



Hosted by Tom Henschel

Leading with Political Savvy – Part 1

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A leader feels stuck. She sees others winning resources she felt should have been hers, but she hates playing politics. What to do?

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“I’m Not Good at Politics”

Hui Min was an art director in animation. Our initial coaching conversations happened when she was “between jobs.” But in short order, she was hired by a small animation studio to build an art department, establish systems, and create a pipeline of talent.

The job, she said, was thrilling and scary.

The thrilling part was that she absolutely knew she could do this. She was good at assembling talent and making work run smoothly. Creating an art department sounded like fun to her.

The scary part was that money is always tight in production houses; she knew she would need to fight for resources.

“But I don’t usually win those fights,” she said. “I’m not good at all that politics stuff.”

“Not good how?” I asked.

“Some people tell me I’m too honest, but look, it’s hard enough being a woman in this role, let alone an Asian woman. So sometimes when I speak up, I guess it sounds harsh. But what they

don't know is that most of the time, I don't speak up at all. Or if I do it's just awkward."

"Awkward?" I echoed.

"...at the last studio I was with, it was a total boys' club"

"Yeah. Like at the last studio I was with, it was a total boys' club. Two other women were running departments, too. The three of us always felt we were swimming against the tide. It didn't matter what my reasons were, I could never get what I needed. And it was even worse because it's hard for me to speak up in the first place."

I asked, "So, the part of you that feels awkward, was that specific to that boys' club? Or do you feel awkward a lot?"

"Oh, a lot," she said. "Sometimes I think it's because English isn't my first language. People tell me I speak fine, but I'm not always sure I say what I mean. But there's something else. I see it. I see other people get what they need when I don't. And it's not because I'm bad at what I do. It's like they all got some secret code that I never got. That's what's awkward. And I'm tired of it. So if playing politics will help me build a great department, then, okay, I'll do it."

I asked, "Hui Min, what exactly does 'playing politics' mean to you?"

Good Work Does Not Speak for Itself

"It means doing whatever you have to do to win. I've said it to some of the women I mentor. To me, politics looks like a street fight in an alley at midnight. Bad things happen in politics. People get hurt in politics. But that's the price of admission. It would be nice if good work would speak for itself, but I don't think it does."

"Good work does not speak for itself"

"Boy, do I agree with you, Hui Min," I said. "I tell people that all the time. Good work does not speak for itself. We can argue about whether that's fair or not, but no matter, it's true. It's the state of the world. Good work does not speak for itself. I don't know that it ever did."

"Do you think it's fair?" she asked.

"Fair? What's fair? Is a twenty-four hour cycle of the sun fair? It just is. Politics just are."

She thought.

I asked her, "Would you feel differently about politics if you substituted the word relationships? Instead of 'I hate politics,' would you say, 'I hate relationships'? I don't think

you would. Or would you even ask are relationships fair?"

"Really?" she asked. "Those two words are interchangeable? Are you sure?"

"I think they can be. I haven't found a sentence yet where it doesn't work. Except! It has to be about *workplace* politics. Then, yes, you can substitute the word relationships for politics every time. It's completely different if the politics are like state or federal or global politics. Then, no, the words are not interchangeable."

That made her laugh. "Agreed, that's not what we're talking about. So if I want to get better at all this, what do I need to know? Where do we start?"

I said, "Can I start by telling you what 'playing politics' means to me? To me, playing politics means always having one thing in the back of your mind: your career. Everything you do, every project, every report, every piece of feedback, every conversation, every email, all of it contributes to your career. Being a good steward, at all times, on behalf of your career, that's what 'playing politics' means to me. When you act in the best interest of your future success, you are being political.

"People who have a vision of themselves in the future live with purpose."

"And this not a selfish, narcissistic thing to do, by the way. It is devoutly to be wished that you act on behalf of your career. It would mean you have a vision of your future. People who have a vision of themselves in the future live with purpose. They put meaning in their work. They are easy people to follow."

Hui Min said, "Funny, a friend asked me the other day, what I want to be doing in ten years. I wasn't really sure. She wasn't either. And you're saying that if I knew, if I had a ten-year plan for myself at my last studio, I would've gotten the resources I wanted?"

"That's an interesting idea. Maybe you would've. You could give it a shot here and see what happens."

"But even suppose I could do all this, it bothers me that when I win, someone else loses."

"So, you should be the loser? Just to be nice?"

"Yeah! Right! I don't want to be the loser anymore." She said, "So, tell me what I need to know."

Politics = Relationships + Culture

"Okay. When I think of politics, I think of it in two parts. The first part we've talked about already: relationships. Relationships help you build a great freaking art department, which,

don't forget, helps your career. The other part of politics is culture. The culture of your workplace is going to determine a lot of things. The culture will show you how to do what needs to get done, relationships will make it happen. Culture and relationships."

She said, "But let me ask you this. What about this kind of relationship? I see people suck up to people, they make all nice, then turn around and say the person's a moron. What about that for playing politics?"

"In my version, politics are positive and empowering"

I said, "In my version, politics are positive and empowering. That kind of relationship is not. So, in my version, that relationship wouldn't fit the definition of politics."

She said, "When I think about relationships, I think about being awkward. People's feelings get hurt in relationships. I keep my distance at work. I'm not unfriendly, but I'm not anybody's buddy."

I said, "Can I give you some ideas about relationships that might help you be more comfortable?"

"Sure, of course," she said.

"Okay. You're building relationships so you can build a great art department, right?"

"Right!" she said.

"Here are three ideas to help your relationships when you're playing politics. Two beliefs and one skill set."

"Really? You start talking about politics by talking about beliefs? I didn't expect that."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know. You surprised me, that's all. Go ahead."

2 Beliefs & 1 Skill Set

I said, "We're talking about the relationship side of politics, right? Well, I think we can all use help on this side because most of us aren't super skilled when it comes to this relationship stuff. Just like you said. What happens in my relationships? My feelings get hurt. People say no to me. People tell me things that are hard to hear. And that's with people I choose to be with. But now, I'm going to have to try and do all that in the workplace? Yikes! I think it can be scary. That's when this first belief helps.

“Ultimately, this is all in service of my career, and my career is not fragile.”

“This belief says, everything is going to be okay. If I consciously choose to make relationships that will help me build my department, no matter what happens, everything will be okay. People might get mad at me. People might not play fair. Bad things might happen. Nevertheless, everything will be okay. Ultimately, this is all in service of my career, and my career is not fragile. That’s belief number one. Everything will be okay. What do you think?”

“That’s an optimistic view,” she said with a smile. “I live with the idea that smaller is better. Keep your head down because otherwise, everything will *not* be okay.”

“Interesting,” I said. “What will your department look like if you keep your head down like that?”

She gave a wicked smile and wagged a finger at me. “Oh, you want me to keep my head up, huh? You’re not the first person who’s told me that. Okay, yes, I need to speak up more, I know. Okay. So what’s the second belief?”

I smiled and said, “If everything’s going to be okay, then you have no reason to stay silent. This belief says, speak for yourself.”

“How is that different from keeping my head up?” she asked.

“To me, this belief, that I have full permission to speak for myself, it’s about responsibility, about giving voice. If I want to build the best art department, and if I want to act on behalf of my career, I have to take full responsibility for everything I do: when I speak up; when I don’t. How I phrase things. Am I an accurate reporter? Can I communicate my ideas? This belief empowers me to use my voice and speak for myself. That is a very political thing to do.”

“Whoo, sounds risky. Okay, we’ll see. What’s number three?”

“The skill set,” I said

“Yeah, what’s that about?” she asked.

“Relationship skills. We’re talking about building relationships that allow you to play politics positively, right? You’ll need to influence people. You’ll be in weird situations. You are going to have to give tough feedback. You’re going to *get* tough feedback. Whatever happens in your relationships, you will need good skills. Listening. Empathy. Managing hard conversations.”

“You are killing me here, Tom. I grew up with a family that didn’t do any of that. This is going to be tough. And we haven’t even begun to talk about culture yet!”

My conversation with Hui Min about playing politics with the culture in mind, is next month’s episode of [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



Core Concepts

- Use the word “relationships” instead of “politics.” How does that feel?
- Politics is acting on behalf of your career.
- Politics are always positive and empowering.
- In Politics, Culture dictates how things get done; Relationships make them happen.
- Often our beliefs hold us back from acting on behalf of our career.



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