Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS

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"I hate politics!" ▶ 10/08/09

"I hate politics!"

I was hired to groom Danielle for a promotion. Less than a week after our first coaching session, the head of her division, who had been a fixture for a dozen years, announced he was leaving for another opportunity. Overnight, every senior leader in the division, including Danielle, was thrown into a major game of musical chairs. Some people would zoom upward while others would stay where they were.

Danielle felt this was the perfect opportunity for her to snag her promotion. I agreed it well might be. I began to ask Danielle about the details of her relationships with each of the most senior players in the division. After a bit, Danielle's shoulders slumped and she muttered, "Ugh! I hate politics."

Whenever I hear that comment (and I am surprised by how often I hear it!), I reply with a suggestion. "How would it be if you substituted the word 'relationships' for 'politics'? Would you still hate it?" Usually people answer no.

The truth is, politics exist. But just as the word "power" is neither positive nor negative, the word "politics" by itself doesn't tell you what *sort* of politics exist in your organization nor how you relate to it.

Political ≠ wicked and manipulative

Most often people who say they hate politics believe politics are nefarious, illegitimate means of getting ahead. While that certainly can be true, it's rare that I see an organization play by those rules. What I do see is that every company, and every group within a company, has its own rules about how politics are played.

Since the game of politics is being played—like it or not!—people can choose to play the game or they can bench themselves on the sidelines. I challenge clients to get in the game or get left behind.

It's naïve to think political savvy doesn't factor into people's success. If two candidates for a role are equally qualified but one is more savvy than the other, most often the savvier candidate will get the nod. I think that's appropriate. To me this feels as inevitable as the fact that the candidate who can display *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™ will have an advantage over the one who can't.

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So if "politics" doesn't automatically mean manipulation and back stabbing, what does it mean? To me, being political simply means knowing the rules for how people within a specific group get things done. It's not unlike the dynamics within particular families. One family may have a strict but unspoken rule that you don't do anything to upset Mom or hurt her feelings. Meanwhile, the family next door may live by an "anything goes" rule in terms of how you treat each other but you never, ever air your dirty laundry to outsiders.

Of course it takes time to figure out what hurts Mom's feelings or who are outsiders and who aren't. But learning the rules and sticking to them is how each family member earns privileges. The child who never learns the rules, or who consciously rejects them, will ultimately have trouble being an accepted member of the family. Over time that child might succeed in ducking the family politics, but she will most likely also miss out on much of the family's nurturing.

Political savvy answers tough questions

Politics in the world of work isn't so different. When you know the rules within your organization, it's easier to answer tough questions like, "When is it okay to stand firm and defend myself?" "When is it okay to talk about someone else's performance?" "What support can I expect for a particularly challenging idea?" "What will turn someone from an ally into an enemy?"

If you're going to achieve advancement and influence in your current position, you need to be able to discern the answers to these sorts of questions, which means you have to have some political savvy.

Kathleen Kelly Reardon spent her career studying politics in organizations and then wrote the definitive book on it: *The Secret Handshake*. She describes politically savvy people as agile in the use of power and the ability to influence others. Something to aspire to, I think.

(By the way, if you have the chance to see her in person, run to be first in line. She lives overseas now and doesn't often make public appearances, but her keen insights, practical advice and ruthless wit make her a special treat to hear. Keep your eye out for her.)

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In *The Secret Handshake*, Kathleen puts forth two premises, which she then interweaves. Her first premise is that organizations vary in the degree to which they use politics to accomplish goals. She describes four different political climates in organizations:

- Minimally politicized, where the atmosphere is amicable and team oriented
- Moderately politicized, where rules are sanctioned and conflict is not pervasive
- Highly politicized, where rules are invoked when convenient and conflict is pervasive
- Pathologically politicized, where rules are circumvented and conflict is long lasting and pervasive. ("And," she writes about this last kind," my condolences if you've ever worked in this political climate.")

Her second premise is that each of us has an innate preference for how we like to play politics. She identifies four political styles for individuals:

- The Purist, who believes in getting ahead through hard work
- The Team Player, who believes you get ahead by participating in politics that further the goals of the group
- The Street Fighter, who believes that rough tactics lead to advancement
- The Maneuverer, who plays political games in a skillful but unobtrusive manner, preferring to have deniability

Reardon goes out of her way to make clear that Street Fighters and Maneuverers are not inherently wicked or out to advance their own careers over the bodies of others. But, she says, people in any of the styles may find it difficult to tolerate others who have significantly different styles.

Often, when people say they hate politics, what they really mean is that they're experiencing a mismatch between their styles and the styles of others. Either the individuals they're working with have radically different styles from their own, or the organization itself favors those who have a different style. In either case, the result feels oppressive and unpleasant.

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Reardon lays out how people who are politically inhibited are unlikely to match cultures that are highly political. And vice versa. She creates the following table.

Fit of Style to Organization Type

STYLE	POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT			
	MINIMAL	MODERATE	HIGH	PATHOLOGICAL
PURIST	BEST FIT	POSSIBLE	UNLIKELY	HIGHLY UNLIKELY
TEAM PLAYER	LIKELY	BEST FIT	UNLIKELY	HIGHLY UNLIKELY
STREET FIGHTER	HIGHLY UNLIKELY	LIKELY	BEST FIT	POSSIBLE
MANEUVERER	HIGHLY UNLIKELY	POSSIBLE	BEST FIT	LIKELY

Reardon bluntly states, "You can't achieve the secret handshake (advancement and influence) in an organization that is completely antagonistic to your style." In her wry fashion, she goes on to observe, "Investing your effort in an organization for which you're unsuited is not a pleasant or productive way to spend a chunk of your life."

When Danielle told me she hated politics, I wanted to know which political style felt most natural to her and whether that style was a good match with the way politics was played in her division. We determined that she actually was quite well matched with her division. Once we knew that, we began identifying actions that would strengthen her relationships during the ensuing game of musical chairs, because, after all, politics is all about relationships.

As you think about yourself as a political player, first and foremost, consider how well you manage relationships. Do you manage up as effectively as you manage down? How are your relationships with your peers? Do you know what the "word on the street" is about you? If not, do you have trusted sources who will give you good feedback? Tend your relationships well and you'll grow your political savvy.

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If, having read this Tip, you don't have a sense of which style you are, you might read *The Secret Handshake* and pay particular attention to the detailed descriptors of each style. (I've reduced her descriptors to bullet points but Kathleen's eight descriptions are specific and nuanced.) There's also a Leadership Style Inventory in the book that may help raise your awareness about your preferences. Then, study Kathleen's recommendations for becoming politically savvy. If you can become comfortable with even half the skills she discusses, you'll be well on your way to achieving *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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