

Moving Ideas Forward Inside the Organization: Being Politically Savvy...

By Mark Antonucci

No “politics” in this organization? Think again....assuming you make any group decisions at all. “Politics” is really the process of group decision-making and organizational politics is about what process your organization uses to make its decisions. There are rules. Don’t shy away from that process...learn it, embrace it and you will be in a position to lead and introduce meaningful change...

Have you ever had a great idea that you knew would benefit the organization you worked for? A no-brainer, can’t miss idea? You were so excited you couldn’t wait to tell others in the organization of your wonderful insight? They would tell you what a wonderful idea it was and offer to help in any way. Is that how it actually did pan out? Just like you imagined it would? Probably not...What actually did happen when you did tell someone...? Did it come as a surprise when he or she didn’t seem to have the same enthusiasm for your idea that you had? It happens all the time. Let me tell you about a time this happened to me:

Some time ago, I worked in Human Resources for a major newspaper ...back when total quality management and cost reduction were just coming to be in vogue. So I had an idea to initiate a program to reduce newsprint waste, which as you may know, is one of the major expense items for any daily newspaper.

This is perfect I thought...Other newspapers were doing it. Let’s get with the program. We always struggled with newsprint waste so I figured my idea for a new enhanced plan in this area would be hailed as an innovative step we needed to make. It made sense – plain and simple. I had to propose it. It would actually be a disservice to see a solution such as this and NOT bring it to the company’s attention.

So I quickly outlined the proposal in a three page memo and sent it to the President through inter-office mail. I figured I would have to wait until maybe the end of the day when he went through his mail before I would receive a phone call from his office thanking me for suggestion such a cost-saving measure. Maybe he’d even invite me up to his office for a private lunch so I could give him even more details on how this would work. At least he would invite me to the key managers’ meeting the following week to take questions... Who knows? It was definitely going to be a big “win” for the company and maybe a bigger win for me. I mean...they did have some nice offices in the executive suite. I could get used to that real quick. Funny...but that call never came – and then I found out it wasn’t so funny!

See, what I soon found out was that our President did not like someone “reaching up and slapping him in the face” as he characterized it, i.e. telling him how to run his business. It was his view that if an idea is so good, he would have heard about it *already*Uh oh.....

I also learned that the VP Operations, when shown this idea by the President, also had a negative reaction. It turns out that he and my boss, the VP of HR, had a feud going on from way back. The Operation VP did not like or trust my boss... In fact he had no use for him and the entire HR department! ...This was not good.

The pressroom manager, when he heard that I had proposed this idea was quoted to have said:

“But he’s from HR. I thought those people handled salary and benefits? Why is he messing with the way the pressroom is run?”

The pressmen themselves also piled on. Their reaction sort of went like this: “Oh, reduce newsprint waste – gee, why didn’t we think of that? What do you think we have been trying to do down here all this time? We already do manage waste. Are you telling us it is not good enough?” Hmm...

Even my dear old boss, the head of HR, was not happy with me because he felt that he hadn’t been adequately briefed so he could handle the question and inquiries posed to him by the President. He too had also been caught by surprise. At this point, I was thinking about that airline ad that said, “Want to get away for a while?”

So the net result of my big, bad bodacious idea was that I had offended or angered the President, the VP of Operation, the pressroom manager, the pressmen and my boss. Whose support was I seeking? See above!

Let’s just say that at this point, my thinking changed from being concerned about my proposal to how do I survive without getting fired!. I had invaded the turf of some, and bruised the ego of others. In trying to “do good” for the organization, I had put myself and my career in jeopardy.

What I had done wrong?? In short, **I violated the “unwritten” rules of how you get things** done around here...I ignored the customary process, procedures and protocol of decision-making entrenched in my organization’s culture – I violated the rules of the game. I didn’t realize it at the time, but looking back it was clear that I did. I ruffled feathers, made waves, rocked the boat etc etc...and placed myself, and my project, in peril.

So, in short, my idea got shelved. I lost “good will” with some key people. Fortunately, I had occasion to re-introduce the concept a few months later, with the support of the right people, (some interested pressroom foremen) and we did implement a version of what I had proposed. I was lucky – I got a second chance. Unfortunately many times that is not the case.

You might have “gotten burned” somewhere along the line when you tried to introduce change. You might have met resistance that you did not anticipate, in the form of someone protecting his or her turf, pet project, or reputation. Others with deep seeded needs for power find your innovation threatening, another sees resources dwindling if your idea is adopted.

What tends to happen when these situations occur? We may all seek a way to sink back in our cubicles and stay out of the “politics”. We wonder why we bothered in the first place and resolve never to put ourselves in that position again.

“OK, if they want to pay me just to show up and do what I am told, so be it. Let them figure it out”. When this occurs, we lose but the biggest loser is, of course, the organization. Creativity and innovation disappear. A sense of powerlessness pervades (you can’t fight City Hall...but, of course, you can if you know how) We throw up our hands with an “I tried” attitude and go about our mundane business. What choice do we have?

But now, because of the work of one Prof. Joel DeLuca we have a better choice. DeLuca, a former Captain and research scientist in the US Air Force and a graduate with a Ph.d from Yale University in Organizational Behavior, conducted a unique kind of research for over three decades.

Documented in his book:

Political Savvy: Systematic Approaches to Leadership Behind the Scenes
DeLuca offers research findings as to why some succeed in getting their ideas/projects approved and why some do not. The most critical factor in order to be successful, he states, is that one must take into account the political realities of the organization.

He presents his case in very uncomplicated terms – and it is compelling. And because influencing involves competing for resources, time and attention of decision-makers - he discusses the “politics” involved in any organization...His point is that engaging in politics is inevitable if you are trying to be influential inside the organization – but you can be ethical and effective while doing so. Engaging in “politics” and being ethical are not mutually exclusive. Some people function very well in terms of influencing without resorting to the negative. He found these people in every organization. They were not high-profile, high-powered individuals necessarily, but people who knew where to go and what to

say to get things done. They were trusted and respected by their fellow co-workers but they usually flew under the radar screen. In short, they were highly effective, inclusive, problem-solvers. These were the people DeLuca focused on while doing his research. He called those successful at using positive politics rather than negative, the “politically savvy”. What he elaborated on what was different about these “politically savvy” individuals.

First and foremost, DeLuca emphasized that the political savvy do not see the organization functioning as a meritocracy, where the best answer is always rewarded and the best student is always promoted, as it is in grade school. The politically savvy recognize that organizations are “human” systems, i.e. run by very “human” people with all that comes with that.

While organizations strive to be rational - fair and impartial - the people in charge do have their values, preferences, opinions and egos that tend to affect how they make decisions. This very “human” factor is real and it must be addressed when competing for time, money and resources that are within the purview of these decision-makers. Human factors usually “in play” typically involve issues of turf, departmental priorities, hidden agendas, affiliations, personal values (loyalty, stability, security, etc)... other people involved, who is getting credit, etc. Some or all of these factors could play a part in the ultimate decision. If you ignore these “other than technical” factors”, you minimize your chances of success. Truth be told, many of us have a tendency to “balk” at having to deal with the “other than technical” factors.

“I shouldn’t have to spend time influencing other people...the technical details should be enough” is the cry of the rationalist. I wasn’t hired to be an “influencer”! Maybe not, but being right is not always sufficient, says DeLuca – sometimes you must exhibit leadership – actively influencing those who will take part in making the decision. You must understand that part of your role as a change agent is to get people on board. See people as the means to the end, not the obstacles. That is a mindset that you must cultivate within yourself because it will allow you to act and react differently to the challenges before you.

Which brings us to the second major contribution DeLuca provided...delineating what the “politically savvy do which sets them apart from the rest. Here are a few of the widely practiced behaviors of the “political savvy”:

A. Seek out decision makers through informal channels to uncover potential roadblocks.

Can you speak “off the record” with a key decision maker – using them as a sounding board – to become aware of where your proposal is vulnerable, what issues you have overlooked or whom do you have to win over? Doing so in advance of a formal meeting affords you time and opportunity to take remedial action.

The savvy always use the informal channels because it is less threatening and confrontational than large meetings. People tend to be more honest and more open when they speak one-on-one. Use this human tendency to your advantage.

- B. Avoid meetings that are going to make a decision on your proposal unless you are sure that 51% of the influence in that room understand your proposal and are at least willing to explore it further.**

Delay until you are sure of your support. What is the use of going to a meeting only to get shot down? Meetings are quick ways of getting decisions – but what is the quickest way to getting a “yes” decision. That is the “decision” we are aiming for.

- C. Know the interests and concerns of those who will make the decision. If you can link your agenda to theirs, you will make a strong ally**

- D. Stay on “credibility paths” to build support.**

If you do not have a strong positive relationship (credibility) with someone whose support you need, find someone who does. People tend to trust the judgment of those they are comfortable with. Sometimes others can open doors you can't so lose your ego and be smart about who should approach who with the idea you are proposing.

- E. Overcome feeling like you are “manipulating” other people.**

If you have the good of the organization at heart and feel strongly about your cause, do your best to see it through. Don't do anything unethical, of course, and always play above board. You can lead others to make the right choices if you do your homework, have a sound business case and put together a thoughtful strategy for getting others to support you.

- F. Map out a comprehensive strategy.**

You don't need unanimity, just critical mass. Ask yourself: who are the key players, what is the relative degree of influence, how are they currently leaning – for or against: and what significant positive or negative relationship exists among them. Then map out a strategy of who should speak to whom and what should be the gist of the conversation.

Re-group and re-strategize if and when you hit a bump in the road.

For more information on how you can be better equipped to move your ideas, projects...and possibly your career forward, go to www.politicalsavvy.com or read Political Savvy: Systematic Approaches to Leadership Behind the Scenes.

*Research made available for the National Academy of Management:
Symposium on Organizational Politics – 2005.