

RICK'S TIPS

Rick's Tips explores the competencies necessary for successful leadership and provides activities to assist with the development and mastery of these skills.

THE EXECUTIVE GROUP

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THE ART OF BEING POLITICALLY SAVVY

“It’s survival of the politically fittest. No matter how good you are at your job, without the ability to negotiate office power structures, you’re toast.”

– MacRae, 2001, online

Someone who is politically savvy understands the internal and external politics that impact the work of an organization. Possessing political savvy means that each situation is approached with a clear perception of organizational and political reality and recognizes the impact of alternative courses of action.

There is a difference between playing politics, being political and being politically savvy. Being politically savvy requires one to maneuver through complex political situations effectively and quietly. It requires being sensitive to how people and organizations function, as well as the current role and its potential limitations and its political climate. It requires one to anticipate where the land mines are and plan their approach accordingly. It requires one to view corporate politics as a necessary part of organizational life and work to adjust to that reality. Think of it as a chess match and you have to anticipate your best moves.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A POLITICALLY SAVVY INDIVIDUAL

- Puts the organization first
- Believes in and cares about the issues at hand
- Sees a career as an outcome rather than a goal
- Plays above board
- Legitimizes the task
- Avoids their own political blind spots
- Knows how to navigate smoothly and quietly through political waters
- Says and does things that do not cause political problems
- Understands how to deal with not invented here and territory protection
- Rejects politics and minimizes procedural errors
- Weighs their words and considers the impact on others
- Is aware of the consequences of their actions

THE THREE SHOT METHOD OF INFLUENCING

In attempting to influence an individual or group about a new or controversial idea use the **Three Shot** method of influencing:

1. Take a shot at it. Explain the idea and its potential benefits. If this idea is accepted, fine. If not,
2. Take a second shot at it. Learn from the first attempt and customize further based upon the particular audience. If it is accepted, fine. If not,
3. Make a sincere commitment to implement whatever the organization has decided to do. Those who do not have not learned the art of being politically savvy and usually self-destruct.

SPECIFIC ACTIONS FOR BECOMING POLITICALLY SAVVY

- **Find the Right Mix**
Politically savvy managers work to find the right mix of planning and acting when customizing their attempts at influence. This customization can occur at two levels, one for the situation as a whole, and the other when gauging how to approach a specific individual.
- **Keep political conflicts small and concrete**
The more abstract it gets, the more unmanageable it becomes. Separate the people from the problem. Attack problems by looking at the nature of the problem, not the person presenting the problem. Avoid direct blaming remarks; describe the problem and its impact. If you can't agree on a solution, agree on procedure, or agree on a few things, and list all the issues remaining. This creates some motion and breaks political stalemates.
- **Be process flexible**
Always have a plan of attack but also have a contingency plan. Be ready for instant change. Expect the unexpected. People who are politically savvy are personally flexible. They care more about accomplishing the objective than staying true to the "one true" me.
- **Adopt a long-term orientation**
Savvy managers typically seem to have a longer view than other managers. They are able to make the critical distinction between individual battles and the overall war. Always remember, timing may not be right, but eventually your ideas may become a successful step to acceptance and implementation of an idea.

- **Foster face-saving gracious winning**

View losses as unfortunate outcomes of scarce resources or results of the impossibility of finding win-win solutions. Be a gracious winner and give credit to the losing project. This will foster greater cooperation and rational problem solving. Savvy individuals work hard at minimizing the experience of losing for others.

- **Strong advocates for narrow views don't usually fare well politically in organizations**

Initially be tentative. Give others some room to maneuver. Make the business or organizational case first. Be prepared to counter arguments that your objective is less important than theirs. A lot of political noise is caused by making extreme statements right out of the box.

- **Learn how to read non-verbal signals**

Common signals of trouble are changes in body posture (especially turning away), crossed arms, staring, or the telltale glancing at one's watch, frowns and washboard foreheads. When this occurs, pause. Ask a question. Ask how we're doing. Do a live process check.

- **Selective savvy**

Is there an individual, a group or groups you have more trouble with politically than others? Is it because you don't like or are uncomfortable with them? To work better with problem people or groups, put yourself in their case. Turn off your "I like – I don't like; I agree – I don't agree" switch. Ask yourself why would you act that way? What do you think they're trying to achieve? Establish reciprocity. Relationships don't last unless you provide something and so do they. Find out what they want and tell them what you want. Strike a bargain.

- **Develop more patience**

Dominate people who are used to being in control make decisions that do not always exemplify the necessary patience and wind up saying things or doing things that can cause political mis-steps.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Political Savvy: Systemic Approaches to Leadership Behind the Scenes](#) by Joel R. Deluca

[The 10 Dumbest Mistakes Smart People Make](#) by Arthur Freeman

[The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive](#) by Patrick Lencioni

[Dancing with the Dinosaur: Learning to Live in the Corporate Jungle](#) by William Lareau

"The magic of being politically savvy lies in advance work, not fancy strategies."

– Unknown