

Managing the political realities

Most people baulk at the idea of being “political”, yet being politically aware is a critical skill in career management. Coaches and mentors need to be able to use their own political awareness to help the learner make astute decisions and judgements; and to help the learner develop both political awareness and the ability to operate within a political environment. (Operating effectively in a political environment is not the same as being political!)

Being politically aware involves understanding, for example:

- What is and isn't possible within current resources and organisational climate
- What rules it is necessary to adhere to strictly and which rules it is acceptable to work round, and in what circumstances
- Prevailing attitudes and myths
- Both formal and informal decision-making processes
- What types of experience carry greatest “cred” in terms of being listened to and being considered promotable
- Which networks, groups and individuals have significant influence
- Which behaviours attract positive and negative comment
- How the organisation reacts to and deals with mistakes
- What issues top management prefers to avoid
- How to gain access to decision-makers and budget-holders

The coach or mentor can help by sharing their own understanding of these issues, as and when the learner faces relevant problems. They can also encourage the learner to think through what would be politically astute or politically inept approaches to those issues, to help them develop the instinct for “thinking politically, acting with integrity”.

Topics, where help in developing political awareness and astuteness is particularly valuable, include:

- When the learner is establishing a career plan (eg what routes lead to fastest promotion possibilities?) or considering a specific career move (eg how valuable will this experience be long-term?)
- When the learner needs support from above for tasks or projects, for which they have responsibility)
- When the learner needs to deal with workplace conflict (eg how do I manage this without risk of damaging my own reputation?)

Assessing political astuteness – a diagnostic

You can try this simple test on yourself and/or obtain feedback from work colleagues

1. Do people often seek advice from you about how more senior managers are approaching an issue?	Y/N
2. Do you have strong and effective networks of information and influence?	Y/N
3. Do you routinely consider the interests of different stakeholders when putting together a project?	Y/N
4. Do you routinely ensure that you have support for an idea before going public with it?	Y/N
5. Do you have clear feelings about when and where to compromise and when and where to make a stand?	Y/N
6. Do you usually demonstrate good timing in raising issues and ideas?	Y/N
7. Can you usually sense when something is a “done deal” and not to be challenged openly?	Y/N
8. Do you usually have accurate judgement about when it is appropriate to seek permission and when to act and be prepared to seek forgiveness?	Y/N
9. Are you usually able to detect corporate changes in mood or direction before they are announced?	Y/N
10. Do you typically see the opportunities within problems?	Y/N
11. Do you know in detail what motivates the key players, in tasks you are involved with?	Y/N
12. Do you have a good sense of when the time is ripe to introduce a new idea, or resurrect an old one?	Y/N
13. Do you invest time in helping other people build coalitions, which will help achieve goals you believe important?	Y/N
14. Do you have a good understanding of both the espoused corporate values and the values the organisation actually practices? And are you able to work pragmatically within those gaps?	Y/N
15. Are you able to handle difficult conversations with tact and empathy; and do usually achieve what you intended from such conversations?	Y/N
16. Do you have a lot more people, who owe you favours, than vice versa?	Y/N

It should be clear from this checklist that there is a significant difference between being *political* and being *politically adept*. Being politically adept is, at root, no different from effective, ethical management.

Reflection exercises for mentors and coaches

1. Consider how politically astute you are, using the diagnostic below, if appropriate. What could you do to become more politically competent?
2. How can you help a mentee or coachee become more politically aware?
3. How can you help a mentee or coachee develop their skills of political astuteness?