
----- WHAT'S UP, DOC? -----
Vol. 4, No. 8; August 2004; Copyright 2004 by A. J. Schuler, Psy. D
"Creating Leadership Solutions for Profit and Growth"

THIS MONTH'S THEME: PLAYING OFFICE POLITICS

Here in the United States, we're heading into an active political season. That got me thinking: we often used the word "politics" to talk about the realities of what we see in the workplace. So, what are "office politics?" Are they good or are they bad? Should you play "office politics" or not? In this month's newsletter, I'll offer some observations, and let you decide what's best for you. Enjoy!

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THIS MONTH'S QUOTES:

"The life that conquers is the life that moves with a steady resolution and persistence toward a predetermined goal. Those who succeed are those who have thoroughly learned the immense importance of plan in life, and the tragic brevity of time." -- W.J. Davison

"The most important work you and I will ever do will be within the wall of our own homes." -- Harold B. Lee

"Be master of your petty annoyances and conserve your energies for the big, worthwhile things. It isn't the mountain ahead that wears you out - it's the grain of sand in your shoe." -- Robert Service

1. PLAYING OFFICE POLITICS

“OFFICE POLITICS” AS POWER PLAY

Here in America, the word “politics” often carries unseemly connotations. We tend to be suspicious of the motives of politicians including office politicians: we often think they’re only out to accrue power or to line their pockets, while betraying the interests of those they should serve. Here in the U. S., scandals like those that destroyed Enron, Anderson Consulting and WorldCom only add weight to those impressions. When people talk about office politics, they often think of those who take unfair advantage of others, those who seek only to advance their careers at the expense of others, or those who deceptively flatter those in power purely for personal gain. What nasty stuff! While it’s true that some people play the game that way, due to their selfish motives and unprincipled actions, I’m about to argue here that not all office politics have to be based on destructive power plays. “Politics” is just a word we use to describe how people behave as part of larger groups, and that behavior can have good results, bad results or (most likely) mixed results.

IT’S ALL A QUESTION OF MOTIVES AND ACTIONS

If you or someone else wants to win people over, for the right reasons, to do something in a particular way, then that could lead to actions others would describe as playing office politics. Is that such a bad thing? It’s all a question of your motives, and the action you take in support of your goals. If you are honest, and you genuinely seek to do the right thing by the organization, then playing this kind of office politics is fair game. If your motives and methods are less admirable, then your “politics” are less likely to be admired – and you’re less likely to be successful.

OFFICE POLITICS AS “SERVICE PLAY”

The opposite of the “power play” is the “service play.” By that I mean an attempt to exercise influence so as to provide a valuable service to an organization and to others. We don’t usually think of “office politics” in these terms, but the dynamics building coalitions to advocate for a particular course of action are generally the same. Now, no one has pure motives, and most people want to advance their careers even as they do good things. . . so, what’s so wrong with that? Those who genuinely make work better for people and help an organization succeed should be rewarded, shouldn’t they? What would business life be like without rewarding these kinds of people? While some cynics believe that any shred of ambition taints all office political activity, the truth is that the cynics don’t really live in the real world. As long as the ambitious play by the rules, others should let them work to do what they can: when free markets are at their best, they allow those with drive and talent to carve out a niche for themselves, no matter where they come from.

OFFICE POLITICS AND COMMUNICATION: HIDING THE TRUTH OR ACKNOWLEDGING REALITY?

Business leaders, as they take on more responsibility, soon learn the need to be careful in how they communicate. Off-the-cuff remarks, spontaneous jokes or verbal speculations can all be taken the wrong way by some people, and by the time the rumor mill is through transforming the original quote, a lot of organizational damage can be done. And so, leaders find they are challenged to do some seemingly contradictory things at once. They must be candid and forthright, but also careful not to create unintended problems by communicating hastily. They must be sensitive to the many points of view that others hold, and yet be authentic and spontaneous enough to be trusted. They must focus on the listeners in front of them, but also think about the reactions that others not present might have to their remarks. Because leaders can find it harder and harder to communicate spontaneously, and not as if they are on their guard, they fall prey to suspicions that they are hiding the truth. Well, sometimes, they are, but that's not necessarily for bad reasons: they may let out parts of the truth without telling all of it, and that may simply be a reflection of their willingness to serve, and remain aware of the communication needs of all audiences, and not just those in front of them at any given moment.

The need, therefore, to speak with some care is simply a reflection of reality, and an acceptance of responsibility. Lying is never the answer, but the issues get a little fuzzy when the whole truth is not told – as often it simply cannot be. The best leaders know how to draw these lines in the right places, but most of all, they engender trust, even when they can't tell, for example, all of the factors they weighed in making a particular decision. Is this parsing of the whole truth an example of office politics at work? Maybe. Is that a bad thing? That depends of the level of implicit deception-by-omission employed, and the consequences and motives behind any such deception. But anyone who wants to work well within a family, company or group of people must be careful with communication, and blaming those who take the most responsibility in business for communicating carefully (and therefore sounding “political”) is not really, in my opinion, a very honest or realistic thing to do. Leadership communication is not easy!

COALITIONS, INNOVATION AND OFFICE POLITICS

If you would like to see things in your business environment change, whether you like it or not, you'll have to build support for your ideas. Will that mean you have to play “office politics?” You bet! You've got to win people over to your point of view, and perhaps establish enough of a group to pilot your ideas. That way, you can work to generate some small results that could gain you more support from higher up in the organization. That's how innovation occurs (I'll be going into all of this in my future book, “You Say You Want a Revolution: How to Transform Your Company From Within”). For those who would complain about office politics, and who would like to see something change, they have to

recognize that no change can occur without jumping into the process of winning people over. That's politics.

SO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU?

Everyone plays office politics. Even for those whose only ambition is to stay put, avoid promotions and do what they most enjoy doing, the process of being left alone will often involve winning people over to agree with you and your goals! Some people play office politics at a higher level, depending on their levels of responsibility and their ambitions, be they personal or on behalf of a whole organization and its improvement. If you would like to exert some influence, make a difference, grow into leadership or take on more responsibility, you have to accept that playing "office politics" is just what you have to do to get ahead, and that's not a bad thing. Politics is just a word we use for the process of winning people over in order to achieve some results, be they admirable results or deplorable ones. Your motives are your own, but the process of winning people over is neither good nor bad. Don't get hung up on the word "politics." If you want to make a difference, you've got to learn to communicate and win people over effectively. If your ambitions are simpler, that's fine, but you would do well to learn what you can about how to win people over, if only to have the opportunity to do what you like to do without too much interference! And for those of you who are more ambitious, remember: your motives matter, and on balance, those with less admirable motives are less likely to succeed over the long haul. Winning people over is built on trust, and winning the trust of others is based on being consistently trustworthy!

2. RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND FILMS

BOOK: "Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?" by Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., Harper Business (paperback), New York, 2002.

A nice case study in the art of the corporate turnaround. It does not break new ground, but its value does come from its first-hand account of Gerstner's experience at the helm of IBM. The material is laid out in a readable, concise format, and it's not an exercise in stroking the author's own ego. A worthwhile read, if you did not get to it when it first came out (as I did not!).

FILM: "The Bourne Supremacy," in wide release.

This is the only movie I've seen in the last month, and judging by its popularity, there's a good chance you may already have seen it, too. But hey, I liked it, so I'm recommending it. Fast but not overdone in the special effects department. I appreciate seeing an action movie that does not feel the need to impress me with CGI graphics and characters, which relies on pace and situation. Matt Damon does an effective job as a bright, haunted guy on the run; I've a feeling he has a long career ahead of him. The movie misses a bit the presence of his female co-lead from the previous film, Franka Potente, but it moves so fast you get used to her absence all too quickly. It's not a classic, but it is good summer fun. I appreciate this newer Hollywood twist of an action hero whose ability is based more on intelligence and skill than brawn. Read more reviews of the movie [here](#).

3. CHUCKLES

NEW BIRD DOG:

An avid duck hunter was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could actually walk on water to retrieve a duck. Shocked by his find, he was sure none of his friends would ever believe him.

He decided to try to break the news to a friend of his, the eternal pessimist who refused to be impressed with anything. This, surely, would impress him. He invited him to hunt with him and his new dog.

As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by. They fired, and a duck fell. The dog responded and jumped into the water. The dog, however, did not sink but instead walked across the water to retrieve the bird, never getting more than his paws wet. This continued all day long; each time a duck fell, the dog walked across the surface of the water to retrieve it.

The pessimist watched carefully, saw everything, but did not say a single word.

On the drive home the hunter asked his friend, "Did you notice anything unusual about my new dog?"

"I sure did," responded the pessimist. "He can't swim."

4. PROMOTE YOUR OWN GROWTH

You don't have to live near the Schuler Solutions main office in Alexandria, Virginia to benefit from my coaching services. Great work can be done for your own growth and development over the phone and through document review via email. To find out more about your coaching options and available coaching plans, just click [here](#) now.

5. ABOUT DR. SCHULER

A. J. Schuler, Psy. D., an expert on leadership, negotiation and organizational change, provides consulting services, keynote presentations and seminars for client companies. His trademark is highly personalized service that leads to measurable increases in productivity, profit and growth. He also provides personalized leadership education and coaching for highly motivated clients.

Dr. Schuler, President of Schuler Solutions, Inc., has served diverse organizations in the private and public sectors, including The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Sony Development, Nomura Securities and the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

A graduate of the Wharton School of Business, Dr. Schuler has successfully led the profitable growth of a dynamic, international consulting firm while serving as Operations Director, and has successfully coached over five hundred CEO's and corporate executives.

6. HOW TO SUBSCRIBE OR UNSUBSCRIBE

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“What’s Up, Doc?” distribution list.

7. NEWSLETTER STATEMENT OF ETHICS

NEWSLETTER ETHICS: This e-Newsletter will be sent to subscribers only upon REQUEST, though subscribers may forward this letter to anyone they wish. Subscriber identities or contact information will NOT BE DISCLOSED to any other persons or entities under any circumstances. (An attorney friend recently pointed out that, technically, I'd have to give up my list if compelled to do so by a court of law. He's technically right, of course, but let's face it: that won't happen!)

Have a great month. . .

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“Make each day your masterpiece.” -- John Wooden

P.S. - Remember to send in your comments and successes, and to forward this newsletter to at least one friend! Thanks . . . AJS