

> BY DR. ROZA ROSDEV

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## + High-Stake Games

PLAYING POLITICS IN THE OFFICE IS ONLY HUMAN NATURE, BUT IT CAN CREATE BIG PROBLEMS FOR YOUR COMPANY IF IT GETS IN THE WAY OF YOUR GOALS.

### One of the underpinnings of great human endeavors

has always been self-interest. An inherent characteristic, it is a powerful, motivating force that – properly channeled within a business enterprise – drives individuals to explore, strive and achieve. When ungoverned, self-interest results in the pursuit of personal agendas in lieu of company objectives, and forthright, honest communication is replaced with deceptive, unscrupulous pandering. This is the currency of politics.

Politics are viral, non-value added activities that steal and redirect the energy of the enterprise to their own purposes. When the CEO wonders why it takes so long to get a job done, it's probably because there are politics swarming within the organization. Personal agendas override business objectives and undermine the organization. Like termites, office politics usually go unnoticed until severe structural damage is done.

### Workplace Politics

Workplace politics frequently begin with the occurrence of an isolated event in which one small personal agenda item is successfully advanced. It may be nothing more than someone successfully claiming credit for someone else's work. However, each successful attempt thereafter reinforces the idea of promoting one's personal agenda.

Smart people learn quickly what gets them ahead. As such, those practices that require less effort to get where they are going will be readily adopted by most. When those who truly create value for the organization see others getting rewarded for politics over production, it's a message to either do the same or move elsewhere. This is why a high-performing culture under the wrong leadership can plunge into complacency and under-performance overnight.

Workplace politics are a direct assault on all attempts at creating or sustaining a culture that values honesty and integrity and rewards performance objectively. The subtle nature of politics allows their practice to spread easily, multiplying their destructive impacts with each new convert, at each decision-making point.

The more widespread workplace politics become, the more commonly they affect decision-making. Like a virus, they attempt to redirect assets and talent toward objectives that fit the personal agendas of the practitioners vs. pursuits aligned with the company's strategic or cultural objectives.

### The Role of the CEO

Safeguarding the organization from threats is as much a part of the CEO's job as is maximizing its market opportunities. For

most CEOs, the solutions to dealing with personal agendas and workplace politics seem to be easier than detecting them. This is due to several factors. First, savvy senior executives know how to camouflage their personal agendas and politics from scrutiny by the CEO. Second, the CEO is typically isolated from all but the executive level. Therefore, much of what the CEO “knows” about the organization may be inaccurate.

For CEOs to effectively safeguard their organizations, they first need to understand the factors that promote and encourage workplace politics:

- 1. People are fallible** – no matter how smart, no matter how knowledgeable, every individual has blind spots and the potential to make errors.
- 2. People resist change** – it is a part of human nature to want to preserve the status quo, to remain safely with the known and the familiar.
- 3. People seek rewards** – individuals want to be acknowledged for their efforts, and the sooner the better. People will seek the path of shortest distance to get what they desire to attain.

In an organization where mistakes are punished, change is an executive mandate. At the same time, rewards and recognition are whimsically distributed, and workplace politics become the preferred method of coping. The CEO who is cognizant of this dynamic understands that it is his or her role to instigate the desired, principled behavior in its place.

### ***The Right Tools***

The following tools help CEOs build and preserve a “politics-free work force:”

- 1. CEOs need to create an environment of transparency, candor and straight talk.** They have to make it absolutely clear that politics will not be tolerated in the company and will be destroyed with a vengeance at every level. CEOs can set good examples by not tolerating hidden agendas or being seduced into private conversations about another executive. CEOs who are seriously committed to safeguarding their own behavior against politics pay particular attention to their behavior when preparing for board meetings because this is a particularly vulnerable place for them. CEOs committed to a politics-free workplace check



and double-check their motives and practices in how transparent they are regarding the information they present to their board of directors.

**2.** CEOs need objective information on the state of their organization's culture. Soliciting critical information first hand is paramount for any CEO. They need to accurately assess the state of the company, its culture and people. CEOs who depend on the reports of their immediate lieutenants are going to have a distorted view. It is imperative for all CEOs to compare the reports of their direct executives to their personal observations for validation.

**3.** CEOs need to listen with their eyes. They are not kept in the dark by others as much as they keep themselves in the dark. They need to make it a constant habit to step out of their offices and walk among their employees without an entourage. Geography is no excuse for not doing it – phone calls and reflective e-mails can be effective substitutes. CEOs should ask themselves how far down into the organization is reaching far enough and how frequently is enough to maintain a current reading.

**4.** CEOs need to learn how to effectively communicate. That means tuning out the words and listening to the music of the story that's being told. As they ask questions, they need to listen to the change of the tone in the story – the change in body language, eye contact, the speed of conversation and other "tells."

### ***Things Are Not Always As They Seem***

To the common observer, Leo, a regional president in the hospitality industry, had very predictable behavior: don't schedule any meetings before 10 a.m., as he was grumpy in the morning, and don't schedule anything between 3 and 4 p.m., as that was his tea time. This was his practice and reputation no matter where he was – at his home office or traveling.

What most people didn't know about Leo's pattern was that before 10 a.m. and between 3 and 4 p.m. were his "surveillance" times. During these times, he walked through the company and chatted with everyone along the way.

On his rounds, Leo never missed hearing a story or two from

various people, as their stories provided a consistent stream of assessment information on the health of the company. When he spoke to his direct reports, he listened for reference to the hints he picked up from his walks. When he didn't hear reference to some of the potential troublesome issues he didn't hesitate to let his executives know that either they were out of touch with their organization or someone was keeping him in the dark. Both conditions were unacceptable and immediately rectified.

This ability to be a keen observer and listener to the organization's health was a critically important competency for Leo.

During his semi-annual succession planning process, he carefully scrutinized the degree to which this competency was developed among his executives. He further insisted on developing this competency in anyone who was managing employees at all levels.

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### ***The Story Behind the Behavior***

Successful CEOs are keenly aware of the external threats facing their businesses. Together with their leadership teams, these successful CEOs devote many hours each quarter to discussing and exploring

strategic defenses, positioning, counter moves and other key issues. These outside threats are taken very seriously, and competent CEOs make sure that the appropriate steps are taken.

On the other hand, workplace politics, which are far more reality than possibility, are often ignored as a significant and viable threat to the business.

Is it because CEOs simply accept corporate politics because they don't know how to eliminate them? Or is it because CEOs give them their tacit approval? Regardless of the reason why corporate politics thrive in the office, they spell disaster for the health of any organization.

That's why in-tune leaders will address the threat with as much vigor as if it were an external danger. Then – and only then – will organizations have the necessary energy and resources (time, money, personnel) to achieve their short- and long-term objectives. •mt

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