

Notes: It's All Politics

By Kathleen Kelley Reardon

CHAPTER ONE

IT'S ALL POLITICS

Politics is inevitable. It is part of life. And, like business in general, politics is not a spectator sport. You cannot afford to be apolitical at work if you have any aspirations for advancement. The only way to avoid politics is to avoid people. In any job, when you reach a certain level of technical competence, politics is what makes the difference with regard to success. At that point, it is indeed all politics. Everyday, brilliant people take a backseat to politically adept colleagues by failing to win crucial support for their ideas. Sometimes politics involves going around or bending rules, but more typically it's about positioning your ideas in a favorable light and knowing what to say, and how, when, and to whom to say it. Refusing to participate in what you may consider "the incivility of politics" is exactly what will keep you a political underdog, watching helplessly as your career aspirations evaporate.

Ask yourself the following questions to see if you're up to snuff on Politics 101:

- **Can you effectively influence and manage people's perceptions of you and your ideas?**
- **Are you able to convert enemies to allies?**
- **Can you manage outcomes long before they're in sight?**
- **Do your ideas get a fair hearing?**
- **Do you know how to present them?**
- **Are you in the loop?**

Security at work comes from being able to manage how people treat you and your ideas. Whether at the very top of the organization or farther down the ladder, the politically astute stay in touch with what is going on around them and communicate with others in ways that align their goals with those in power or soon to be in power. They make it their business to know a great deal about the systems in which they work, the common views that define those systems, as well as loopholes in those common views, and the kinds of behavior considered controversial. They know how to talk so that others are compelled to listen. Well in advance of any serious conflict, they develop an arsenal of options and

a corral of connections that can help make those options possible. The magic in being politically savvy lies in advance work, not in fancy strategies. You have to learn to be on the lookout for situations that could be harmful to your career. Skilled politicians have multiple antennae taking in information that others overlook or discard. They go from room to room dusting for fingerprints, asking questions when others don't. You have to know what makes the people with whom you're dealing tick. Politics is often associated with power as if they're one and the same. People pay attention to those they perceive to be powerful.

CHAPTER TWO

POLITICAL INTUITION

Intuition is about seeing more and faster ahead than others. Truly effective politicians possess an uncanny sense of their surroundings. Small nonverbal moves, changes in the direction of talk, and momentary emotional expressions do not escape them. Information that seems peripheral to most people is often pivotal for the intuitive, whether on a basketball court, or in a critical business meeting.

Intuition, political or otherwise, is a skill possessed by a minority of people who approach communication attentively. They are high-level thinkers who take little for granted and avoid the common tendency to slip into destructive patterns. More importantly, these people are far less predictable than the rest of us. Developing intuition requires an ability to observe patterns and openness to many types of information, including emotional cues. They've simply learned to perform "gut checks." When they sense something awry, they do not dismiss their hunches—they stop and ask if something is awry. Intuitive people take in information from a variety of sources (e.g. words, gestures, tone of voice, environment) and process it in more advanced ways than other people. These observations generate more choices and open more doors for effective communication.

Political Advantage #1

Political intuition is not uncanny clairvoyance, but rather uncanny attentiveness to what others say and how they act.

If you're politically intuitive, you'll sense when a policy change is afoot because of your attentiveness to clues that others miss. You'll know before others when people are lying, wiggling out of a commitment, setting you up for a fall, covering their backs, or making themselves look good at your expense. Once you develop a political early warning system, it will be hard to get much by you. Your political antennae will be on high alert and ready to take in important information.

People who are politically naïve have few, if any, antennae. They walk around unconsciously letting life happen to them. They're pushed and pulled through life because they're so often blindsided by events that politically astute people anticipate. They simply don't see political disaster coming.

Taking Little At Face Value

You can't develop political intuition without adopting an inquisitive approach to your dealings with people. You can't believe, as so many people do, the last thing you heard just because it was the most recent.

Politically intuitive people ask lots of questions.

- Why do you think that?
- Have you considered other options?
- Is there more here than meets the eye?
- Are there alternative ways to look at this?

They don't react before observing and thinking about multiple ways that a situation might be interpreted. They take an inordinate interest in people, not simply because they're more considerate or curious than the rest of us, but because they've trained themselves to learn before judging, to consider before acting.

How Can You Get That Way?

Develop a red-flag alert that warns them when they're doing more telling than asking, or more assuming than inquiring. When you become aware that you're making snap judgments or failing to ask enough questions, STOP!!

- Substitute questions for assumptions when speaking with people
- Ask about them
- Find out what they think, as opposed to what you assume they think

Try this with someone you know well, whose intentions you usually judge quite quickly. The next time you speak with that person, try to see them in a new way. Take an interest in their perspective, not what you assume it to be. You may discover you don't know them at all.

Make an inquisitive approach a part of your style. Speed in decision making is rarely as important as having enough information. Learning how to get additional and crucial information without getting sidetracked is critical in the development of political intuition.

Most people enter into negotiation and politics role plays thinking of what they are going to tell the other person rather than what they are going to ask.

Questions are a politician's secret weapon, underused by novices, used often and

effectively by experts.

- What would you have done differently now that you know that that didn't work?
- What was learned from that failure?
- Was any aspect of that experience successful?

Learning How Things are Done Around Here

Those who've been around for a while might know, for example, that a discussion at a departmental meeting has likely been preceded by a backroom discussion involving a few key people. In such cases, entering into the discussion thinking your comments actually might make a difference is politically naïve. If you want to make a difference, make your contributions earlier.

Increase your master of Pattern Recognition:

Learn to interpret events in an "if-then" fashion. In other words, in the past, when X happened, was it usually followed by Y or Z? Make it your mission to find out what your coworkers did before getting a raise or getting fired.

Questions to Ask:

- **Are there people I can speak to who will help me get promoted?**
- **When and how should the idea of my being promoted be advanced?**
- **Whose toes should I avoid stepping on?**

Read Between the Lines

The first step in learning to read between the lines is to recognize that communication operates on two levels of meaning:

Content and Relational

- **Content** meaning refers to what is actually said.
- **Relational** meaning refers to what is said, or more often implied, regarding the relationship between the persons involved. It is difficult to read meaning into a conversation because people engage in myriad forms of deception on both levels. From a very early age we are discouraged from being completely honest in our communication. This indirectness is more prevalent in some cultures than in others, but it exists everywhere.

As social beings, we cannot afford to say whatever is on our minds. As a result we cloak demands in the guise of advice, criticism in the robe of constructive guidance. Learn to recognize when a disconnect exists between what is said and what is meant.

How about the Phrases:

- **You've done quite a job here**
- **You certainly came on strong in that meeting**
- **No one should mess with you**

Ways to Respond if you are Unsure of the Meaning:

- I'm not sure that I completely understand what you're saying.
- Should I take what you said to mean that I need to change my ways?

Email Communications:

Difficult to sort out the difference between a bad day and an intentionally offensive message

Phrases to Check it Out:

I noticed some tension in your last email. Is there something wrong? OR
My apologies for the abrupt tone in responding last time. I was distracted by six phone calls in a row.

Emails:

The "send them a rose" strategy – rather than responding in kind if someone attacks you, smooth the waters of dissention with kind words. Addressing attacks just breathes life into them.

Emails, unlike conversation, are permanent and subject to considerable misinterpretation. It's wise to use them cautiously in politically delicate situations.

Lies and Big Lies

Unfortunately, dishonesty is frequent in human interactions. When someone important leaves the company, a memo may be circulated that mentions he or she left to spend more time with family or seek opportunities in another field. However, more often than not, the person is leaving because of a falling out with someone higher-up.

Empathy

Psychologist Carl Rogers defined empathy as "entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person." Empathy comes from the Greek work *empathia*, which means an active appreciation of another person's

emotional experience.

Unlike sympathy which involves feeling sorrow or concern for someone, empathy requires a journey beyond our own thinking into the mental and emotional processes of others. The political advantage to those who can empathize effectively is a deep understanding of how another person thinks and feels.

“If I were her, how would I feel right now?”

Political Advantage #2

Developing empathy for the benefit of political advantage starts with an interest in other people, what they have to say and how they think and feel.

Empathy is not about judging people, it's about exploring their behavior. We suspend the very human tendency to pass judgment on others when we attempt to get to know them through empathy. After we check our understanding for accuracy, it then becomes a bridge from one person to another. Empathy provides a two-part advantage – one of understanding why another person sees an issue as he or she does, and another of being able to predict what that person is likely to do next.

High level political skill requires empathy.

- **Listen and learn. Become one of those rare people who has a deep interest in what people have to say, who want to know what really makes others tick.**
- **Ask questions you've neglected to ask in the past.**
- **Probe into the details of someone's perceptions. Note that doing this is extraordinarily difficult.**
- **Don't judge or infer, even though you've become trained to do so. Spend an entire morning practicing empathy.**

Finding the Inside Track

Learning how other people think is a lot easier when you're on “the inside track.” When you are, access to information from those higher up is much more readily available. Once you prove yourself a trustworthy handler of information, you'll find yourself on this track. So the first step is to become connected to at least one person who seems to know how your company works. Try to visit an important person at least once a day, but don't waste their time. Offer your assistance on a project he/she is working on and indicate your willingness.

Developing a political advantage at work means knowing where to find the knowledge you need to become intuitive. It calls for sharpening of observations and openness to information previously blocked by faulty assumptions.

Ask yourself these questions to see how much you know about your organization:

- **In your organization, who talks to whom and when?**
- **Who talks first, for how long? What are their agendas?**
- **Who are the insiders?**
- **What are their views and what stories do they share about the organization?**
- **How do the people around you get things done?**
- **What are their motives and attitudes toward work issues?**
- **Whose side are they on—and is it your?**
- **What inconsistencies have they demonstrated in their words and behaviors?**
- **What types of behaviors are rewarded and by whom?**
- **What organizational fictions are passed around and what happens to people who buy into them?**
- **Your company probably has an inside track. Are you on it?**

Answering these questions will help you take strong steps forward in your development of political intuition.

CHAPTER THREE

POLITICAL INSIGHT

Intuition may be indispensable to political acumen, but it only provides a sense of what is about to happen. Knowing what to do once you have this sense calls for a different skill: political insight.

Insightful ideas are ones that seem to get to the core of an issue in novel, interesting ways. Skillful politicians don't settle for simplistic responses to problems when the potential outcomes could have significant effects on their futures. They don't allow themselves to slip into old patterns of thinking. They stretch themselves to identify responses that are beyond the norm. Skillful politicians train themselves to think outside the box, to use common business vernacular.

Insight, like creativity, is 99 percent perspiration and 1 percent inspiration.

Receptivity to novel ways of thinking and the development of a kind of personal brainstorming in the search for a solution are they keys to insightfulness. A willingness to let the subconscious mind inform the conscious is critical. Researchers believe that insight depends on chance combinations of thought processes below the threshold of awareness. Insight experts believe that the mind can subconsciously transform ideas in ways that enable "Aha!" experiences once they are brought to the conscious level and combined with more conscious thought. Insightful people possess an ability that allows the subconscious to cue the conscious mind to think in novel ways. Insight does not occur in isolation, but is often brought on by social interactions.

Here are a few tactics to facilitate your development of insightfulness:

- **Read biographies for insights**
- **Observe how more savvy persons communicate at meetings**
- **Pay attention to how their memos read**
- **Notice how they related to people**
- **Understand how they use power and formulate connections.**

When confronted with a political problem insightful people have an advantage. They can reconstruct their goals or keep their original goals while coming up with novel means of achieving them. Where everyone else is expecting them to take one approach, the politically skilled often take another because they are versatile in their thinking. They make themselves unpredictable because they don't allow themselves to slip into limited reasoning habits.

Flexibility in thinking is especially important in highly and pathologically political environments. Much of what goes on in these types of organizations involves less than up-front behavior. If you're predictable in highly political organizations or divisions or during negotiations, you're a sitting duck. People will soon know what gets you upset, what will lead you to do something rash, and how to sabotage your career, if they have it in their minds to do so. Survival in highly politicized arenas requires versatility of action – an extensive repertoire of possible responses to a wide variety of potential situations.

How To Develop Versatility

One of the best ways to become a more versatile thinker is what author Tony Buzan calls “**mind mapping.**”

Mind mapping is a technique for expanding thought, for encouraging insights. The way to use mind mapping is to identify a number of potential options and then to omit ones that seem too risky or ill-advised in the political climate in which you work.

- **Paper clip analogy**
- **Mind mapping copies**

Steps Chart (multiple option kind of thinking, whether using a mind map or merely writing down possible steps, to encourage insightful solutions):

- **Identify your primary goals**
- **Pick the goals most pressing or most important to you**
- **Develop a set of options (perhaps using a mind map approach)**
- **Go over each option, considering the political upsides and downsides**
- **Consider whether you might want to respond (if there are political downsides)**
- **Discuss your options with a mentor or coach familiar with the political climate.**
- **Revise your options**
- **Select the one that will most likely help you achieve your primary goals**

Nurturing Your Insightfulness

Ask people who know you well to describe how you tend to solve problems. Ask for some examples, but be ready for some information you've successfully avoided hearing for some time. Then take what you've learned and try to approach problem solving differently.

Political novices are myopic; they see only their own perspective.

Political Advantage #4

Of all the skills important to the development of political intelligence or ingenuity, the ability to see things as others do is paramount.

The primary job of any politician, whether in business or government, is to expand on his or her view of a significant event or project in an effort to find the place where many points of view converge.

Learning how you solve problems should allow you to see whether your perceptions differ from people important to your progress.

- **Do you see problems from only one vantage point?**
- **Or do you see a point of convergence (or preferably a zone of convergence) between you and your coworkers?**
- **Are you fully aware not only of what they think but also of how they think?**

Framing

Framing is an important strategy in persuasion. It refers to the manner in which people position themselves and their surroundings. A framing effect happens in communication when a speaker defines a situation in a particular way in an attempt to persuade those listening go accept his or her point of view. Often frames are metaphors, images or words effectively used to create impressions. (her example of the Northridge earthquake as an adventure –framing it for her children in a way that allowed them to be relaxed as opposed to fearful)

- Skilled negotiators often frame their preferred options in terms of gains, a frame that influences others to accept those options. They also tend to frame options they do not prefer as losses.
- Framing involves presenting key issues in ways that will elicit the responses you desire from other people.
- Example: A negotiator might describe a difficult negotiation as an opportunity for us to find the common ground or a chance for us to make a good working relationship a greater one.
- What one person describes as a fight can be reframed by another as a disagreement on issue, thereby making the interaction less persona.

- A person who seems stubborn to some may appear determined or persistent to others. Simply by framing the same behavior differently, very different outcomes can result.
- Insights and frames are ways of reorganizing perceptions. Insights usually emerge after considerable study of a problem. Frames are used to set parameters on a situation and to convince others of which actions are reasonable and which are unreasonable.
- Insights can be converted to frames to facilitate expression. For example, if a manager is faced with a significant problem, but after careful study and a chance to step back and think, has the insight to see that his “problem” is actually an advantage, he might convey this new view to his boss using a frame. He might explain that the obstacle they fear most, perhaps competition, is actually the incentive they need to drive them to greater success. Rather than dread the competition, the manager might say, we should welcome and even encourage it – if we are up to the challenge.

CHAPTER FOUR

ADVANCE WORK AND GETTING GOOD ON YOUR FEET

Effective politicians examine a situation to determine whether they should use political strategies and tactics before an event (i.e. an important meeting), during the event—or both. They're experts at advance work, in other words, they know how to create conditions ahead of time that facilitate their ultimate goals, in the same way that Yankee Stadium's original designers drew the outfield to suit Babe Ruth's strengths as a hitter.

Thinking on Your Feet

Advance work is only half the battle when presenting ideas in politically adept ways. Thinking well on your feet is critical. Thinking on your feet is about keeping yourself from slipping into easy answers and old habits when a fresh approach might work better.

People often think of what they think they should have said at some point throughout the work day only when they're driving home from work; but of course, it's already too late. When you learn how to think strategically, you can jump into the fray and walk away with everything you want—or pretty close.

The use of advance political strategies involves arranging conditions or managing perceptions that will favor a preferred agenda. Such actions include:

- Getting to know people who can be helpful in certain regards
- Meeting with these people before taking an important action
- Floating trial balloons (testing out an idea by mentioning it or a portion of it to see how people respond)
- Performing impression management to advance an agenda
- Anticipating and preparing to deal with obstacles

Thinking and Acting on Your Feet

Operating on your own feet at work means being able to employ offensive and defensive tactics. A few examples of on-your-feet political acumen include:

- **Having a sense of whether to confront a situation head-on or let time heal wounds**

- **Knowing whether to call in heavy artillery in the form of powerful supporters**
- **Asking a politically sensitive friend how to make amends with someone you've offended**
- **Recognizing when to apologize**
- **Providing an excuse that's acceptable in your company's culture if your behavior is questioned**

Constructive vs. Destructive Approaches

Both advance work and on-your-feet strategies can be of two forms: **Constructive and Destructive.**

Constructive politicians do not attempt to dupe or backstab their opponents, nor do they use traps or spies. The political strategies are largely up front. In terms of advance work, constructive politics include such things as:

- **Creating a positive impression** - assuring that key people find you interesting and approachable
- **Positioning** – being in the right place at the right time
- **Cultivating mentors** – locating experienced advisors
- **Lining up the ducks** – making strategic visits to strategic peers, senior people, and support staff at which you mention your accomplishments and let them know what you can do for them
- **Developing your favor bank** – favors usually require reciprocation; by agree to – or even offering – favors, you make “deposits” in anticipation that someday, when you need to call in a chit, you have the “currency” to do so

Destructive politics include:

- **Poisoning the well** – fabricating negative information about others, dropping defaming information into conversation and meetings in the hope of ruining the target's career changes
- **Faking left while going right** – leading others to believe you will take one action in order to increase the likelihood of succeeding via an entirely different maneuver; allowing or encouraging someone to think one condition exists when in reality another condition holds
- **Deception** – lying, for whatever reason
- **Entrapment** – steering or manipulating someone into a political position or action that results in embarrassment, failure, discipline, or job loss

Destructive political tactics are at best indirect and at worst downright malicious.

CHAPTER FIVE

PERSUASION

Are you Persuasive?

(Page 110-1)

- Do you know how to make your views interesting to other people?
- When you are attempting to persuade someone, do you effectively adapt your manner of speaking to the task and type of person with whom you're dealing?
- Do you have a good sense of how high to set your goals when you are trying to influence someone's thoughts or actions?
- Can you sense the best time to attempt to change someone's mind on an issue that's important to you?
- When you've been persuaded of something, do you know what strategies were used?
- When an important conversation goes off track, do you know how to turn it to your favor?
- When conflict occurs, can you handle it in ways that advance your cause?
- Are you conscious of your word choices when attempting to persuade someone?
- Can you make your most important comments and actions memorable to others?
- Can you support your ideas with reasons that others find compelling?

- **Do you know how to say no gracefully?**
- **Do you know how to use gestures and expressiveness to increase your persuasiveness?**

CHAPTER SIX

POLITICAL POWER

In his 1951 book, White Collar, C. Wright Mills candidly disparaged the road to advancement in organizations of that time:

Now the stress is on agility rather than on ability, on “getting along, in a context of associates, superiors, and rules, rather than “getting ahead” across an open market; on who you know rather than what you know; on techniques of self display and the generalized knack of handling people. But the most important single factor is “personality,” which commands attention...by charm....force of character, or...demeanor...

Accomplishment without personality is unfortunate...Personality without industry is undesirable. Getting ahead becomes a continual selling job...You have a product and that product is yourself.

Power is gained and lost because of communication – the means by which power is developed, exercised, maintained, diminished, and destroyed. Communication expert Klaus Krippendorff explains that people often become trapped by their perceptions of power balances—perceptions that could change if they would realize that power is not an object, but rather is defined in the course of relating to someone. In other words, if you feel powerless, it is likely because you’ve allowed someone else to have too much power. Even if someone has a better title than you, it doesn’t necessarily follow that he also should hold all the power in the relationship. If you have too little power, it’s time to take some back.

Assessing Your Power

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- Do you study how power is established and used where you work?
- Do you take steps to establish your credibility with others rather than assuming your work will do it for you?
- Have you established yourself as the one to go to in terms of specific types of knowledge?
- Are you skilled at making people feel good about working for or with you?
- Can you use words in ways that convey a sense of confidence and power?
- Do you make sure that your energy isn’t devoted to small issues?

Become a Student of Power

Start assessing your power base. The chart (Power Crafting and Maintaining Strategies), lists five primary avenues to power and examples of strategies to enhance effectiveness in each. Some of the strategies are deceptive; most of them can be made deceptive. Obviously a good many of these means of securing and maintaining power are distasteful. But you need to know they exist and recognize when they're being used to your disadvantage. At times, you may need to use some of them yourself. Many of these strategies are smart rather than devious, if not taken too far.

Keeping Up Appearances

Do people respect, trust, even admire you?

If they do, you have likely made good impressions on them. If they don't, there are ways you can learn to better manage people's perceptions of you.

It pays to ask yourself the extent to which appearances matter where you work.

- **Do those in power dress the part?**
- **Do their offices look like they are leaders or followers?**
- **Do they have charisma – a kind of attractiveness of appearance, style, humor – that sets them apart?**

Power-Crafting and Maintaining Strategies¹

Appearances

- **Impression management:** Craft your reputation
- **Surroundings:** Attend to the decor of your office/work area
- **Credibility:** Aim to get the respect, trust, confidence of your coworkers
- **Commitment:** Be busy and in demand, but don't appear overwhelmed
- **Charisma:** Be charming and humorous
- **Value:** Link what you do to company/division goals

Relationships

- **Attraction:** make people feel good about working with or for you
- **Similarity:** Be like "the duck" in some important way, or care about what he/she cares about
- **Favor bank:** Remember the value of reciprocity
- **Mentors;** Seek out advisors
- **Connections:** Get to know people in power who can be helpful to your career

¹ (Pages 144-145)

Communication

- **Information control:** Use caution when giving information to others
- **Conversation management:** Avoid dysfunctional habits, and going off track
- **Style management:** Adjust your style to facilitate communication
- **Open to input:** Do more listening than telling
- **Face Work:** Avoid causing other people to lose “face”
- **Flexibility:** Remain open to creative ways to achieve your goals

Structural Power

- **Job status:** Assess the power of your position and ask yourself where your career is headed
- **Limit access:** Be a team player but don't tell everyone everything you're thinking
- **Rewarding allies:** Be sure to thank people who help you, and remember to help them, too
- **Selective availability:** Help out, but don't be available all the time

Knowledge Power

- **Keep learning:** Never stop learning from people at every level of the organization
- **Recognize “Regimes of Truth”:** Identify philosophies that guide choices in your organization and learn to work with or circumvent them
- **Be where knowledge emerges:** Locate information sources and be around them
- **Create knowledge dependence:** Find out what areas of expertise those in power look for and learn about them or connect what you do already to their needs

Communication – Using Words in Powerful Ways

Communication is vital to developing power. Daily conversations at work can form the building blocks of eventual power. What you say to other people will help determine whether they view you as powerful or powerless. What you say also will influence whether or how much others will exert themselves to help you. Communication is the vehicle to get your ideas where you want them to be heard and appreciated.

- **Are you really listening at work, hearing not only what is said but also what is implied?**
- **When there's ambiguity, do you investigate before taking any steps that might put you in peril?**
- **Are you an information outsider, and are there things you've done to make it that way?**

Face-Work

In the course of everyday exchanges, people can cause others to lose esteem unless they engage in what Erving Goffman calls “face work”. This term refers to types of

communication designed to create support or challenge a certain course. “Face” isn’t a trait that we carry around; it’s socially created in each interaction. The German poet Johan Wolfgang von Goethe once said, “You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him.”

Face-work consists of strategies that avoid threat to your own face or someone else’s. Changing topic to avoid contentiousness, phrasing remarks carefully or ambiguously to avoid affront, and repairing a previous offense are all forms of face-work.

One of the most important political strategies you can learn is how to say “No” in ways that don’t threaten the face of the person making the request. Far too many people in business take on tasks they shouldn’t merely because they don’t know how to say “No” graciously.

Here are some ways to decline graciously:

- **This sounds very interesting, but I have to decline unless you know a way to get some of these other projects off my desk.**
- **I truly wish I could say yes, but at this particular time, I can’t.**
- **You’d want me to be honest because this project requires someone who can commit time. That’s the one thing I don’t have right now.**
- **I want to help. So keep me in mind to help in some other ways when I get through with this stuff.**
- **I gave this a lot of consideration and if I could help I would.**
- **I wouldn’t even consider saying yes if anyone but you had asked. So, if you really want me to help on this, we need to find someone to take on two tasks that are really draining my time.**

Henry Kissinger once revealed that it was his policy to refuse, initially, every invitation or offer of which he was uncertain. Then, if he changed his mind, it was easier to go back and accept the offer or proposal than it would have been to extricate himself from a hasty acquiescence. It’s wise to learn to say no, or you’ll be forever stuck doing what you don’t want to do or trying to exit situations where few gracious exits exist.

Here are some ways to disagree in an agreeable fashion:

- **I agree with what you’re saying, but my opinion differs somewhat in what we should do about it.**
- **Something you said earlier is actually closer to the way I’m looking at this now.**

- **Do you mind if I ask a question or two about this plan?**
- **We agree on 95% of this. It's just that stubborn 5% that we need to work out.**
- **Your reasons are so compelling that I don't see how anyone can disagree, but I do have concerns.**
- **I now see what you mean and I agree in principle. In practice I have one recommendation.**

CHAPTER EIGHT

POSITIVE POLITICS

Developing Your Political Compass

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As a first step in developing your political compass think about how you'd handle the following situations, keeping mind the virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, and compassion. People often do nothing in response to ethical dilemmas because they haven't developed a repertoire of responses.

Practicing with the following scenarios is a start, although they're generic and so may not reflect the climate in which you work. Feel free to modify the suggested solutions so long as you remember that each is intended to avoid negative politics.

Situation 1 **Credit Snatching**

You just watched your boss present one of your ideas as if it were her own. What do you do?

Consider if this is the first time your boss has done this. If it is, then there's a chance it was an oversight. It's important to separate offense from insult at work. We'll all offend each other now and then. Accidental offenses call for a gentle reminder or even overlooking the offense. But if you tell your boss she's offended you and she does it again, then you've been insulted. This requires a stronger response. If your boss often steals your ideas, you need to have a heart-to-heart with her. Find out what she expects of you. If she defines your job simply as making her look good and you can't live with, get out your résumé. Check your options. If you have other options, you'll be approaching the situation from a position of strength.

Situation 2 **"It'll Ruin Your Career" Threat**

You've been told that standing up to one of your peers, who on several occasions has attempted to publicly demean you, could ruin your career. Apparently he knows a lot of people in high places, and he's vindictive. The latest incident occurred after you misstated the delivery date for your team's project. Your detractor smirked and shook his head as if to say "There you go again making mistakes." He then said "Shy do you bother coming if you can't adequately prepare? You don't even know when we're supposed to have this project completed. You shouldn't be in a leadership role on this

project if you don't know what's going on.”

Situation 3
Targeting

You know that your boss, whom you don't really respect, is out to get someone you do respect. Should you let that person know?

Situation 4
Scapegoating

You receive an email copied to all project team members describing your work as “below expectations.” You realize that you're taking the fall for mistakes made by people in the project's inner circle – a dangerous clique whose members likely colluded in the creation of this email.

Situation 5
Patronizing

Someone senior to you by one level dismisses what you say at meetings with a sneer and a laugh. She verbally belittles your contributions and tries, with some success, to bring others into the game.

Situation 6
The Double Bind

You can't seem to please your boss. You did what he said would get you a promotion, but now he tells you that kind of work is no longer valued. He says he sympathizes with you but he's powerless. The people upstairs call the shots.

Situation 7
Lording

You work for someone who makes everything a power issue. Any requests you make are subject to what h/she calls “evaluation.” What she means is you're not going to get what you want unless you demonstrate loyalty, even on simple requests.

Situation 8
Embedded Spies

A colleague invited you to lunch and spent the whole time pumping you for information.

Situation 9
Gossiping

You confide in someone you thought was trustworthy about a problem in your personal

life, and now you find that s/he used that information to raise his value with a more senior person. The impression he created is that you're distracted.

Situation 10 **Belittling**

A colleague of yours is predictable, in that he takes advantage of any opportunity to put you down at meetings or in small gatherings. He derives considerable pleasure from making you feel uncomfortable and, you believe, derives some power from it as well. Others appear to look to you for a comeback that will put him in his place, but you prefer to bring the conversation back to the business at hand. You're afraid that if you gave him what he deserves, you might go too far, and that, in your opinion, is worse than saying nothing.

A Few Tips for Leaning Toward Positive Politics

Positive Politics Guidelines

- **Have you check your assumptions about what the other person intended?**
- **When you're trying to determine someone's intent, do you use a telling or an asking approach?**
- **What exactly do you want to change?**
- **What exactly do you want from the other person?**
- **What can you give in return?**
- **How will you avoid placing blame when you want to move toward a constructive outcome?**
- **What events or issues of a delicate nature might you have to discuss, and how will you do so in a constructive way?**
- **Or will you initially frame what you have to say (as an idea, a disagreement, a suggestion, etc.)?**
- **Are you ready for what he or she might say that could derail you?**
- **Is there someone you both respect who might be of assistance in working through the issue?**
- **How will you constructively elicit such help?**
- **What steps will you take to keep any and all discussion on target? Might some diversions be constructive?**
- **Can you make this a win-win situation?**
- **What follow-up steps will both of you take?**
- **What stopgap measures will you develop to ensure that this kind of situation doesn't arise again?**

Value System

If more companies were to approach the development of value systems as a process that requires ongoing discussion, organizational values implementation would be more successful. The document produced would be a living one. Before beginning the process of developing political guidelines, organization leaders should ask themselves and the people who work for them these questions:

- **What biases do we bring to the subject of politics or any value system?**
- **What matters to us and therefore may shape what we decide is right or wrong?**
- **Who should be involved in this discussion so that the product that emerges is not foreign to those whose behaviors will be guided by it?**
- **How can we ensure that the product is a living one responsive to the needs of the organization and its people rather than one imposed on both with no room for revision?**