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Early in my professional career, I felt that office politics or leaders who were highly political in their motives and actions were detrimental to the morale and success of an organization. Then I became a leader and learned some valuable lessons about politics.

Initially, I avoided politics at all costs because I didn’t want to be perceived as a kiss-up or as someone who accommodated kiss-ups. Although this stance won me some loyal followers, in time, my department would lose out on resources and funding which ultimately went to leaders who were more political than I was. That’s when I realized that being a renegade-maverick type of a leader was more or less self defeating for me and my team.

Therefore, I began engaging in some degree of politics but did it in a manner that wasn’t very obvious. I learned that effective leadership requires the ability to master the illusion of not playing politics (but behind the scenes really is).

Dr. Anthony F. Smith, co-founder and managing director of the Leadership Research Institute, wrote in his book *The*

Politics all the way!

Taboos of Leadership: “The political leader knows how to stack the deck, play the right cards, build solid alliances, triangulate issues, and isolate those with conflicting points of view.” No leader achieves goals without playing politics in one way, shape or form.

Politics can be something as simple as agreeing to let a competing manager borrow something you have control over or giving someone else extra time to complete a task of which you are the main authority or decision maker. Regardless what it may be, it can’t hurt to help someone if you can do it at little-to-no cost, even if it’s someone you don’t like or feel is undeserving of your favor. Some day, when you need it most, the favor could very well be returned.

One time, when I had the unenviable task of relocating a community college headquarters complex, I had to compete with other division managers for contractors’ time and resources as well as for corporate funding. By agreeing to let contractors stage their equipment in some of my facilities, giving them extra time on a few tasks, or giving them a head start on other tasks, they, in-turn, began taking care of my needs

before the needs of others. This enabled me to complete the community college move several months ahead of schedule, saving over a million dollars in logistics costs.

Politics is mainly about creating win-win situations for all parties involved. “Scratching each other’s backs when we need it” is what a wise Air Force Chief once said to me about office politics. The Chief always had someone he could call in a pinch--when his back was against the wall. And the person he called always came through for him in the clutch. Why? Because the Chief always came through for them in prior situations. And of course it helped that the Chief garnered much respect for his integrity and support.

To be a successful leader, you will have to engage in politics in one form or another. Don’t put up a wall around you and your team or some day when you eventually tear the wall down, there’ll be nothing on the other side of it. If you can help someone by granting their simple request without jeopardizing yourself, your resources, or your people, then help them!

~ The End ~