



Politics all the way!

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DEAR CHIEF: I hate office politics. People are always trying to coax me into agreements for their benefit and I get asked all the time to try and coax others for my department’s benefit. I don’t do any of it because I feel it is unethical and hurts morale. As far as I’m concerned, politics is for politicians, not leaders. Can you write a column about the ineffectiveness of being political?

SICK OF POLITICS



DEAR SICK OF POLITICS: I’d like to agree with you but I can’t. I used to feel the same way as you until I learned some valuable lessons about what happens when I don’t try to engage in some degree of office politics. There was a time when 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 is when I learned 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 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. 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 both 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.

I recommend you reconsider your stance on office politics. 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 outside of it. If you can help someone by granting their simple request without jeopardizing yourself, your resources, or your people, then help them!



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