



Deciphering the Organizational Culture and Developing Political Savvy

BY JANET BICKEL, MA

After completing training at State Medical College, you've just arrived at Prestigious Medical Center, eager to create an innovative program with the also-new center director. You're shocked at how different the terrain is at Prestigious, including many unimagined landmines and hoops. There seem to be more street fighters and financial warriors than team players, and as an optimist used to doing "what should be done," you often feel like a golden retriever puppy repeatedly colliding with Godzilla.

Preferring to focus on advancing science, patient care, and education, most physicians and scientists find political considerations distracting and enervating. Political savvy isn't part of their training and is rarely even referred to. Yet surrounded by competing interests, faculty who lack political skills will not reach their potential and risk getting trampled by those who know the ins and outs of the system.

'How We Do Things Around Here'

Political skills depend on a keen appreciation of organizational culture. Extensive and stable, an organization's culture represents its accumulated learning—its ways of perceiving and acting that have made it successful. Understanding "how we do things around here" in a complicated system takes time—it may even be easier to decipher the culture of a country than that of most academic health centers (AHCs). When it comes to power relations and control of resources, important features are often invisible, e.g., behind-the-scenes alliances. Culture also tends to be invisible in the same way that water is to fish: it's taken for granted.

Although the new faculty orientation may cover lots of the written rules and other salient facts, no one is going to define the culture for you. But a newcomer might take advantage of the situation and seek infor-

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mation directly from senior members by asking, for example: What is our primary mission? Are our immediate goals aligned with the mission? Have you learned anything recently to change your thinking about our goals? How much focus is on immediate priorities and how much on where we are headed? If framed not as a challenge but as evidence of your commitment, no one can blame you for wanting to understand.

More indirect methods are also necessary. Think of yourself as an anthropologist or an investigative reporter: Every interaction is a chance to gather clues about, for instance, the level of formality and directness preferred, who is respected and why, and whether diversity is valued or just paid lip service to.

Other parameters on which to collect observations include:

- ❖ How are relationships defined hierarchically?
- ❖ How is conflict dealt with?
- ❖ How diverse are the leadership and key committees?
- ❖ How do colleagues socialize with each other? Are efforts made to be inclusive?
- ❖ Do products mainly reflect group or individual effort? If teamwork is espoused, how is it evaluated?
- ❖ Do faculty feel supported?
- ❖ Is there sufficient trust for employees to give constructive criticism to their bosses?
- ❖ Are employees expected to keep family issues private?

- ❖ Is face time more important than productivity?
- ❖ What is "undiscussable"?

Write down your observations and questions both to bounce off trusted colleagues and to analyze your emotional reactions (e.g., what have I observed that disturbed me and why?) and your failures and successes (e.g., what's turning out particularly well and how can I increase my impact?).

Don't overlook published sources of information about the culture, e.g., employee newsletters, annual reports, alumni magazines. Add *Harvard Business Review* to the journals you regularly look at. And stay current with events and trends affecting your AHC by scanning, for example, *Modern Healthcare* and AAMC's Web site.

Overcoming Blind Spots and Myopia

Becoming more observant, asking acute questions, and testing the results are critical but insufficient. Everyone tends to overrely on his or her area of expertise (e.g., discipline) and his or her preferred learning style, thereby missing important perspectives. For example, individuals who prefer quantitative assessments may miss crucial information about peoples' feelings, and those who attend best to observable data may lack the imagination to glimpse trends and the "big picture." So it's important to compensate for these blind spots and discipline-induced myopia by teaming and consulting with individuals who can offer other perspectives.

Another kind of blindness results from considering only one interpretation of events and processes. "Reframing" involves looking at events through multiple lenses to select the most effective action or response. Bolman describes four frames based on very different metaphors: structural (factory/

machine), human resources (family), political (jungle) and symbolic (temple/theater). Very briefly, structural frames focus on technical qualities and ignore what falls outside the rational. A human resources perspective assumes a hunger for growth and collaboration. A political lens captures the dynamics of ambition and uncertainty but may reinforce conflict and mistrust. A symbolic frame offers insights into organizational values.

Let's say, for instance, after not seeing eye-to-eye with the dean, an associate dean goes above his boss to the provost. Although the associate dean was seeking the most efficient, collaborative solution, the dean interpreted this action as inappropriate in every way—structurally (outside the chain of command), politically (interfering with the dean's relationship with the provost), and symbolically (the associate dean demonstrated he is not a "team player").

"Facts" are really social interpretations based on what we expect and want the world to be like. Where we sit colors, if not determines, what we see. When we try to make the world conform to our internal map, we apply a simplistic mental model to a complicated system. Too often, for instance, faculty imagine that the importance of their goals is self-evident and that their goals are shared. Appreciating how many legitimate, competing goals the AHC contains can prevent overusing any one interpretation and getting trapped in unrealistic expectations.

Constructive Politics

How can you more effectively get things done in this organizational maze with the least noise for the maximum benefit? Because everything gets done through people, you need to be alert to who is pivotal and why. Seek to understand the sources of their power, how they acquired it, and how they use it; that is, what unique expertise do they have? How did they achieve access to information and resources? To whom are they most loyal? What are their priorities and pressures?

In addition to these professional characteristics, what seem to be their personal needs for control, for affection, and for inclusion? How would you characterize your relationship with the person and how would he or she describe you? Do you know where you stand with the person or do you get mixed messages?

Study both verbal and nonverbal information, as people are often inconsistent, especially when seeking to bypass embarrassment or threat. Typically less controlled than the spoken word, body language can reveal a lot—for example, if the boss breaks eye contact or suddenly fidgets when you ask about that space she promised. Work to increase your emotional intelligence by becoming a student of people, their strengths, weaknesses, motivations, preferences. Look below the surface. Try making a game of predicting someone's behavior; it's satisfying when you're right and instructive when you're not.



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Constructive politics is about managing relationships so that you can achieve your goals. As outlined above, this begins with understanding others' frameworks and pressures. The next step is individualizing your approach to and your communications with key people, and if necessary adapting your message and style as needed to identify and build support for shared goals.

These skills consolidate with practice especially if you actively reflect about what you're learning—both with colleagues and privately. You might ask yourself: With whom am I not getting along? What do I contribute to the conflicts? Where have my expectations been out of line? What new information do I need? What changes can I make? What interactions have I handled badly and what might I try differently next time? You might create a document titled "Lessons Learned" in which to record mistakes you hope not to repeat and ideas for new approaches.

Political savvy doesn't come naturally to many physicians and scientists, but it is especially challenging for women and minorities to acquire. However stellar their

credentials, compared to majority men, they are more likely to feel like "outsiders" and less likely to garner effective mentoring or to be included in boardrooms or golf games. Also, while societal norms of recognition and achievement sustain men's drive, women enjoy fewer degrees of freedom in assertive and self-promoting behaviors ("she's too big for her britches"). Women compound these disadvantages when they cling to unrealistic ideals—for instance, that academia is a meritocracy and that hard work and loyalty will inevitably translate into rewards.

Take-Home Messages

Although the above outline and recommendations only skim the surface of these complex subjects, understanding a few key points can make a big difference to career success:

- ❖ Institutions do not love you back. But you can adopt a constructive and forward-looking perspective rather than dismissing organizational politics as Machiavellian games or schmoozing.
- ❖ Achieving your goals in a competitive world requires continuous adjustments to environmental complexities and demands. Political savvy involves both acquiring and testing knowledge of the organizational culture and building and maintaining relationships with key people.
- ❖ Ask questions and listen to the answers, remaining alert to and curious about nonverbal cues. Seek clarifications. Try to maintain an open stance.
- ❖ Assess your fit with the demands of your position and institution. Are you a purist in a den of street fighters? Do you prefer informal processes but work in a highly structured place? Are there important ways in which the gears don't mesh? If

Recommended Resources

1. AAMC's STAT electronic newsletter [<http://www.aamc.org/newsroom/aamcstat/aamcnews.htm>]
2. Bolman LG, Deal T. Reframing organizations: artistry, choice and leadership. Jossey-Bass, 1997.
3. Egan, G. Working the shadow side: a guide to positive behind-the-scenes management. Jossey-Bass, 1994.
4. Fisher, Roger. Getting it done: how to lead when you're not in charge. Harper, 1998.

so, realize that everything will be harder to accomplish; you may wish to consider other options.

- ❖ Identify those areas where you can achieve the most tangible progress, then work to build receptivity to shared goals.
- ❖ As isolation is death, get assistance. Build a diverse network. Especially valuable are close colleagues and allies who can help you interpret events and processes. If for whatever reason you don't have such colleagues, become more active in developing them. You might also consider hiring a coach. (The ELAM Consultation Alliance is a compilation of vetted coaches [see <http://www.drexel.edu/elam/alliance/consultation2.html>].) ❖