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**LEADING WITH POLITICAL AWARENESS:**

**Leadership across diverse interests inside and outside the organization**

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This chapter examines some current limitations of leadership theory which focuses on leadership in rather than of the organization and which underplays the skills of leading across diverse and sometimes competing interests both inside and outside the organization. We propose an alternative view of leadership which we call leading with political awareness but political astuteness, or political savvy are also expressions of this capability. The chapter is based on a large UK research project with middle and senior private, public and voluntary sector managers, which involved a literature review, focus groups with 41 managers; a survey of 1,475 managers and 12 interviews (details in Hartley et al, 2007). The chapter does not report on the empirical findings, but rather sets out some themes concerned with why leadership increasingly needs to take into account political awareness skills, the contexts where such skills are needed; how politics and therefore political awareness is conceptualised; and crucially, a framework of political skills. The chapter argues that political awareness skills raise new questions for leadership theory because the research takes into account the leadership of difference; leadership outside as well as inside the organization, and the strategic context of leadership.

### **Where is leadership happening?**

Organizational leadership theory and research has tended to focus on leadership in the organization rather than leadership of the organization (i.e.both inside and outside) and this is a limitation. Increasingly leadership activities and meaning-making take place not only inside the organization but in the networks of stakeholders and other organizations that organizational leaders have to, or choose to, interact with. The limited focus inside the organization is evident in a number of

ways, of which three are highlighted here. First, recent reviews of the field (e.g. Parry and Bryman, 2006; Storey, 2004; Burke, 2006) cover the key themes and issues in past and present leadership research but continue to focus on personal qualities and particular behaviours of leaders, set in their organizational context in terms of structures, cultures and internal processes. Yukl (2006), in his wide-ranging exposition of leadership studies, has a chapter which examines 'strategic leadership by executives' but this focuses on the organizational choices and decisions by senior managers such as chief executives, working in a context of external constraints (which take up half a page of text) and there is little sense of exercising influence outside as well as inside the organization. Kotter (1999) analysed the work of a set of American business leaders and found that they were engaged in many relationships outside as well as inside the company, but the external context is not clearly theorised.

Second, there is, of course, interest in the context of leadership, both from a contingency and situational perspective (i.e. how different situations call forth or require different leadership talents and styles and in terms of how leaders shape context or constitute their context (e.g. Grint, 2005; Storey, 2004). Yet Parry and Bryman (2006) note that there "has been little situational analysis" (p. 453) of the 'new leadership' (Bryman, 1992) approaches. Context, with some exceptions, has been analysed in terms of industry or organizational differences (e.g. Pawar and Eastman, 1997) and there has been less interest in analysing features of the environment which create the challenges for leadership (though see Leach et al, 2005; Grint, 2005). There has been some discussion of the challenges for leaders

operating in conditions of uncertainty and instability (e.g. Storey, 2004) but this is not examined in detail.

Third, the primary focus on the internal affairs of the organization is also captured in research about 'followership' and 'distributed leadership'. Followership studies are less in evidence than leadership studies (though see Collinson, 2006) but followers are generally assumed to be the subordinates of the leader, or other groups and teams within the organization. But followership is a rather passive term which includes within it an implied sense of hierarchy. What if the people to be influenced work outside the organization and hence beyond formal authority relationships, and can only be influenced through persuasion and not through formal line management? Distributed leadership is currently of considerable interest to leadership researchers, but the concept is largely about leaders developing capacity in their subordinates (e.g. Kouzes and Posner, 2007) or about leaders creating climates which empower others within the organization to act in a leadership capacity. There is less writing about leadership distributed across rather than solely within organizations (though see Hartley and Allison, 2000).

Overall, then, leadership themes by and large concentrate on leadership inside the organization, yet this chapter will argue that organizations are increasingly interdependent and therefore many of the challenges of leadership lie outside as well as inside the organization.

## **Leadership outside as well as inside the organization**

Analysis of organizational conditions shows that many forces act on organizations to make them more inter-dependent, both with other organizations and with a wide range of stakeholders in increasingly public arenas. For example, globalisation has increased global competition for private sector organizations and has raised awareness amongst consumer groups and citizens about the activities, standards and outcomes of business and government. In addition, information and communication technologies enable news to pass round the world rapidly and widely and have rendered organizations naked in that emails, mobile phone photographs and blogs can broadcast information out from the organization rapidly, to be picked up and amplified by a hungry, volatile, 24-hour news media. Furthermore, the decline of deference has led to more people questioning the activities of business and government. Individuals, and advocacy and campaigning groups take actions which can build or destroy the reputation of a company very rapidly. And more companies are developing joint ventures, strategic alliances and partnerships to share the risks of large projects (for example, in biotechnology, in the auto industry, in civil construction) which require leadership and influence beyond the boundaries of the organization. Networks and partnerships are also increasingly mandated for the public sector, both to create 'joined up government' and also to spread the risk, with the private and voluntary sectors, for major initiatives. The handling of risk has also led to a massive increase in regulation by the state of private sector activities, not only post-Enron, but also to try to ensure safety and standards in the market sector.

## **The contexts of external and internal leadership**

The research commenced with an initial scoping of contexts which may be relevant to contemporary organisations whether they are in the private, public and voluntary sectors (though possibly with different emphases and preoccupations in each broad sector). The following framework therefore captures four inter-related levels, or contexts, at which political skills may be required.

1. An understanding of the external policy context of the organisation (including aspects of competition, regulation and trade agreements, media interest and public opinion)
2. An understanding of the formal political context: how politicians (whether EU, national, devolved or local) may interact with the organisation in order to achieve outcomes of public interest and/or commercial purpose.
3. An understanding of the strategic context as expressed in interactions with partners and alliances.
4. An understanding of how power blocs and interests within the organisation may operate to achieve outcomes through mechanisms of power rather than solely through apparently rational plans and purposes.

## **Leading across diverse and sometimes competing interests**

Leadership outside as well as inside the organization requires the effective use of political skills. This is because a leader needs to be able to understand and work with a range of stakeholders, who may have diverse interests, values and goals and who may sometimes collaborate but at other times compete. This is likely to happen inside the organization as well as outside its formal boundaries. There is a need to

anticipate and shape challenges arising from diverse interests not just respond to them.

So, there is a pressing need for managers to be able to work not only with the formal institutions and representatives of the state, but also across and with a diverse range of organisations. Many managers have to work with stakeholders who advocate or lobby on behalf of consumer, pressure and political groups. Other managers may have to understand and work in a complex and dynamic environment of legislation, regulation and policy advice. A globalising world creates a range of uncertainties about world governance, national stability or local priorities which managers need to understand and take account of, and which may have unexpected or substantial repercussions which have to be addressed. The impact of politics (both formal and informal) may vary according to the sector the organisation is in, the degree to which it has a high and visible public profile, the sensitivity of some of its activities and its accountability and governance structures. However, all organisations must take account of politics, and senior and strategic managers in particular must be sensitive to the interplay of politics with organisational purpose.

A range of skills for leading in these environments is important for private sector managers as much as public or voluntary sector managers, given the complex and increasingly media-visible world in which they are located. The rising interest in corporate social responsibility, for example, means that many private firms are under increasing scrutiny from politicians and the public alike.



It would be misleading to see key context-related leadership skills as solely responsive in nature, because there are circumstances in which leaders can anticipate shifts in context and can change or at least shape elements of context. Thus, context is crucial for understanding leading with political awareness.

### **What are the politics in political awareness?**

Political awareness skills are starting to be recognised in the management academic literature as elements of effective management. However, there is still too little conceptual understanding of political skills and also sometimes a tendency to view political skills narrowly as self-interest rather than as a power-based approach to influence in the context of varied interests and motives.

The literature review was undertaken to examine contemporary management approaches to understanding politics and political awareness (Hartley and Branicki, 2006). Here, we draw on that analysis to tease out some varied threads in the concept of politics.

Within the management field, politics is generally thought to have no place within rational or fair systems of management. Most studies of organisational behaviour, or leadership development make little or no reference to politics or political behaviour. Where it is mentioned, the focus is largely on self-interested behaviour by individual managers, often with the sole objective of advancing their own power, career interests, or that of their clique. A Machiavellian perspective prevails in this perspective with motives and interests concealed, and 'spin' substituting for

substance. Politics is frequently conflated with politicking (Mintzberg, 1985) and is seen as dysfunctional for employees and for the whole organisation, with blaming, attacking, scapegoating, manipulation and exploitation seen as the main manifestations (e.g. Allen et al, 1979; Eiring, 1999). Some managers are seen to be more skilled at playing the 'organisational game' of politics than others (Baddeley and James, 1987).

This view of politics can be seen as underpinned by a 'rational choice' model of behaviour (Leftwich, 2004) whereby society, or the organisation, is seen in terms of the metaphor of the marketplace. Individuals pursue their interests in order to maximise their own benefits and minimise their own costs. Politics may be viewed as a pervasive reality of organisational life which is either managed or suppressed. Negotiation, influence and persuasion may be acceptable as rational activities, but politics is seen as seedy and disreputable; advice about how best to pursue one's interests is often covert. Politics is seen as being about winning 'turf wars' (e.g. Buchanan and Badham, 1999; Bacharach and Lawler, 1980) with the focus on the internal politics of the firm or organisation.

There have been attempts in the management literature to 'rehabilitate' politics (e.g. Butcher and Clarke, 1999) or at least to accept that organizational politics are a fact of life (Ferris, Davidson and Perrewé, 2005; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000) and to recognise that political astuteness can be valuable in achieving organizational as well as personal goals (e.g. Baddeley and James, 1987; Ammeter et al 2002).

These writings have helped to elucidate aspects of political skill (taking skill to be a broad word to cover behaviours and competencies) but have two drawbacks. They

focus on the internal affairs of the organization, and they do not cast these skills in leadership terms. The skills are largely about how to influence colleagues, bosses and subordinates for a range of purposes.

Other definitions offer a broader view of politics, both formal and informal, within and outside the organisation. In this view, politics is seen as a set of pluralistic interactions within and between individuals, groups and institutions, covering both formal and informal activities and concerned with contestation, negotiation or co-operation over the use and distribution of resources (Leftwich, 2004).

Bernard Crick's (1993) influential definition also takes a more positive view. Politics is defined as the mobilisation of support for a position, decision or action whereby "people act together through institutionalised procedures to resolve differences, to conciliate different interests and values, and to make public policies in the pursuit of common purposes" (2004: 67). While his conceptualisation was concerned with the means to resolve differences in society, this analysis can be applied to organizations and networks. The underlying purpose of politics is thus identified as being about mobilising support for particular actions by reconciling different interests and values. This approach is conceptually different from the 'politics solely as self-interest' perspective.

Overall, this brief snapshot of some of the academic literature indicates that many different definitions of politics abound. Therefore, the notion of 'managing with political awareness' is related to how politics is viewed. This research takes the view that while some researchers see politics as self-interest, this is an unnecessarily

limited view of politics, given that organisations operate in a pluralistic society, with a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups. Leading with political awareness is about leadership skills for working with stakeholders.

Political skill has been described as the ‘missing discipline’ in management selection, training and development (Butcher and Clarke 1999:12) and some studies have presented it as a key factor in successful teams (e.g. Peled 2000). Reflecting the different understandings of politics, views in the literature vary from managing the dysfunctional consequences of politics to realising the potential benefits of political behaviours.

Politics may or may not result in positive outcomes – it can be seen as an “important social influence process with the potential of being functional or dysfunctional to organisations and individuals” (Allen et al 1979:82). Either way, sensitivity to political behaviours is important. The view taken in this chapter is that the skills are value-neutral in that they may be used for individual, organisational or collective objectives. How and why such skills are used may be a matter of moral and other judgements, but our purpose in this chapter is to identify both the skills of political awareness and the contexts within which they are exercised.

### **Developing the political skills framework**

The political skills framework was a key development arising from the research and a brief explanation of its provenance is appropriate. It was developed by the authors, with contributions from other research team members. A tentative framework was

proposed, based on the initial research i.e. literature review, focus groups and discussions with the research steering board. Items for the instrument were generated from analysis of the focus group transcripts and from analysis of relevant items from the Warwick Political Leadership Questionnaire (which has been developed for those in formal political leadership roles, Hartley, Fletcher and Morrell, 2005). Over 100 items were initially generated across the 5 dimensions of the framework. Items were reduced to 50 items by reducing overlapping items and ambiguous items. The initial version of the framework was then trialled among relevant academics and practitioners and some adjustments made to item wording.

The questionnaire was piloted at the Chartered Management Institute's Annual Convention in October 2006, when the draft survey was available on-line and a research assistant was on hand to deal with any problems and record any comments. The political skills framework used an identical 6 point scale for rating of self and others, so that comparisons could be made. The data from the self rating scale was subjected to a principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation in order to validate the hypothesized model. The actual extracted components agreed very well with the proposed factors.

### **The framework's five dimensions**

**Personal skills** An essential foundation for being able to be effective in managing with political awareness is to have self-awareness of one's own motives and behaviours, and the ability to exercise self-control. It is also about being open to the views of others so that it is possible to listen and reflect on the views of others. It is

also about having a proactive disposition, initiating rather than waiting for things to happen.

To some extent, these are skills which are valuable in any effective manager and are not distinctively about political awareness. Yet understanding motives, interests and influence is central to leading with political awareness, and the personal skills are the bedrock on which other skills are built.

**Interpersonal skills** Political awareness seems to require strong interpersonal skills. These concern having the inter-personal capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of others, and getting buy-in from people over whom the person has no direct authority, and making people feel valued. These are ‘tough’ as well as ‘soft’ skills because the ability to negotiate, to stand up to pressures from other people, and to handle conflict in ways to achieve constructive outcomes are important.

Again, these skills may be viewed as core management and certainly core leadership skills, but they also constitute foundational skills for political awareness. There are some elements which go beyond direct leadership skills such as cultivating relationships which have potential rather than immediate value, and on knowing when to rely on position and authority and when to rely on less direct methods of exerting influence.

**Reading people and situations** This dimension has a strong analytical aspect to it, and is based on thinking and intuition about the dynamics which can or might occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. There is a recognition of different

interests and agendas of a variety of people and their organisations, and an interest in discerning what may be the underlying as opposed to the espoused agendas which people bring to situations. It includes thinking through the likely standpoints of varying interest groups in advance of dealing with them, and using a wider knowledge of institutions, political processes and social systems to understand what is or might happen. It also includes recognising where you may be seen as a threat to others and their interests (rightly or wrongly, because this is about the ability to view situations from other people's perspective).

This dimension concerns the power, influence and interests of different groups. This dimension is primarily concerned with analytical rather than influencing skills (influence is particularly salient in the following dimension of building alignment and alliances).

**Building alignment and alliances** This dimension is a crucial skill of action, which requires the previous elements of skill in order to be effective. Building alignment out of different interests, goals and motives requires a detailed understanding and appreciation of the context, the players and the objectives of each stakeholder, as far as these can be ascertained. Building alignment and alliances is about recognising difference and plurality of interest but being able to forge these into collaborative actions even where there are substantial differences in outlook or emphasis. This dimension goes beyond much of the literature on partnerships where finding consensus and commonality is the key skill. This dimension recognises but works with difference and with conflicts of interest in order to forge new opportunities. It builds on the proactivity of the first dimension (personal skill) in actively seeking out

alliances and partnerships rather than relying on those which are already in existence or which are expected to contribute. It includes being able to bring out into the open and deal with differences between stakeholders, not conceal them or hope that if they are ignored they will somehow go away. Tough negotiation skills (from interpersonal skills) may underpin the capacity to build a realistic and useful consensus without ending up with the lowest common denominator.

**Strategic direction and scanning** This dimension brings in the important question of purpose – what these political awareness skills are being used for. This includes two major elements. The first is a sense of strategic thinking and action in relation to organisational purpose, so that the understanding of power, interests and influence is set within a strategic aim. This includes thinking long term and having a road map of where the manager wants to go so that he or she is not diverted by short-term pressures. But the second element is about not just a focused sense of strategy but also a skill in strategic scanning – about thinking about longer-term issues which may have the potential to have an impact on the organisation. This is about not just looking at what is on the horizon but what may be over the horizon. It requires analytical capacity to think through scenarios of possible futures, to think about small changes which may herald bigger shifts in society and the economy, and being able to find ways to analyse and manage (as far as possible) the uncertainty which lies outside the organisation. This last includes being about to keep options open rather than reaching for a decision prematurely.

### **The inter-connectedness of the five dimensions**



This research suggests that an effective leader in a complex set of inter-relationships across organisations will require skills in each of these dimensions in order to show astuteness, 'nous' or political awareness. While personal and interpersonal skills are the foundation of building trust and understanding the needs and interests of other people and organisations, there is also a need for the skills of building alliances across those differences and being able to sense or interpret wider changes in the external environment which may have an impact on plans and objectives.

Thus, the five dimensions of the framework outlined above are those which the research suggests are needed by individuals to achieve outcomes in complex and dynamic settings inside and outside the organization where diverse interests are in play. We use the language of skill as a shorthand for a wide set of abilities that enable the non-specific, non-routine, discretionary and unstructured parts of the job or role to be achieved. Hirsh and Strebler (1995) describe "the skills, knowledge, experience, attributes and behaviours that an individual needs to perform a job [or role] effectively" in their definition of competency. Boyatzis (1982) argues that skills need to be set in the context both of role demands and the environment. This reinforces the conceptual approach presented here, which is that skills cannot be seen in isolation, but must be set in the context of the environment in which they are exercised.

### **Leadership with political awareness**

To what extent is this framework for the skills of political awareness just another take on leadership? Is it radically different or does it just clutter up the leadership scene with yet another framework? There are three arguments to suggest that thinking

about the leadership skills of political awareness are both distinctive and important for contemporary organizations and for research and theory.

First, the skills identified through the management literature, the political leadership literature and the focus groups and interviews are based on leadership concerned with managing differences. These may be differences in interests, goals, values and priorities across a range of stakeholders. Crick's (2004) view of politics as a means to achieve outcomes in situations where there are differences is critical to this view of politics. It means that effective leadership needs to be able to identify, reflect on and address differences in viewpoints and interests. Yet, this view of leadership as being concerned with variety and difference is not well articulated in current leadership frameworks. A number emphasise the importance of leaders creating and sustaining 'vision' (e.g. Kotter, 1999). The great interest in transformational leadership includes the capacity to enthuse others, and even the capacity to get 'followers' to identify with the leader (e.g. Avolio, 1999). The interest in emotional intelligence and leadership (e.g. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002) has emphasised skills of engaging with others, with authenticity, credibility and genuineness but with relatively little said about some harder skills of managing conflict, dealing with pressure and on occasions the need to bang heads together. Yet, Huxham and Vangen (2005) have noted that working across boundaries is not about simple consensus-building but can sometimes include the need for 'collaborative thuggery'. Summarising this point, there is a question to be raised as to whether the leadership literature has been too influenced by American-style win-win soft and positive human relations. Leadership which takes account of variety and diversity may have, on occasions, a harder edge, and be based in more pluralist

perspectives. The framework presented here for leading with political awareness is one attempt to create a leadership theory which is predicated on difference and the achievement of outcomes in spite of, or alongside of, difference.

Another way of differentiating between leadership skills and the skills of political awareness is that, while there are likely to be overlaps between them (because both require an understanding of the context, the people involved or potentially involved and task to be achieved), the political skills framework focuses on analysing and working with stakeholders and other groups through influence rather than through direct control. Working with a range of stakeholders and building alliances and coalitions means that astuteness in understanding the interests and motives of other groups and institutions is critical. Managing with political awareness is also linked to the four principal contexts identified in the research – so that skills are related to the context and the challenges of that situation.

Second, this framework is concerned with leadership of the organization not solely leadership inside the organization. Leadership frameworks, by and large, as noted earlier, have not yet really caught up with the major changes which are taking place in the way that organizations work – the greater inter-relationships both through networking, joint ventures and strategic alliances and through the greater impacts that a range of stakeholders such as lobby and campaigning groups may have on the organization. Selznick (1957) argued that “the theory of leadership is dependent on the theory of organization” (p.23, quoted in Storey, 2004), so that as organizations change our theories of leadership need to change as well.

Leadership which is able to influence not only colleagues and subordinates, but stakeholders in the private, public and voluntary sectors is becoming increasingly important. There are too many stories and evidence of organizations which failed to understand, let alone try to influence the external perceptions and decisions which have an impact on their organization. This means that, as Sir David Varney (senior manager and chair of the research Steering Board) has noted:

*“political skills cannot be viewed as the domain of the specialist, but as a mainstream element of leadership needed across all sectors. Effective political leaders are like the Roman god Janus. They wear two faces – one looking outward and the other inward. They have a strong vision and sense of direction for their organisation, know what's happening in the marketplace and anticipating what's ahead, and can balance this against the internal capabilities required to operate in a competitive environment.”* (quoted in Hartley et al, 2007, p. 4).

Third, the political skills framework presented here has a strategic focus. It shares a number of elements found in other leadership approaches, such as aspects of personal skills and interpersonal skills. It is interesting to note that the great attraction to and take-up of the concept of emotional intelligence (e.g. Goleman et al, 2002) may reflect in part an awareness by managers and trainers of the need to address some of the personal and interpersonal skills outlined here, but that the emotional intelligence approach has been taken up within a limited leadership perspective and without any strategic or political context, which is addressed here.

This chapter, describing the conceptual thinking about leadership with political awareness, opens up a new avenue for theory-building and empirical research. The aim here has been to present the changing contexts within which leadership skills requiring political awareness are exercised, and to use that context to think about and develop a framework which aims to capture key elements of the capabilities required for effective skilled leadership with political awareness. Empirical findings are presented elsewhere (Hartley et al, 2007) but here the focus is on how this framework provides new thinking and will perhaps stimulate a re-orientation of some strands of leadership research.

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