Reading the Political Tea Leaves

Understanding workplace dynamics is an essential component of career development.

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Are you an engineer who believes that by working hard and keeping your nose clean, your talent will be recognized and you will move forward in your career? Do you go out of your way to avoid office politics because you think they don't involve you? We have bad news for you: If you wish to get that raise, get that prize assignment, get that promotion, you will need to start understanding the politics of your workplace. To achieve career success, you need to learn to read the political "tea leaves." How do you obtain this important skill? To begin, seek the answers to these questions:

• Who's in charge at your place of work?

• How does the work actually get done?
• What does your boss need from you for him or her to be successful?
• What behaviors are valued in your workplace?
• What types of relationships are important?

Who's in charge?

The answer to this question is not as obvious as you might think. Engineers often prefer to believe that title and rank define who has the authority or who is in control. However, organizations are much more complex than this. We must train ourselves to recognize the possible, and even probable, key influence structures that exist. Today's work environment is less hierarchical than we might suppose and is based more on social capital and network connectivity. The phrase "knowledge is power" often provides a key indicator of where the influencers and experts are in an organization. The person who might have to approve your new idea could be the oracle across the hall — the person whom your boss relies on for vetting new ideas. Watch for the signs of where the knowledge and power lie and make sure you understand the formal and informal control structures in your organization.

How does the work get done?

In high-performing organizations, those with the right skills, who are in the right place, at the right time, get the work done. Of course, it is imperative for you, as an engineer, to have fundamental "technical" skills, including problem-solving and technology know-how relevant to your engineering discipline. In a program management role, technical skills include competency in financial and customer relationship matters. People who are successful movers and shakers possess some critical aptitude in the areas of influence and presence. The work gets done by effectively applying your technical skills and by networking with people to fill gaps in your knowledge and expertise.

In addition, as you move to levels of broader responsibility, you must be able to exhibit influence by aligning support for your solutions — that is, being able to recognize the interests of stakeholders and presenting approaches in terms that show how your solutions support their objectives. In many cases, this might be referred to as recognizing the "politics" of the organization. Perhaps, more appropriately, it means understanding the culture, as culture is the people, values, and behaviors of an organization. This means success is effectively knowing how to read the political tea leaves — being able to understand and affect your desired outcome within the cultural environment.

What does your boss need from you?

Your boss doesn't need to know all the details of your work or how you've arrived at your results. What is important is that he or she is confident that you have done the appropriate work to arrive at your solutions — that you have applied the right tools and intel-

lect to have thorough and complete work products. Your credibility and performance create your boss's trust in you. You must strive to deliver results on every project. Projects should be on time and under budget. When you say you'll do something, you get it done and it's done well. You keep your promises. You are reliable and dependable. The boss knows you will do what you have committed to do. You have become the "go-to" person.

What behaviors are valued?

Taking initiative is an important step. The only way to know what you're capable of is to try it. When you see something that needs to be done, and you have the wherewithal to take on the task, step up to it. Leaders take on the challenges. They personify motivation. They approach tasks with a "get 'er done" attitude. And people are an important part of the equation. As you engage others for their knowledge, assistance, or simply for their feedback, you can develop presence in the organization. Others will recognize you as one of the influential people who can create results.

What types of relationships are important?

Relationships up, down, and across the organization are important. You should cultivate and establish collaborative relationships with your co-workers. Fostering solid relationships with your immediate work colleagues that are based on trust will gain you momentum and respect and provide you with advocates. Your co-workers can be great allies, especially when you have the opportunity to share a positive result that can be mutually beneficial and become a shared success. Co-workers who are willing to go the extra step for you will not only help you be successful, but will in turn provide your leaders the results that make them successful.

Find both mentors and protégés (mentees) in your organization. Just as important are relationships outside your organization, especially with customers. Customers can be incredible assets when you deliver the results they need. Supporting your customers' successes can create significant influential partnerships that

can be useful in your future career growth and achievements.

The information you have gleaned from these answers should give you a better understanding of what is truly expected of you and how you can be as effective as possible at your workplace. Your ability to read the political tea leaves in the years ahead will continue to yield you many career benefits. ■

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