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Clashes, Culture and Savvy

Some months ago I was called by a good friend who had just been through a rough ride on a client project and needed a shoulder to cry on. He had fallen foul of office “politics” and was feeling quite bruised and confused. I couldn’t save his job, but I could help him learn from the experience and operate more effectively next time he found himself in a strange environment.

As a coach, one of my jobs is to help my clients develop the savvy they require to co-operate and compete appropriately to achieve their goals. A manager’s ability to strategically navigate the political landscape has become as important as the ability to comprehend the product and service market environment. In today’s messy world of flatter structures, transient teams, partnerships and complex stakeholder maps, political skills can no longer be dismissed as Machiavellian and undesirable. They have in fact become a vital and positive component of a leader’s toolkit, particularly when we enter new environments, where we can be at our most politically vulnerable.

My interest in this goes way back. As a young buck in BP, I got moved to Aberdeen to join the small start-up office of a new speciality business. It was an exciting time, but even though I had just been in the organisation a few years, I had unwittingly taken on the culture, unconscious of how it might differ to that of other organisations. About 18 months in, our senior managers at headquarters decided to grow our business by acquisition, and before we knew it we had quadrupled overnight. Like the snake swallowing a prey 3 times its size, we were faced with assimilating a large group of individuals with very different ways of operating to ours. Despite being a small office, we (the original team) had a strong hierarchy with a definite “power distance” between levels in rank. The boss decided things unilaterally and we didn’t challenge or sometimes even get told. However, the new folk operated far more as a cohesive unit, with everyone chipping in and offering views that influenced what should happen in any given situation.

One day, without meaning to, I seriously offended one of the new technicians who was about to accompany me on an offshore trial. As the person running the project and his senior in the office, I told him what we were going to do on the project. Quite appropriate for “our” culture. But he was expecting me to seek his views and support. It didn’t help that he was used to working in a totally male, collegiate environment - and here was I, younger, less experienced, and a female to boot, being rather authoritative with him. He was incensed. To make matters worse, I reacted defensively by saying it was my job to be in charge. Well! I had just made two big withdrawals from my “emotional bank account” with him.

The emotional bank account (from Stephen Covey’s book the 7 Habits of Highly Effective people) is a concept I find really useful. In order to build trust and healthy relationships we make deposits into the accounts we hold with others, and they make deposits into ours. We do it by showing interest, offering help, support, validation, and giving positive strokes. However, we can unwittingly make withdrawals. We can do it by letting people down, not keeping promises, being dishonest, and a myriad of other ways. Sometimes we do it simply by implying that our way is “right” or “best” – making others “wrong”. Sometimes it’s merely by virtue of our position (we may encounter people who resent authority) – or it may be the way we wear our position – haughtiness rather than humility. If we realise what we’ve done, we may just need to be big enough to make new deposits in order to put things right, especially if the relationship matters to us. And if we are aware of what’s going on, then we can help by explaining our positive intentions.

The technician became rather difficult to say the least, and our relationship never really recovered. Although his subsequent treatment of me wasn’t very nice, looking down on him from a higher moral ground didn’t help matters. At that early stage in my career I was unaware of what was really going on. It was tempting to take his reaction very personally and label his actions as politically undermining. They were part of the challenge that we both had with integrating into each others’ ways of doing things.

This little story looks at how culture differences can be one of the issues at play when we look at events that seem evidence of “politics” at work. It’s easy to miss or ignore, because when we are part of a culture, it’s all around us like the air we breathe, invisible, indefinable – until something changes. Then, things we took for granted are challenged, often triggering intense defensiveness. Clashes occur not just when organisations merge, but when new bosses come on board, when an individual moves into another department, when the organisation decides to “change”, or when people from different worlds choose to collaborate. When we think “politics” are at play it’s worth considering if the natural tensions that are due to different values and ways of doing things might be part of what is going on.

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