

The Fundamentals of Organizational Politics: How to Get a Job and Keep a Job for Students, Interns, and Young Professionals (The Things They Don't Teach You in School)

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Years ago, when I was working for the Clinton Administration in Washington, D.C., I became acutely aware of the relevance of certain skills and key qualifications (“*Schlüsselqualifikationen*”) to the success of my career.

During my time in government, I first recognized the importance of mastering key skills they don't teach you in school, such as:

- Successfully navigating the organizational politics of your firm
- Developing your own personal presentation style
- Honing your cocktail conversation and elevator pitch skills
- Mastering the Art of the Briefing

As the Director of the US Department of Commerce's Office of Space Commercialization, I represented the Commerce Department on matters involving commercial space policy. Therefore, I spent a lot of time in interagency meetings with representatives from the Defense Department, the State Department, the Department of Transportation, NASA, NOAA, the U.S. Trade Representative, Treasury, and the White House, along with other agencies depending on the issue.

In that post-Cold War period, pivotal policies were put in place that set the trajectory for the availability of commercial satellite imagery, the commercial use of GPS location and timing data, international space launch trade agreements, the licensing of commercial spaceports, and rules for a new generation of commercial launch vehicles and space tourism. The decisions made during that period laid the policy groundwork for the commercial New Space era we are seeing today.

The goal of the interagency process was to arrive at a consensus on what the US government position should be on a given space policy issue. Communication skills and a keen understanding of organizational politics were critical to being effective in such an environment.

I was able to observe the entire spectrum of skills and styles that make people effective in the real world. I had the privilege of sitting in on examples of masterful meeting management, brilliant use of language and argumentation, and flawlessly polished presentations. It was a laboratory of what was possible and I was lucky enough to watch the best in the world at work. Every day was a Masters Class in organizational politics, communications skills, and presentation styles.

For example, one of the first things I noticed was that certain agencies had disproportionate influence based on their historic role in space, the prestige of their principal, and/or the size of their budgets. Nevertheless, policy decisions still were influenced by how effectively you could persuade others in the room.

This is where your style and understanding of organizational politics paid off.

I also noticed that certain individuals were disproportionately influential based on the style of their arguments. They had the ability to consistently project influence far beyond their actual interests in a given issue due to their style of presentation.

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After one meeting, as I was walking back to my office at the Commerce Department, I thought about what happened in the meeting and the dynamics in the room. As I approached Freedom Plaza, it suddenly occurred to me that it would be a good idea if someone wrote a short, basic, "How-To" book for summer interns and new government employees describing succinctly what they needed to know to be successful in their government agencies. I stopped and jotted down a few notes, then went back to work in the Office of the Secretary of Commerce, at that time, Secretary Ron Brown.

The more I thought about this idea, the more convinced I became that such a brief "How-To" book also would be helpful to law school interns and summer associates trying to succeed at their new law firms. Since most young lawyers (like myself) learned their most valuable lessons the hard way – through brutal trial and painful error – I thought it could be a real service to young professionals beginning their careers. So I jotted down a few more notes.

Then I forgot about it. For almost 20 years.

In 2012, while working as Senior Counsel at an international law firm in Munich, Germany, and teaching a course in "International Commercial Law" at the University of Bonn Law School, I realized that many of my bright, up-and-coming German law students had little idea of the practical political skills necessary for them to succeed in their new jobs after they earned their degrees. So I dug out my old notes, added a few new thoughts, and devoted one of my lectures to the topic of "The Fundamentals of Organizational Politics".

The class was a big hit.

After expanding on this theme for a few more semesters, I finally decided to put these ideas down on paper. The result is my book, "The Fundamentals of Organizational Politics: How to Get a Job and Keep a Job for Students, Interns, and Young Professionals (The Things They Don't Teach You in School)".

The book is not an intellectual treatise on organizational theory. It is not intended as a scholarly work on social dynamics. It is not exhaustive. There are no footnotes or citations. This is simply real-world guidance written as a short, practical, and brutally honest guide for students and young professionals starting their careers. It attempts to describe in simple terms important practical skills and *Schlüsselqualifikationen* you need to master in organizations you will work for in Germany, the U.S., or virtually anywhere else in the world.

In short, it discusses the important stuff they don't teach you in school. In today's brutal job environment, this topic deserves particular attention.

Below are a few tips worth noting.

A. To be Successful, You Must Master the Internal Politics of Your Organization

Your talent alone simply is not enough to ensure your success in most organizations you will work for. This is because most organizations are not meritocracies. You also must master the *politics* of that organization to be successful.

Organizational politics are the dynamics, processes, and techniques by which power is sought, obtained, or lost within a particular organization. This varies subtly from organization to organization, since every organization has its own particular culture and characteristics. However, human interactions are surprisingly similar across history, organizations, and cultures. Therefore, most of these lessons are very old, yet very relevant, to today's job market. When you think about politics, think about dealing with people. If you remember that politics equals people, you won't go far wrong.

B. Style Matters

Style is critical in organizational politics. Substance is important, but you may never get to the substance of your argument if you don't first master an effective style.

Two people can say the exact same thing in two different ways, to very different effect. Your style communicates unspoken messages to your audience that can be very powerful.

Style is important because it makes people want to listen to what you have to say. An effective style must be honest and personal to you. There is no right style, but if it's ineffective, it's definitely wrong.

You inevitably will find yourself in front of a group giving a presentation, or briefing your boss, or making a pitch to colleagues. Presentations, briefings, and private conversation, as well as memos and emails, are how things get done in most organizations. The substance of your presentation is always more important than how you deliver it, but poor presentation style can obscure the message of your argument, making you far less effective.

C. Master the Art of the Briefing

The ability to deliver a sharp, cogent briefing is a critical skill ignored in many schools. Briefings and memos are the primary means of transmitting information up the pyramid. It is a reflection of your research, thought process, and communication skills. Your briefing materials will survive you and are what people will remember long after you have gone.

Good briefings require far more preparation than most people realize. You must know your facts cold. You must present a succinct analysis of the situation. You must clearly address the problem and offer viable options for solving it. And you must anticipate questions from your audience. Good briefings require polished verbal and written skills. These skills will serve you well in any job you pursue. So you might as well learn them now.

D. Develop Your Own Style (make who you are work for you)

Starting early in your career, you must develop your own style. That style must reflect you as an individual and be true to who you are. Otherwise, it will not work. People can see immediately when you are not being yourself.

The goal is to develop an effective communications style that is unique and authentic to you. This comes with practice and experience.

Start by constantly observing others and adopting styles you admire. Experiment with different techniques. Adapt techniques that you like; keep what works, discard what doesn't. Over time you gradually will develop your own unique style. But always be true to who you are.

An effective style allows you to present arguments in a way that is convincing to others and makes them believe you have more insight than they do on a particular topic, simply based on the way you express yourself. Your use of language and style can help you captivate your audiences and win the day.

However, you must remain true to yourself. To successfully navigate the organizational politics of your firm or agency you must be comfortable in your own skin. Embrace who you are and, generally, others will embrace who you are, too.

If you are enthusiastic, then be enthusiastic. If you are quiet, be quiet. Stay who you are, but experiment and think about adapting different styles.

E. Constantly Improve Your Weaknesses

Most people know their weaknesses, but don't work systematically to improve them.

When I was on my high school tennis team, I probably read every book in my local public library on tennis. In one book, I read that most players don't think about improving their weaknesses. If you play someone early in the season who has a weak backhand, later in the season they probably still will have a weak backhand. Most people don't think about eliminating weaknesses that their opponents can exploit.

Don't make that mistake. Honestly assess your weaknesses and systematically improve them. Turn your former weaknesses into your major strengths.

I also read that good tennis players typically have several major weaknesses, but one killer stroke. Very good players have only one or two major weaknesses, but more than one killer stroke. And the very best players have no major weaknesses and several killer strokes (serve, backhand, volley, etc.).

Therefore, you want to work to have no major weaknesses and several killer strokes over the course of your career. If you constantly work to identify and improve your weaknesses, you will be one of the few people who do.

Examples of areas you might want to think about improving are:

- Public speaking skills
- Foreign language fluency
- Writing skills
- Business development networking

Anything you believe could be a weakness or professional liability should make your list and you should develop a plan to systematically improve it.

Your goal should be to have no major weaknesses as you make your way through your career. This is very doable if you start now developing the habit of constantly working to eliminate your weaknesses.

F. Hone Your Communication Skills

Excellent communication skills are critical to your success in any organization.

Therefore, seek out opportunities to strengthen your written and verbal communication skills whenever you can. Communication skills can be taught and learned. So take the time to master them.

Put yourself in situations where you will be forced to use them and observe others who are good at them.

For example:

- Public speaking opportunities
- Cocktail party small talk
- Formal dinner conversation
- Debating or moot court competitions, and
- Newspaper or journal articles or academic research

I wish you the best of luck in your careers!

Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions.

You can read more about organizational politics and important "Schlüsselqualifikationen" you should develop in "The Fundamentals of Organizational Politics" by Keith Calhoun-Senghor.

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