



Gender & Career Success:
The Facilitative Role
of Political Skill

Gender and Career Success: The Facilitative Role of Political Skill

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It would be comforting and progressive to conclude after 40 years of gender discrimination legislation, case law, and workplace initiatives that women now receive treatment and opportunities equal to men at work. Unfortunately, we still see considerable evidence of unfair treatment in organizations based on gender. This unfair treatment not only strains advancement opportunities and compensation for women, but also increases work stress and reduces general well-being at work. Explanations of this state of affairs range from traditional male attitudes about the role of women in the work world to self-limiting behaviors held by women themselves. However, none of these explanations adequately account for how and why women do not realize comparable opportunities to men in organizations.

In this article, we characterize differently the plight of women in organizations, the reasons for this plight, and what might be reasonable ways to propose change. Organizations are viewed as political arenas, according to Mintzberg. To be effective in such arenas, one must possess political will and political skill. However, if political skill reflects to some degree the tacit knowledge acquired over time through experience and through the guidance of mentors, women may be placed at a competitive disadvantage to white males in never really learning “the ropes,” nor realizing the positioning and visibility benefits of being introduced into new and influential networks. This is essen-

tially the argument made by Ferris, Frink, and Galang in proposing a “political skill deficiency” explanation for what appears to manifest itself in race and gender discrimination. We characterize this case in the following sections, discuss the implications for stress and well-being at work, and propose ways to try to address political skill deficiency in women.

THE IMPORTANCE AND NATURE OF POLITICAL SKILL

Many subscribe to the belief that organizations are inherently political arenas and that – due to factors such as competing interest groups and scarce resources – the use of influence tactics is the best way to survive and succeed in these environments. Further, there is an extensive body of work showing that employment decisions such as personnel selection, performance evaluation, training opportunities and promotions tend to be quite political in nature. Thus, in order to succeed and be effective in organizations, it has been proposed that people must possess intuitive savvy concerning what behaviors to demonstrate in particular situations. The style or execution of the influence behaviors in organizations is a critical factor for success, and it represents a special type of social competency and astuteness referred to as political skill.

Political skill is an interpersonal style that combines social astuteness and the abil-

ity to execute appropriate behaviors in an engaging manner that inspires confidence, trust and genuineness. Politically skilled individuals not only know precisely what to do in different social situations at work: they also know exactly how to do it in a manner that diffuses any potentially manipulative motives. Political skill differs from other types of social effectiveness competencies, in that political skill is specific to interactions aimed at achieving success in organizations. Clearly, these interactions may take place outside of the organizational context (e.g., colleague's birthday party); however, the goal is still organizational savvy, influence and success.

Political skills are essential career competencies that become more important as one ascends the corporate ladder. When Sallie Krawcheck became chief executive officer (CEO) at Smith Barney, she inherited the fallout from the Wall Street scandals of the 1990s, including parent company Citigroup's \$400 million fine for defrauding investors, and a company culture that put its own interests ahead of its customers. Repairing the damage required political savvy, and Krawcheck began by apologizing—over and over again. She visited 35 cities, and listened as thousands of clients recounted tales of portfolios demolished by Smith Barney's recommendations on Enron Corp. and WorldCom Inc. stocks. Winning back trust takes time and political skill, and Krawcheck will need both to restore Smith Barney's damaged reputation.

Dimensions of Political Skill

Ferris and his colleagues have developed a multidimensional conceptualization and measure of political skill that identifies and assesses four key dimensions; social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and sincerity. People with social astuteness can accurately perceive and understand social situations as well as the personal interactions that occur in these settings. Individuals who have political skill are excellent observers of others' behaviors and

are attuned to subtle differences in social situations. Individuals with strong interpersonal influence competencies have the ability to adapt their behavior to each social situation in order to elicit a particular response from others. Politically skilled individuals have a personal style that has a powerful influence on others around them.

Individuals who are highly competent in networking ability are able to position themselves well in order to create and take advantage of opportunities. Because of their subtle style, politically skilled individuals easily develop strong and beneficial alliances and coalitions. Finally, politically skilled individuals must appear to be sincere, authentic, honest, and genuine. This dimension of political skill is critical for successful influence attempts, because it focuses on the perceived intentions of the actor.

The perceived intentions of the actor will affect the target's interpretation of the actor's behavior. Highly politically skilled individuals have the ability and willingness to use social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and networking in a sincere and genuine fashion. Not only can politically skilled individuals obtain gains from the organization, they are likely to experience less stress in the workplace as well.

Political Skill as a Buffer Against Stressors

Perrewé and her colleagues see the use of political skill as a means of reducing stress and, hence, improving the health and well-being of employees. Political skill is conceptualized as directly reducing employees' perceptions of organizational and interpersonal stressors. They argue that executives with strong political skill are more confident about their ability to control impressions and interactions in the workplace; thus they are less likely to perceive their situation as stressful. Further, they argue that political skill acts as a buffer between perceived stressors in the workplace and experienced strain. Thus, even when employees perceive their work environments as stressful, political skill can

be used as a coping mechanism to reduce the negative effects. Essentially, individuals with political skill feel as though they are more in control of their environment. Although there are demands, challenges, and stressors in the workplace for all employees, we now focus on specific concerns for women in organizations.

The Importance of Political Skill for Women

Mainiero argued “political skill is a necessary, even vital, aspect of women’s career advancement—that breaking the glass ceiling without shattering hopes for a promising executive career requires delicate political skill” (p. 6). Women can lack both access to important organizational information and effective positioning. Access can mean access to critically important inside information (e.g., the sort that one is deprived of by not “learning the ropes”), and it can also mean access to important and influential people one meets by getting access to new social networks, typically through mentoring experiences. Positioning involves getting into positions to take advantage of opportunities when they are presented, as well as helping to create opportunities. Individuals in organizations can use political skill to secure an effective position that might put them at “the right place at the right time” to capitalize on opportunities. So, for women to be successful in organizations, they need political skill to gain access to inside information that will help them to position themselves to leverage their social capital for career success.

CAREER BARRIERS, SUCCESS AND STRESS AT WORK

Women face career barriers and stressors at work that require considerable political skill to manage. Some of these barriers are glass ceilings and maternal walls, tokenism, exclusion from informal networks, and lack of developmental opportunities. The glass ceil-

ing is an obstacle that keeps women from rising to top-level positions in organizations. Despite progress, women are still rarely seen at the top of organizations, or on corporate boards, positions that would allow them to wield considerable influence.

In addition, women’s earnings are still not at parity with men’s earnings. On average, women earn approximately 76 percent of their male counterparts’ salaries. The lack of earning power extends to benefits like health care and retirement as well, because these benefits are tied directly into salary. Women also face “maternal walls,” being given less desirable jobs or limited career advancement opportunities once they have children. The assumption is that women with children cannot be good employees because their primary commitment is to the family, not to the organization.

“Glass walls” segregate women into support functions, with little to no chance of upward mobility. Women, therefore, often find themselves stuck in lower level positions in the organization, ones that do not have profit-and-loss responsibility, and those with less visibility and lower earning potential. Lower level positions constitute a lack of control over people, resources, information, and technology, and hence a lack of power. The result is that women face legitimate power deficits related to their inability to move into higher echelons in organizations (Fig. 1).

Often, women who enter the managerial and executive ranks are the first of their gender to do so, and they experience token status. Those who are in token status situations, whether they are male or female, face different barriers from those who enjoy majority status. These barriers include isolation, stereotyping and discrimination, and being put in the role of serving as spokesperson for their gender within the organization. Those individuals that believe they were promoted because of their gender, rather than their competence, are likely to undervalue their own leadership skills, and avoid taking credit for success at work. Majority members often believe that gender,

FIGURE 1 THE GLASS CEILING CAN BE A WALL



rather than competence, led to the token's promotion; therefore, they devalue the capabilities of token women.

Informal Networks

One of the most formidable barriers to women's career advancement is exclusion from informal networks. Matters of power and influence often take place in informal, rather than formal organizational settings. The "good old boy network" is an important source of business contacts, career opportunities, social support, sponsorship, and company information. For men, these networks

often are formed around social groups, golf, or private clubs. Networking may involve going out late for drinks (difficult for women with family commitments) or playing sports (more attractive to many men than women).

Conversations in the informal network may center on sports, men's organizations, corporate boards, and other topics that represent the shared experiences of men. These shared experiences within informal networks encourage bonding and trust among men, and also serve to promote norms such as the exclusion of women from the network. Cultures form within the network that are not easily permeated or changed. Networks

that are already male-dominated tend to reinforce themselves, because men are more comfortable with other men, and because women are seen as having little power, and thus, not good candidates for reciprocating political favors.

Women are not afforded the same developmental opportunities as men are in the workplace. These opportunities include training, challenging work assignments, and other forms of organizational support. High-profile jobs, with challenge, recognition, and support, often are awarded to men rather than women. Research has indicated that, even if women do receive challenging assignments, they experience an imbalance because the other two components (i.e., recognition and support) are not commensurate with the challenge that is given.

Importance of Mentoring

Lack of access to mentors is perhaps the most threatening developmental disadvantage encountered by women. Managers at top levels of organizations cite the presence of mentors as critical to their success, and the absence of mentors as critical to failure. Individuals with mentors reap many benefits from the mentoring relationship. They have more influence over organizational policies, access to influential people, and greater access to resources. They enjoy higher promotion rates and higher salaries. However, there is a smaller supply of mentors available for women than for men. There is a severe shortage of female mentors at top levels of organizations. Male executives serving as mentors to females may encounter resentment from coworkers, and both mentor and protégé must manage both the intimacy level in the relationship and the perceptions of outsiders concerning the relationship. Female protégés who have male mentors often experience social distance from others, and over-protectiveness on the part of the male mentor.

Women thus lack general management/line experience, high visibility assignments, role models, and mentors—all things that would help them hone their political skill.

In addition to these career obstacles, women face certain stressors to a greater extent than do their male counterparts. Research conducted by Nelson and her colleagues indicates that these stressors include organizational politics, socio-sexual behavior, total workload, and work-home conflicts.

Women and Experienced Stress

Women report greater stress from organizational politics than do men. Although the reasons behind this finding are largely unexplored, some studies/writings suggest that lack of political skill and lack of knowledge of organizational politics contribute to politics being viewed as stressful by women. In addition, the career barriers and obstacles cited earlier doubtless play roles in shaping women's view of organizational politics. Being denied access to networks, women may struggle with accessing important information. Concentrated at lower levels of the hierarchy, women lack legitimate power and find themselves in positions that are not central to the organization. As a result, they lack upward influence and have fewer resources for managing their employees. A lack of information, influence, and resources can make women more vulnerable to organizational politics as a source of stress.

Women report great stress from social-sexual behavior at work. This behavior, which may include flirting and making sexual jokes, is much more prevalent in industries and workplaces that are predominately male, such as police work and construction work. The most severe form of social-sexual behavior is sexual harassment, which is experienced more often by women than men. Gender harassment is another form of social-sexual behavior, and involves conduct that is gender-hostile; that is, behavior that conveys insulting or degrading attitudes toward women. Women who experience social-sexual behavior at work find it extremely stressful, and report depression, headaches, nausea and other psychological symptoms associated with this stress. They also have lower job satisfaction.

Another stressor that is especially challenging for women is total workload, which encompasses all kinds of work, including paid and unpaid, job-related and home-related. Whereas men report a total workload of 68 hours per week, women's workload averaged 78 hours per week. Although more and more men are helping with childcare and household chores, this workload gap persists. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that women's household tasks are low-schedule-control tasks that must often be completed under time pressure and with great urgency; they must be done despite other conflicts and they are not disposable. These tasks include dependent care and meal preparation, among others. Low-schedule-control tasks, combined with long work hours, make it difficult for women to find time to wind down at the end of the day, which negatively affects their health.

Work-home conflict is a stressor for both sexes, but it is particularly problematic for working women. As a stressor, work-home conflict goes both directions: work interferes with family life, and family interferes with work life. The fact that women are more prone to the experience of work-home conflict is not surprising, given their higher total workload. It is more acceptable for men to trade off work for family and vice versa; women often feel they must "do it all." Men's family involvement may wax and wane, while the family demands on women tend to be constant and independent of the influence of work.

Hence, a curious paradox exists. In order to overcome career barriers and cope with work stressors, considerable political skills are required, yet women often seem unwilling or unable to develop these skills. Breaking into top management positions, gaining access to critical developmental opportunities and high-profile assignments, building and/or joining networks, and finding mentors are behaviors that all require the use of power and influence. Dealing with sexual behavior at work requires empowerment and political acumen. Managing a high total workload and negotiating work-home

conflicts requires influence and political skill in both the work and home arenas. Yet, many women view political activity with distaste, and therefore, do not develop political skills that might help them in surmounting career obstacles and preventing or resolving stressors. Women's reluctance to engage in politics excludes them from an integral part of organizational life, and denies them information and assistance.

DISADVANTAGES FOR WOMEN IN POLITICAL ARENAS

Women's reluctance to use politics stems from lack of competence, lack of confidence, failure to see the relevance of politics, and, sometimes, pure distaste. Women are not as likely to use politics and influence to get ahead. Instead, they tend to play by "stated or traditional" rules and have what has been termed a political skill deficiency. Women tend to view career success as linked with task accomplishment and expertise. They believe that if their work is good enough, and they are competent enough, they should be rewarded (promoted) in organizations. Many women, therefore, simply do not see the necessity of organizational politics. Part of the reason for this is they tend to be excluded from "the insider group" who are socialized and mentored early on in the rules of the game, and who, by the way, are almost exclusively white males. Women tend to be closed out of this "white men's club" so they are forced to compete on an unlevelled playing field, where they do not even know the rules. This political deficiency relegates them quickly to the losers' bracket, and likely explains what appears to be active and blatant gender discrimination in promotion and advancement. If females do hone their political skill, this typically is due to the interest and mentoring of a senior manager mentor.

In Bell and Nkomo's 2001 book, *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*, the authors argued that many of the women with

whom they spoke emphasized the importance of informal networks in career advancement. They observed that in most corporations, excellent performance is necessary for advancement but is not the sole criterion. Getting ahead also depends on access to informal networks through mentoring, sponsorships, and help from colleagues. Further, they argued that the more important relationships become, the less important the actual business at hand becomes, and that arbitrary business decisions are made because of relationships. One of the things Bell and Nkomo observed is the strength of the old boy network. Women don't really "break down the wall" by advancing upward, they said. They climb over the wall, but the wall, unfortunately, remains intact. Perhaps one way for women to advance upward and through the wall is through the use of the political skill and networking they gain in mentoring relationships.

Men view politics as part of the rules of the game, and they use informal systems built on the notions of loyalty, trading of favors and protection. They use informal systems to gain access to early information and to read political currents within the organization. Women, in contrast, tend to rely on the formal organizational system for information and support, and view politics as an impediment to goal accomplishment. Denying the value of corporate politics can result in women being viewed as politically naïve and ignorant. It limits their ability to identify and bond with powerful people within the organization who can help them in their careers.

Women who display political behavior may be evaluated differently than men, or may be viewed negatively by men because of it. Men are much more tolerant of political behavior, overall, than are women. Both sexes view politicians of their own sex more favorably. Men and women are also evaluated differently when they use influence tactics on their bosses. Men who use strong upward influence tactics, such as building coalitions and upward appeals, get higher performance ratings. They also get more

career-related mentoring in the form of introductions to important people and preparations for higher level jobs. Women who use weaker upward influence tactics, such as friendliness, rational persuasion, and offering to exchange favors, get more psychosocial mentoring in the form of the boss offering to serve as a role model.

Mixed messages are given to women concerning what constitutes appropriate political behavior at work. There is a narrow range of acceptable political behavior by women, with inherent contradictions: take risks, but always be successful; be tough but not too tough; be ambitious but don't expect equal opportunities; be assertive but defer to men at work. We now turn to some ways in which the exercise of influence can be enhanced by political skill (or destroyed without political skill).

THE EXERCISE OF INFLUENCE

The exercise of influence requires political skill in order to achieve the desired outcomes. One may be able to learn influence tactics and strategies, but if these strategies are not implemented with political skill, the goal of the influence attempt will likely fail. We examine two forms of influence and discuss the ramifications of each when the influence strategy is not implemented skillfully. Specifically, we examine assertiveness, ingratiation and self-promotion. The famous sociologist Erving Goffman wrote that we are all actors in life, and that in every encounter we try to present ourselves in the most favorable light possible. Essentially, we try to control the impressions of ourselves to others. The three management tactics most often used to control impressions are assertiveness, ingratiation and self-promotion.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the act of expressing yourself and your rights without violating the rights of others. Assertiveness means individuals communicate openly, honestly, and

directly in order to expressive themselves. Acting assertively allows people to feel self-confident and will generally gain them the respect of colleagues. It can increase your chances for honest relationships, and help you to feel better about yourself and your self-control in everyday situations.

When you allow the needs, opinions, and judgments of others to become more important than your own, you are likely to feel hurt, anxious, and even angry. Many women feel that attending to their legitimate needs and asserting their rights translates to being selfish. Selfishness means being concerned about only your rights, with little or no regard for others. Implicit in your rights is the fact that you are concerned about the legitimate rights of others as well. When you behave selfishly, or in a way that violates the rights of others, you are, in fact, acting in a destructive, aggressive manner—rather than in a constructive, assertive manner. There is a very fine line that divides the perceptions of these two behaviors. Of course, in order to be successful, the real challenge is to be assertive and also to be perceived as assertive—and not aggressive.

Aggressiveness means that you express your rights but at the expense or humiliation of another. Aggressiveness usually results in others becoming angry or vengeful, and as such, it can work against your intentions and cause people to lose respect for you. It is not just what you say to someone verbally, but also how you communicate nonverbally with voice tone, gestures, eye contact, facial expression and posture that will influence your impact on others. This requires the use of political skill to get your point across to others without offending them or making them feel defensive.

Women who behave in assertive manners are often perceived to be aggressors; thus, it is particularly critical for women to have political skill. Women, to a large extent, need to be aware of prevailing stereotypes that put women in more supportive and nurturing roles rather than confronting and direct leadership roles. If individuals believe women should play a more supportive and

nurturing role in organizations, simple disagreements with employees may be perceived as aggressiveness rather than the intended assertiveness. It is not enough to simply behave in an assertive and non-aggressive fashion, others need to *perceive* these behaviors as being assertive. Thus, based on prevailing stereotypical roles, the same behavior may be viewed very differently if exhibited by a man versus a woman.

Today's workforce is different from years ago. With increasing frequency, women are leading, managing and supervising men and other women. Yet many women still encounter considerable hurdles when communicating with others in their organization. Professional women face challenges when expressing themselves at work, where they must be assertive without being seen as overtly aggressive to be successful. Much of the impact of an assertive message is determined by how the message is perceived by others—this takes political skill.

Ingratiation

Ingratiation has been defined as flattery and favor-doing in order to gain a favorable reaction from someone. Richard Stengel, in his 2000 book *You're Too Kind*, argued that to be effective at ingratiation, one must appear to praise, not merely flatter someone. The difference between praise and flattery is that praise is perceived as being sincere. Stengel argued that one way to appear more sincere is to be specific in one's compliments. For example, "You're great" is more likely to be perceived as flattery, whereas "Your volunteer work with our youth group is inspiring to me" is more likely to be perceived as praise. Of course, we would argue that individuals with political skill are more likely to be convincing in their sincerity when complimenting others; if complimenting is not done with political savvy, individuals may be viewed as "suck-ups." Further, if individuals are not perceived to be sincere in their compliments, this influence tactic may be deemed manipulative, and concerns about ulterior motives will likely come into play.

Another form of ingratiation is doing favors. This can present a particular problem for women in organizations. In Reardon's 2000 book *The Secret Handshake*, she argued that women tend to be giving; for many women, wanting someone to return a favor is viewed as unfeminine—this is why women will agree to do jobs that many men would not consider. Further, she argued that most men would do favors for others, but expect that the favor will be returned at some point. Many women want to please and to be liked, so they do things for these reasons alone. Males seem to have the political rules of clear reciprocity; however, women are more likely to behave in a more altruistic fashion. Over time, women may experience stress and become resentful, but as important, they may be perceived by influential others as a helpful doormat. This type of situation can lead to additional career barriers and long-term stress and burnout for women

Self-Promotion

Research has shown that the way women dress, walk, and talk in organizations has a large impact on their being noticed, because women have a greater likelihood of being in the minority. In order not to attract negative attention, Reardon argued that women often keep a low profile so they are not labeled a "trouble-maker." Research also has demonstrated that women are less likely to "self-promote." Keeping a low profile, coupled with a failure to self-promote, may lead to accomplishments going unnoticed. Of course, self-promotion must be done with political savvy. If not done well, self-promotion may be perceived as simply bragging. Further, it is important to know your audience. Some supervisors may welcome information about their employees' accomplishments as "the better they look, the better I look." On the other hand, some supervisors, particularly women, are more likely to view self-promotion as "posturing." Thus, not only does it take political skill to self-promote effectively, it takes political skill to know your audience. Given the importance of political skill, espe-

cially for women, can women learn to be more politically skilled?

SUGGESTIONS FOR GAINING POLITICAL SKILL

Political skill has been conceptualized as being partially inherent in a person, but also partially environmental, so it can be developed and shaped. Thus, political skill is an integration of dispositional and situational perspectives on behavior. Individuals are likely born with a predisposition toward political skill, but without proper environmental stimuli and practice, these political skills may never be fully developed. The effectiveness of political skill relies upon the ability to adjust one's behavior to environmental demands and the subtleties of particular situations. It is important to note that not everyone may have the innate talent to become politically skilled. Some individuals simply do not have the ability to perceive their interpersonal environment correctly, or they do not have the ability to *convincingly* engage in the proper behaviors. Regardless, we believe most individuals can at least increase their political skill, because it is partially developmental. We offer suggestions for increasing and shaping political skill, specifically, mentoring and executive coaching.

Establishing Mentoring Relationships

We suggest that one of the best ways for women to develop political skill is through mentoring relationships. Mentors instruct protégés on office and firm politics, they help manage protégé image and visibility, and they can even influence promotion decisions. Mentors, operating from a stronger power base, also can "run interference" for the protégé, clearing out potential obstacles in support of the protégé's progress. Mentors also can tap the protégé into a vast network of relationship alliances to promote the protégé's visibility and progression. However,

it is fundamentally a relationship based on exchange. Previous studies indicate that mentors will select protégés they believe can bring certain desirable competencies to the relationship in order to bring greater rewards to the mentor. Thus, the tendency for women to shy away from self-promotion may hurt them in their pursuit to find a mentor.

Protégés are apprentices who are shown “the ropes” and educated in the political ways of the game within the organization. Thus, mentoring is at the heart of this professional development process, and the political skills developed by the protégés may actually be the most critical set of skills that they acquire in their entire careers. The information passed to protégés provides the necessary roadmap for the boundaries and the informal rules of the game. A particularly innovative example is MentorNet, an online networking resource that helps women in the fields of engineering, science and mathematics. More than 80 universities (including MIT and Princeton) and 20 companies (including AT&T Corp. and Cisco Systems Inc.) match female students with mentors in their fields, providing the students with real-world information and access to networks before the students even join their firms.

Because the mentoring relationship is one of an exchange between the mentor and protégé, the mentor would likely enter into a mentoring relationship after assessing the protégé’s potential for success. Because a mentoring relationship is likely to be a substantial investment of time and energy on the part of the mentor, the mentor must make a cost-benefit judgment when considering a protégé. Indeed, research suggests that protégé potential may be the single most probable characteristic of interest to a mentor. To the degree a mentor is perceived as having the ability to recognize and develop talent, they attract not only a host of loyal followers, but also earn the respect and admiration of their peers and superiors.

As these mentoring relationships develop, protégés are socialized in the political ways of the organization. As protégés

become successful in the organization, their mentors gain status and extend their social networks, and protégés become privy to these expanded networks which better position them for success in the future. This relationship, which is regarded as mutually beneficial to both the mentor and the protégé, includes the refinement of general social skill into political skill. Luthans and his colleagues have argued convincingly that political skill differs from general social skill and that women need political skill and mentoring to be successful. Finding the right mentor should not be limited to individuals with whom you are similar. In fact, Reardon argued that most women she interviewed told her someone unlike themselves helped them to get ahead. Thus, women need not seek out other women as mentors—if they have a female mentor, fine. However, women shouldn’t limit themselves by trying to find mentors with cultural or gender similarities.

Interestingly, most company examples of mentoring programs do not specifically mention political skills. Some companies, like Knight-Ridder Inc., have formal mentoring programs that are instituted specifically to advance women. In the company’s “Bench Strength” program, corporate officers mentor groups of six to eight individuals. Through this program, Knight-Ridder has dramatically increased the number of female executives to the point that it mirrors the female participation in the company.

Executive Coaching

Ferris and colleagues argued that as one moves up the hierarchy, political skill becomes increasingly important for successful managers, as the scope of their jobs become broader. At executive levels, political and strategic skills are critical to success. Possessing the political savvy to garner support and obtain scarce organizational resources largely determine success at this level. Therefore, as one progresses up the hierarchy in organizations, political skill becomes increasingly important, whereas technical skills become less important.

Executive coaching relationships are formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals. The executive coaching process usually begins with some assessment of the client that might include interviews with people with whom the manager works and some psychological tests. Sometimes the assessments involve 360-degree feedback from bosses, peers, subordinates, clients, and even family. Based upon this assessment, the coach provides feedback to the manager, and then the two determine the needs of the manager and how best to bring about desirable changes.

Wachovia Corporation's coaching program is extensive. The financial services provider uses both internal and external coaches. The external coaches are used for Wachovia's executives at the top tiers of the company who face challenges like moving into a new position or dealing with a merger—challenges that doubtless require political skill. Internal coaches are from different divisions within the company, and they partner with university professors to provide 360-degree feedback and action plans to managers.

The focus of executive coaching is usually on skills such as political savvy and strategic vision. Clearly, political skill is seen as a key focus of executive coaching. Although some people acquire political skill earlier in their careers, either by trial and error or by observation, there is no doubt that possession of such political skill is critical to success at executive levels in organizations. If women do not embrace the notion that political skill is a necessity for success,

there will be fewer women executives. The unique problems that women managers face can be addressed with an individually tailored approach, as offered by executive coaching. Executive coaching increases psychological and social awareness and understanding, as well as the ability to develop and maintain effective interpersonal relationships. These areas are central to the conceptualization of political skill.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that political skill is essential for successful managers, particularly female managers. We contend that women face unique and constraining barriers to advancement, and that developing political skill is particularly important for women in organizations. We discuss three key influence tactics: assertiveness, ingratiation, and self-promotion. These influence tactics will not be effective, and might even be damaging to one's reputation, if not done with political skill. Political skill is not an influence tactic—political skill makes the influence tactic effective. Further, we argue that having political skill can increase managerial and organizational effectiveness and reduce experienced stress. Finally, mentoring and executive coaching are discussed as ways to develop political skill. Given the fast-paced and competitive organizational environment, individuals are encouraged to increase their political skill in order to enhance their success, their happiness, their health, and their overall sense of well-being.



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Increased attention has been devoted to political skill and its importance for effectiveness in work organizations. Ferris and his colleagues have developed a program of research in political skill in which they have created a measurement scale, and are now engaged in empirical research to establish the relationship of political skill to important work behaviors and human resources decisions. The article they wrote describing the development of the Political Skill Inventory is "Development and Initial Validation of the Political Skill Inventory," and it is published in *Journal of Management*, in press. Additional information on politics, political skill and outcomes can be found in Butcher and Clarke, "Organizational Politics: The Cornerstone for Organizational Democracy," *Organizational Dynamics* 31 (2002): 35–46; Luthans, Hodgetts and Rosenkrantz *Real Managers* (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1988); Mintzberg, *Power in and Around Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983); Perrewé, Ferris, Frink, and Anthony, "Political Skill: An Antidote for Workplace Stressors," *Academy of Management Executive* 14 (2000): 115–123.

Mainiero argued that political skill is "a necessary, even vital, aspect of women's career advancement—that breaking the glass ceiling without shattering hopes for a promising executive career requires delicate political skill" (6), in her article "On Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Political Seasoning of Powerful Women Executives," *Organizational Dynamics* 22 (1994): 5–20. The graphic entitled, "The glass ceiling can be a door" was created by Valerie A. Dibble, assistant professor of art, Kennesaw State University. The specific con-

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