

A review of

Political Savvy by Joel R. DeLuca,
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Come on, be honest. What *really* comes to your mind when you hear that someone has a lot of 'political savvy'? Someone sitting in a smoke-filled room making important decisions with a handful of high-rollers? A snake-oil salesman who could sell anything based on his ability to manipulate more gullible people? Someone to avoid because you don't want to become tainted? And anyway you just shouldn't have to mess with that stuff!

Joel DeLuca offers this definition: "*Political Savvy*: Ethically building a critical mass of support for an idea you care about." Then he notes what he excludes and what he includes in his definition. It excludes striving for power in a general way, but includes seeking influence in a specific situation. It includes caring about an idea – an interesting combination of emotion and intellect. He adds, "It's hard to overstate that the starting point for the Savvy [people] is caring about something bigger than themselves."

The book carries the subtitle, "Systematic Approaches to Leadership Behind-the-Scenes." I suppose that I always knew that effective leaders had some amount of political savvy. They seemed to know who to talk to, and how and when to talk to them. DeLuca believes you can gain in political savvy in a systematic way. He is clear about the role of results when he writes, "Leadership in the near term is making things happen. In the long term, leadership is developing people. The ultimate responsibility of a leader is not just to make things happen today but to increase the organization's capacity to make things happen tomorrow. The best leaders accomplish this by developing others to become leaders." The role of the leader includes attention to the sustainability of the organization and the development of the next generation.

For an organization to survive, it must take care of business. Helping develop others includes increasing their understanding of how organizations actually do take care of business. DeLuca offers this definition: "*Organization Politics*: How power and interest play out in the organization." Thus, politics is not inherently negative or positive, it just is. He also highlights two common blocks people encounter. The Moral Block carries an implication that 'organizational politics' equates to 'manipulation' and thus creates an ethical barrier. The Rational Block says that we should not need to descend to such means – the idea's obvious strengths should be enough. DeLuca counters that the Politically Savvy person accepts that organizational politics is just another fact of life.

Now here we have two provocative ideas: organizational politics is not a sort of necessary evil to tolerate; and you can be politically savvy and ethical at the same time. Well, that makes an interesting theory, but how might those of us

who are 'savvy-impaired' make that systematic progress? DeLuca offers several ideas which he sets out in the form of a mini-case study. An important decision-making meeting is pending. You know certain things about the people involved, their connections with one another, their priorities and potentially show-stopping concerns.

So what strategy does he offer to get the decision to go your way? He offers a scheme to visually map out who is leaning how strongly and in which direction, and who holds sway over whom. Making this information explicit allows you to construct a strategy to ensure that not only do you take the right steps, but you take them in the most productive sequence. He stresses 'agenda linking' (showing how the ends you want support the ends that someone else wants) and following the path of relationships (where people talk to people who trust them). The goal, after all, is to create a base of support. "An ethical alliance – which is the opposite of a manipulative conspiracy – has several benefits: convergent validity, task legitimacy, enhanced ethicalness, and maneuverability." We want it to be clear that we are acting in the best interests of the organization as we see them and not fomenting a mutiny.

Do I feel more savvy now, having read his book (and even attended a one-day seminar)? Well, yes, a little bit. I certainly have new things to consider as I try to move the organizations with which I'm involved. Most of all, I know that my preferred political style needs work. I need to develop a more active approach with a more positive attitude toward politics. (I almost wrote 'mere politics' – I'm learning!)

(Rating: Eight

The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from one to ten. Since I toss anything lower than six, I essentially offer a five-point scale from six to ten.)

Reviewed by
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