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:

1. **The Moral Block** – carries an implication that ‘organizational politics’ equates to ‘manipulation’ and thus creates an ethical barrier.
2. **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!)
**Political Savvy – Styles & Strategies**  
*Interpretation of the Political Style Grid from “Political Savvy” by Joel DeLuca*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLITICAL STYLE</th>
<th>WHAT THIS STYLE MEANS</th>
<th>QUOTES FROM OR ABOUT INDIVIDUALS WITH THIS STYLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **LEADER**      | • Believe strongly that progress depends on aligning the personal interests of individuals with each other and with the interests of the organization  
• View people as basically good and wanting to contribute to the success of the organization  
• Create innovative ways to combine and satisfy apparent opposed interests and make things happen that wouldn’t normally occur | • “I believe most people desire to make a difference. Sure we have the overly ambitious types, but who doesn’t? My job is to see that their drive is channeled for the good of the organization.”  
• “Ed is not charismatic and he keeps a low profile. All he does is get things done. I don’t know how he did it, but he’s made more productive change around here than the last two flashy CEOs put together.” |
| **RESPONSIBLE** | • Active, but often reluctantly, in the political arena  
• Savvy about the various political maneuvers occurring and how to deal with them  
• Feel an obligation to ensure that the interests of the organization are paramount in key decisions | • “I dislike politics as much as the next guy and prefer to stay out of it, but I’m not going to let good ideas get lost because of some overly ambitious person.”  
• “All it takes for evil to conquer is for good men to stand by and do nothing.” |
| **MACHIAVELLIAN** | • Assume that organizational life is a win-lose proposition  
• Often feared within the organization  
• Shift away from the interests of the organization and concentrate on advancing own personal goals | • “It’s a dog-eat-dog world. There is a bunch of ambition and we know the pyramid narrows at the top. Someone has to win, it might as well be me.”  
• “Why should I help Jerry? He’s likely to get the credit and move up faster than me.” |
| **ADVISOR**     | • Stay off center stage and prefer to counsel others  
• Assume politics is not inherently negative, but rather try to find the win-win alternative for the key players and the organization  
• Guide others through the political mazes, but have potential to avoid taking responsibility for actions or for decisions that shape the organization’s destiny | • “I want this place to be successful, and if I can help those people trying to make it work, I will.”  
• “We have a lot of talented young managers who don’t know the first thing about how to make change really happen around here. I want to help them get their innovations brought into the system.” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECULATOR</th>
<th>PROTECTOR</th>
<th>SPECTATOR</th>
<th>FATALIST</th>
<th>CYNIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Active in predicting organization politics  
  • Less concerned with self-protection and more interested in the political dynamics themselves  
  • Source of the organizational grapevine and treat organization politics as a game show, trying to guess the answers and predict the winners | • “There’s a lot of politics around here; that’s what makes the place interesting. I stay out of it for the most part, but I do enjoy predicting who’s trying to do what to whom.”  
  • “I predicted the last three CEOs and started a rumor that likely helped one person get the job.” | • “There’s a lot of politics around here; that’s what makes the place interesting. I stay out of it for the most part, but I do enjoy predicting who’s trying to do what to whom.”  
  • “I predicted the last three CEOs and started a rumor that likely helped one person get the job.” | • “I’ve already been burned twice, and I’m not going to let it happen again.”  
  • “After the ABC account fiasco, Jim began to document everything. The next time something goes wrong, he wants to be able to demonstrate without a doubt that it wasn’t his fault.” | • “I’ve already been burned twice, and I’m not going to let it happen again.”  
  • “After the ABC account fiasco, Jim began to document everything. The next time something goes wrong, he wants to be able to demonstrate without a doubt that it wasn’t his fault.” |
| • View politics negatively, but takes an active approach rather than waiting for the worst  
  • Actively try to predict the political weather and defend themselves against it  
  • Read the political cues first and then go with whichever side seems to be in political favor | • “I’ve already been burned twice, and I’m not going to let it happen again.”  
  • “After the ABC account fiasco, Jim began to document everything. The next time something goes wrong, he wants to be able to demonstrate without a doubt that it wasn’t his fault.” | • “Politics in this department is fascinating. You should see what Larry is trying to do to Mary, but I think Mary can outsmart him.”  
  • “John gathered data showing why Jane’s project couldn’t work, but Jane was ready. She showed how two competitors were already using the new model successfully and came out way on top.” | • “I know these kinds of things go on; you just have to roll with the punches. There will be other projects.”  
  • “I don’t let it get to me, life’s too short, and there’s not much you can do about it.” | • “I know these kinds of things go on; you just have to roll with the punches. There will be other projects.”  
  • “I don’t let it get to me, life’s too short, and there’s not much you can do about it.” |
| • Like to watch politics at work, but don’t like to play  
  • View the organization as a vast human soap opera and root for their favorite characters  
  • Assume politics can be positive, but generally avoids risks. Provides emotional support and consolation to those taking a more active role | • “Politics in this department is fascinating. You should see what Larry is trying to do to Mary, but I think Mary can outsmart him.”  
  • “John gathered data showing why Jane’s project couldn’t work, but Jane was ready. She showed how two competitors were already using the new model successfully and came out way on top.” | • “Politics in this department is fascinating. You should see what Larry is trying to do to Mary, but I think Mary can outsmart him.”  
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  • “I don’t let it get to me, life’s too short, and there’s not much you can do about it.” |
| • Initiate little action, but does not view politics as inherently negative  
  • Assume politics is a given and not much can affect it  
  • Associated with technically-oriented managers | • “I know these kinds of things go on; you just have to roll with the punches. There will be other projects.”  
  • “I don’t let it get to me, life’s too short, and there’s not much you can do about it.” | • “I know these kinds of things go on; you just have to roll with the punches. There will be other projects.”  
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  • “I don’t let it get to me, life’s too short, and there’s not much you can do about it.” |
| • Want no part of organization politics typically viewing organization politics as a win-lose proposition and values it negatively  
  • Believe they are just being realistic  
  • Seldom go the extra mile except under duress, and even then, tend to avoid taking risks | • “To be successful, all you have to do is look good in project reviews and say what the boss wants to hear.”  
  • “I’m tired of beating my head against the wall. It just doesn’t pay and I’ve got better things to do.” | • “To be successful, all you have to do is look good in project reviews and say what the boss wants to hear.”  
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  • “I’m tired of beating my head against the wall. It just doesn’t pay and I’ve got better things to do.” |
# Becoming Politically Savvy

| **Understand the Organization** | • Understand the culture  
• Identify the key players  
• Gauge power and influence  
• Assess relationships |
| **Understand Your Style and Goals** | • Assess your own political style  
• Define what success looks like |
| **Build relationships** | • Determine appropriate involvement level for each player  
• Build across boundaries and hierarchy  
• Create with those who have formal and informal power/influence  
• Base them on trust and respect  
• Be friendly to all – don’t align with one  
• Be part of multiple networks |
| **Use Your Network for Positive Action** | • Gain access to information  
• Build visibility of your achievements  
• Improve difficult relationships  
• Attract opportunities where you can to shine  
• Seek out ways to make yourself, your team and your boss look good |
| **Govern Your Own Behavior** | • Play above-board and maintain integrity at all times  
• Listen carefully before speaking  
• Employ interpersonal diplomacy (don’t pass on gossip or spread rumors)  
• Rise above interpersonal conflicts (don’t get sucked into arguments)  
• Be positive and focused  
• Believe strongly in your change initiative and be assertive without being aggressive  
• Assume things will get disclosed and say only what you would want repeated  
• Be a role model for your team |
| **Anticipate and handle dissenters** | • Get to know them, but be careful what you say  
• Understand their motivations and goals  
• Learn to anticipate their negative politicking and avoid it |