

Squeaky clean but are you being outmanoeuvred?

Here's how to handle organisational politics successfully...

Organisational politics is a subject that evokes a strong response in many managers. Some see it as the art of behind-the-scenes skulduggery, while others accept it as part of organisational life.

Most of us would wince if we heard ourselves described as 'Machiavellian' but if we're honest, we may sometimes secretly envy colleagues who seem to have well-developed political antennae. And I know many NHS managers who are concerned that their naivety about, or unwillingness to engage in, organisational politics may be harming their career development.

The big question for many managers is: *Can I be political without compromising my integrity?* Ultimately, each of us has to answer this question for ourselves, but it can help us to do so if we understand the many different ways that it is possible to engage with organisational politics.

In their paper '*Owl, Fox, Mule or Sheep: Political Skills for Managers*', Simon Baddeley and Kim James identify four distinct approaches to organisational politics. They use images of different animals to bring the concept to life.

If you feel distaste for the kind of manoeuvring for personal advancement that sometimes goes on in organisations, you may have been watching **Foxes**. Foxes are crafty and prefer to go about their business unobserved. They can be seen as game players.

If you don't want to be a Fox, there are three alternatives:

- You could be a **Sheep** and adopt a blindly trusting approach to achieving your objectives. Sheep believe that life is fair, that top management reward effort, and that organisations function like efficient machines. They tend to let others dictate the agenda.
- Alternatively, you may become a **Mule**. This means sticking rigidly to your goals and going about them in the most straightforward way. Mules are single-minded - when they encounter resistance, they just keep pushing.

- Finally, you might choose to adopt the approach of an **Owl**. Owls are wise - they understand that organisations are complex, and contain many competing interests which are often driven by emotions and personal agendas. Owls keep a sense of perspective - they want to do what is right for the organisation, and right for themselves.

How do owls operate?

Owls keep a sense of perspective. This means:

- Thinking ahead. Owls habitually look six to 12 months ahead, which gives them time to build an influencing strategy.
- Building networks. Foxes work alone, and this is one of their weaknesses. Owls cultivate their networks so they have the benefit of others' insights and perspectives. Their extensive networks enable Owls to indirectly access people who aren't in their immediate circle.
- Forming coalitions. Mules stamp their feet, and dig their heels in. Owls recognise that sometimes an indirect approach is needed - they work with others to find a way round obstacles.
- Keeping the bigger picture in mind. Owls don't get bogged down in lengthy arguments about relatively trivial matters. They are happy to concede small points gracefully in order to achieve an important goal - something that Mules refuse to do.



Peter English is an independent consultant who specialises in leadership development within the NHS. He can be contacted via his website www.peterenglish.co.uk or pete@peterenglish.co.uk

Reference

Owl, Fox, Donkey or Sheep: Political Skills for Managers, Simon Baddeley and Kim James, *Management Learning*, 1987, 18:3.