



Our Commonwealth Games – Office Politics!

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A model that has stood the test of time emanates from the work done by Eric Berne and his classical good read “Games People Play.” He distinguishes between the three ‘ego states’ – ‘Parent’, ‘Adult’ and ‘Child’.

How might this model be applied to the phenomenon that is *Office Politics*? The ‘Child’ state is enacted in tantrumming, sulking, and telling secrets mischievously. The ‘Parent’ posture is reflected in judging behaviour, reprimands and inducing guilt. Sounds like your typical office environment, doesn’t it?

How might we define Office Politics?

I believe that Office Politics is a term often used to describe the “*meta*” *communication* (communication within communication) in a workplace; *usually informal, often covert* and for the purpose/s of *power, attention, approval, influence or favour*.

What might be some of the reasons?

- Boredom/enjoy the “sport”
- Learnt behaviour which may have been positively reinforced
- Insecurity – regressive behaviour (the Child State)
- Attention seeking
- Borderline harassment in disguise
- Toxic/hi stress culture where emotions boil over frequently and/or aggressively
- Substitute for poor skills
- Organic Pathology or personality disorder (and don’t kid yourself – this would only account for a few!)

On the surface we would probably all agree that playing politics or in Berne’s language –playing “games” is unnecessary and often destructive but why do so many of us get involved – particularly if we think it’s harmful? To lessen any potential feelings of discomfort, we may rationalise our low grade behaviour (assuming we recognise it and that can’t be automatically assumed) according to some of the following:



- Office Politics or game playing is inevitable/unavoidable
- Everybody does it
- They (the subject) deserve it!
- It's the only way to get ahead (the dog-eat-dog mentality)
- No one really gets hurt by it.

Stephen Covey in his seminal work, *“The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”*, traces the evolution of ethics over the last 200 years. Whilst he goes to great pains not to try to label our generation as superficial, he does note the difference in emphasis between these past 50 years and the 150 years before. The so-called Character Ethic in the first 150 years appears in the literature to have been based on integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, hard work and modesty. The emphasis on the Personality Ethic in the past 50 years has been as the name suggests, on personality, public image, attitudes and behaviours, positive thinking (with no disrespect to Norman Vincent Peale), communication skills training and teaching ‘tactics’.

I had to do some soul searching myself in relation to these thoughts when I first read the book as some of the work I have done in my own consulting practice has been in the area of conflict resolution and interpersonal skills training! Yet I also felt validated because I have always emphasised the importance of genuineness, intent or motive as being critical underpinnings of any of these skills or techniques and a long time ago I decided that I would never teach tactics in negotiation training (except for walking away from a bad deal!).

At the end of the day and this will come as no surprise to those who have read my articles before, we face choices and need to own those choices. In respect of Office Politics, we really have three choices which are to:

1. Play the game *better*
2. ‘Call’ the behaviour
3. Decide *not* to play and show them something else.

I think that Options Two and Three provide us with better outcomes and more self respect.

Scenario One – The Issue

Kath is furious because she tried to see the Director of only 4 months about something she believed was urgent and important and his “bodyguards” (P.A.'s), as she called them, had told her that he was very busy, that she must put her issues in writing and submit it through them. At an Open Forum on a Strategic Planning conference she brought this up when he asked the group what was hindering them in their jobs. He insisted that she should have told him this had occurred. She told the group after he left that she had already raised it with him a couple of times but that he'd done nothing about it. She left very disenchanted.

A Response

The “bodyguards” could be unnecessarily obstructive or they may be most diligent in protecting their new boss from the barrage of issues and people who demand his attention. Kath may have taken this personally when she didn’t need to and may have also enjoyed the attention and sympathy derived from the others when she complained. Kath showed courage when she brought up the issue at the conference but also made a choice when she besmirched the new director once he had left the room. The staff probably want to believe the new boss is open and receptive and he certainly tried to give that impression by agreeing to the Open Forum. Hearing the story from Kath may have served to undermine their confidence. Kath could perhaps have asked the director to provide guidance in prioritising issues that she would be encouraged to escalate to him directly and to identify issues that were reasonable to pass through the assistants. The ‘Adult’ response would have been to share the frustration openly, assertively and non-defensively but to maintain a solution-based focus.

Scenario Two – The Issue

Brenda was invited to co-convene a function committee to raise money for cervical cancer research because of her dynamism and organisational skills. Within a few months, after much initial euphoria amongst all of them, problems began to emerge between the two convenors. Brenda, who tended to be quite self critical did some soul searching regarding her style but was receiving a lot of feedback to suggest that people really welcomed her contribution and found her leadership inspiring.

Things really came to a head in the days before the function when the two convenors had to get together to write their speech and put finishing touches on the evening’s agenda. On the night things were tense between them and fell over at the end (although not obviously to any one else) when the convenor who invited her along became decidedly apathetic about the final “Thankyous” and refused to go on stage. Brenda was mortified when the woman rang her in the wee hours of the morning to berate her about the lack of harmony within the committee.

A Response

It would be easy to imagine that Brenda’s cohort has reacted badly out of insecurity or jealousy but whilst we see the case through Brenda’s eyes, it does not appear that there was any clarity on their respective roles and how they might work together from the beginning. Brenda may have assumed that she was meant to be an equal partner. The woman who invited her in may have believed that Brenda should have served an apprenticeship of sorts, or been more deferential or inclusive. However waiting until the evening and then going on “strike” as it were in front of others was quite ‘Child’-like behaviour on the other woman’s part and then ringing her and telling her off was ‘Parent’- like. The ‘Adult’ way to have handled any frustrations would have been for the other woman to instigate a low key assertive conversation



with Brenda about their respective roles, ensure a shared understanding of their vision and the parts they would play. Brenda now has a choice to make herself as she could gripe about the other woman to fellow committee members to enlist their support, resign her position in protest or re-establish a mature adult relationship to pave the way for the success of next year's function.

Scenario Three – The Issue

Marcus works for a prestigious international consulting firm. While he was delighted to top his year at uni and be offered the position, he is dismayed after 6 months at the appalling behaviour he sees around him. Some of the directors seem to thrive on very poor, arrogant, sometimes brutal behaviour and when people complain to them or others, they are told to "get over it". Marcus has taken to ignoring the comments and assumes that he must be doing a good job or he would soon know about it. One of his colleagues however gets very angry, bad mouths the directors every chance he gets and occasionally judges Marcus as weak because he doesn't react.

A Response

Again it would be easy to assume the worst. It may well be that some of the people wreaking havocs have megalomaniacal or power tripping tendencies at worst, or a warped sense of fun at best. They may also assume (perhaps incorrectly) that the people with whom they work, for all their cognitive intelligence can tell when they are having fun and that they genuinely don't mean anything by it. Marcus is choosing not to respond to the bullying and that is a response in itself. His friend who does not confront the bullies but undermines them to others is seeking safety in a collegiate atmosphere of misery and is probably suffering more than Marcus at the end of the day.

By accusing Marcus of being weak, he is negating Marcus' choice to 'flow' with the situation and is possibly feeling insecure about his inferior ability to cope. Nevertheless both men are absolutely entitled to set boundaries around what they will and won't accept from others at work, regardless of any power imbalance, and if at any point Marcus finds it too much he should either say something or activate another choice and vote with his feet. If he has decided to stay for a while; letting it wash over him and not gnaw at him because of the exceptional professional development he is getting and what the firm's name will mean on his résumé, then he is truly empowered. However if it becomes toxic and begins to cost him too much, he may want to leave and that is certainly not a sign of weakness but an 'Adult' strategic choice.

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