



# Checkmate: Using political skill to recognize and capitalize on opportunities in the 'game' of organizational life



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**Abstract** Politics in organizations are a fact of life, and have been regarded as such for decades by organizational scientists and practitioners alike. Unfortunately, far less is known about the skills or competencies needed in order to be successful—and even survive—in such political environments. Although many believe performance, effectiveness, and career success are determined mostly by intelligence and hard work, political perspectives on organizations contend that other factors such as positioning, social astuteness, and interpersonal savvy also play important roles; that is, individuals need to possess political skill. In this article, we describe the underlying features and operation of political skill in organizations, and argue that it allows people to be effective at work by giving them the capacity to more accurately recognize opportunities in the work environment and effectively capitalize on those opportunities. Using the game of chess as a metaphor, we describe how politically skilled individuals strategically employ their competencies in ways that ensure goal attainment. Further, we provide some practical guidance for employees about how to play the organizational politics 'game' to facilitate success.

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## 1. Organizational politics: You are already playing

*"One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."*

— Plato

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It is a general belief that politics results in under-qualified, but uncommonly silver-tongued, employees gaining undeserved benefits. As such, politics seems destined to be saddled with a negative connotation for all eternity. Not surprisingly, a Google search of the term 'office politics' yields innumerable articles from respected business outlets (e.g., *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*) discussing how employees can handle, survive, or win in this arena of organizational life. Each article tends to focus its advice on telling the reader to stop thinking negatively about politics, and advising them that they simply need to 'play the game' if they want to succeed. Implicit in these views is the idea that politics is neither bad nor good; it is simply a neutral and permanent feature of our work life. Understanding that organizational politics just *is* reflects the reality that everyone is already playing, and to do so effectively requires political skill.

The purpose of this article is to explain how political skill aids in individuals' ability to thrive in organizations by improving their ability to recognize and capitalize on opportunities. Our reference to the terms 'opportunity recognition' and 'opportunity capitalization' (or exploitation) has become fundamental in recent years to the field of entrepreneurship, which tends to focus on determining how, with what, and by whom opportunities are discovered (i.e., recognized), evaluated, and exploited (i.e., capitalized upon).

We apply this opportunity recognition and capitalization framework to behavior in organizations, arguing that certain knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences contribute to the capacity to recognize and then capitalize on opportunities in ways that lead to goal attainment. We use the components of political skill as the specific abilities and competencies that contribute to recognition of, and capitalization on, opportunities that contribute to performance and effectiveness within organizations. More specifically, we explain how political skill allows individuals to choose and execute superior courses of action, using the game of chess as a metaphor for working within an organization. We conclude by providing practical guidance for employees about how to play the organizational politics 'game' in a manner that facilitates success.

## 2. Playing the game vs. playing the game well

*"But what chess teaches you is that you must sit there calmly and think about whether it's*

*really a good idea and whether there are other, better ideas."*

– Stanley Kubrick

In the game of chess, each match entails a very large number of move options from which to select, especially when considering potential opponent responses and their possible answers. Whereas novice players may ignore either too many or too few possibilities, experts typically employ an experience-based model that informs them of the number of future moves to consider based on an opponent's skill level, the board layout, and their own strategy. In business organizations, developments often unfold in a likewise manner; however, instead of moving chess pieces on a board, individuals make decisions or take decisive actions that are designed to win certain outcomes in the organization (e.g., push through a new product design, secure a promotion). Once the 'chess board' has been laid out, the pieces placed, and the opponents identified, the game is under way and opposing forces on negotiable decisions and actions begin to consider their moves and opponents' potential responses, subsequent parries, and so forth.

Thus, chess is a game that requires a balance of patience and decisiveness. Players must carefully consider the options available and try to identify an opportunity to exploit. At the same time, players must be willing to commit to a strategy to avoid becoming mired in uncertainty. Like chess players, employees also must evaluate the benefits and risks of the moves available to them, recognizing the opportunities presented by the work environment. Then they must choose to act in a manner that enables them to capitalize on these opportunities.

Political skill is the competency that provides this ability to recognize opportunities and subsequently capitalize on them. To understand how political skill facilitates these processes, we need to unpack its dimensions and explain how they fit within the political context of organizational life. Each dimension should not be viewed in isolation but rather as an integral component within a complex framework. Only through an understanding of the four dimensions' operations can we appreciate *how* political skill works.

### 2.1. The makeup of political skill

At its foundation, political skill represents a set of social competencies that allows individuals to navigate the often turbulent seas of office politics. Although the importance of a set of competencies like this has been recognized throughout much of history, its inclusion in academic research began

in earnest only recently (Ferris et al., 2005a, 2007). In that short time, research has consistently demonstrated the importance of political skill in predicting a number of significant work outcomes, including employee performance (Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, *in press*) and stress reduction (Perrewé et al., 2004). Thus, political skill is one of the most critical competencies employees can possess if they wish to succeed within the organization (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981).

As defined by Ferris and colleagues (2007, p. 291), political skill is “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives.” Those who are politically skilled are able to adjust their behavior to fit their situation and to execute influence attempts with greater success. Research has demonstrated that political skill is comprised of four subdimensions: social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity. Each dimension represents a core component of what makes an individual politically skilled.

Social astuteness enables politically skilled individuals to read contexts or situations such that they can understand what behaviors are appropriate given the specific circumstances at that point in time. Such perceptiveness also permits individuals to recognize opportunities to influence others by adjusting behaviors so they are more likely to be effective in such contexts. Networking ability represents the capability to effectively gain contacts and access to important individuals and groups. The extensiveness of individuals’ networks, connections, and contacts also provides them with a much broader perspective on their environments, which can help them identify opportunities. Interpersonal influence represents individuals’ abilities to leverage their relationships with others and techniques of influence in ways that lead to effectiveness. Finally, apparent sincerity is the ability to convey thoughts and execute behaviors in sincere and genuine ways that will be interpreted as authentic by others. (For reviews and discussions of the components of political skill, see Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012.)

## 2.2. The effects of political skill

A key characteristic of politically skilled individuals is the consistency with which they continue to find success throughout various work domains and across different organizations. This consistency stems directly from their social astuteness, which facilitates the strategic adaptation of their behavior. Presenting themselves in a situationally appropriate

manner is an important quality of socially astute individuals; this is further refined by their ability to appear sincere. Politically skilled individuals are also capable of adapting their behavior to meet the demands of the current situation while always appearing authentic. Whereas many individuals’ attempts at appearing sincere tend to fall flat, leaving their ulterior motive easily recognizable, those with political skill have an apparent sincerity about them that leads others to believe the motivations they outwardly espouse are genuine.

The resulting coalescence of these four dimensions is exhibited in a calm sense of self-confidence that tends to inspire trust and confidence in others. Adept individuals’ skill in accurately reading people situations, coupled with their ability to select and execute the appropriate methods of influence, is the direct cause of these increased levels of self-confidence, inspired trust, and heightened credibility. These benefits stem directly from how politically skilled individuals are viewed by others in the workplace. According to Ferris et al. (2007, p. 308): “Politically skilled individuals’ behaviors are designed to influence others’ impressions of their competence and similarity.” When these behaviors are successfully employed, the successes gained by the politically skilled will result in additional positive outcomes including increased reputational capital.

## 2.3. Skill versus intelligence: Not always the same

Some researchers have put forth arguments against the existence of a separate political skill construct, alleging that it is no different than general mental ability. However, during development of the Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005a), discriminant validity was shown between these two constructs. Given this finding, it is possible to argue that political skill is not necessarily a function of intelligence—at least not the general mental ability we typically associate with the term. If intelligence relates to book smarts, then political skill tends to be equated with street smarts, which is probably why these two concepts have been found to be uncorrelated in a number of studies to date (Ferris et al., 2012).

It is also possible that political skill could account more for individuals’ success than does intelligence (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005b)—or, more contextually, that political skill is not necessarily indicative of other abilities possessed by an individual. Recently, research has shown that political skill is a significant predictor of job performance above and beyond personality traits and general mental

ability (Ferris et al., 2012). This demonstrates that the argument relating to inborn abilities or natural talents is not necessarily true for political skill. Expert chess players, who exhibit high levels of spatial ability during the course of a match, display no significant differences from a control group in a standard test of spatial ability (Doll & Mayr, 1987). Thus, the expertise associated with a skill is to be considered contextual.

### 3. Reading the board to determine your next move

Anyone familiar with the game of chess can recognize a board that has been prepared for play, as every piece always begins in exactly the same place. After just a few moves, however, the landscape of the board can vary dramatically and those same pieces may be in thousands of different configurations. While novice players may see nothing more than a random arrangement, expert chess players—well versed in the strategy and logic of chess—may look at the same board and recognize the players' intents or the makings of the Sicilian Defense. The difference between novice and expert lies in their ability to recognize patterns.

#### 3.1. Recognizing patterns

Pattern recognition is defined as the “process through which specific persons perceive complex and seemingly unrelated events as constituting identifiable patterns” (Baron, 2006, p. 106). Much like a chess board after only a few moves, the context of an organization often is interpreted by individuals as complex and filled with seemingly unrelated events. Rather than viewing these events as singular and unrelated, attempting to recognize the patterns that exist between them can provide clarity and understanding to attentive individuals.

To recognize patterns in the environment, individuals need to rely on their past experiences, gained learning, and tacit knowledge in order to form cognitive frameworks (Gobet & Simon, 1998; Sternberg, 2004). These frameworks contain all of the information that individuals use to make sense of the world around them. For example, we can classify any number of foods as salty, spicy, or sweet without needing to describe other characteristics of the edible. As a pattern becomes more refined, so does the cognitive framework, which results in increased levels of clarity, richness of focus, and degree of focus (Baron & Ensley, 2006).

Social astuteness captures individuals' ability to leverage their cognitive frameworks in order to

recognize the various elements, cues, or patterns within an environment. Thus, social astuteness is a form of self- and contextual awareness that facilitates individuals' discernment of social cues within an organizational context (Ferris et al., 2005a, 2007). The cues individuals discern are simply components of more complete patterns that are constantly in motion within an organization. Those who are more socially astute are likelier to recognize the entirety of a pattern rather than just its component parts; they can see the puzzle compared to a jumble of disaggregated, individual pieces. The richness of a cognitive framework is not only beneficial in recognizing patterns, but also in determining when something is missing (Baron, 2006). If individuals are able to identify what is missing, they may be able to proactively determine the best way to complete the pattern. Those capable of inserting themselves or their actions into a pattern may find themselves in positions they otherwise could not have attained.

#### 3.2. Recognizing an opportunity

Opportunity recognition is an applied version of pattern recognition, and the process through which individuals identify successful ideas (Shane, 2003). Opportunities exist everywhere, but are rarely realized because most people are not able to recognize that they exist. For example, American outdoor product company The North Face was founded in 1966 by two men who were focused on designing and selling high-quality products to a nascent outdoor sport demographic. Douglas Tompkins and Kenneth 'Hap' Klopp recognized that their passion for adventure outstripped the gear that was available to sportspeople of the time and identified a new pattern: individuals wanted to get into the great outdoors, but had no gear of sufficiently excellent quality in which to do so. Thus, The North Face was born.

In the organizational context, opportunities generally occur on the individual level in the forms of promotions, raises, or the opportunity to work on select projects. Although the scope is somewhat different, the basic process of opportunity recognition functions similarly across both levels. Baron (2006) identified three key aspects of opportunity recognition: (1) active searching for opportunities, (2) level of alertness, and (3) access to and attainment of appropriate information—all of which can be applied to individuals. Within these elements of opportunity recognition exist the link to political skill and an increased understanding of how those adept in this social competency tend to perform so well in the workplace.

Individuals who are socially astute demonstrate a high level of self- and contextual awareness in social settings, resulting in an understanding of their environment and those that inhabit it (Ferris et al., 2007). To effectively and efficiently search the environment, individuals need to know the boundaries and the social norms dictating what is considered appropriate behavior and what constitutes a viable option. The social astuteness dimension of political skill maps onto two aspects of Baron's (2006) opportunity recognition: level of alertness and active searching for opportunities. Alertness is similar to the idea of passive searching, such as when employees meet with foreign clients and—without actively trying—begin to pick up on cultural norms and more. For example, bowing is an integral part of Japanese society, whether you are saying hello, goodbye, apologizing, or even expressing condolences. In Western countries, the handshake is more common in organizations when greeting others. Socially astute individuals will almost instinctively bow when meeting with their Japanese clients.

Likewise, social astuteness also facilitates individuals' actively searching for opportunities within the environment. As opposed to alertness, an active search is dedicated toward a particular goal and focused on maximizing the ratio between rewards and effort expended on attaining success. If individuals are vying for a promotion or a coveted position on a particular project team, they need to actively search the environment for an opportunity to exploit.

Consider General Electric (GE), which employs over 300,000 people. Many young employees of GE likely have designs on becoming a company officer, one of the top 300 positions (0.1%) with the firm. The less astute amongst the hopeful are likely to simply work hard and hope it pays off in the long run; however, the more savvy will search for an underlying pattern and discover that 75% of GE officers are graduates of the Corporate Audit Staff development program.

Armed with information about this pattern, these individuals can work to maximize their exposure to the decision makers that select employees for the Corporate Audit Staff program. Once admitted, these leadership candidates will also better understand the importance of superior performance in the program and will be more likely to persevere through the difficulty of the multi-year, multi-country tour of assignments because they recognize the odds of achieving the goal of officer are not in favor of those who do not complete the program.

Regardless of individuals' abilities to recognize opportunities, if they are not ensconced within opportunity-rich environments, they will not find

success; thus, individuals' networking abilities are critical to the recognition of opportunities. The difficulty associated with recognizing opportunities decreases when greater amounts of information are present. Networking, or the act of positioning oneself within a network such that one has access to information that others may not, is directly related to opportunity recognition abilities. Research on entrepreneurs by Johannisson (1990) found that social networks are some of the most critical information sources available.

F. Ross Johnson, the infamous former head of RJR Nabisco described as having a knack for corporate politics, recognized the importance of being embedded in networks comprised of influential individuals. Shortly after his move to New York as head of Standard Brands International (his first American corporate post), Johnson positioned himself among the major players in Manhattan by wrangling a coveted "seat on the New Canaan Club Car, a hangout for executives" on the commuter train (Burrough & Helyar, 1990, p. 17). Further, Johnson immediately ingratiated himself with Standard Brands board members. This opportunity-rich network led to his promotion to president and a seat on the Standard Brands board 1 year after his arrival in New York.

Potentially, a too-much-of-a-good-thing effect can occur if individuals are embedded in too many networks. They may become inundated with excess information or spend too much time maintaining the social ties required by networks (e.g., attending meetings). Here again, social astuteness works in tandem with networking ability in such a way as to allow individuals to select the more beneficial networks and then focus their efforts on obtaining only relevant and timely information. These two dimensions lead to a greater ability to recognize opportunities because the more extensive individuals' networks, connections, and contacts are, the greater breadth of perspective they develop, which allows them to see things others cannot; the bits of past and current experience from all their contacts form this broad perspective.

#### 4. Check: Capitalizing on your opportunities

*"In chess, as in life, opportunity strikes but once."*

— David Bronstein

In chess, it is not enough to recognize opportunity created by the patterns of pieces in play; rather,

success rests upon players' ability to capitalize upon that knowledge. Too often, individuals fail to translate opportunities into success because they lack the skills required to exploit the openings presented. This is most likely due to a lack of political skill: the ability to influence others and to come across as genuine and sincere when expressing oneself. No matter how viable the recognized opportunity, the rewards associated with capitalizing on it will remain untapped without the skill necessary to turn the opportunity into an actual success.

Research (e.g., [Farmer & Maslyn, 1999](#)) has demonstrated that the success of political behavior is determined in part by the skill with which the behavior is enacted. For example, without political skill, individuals' impression management techniques may be less likely to craft the image desired. However, political skill enables individuals to employ political behaviors (e.g., impression management techniques) in a precise manner that attains the desired effect ([Ferris et al., 2007](#)). The final two dimensions of political skill—interpersonal influence and apparent sincerity—are directly related to individuals' abilities to capitalize upon or exploit recognized opportunities.

Interpersonal influence represents individuals' adaptability when employing wide-ranging politically motivated behaviors based upon the current situation ([Ferris et al., 2005a, 2007, 2012](#)). Politically skilled individuals are not one-trick ponies who, due to lack of flexibility, are only able to engage others in a single fashion (e.g., assertive, coy, flattering). Instead, those with political skill constantly adapt their techniques to the situation and the target of their influence in ways that optimally fit the context. Frequently, this involves the demonstration of several mutually compatible behaviors that synergistically create the desired image that maximizes situational fit (i.e., represents the most situationally appropriate behaviors).

[Goffman \(1959\)](#) suggested that expressed emotion used as strategic interpersonal influence could be referred to as 'control moves' and might be reflected in gestures, tone of voice, language, and facial expressions. Politically skilled individuals understand very well how to employ combinations of verbal and nonverbal behavior in strategic ways to fit the situation and execute influence effectively. Former President Bill Clinton was masterful at combining strategic emotion demonstration, rhetoric, and nonverbal behavior to convey precisely the intended image that usually elicited a favorable reaction from his audience ([Ferris et al., 2005b](#)).

Not being perceived as sincere is one difficulty that could arise from the employment of a repertoire of varied influence behaviors. Otherwise well-executed

influence attempts will fall flat if they appear forced, faked, or self-serving. The apparent sincerity dimension of political skill is critical to the success of influence attempts as it allows individuals to present themselves in a favorable light, yet not in ways perceived as manipulative or self-serving ([Ferris et al., 2007](#)). Indeed, such sincerity and genuineness inspire trust and confidence in others. Rudolph Guiliani was mayor of New York City during the tragic, destructive events that occurred on September 11, 2001, and he demonstrated such an authentic, decisive, and assertive leadership style that he earned the unofficial title of America's Mayor. It is quite apparent that his genuine, sincere, what-you-see-is-what-you-get style contributed to his effectiveness as a leader—one who inspired trust and confidence in others ([Ferris et al., 2005b](#)).

## 5. Organizational grand masters

*"In order to become a grandmaster class player whose understanding of chess is superior to the thousands of ordinary players, you have to develop within yourself a large number of qualities: the qualities of an artistic creator, a calculating practitioner, a cold calm competitor."*

— Alexander Kotov

Every chess grandmaster began their career as a novice. Mastery of the game is achieved via dedicated and deliberate practice. The consistency with which individuals practice and further their knowledge of the game is what facilitates their development into grand masters. As experts, these individuals are able to fluidly navigate games, sometimes several simultaneously, with seemingly little thought or effort. Playing office politics, in many respects, is just like any other game: the more you play, the more you tend to improve. Interestingly, chess—one of the primary subjects for studies of expert performance—is often likened to office politics. Although the parallels between chess and organizational politics are many, one of the most salient is the corollary of expertise. Just as experts in chess can navigate the board more effectively, individuals who are flush with political skill are able to navigate political environments much more efficiently because of their level of expertise.

### 5.1. What makes an expert?

The notion of acquiring skill through practice is in direct contrast to early, and still common, ideas regarding talent. Belief in the unnatural gifts possessed by certain individuals dates back to the early

Greeks, who believed that divine intervention was responsible for such manifestations. Despite these enduring beliefs, both time and effort are necessary to become an expert in nearly all activities. While the casual chess player may recognize a few basic strategic patterns, a chess master may be able to recognize and classify hundreds. Of course, chess masters are not born with that ability, but instead acquire it through thousands of hours of practice (Bloom, 1985). Recent work on expert performance has delved deeper into the cognitive functioning of experts and demonstrated that expertise is more attributable to altered cognitive and physical processes brought about due to extensive training endured by those we consider experts (Ericsson & Charness, 1994).

Expert performance is defined as “consistently superior performance on a specified set of representative tasks for the domain that can be administered to any subject” (Ericsson & Charness, 1994, p. 731). A more empirically grounded conceptualization of expert performance is that of the outlier; more specifically, performance that is at least two standard deviations greater than the average ability demonstrated in a population (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). In the realm of chess, research has found that better chess players consider not just more alternative moves, but also deeper levels to those alternatives (Charness, 1981). This is indicative of an important characteristic of expert performance: flexibility. There is a strong body of research supporting the notion that experts generally are more flexible and creative in their thought patterns (Ericsson, 2003).

## 5.2. Expert execution

The first hallmark of an expert is consistently superior performance (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Expert performance is a factor that can be counted on to remain stable. The basis for this well-researched observation lies in the cognitive frameworks formed by experts. These cognitive frameworks are extremely elaborate and significantly more extensive than those of novices. The sheer expanse of these networks allows experts to better recognize situations, identify potential opportunities, and then determine appropriate courses of action. Identifying new opportunities should occur not only in familiar situations, but also in new or unique situations not yet encountered by experts.

The prior knowledge that experts bring to a unique problem is manifest in these extensive cognitive frameworks. Baron (2006) identified prior knowledge as the third core component of opportunity recognition. The type of knowledge that factors

into opportunity recognition is that gained by experience and study. Research on expert performance has cited evidence that expertise is not created simply through the execution of a task, but rather through deliberate practice and study (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

In chess, one of the greatest predictors of future mastery is the directed study of chess literature and the review of past matches (Campitelli & Gobet, 2008). The evidence is fairly uniform in its suggestion that practice has the most influence on individuals' chess abilities, and it is far and away a better predictor than personal characteristics such as intelligence (Bilalic, McLeod, & Gobet, 2007). The importance of prior knowledge to the consistency of experts' ability to recognize opportunities is related directly to the cognitive frameworks that experts build and use to evaluate problem sets.

These frameworks allow experts to identify aspects of a problem that are similar to previously encountered patterns, bringing their extensive frameworks to bear on solving new situations. Thus, when faced with a unique problem set, experts simply start with more options than novices. However, the ability to consistently recognize opportunities in a stable environment may not necessarily be indicative of expertise. If an employee is constantly presented with the same environment and a repeating set of problems, they may only be proficient at identifying and providing solutions for that specific problem set. If they are not truly experts, they likely will falter when the environment shifts and they are presented with unique problem sets. This outcome may manifest itself through the display of novice-like behaviors, including a decrease in accuracy and speed brought about by mental rigidity (Necka & Kubik, 2012).

The second hallmark of an expert is nonpareil, untouchable performance (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Experts simply perform better than novices. The research and reasoning behind this is the same as presented above in that the cognitive structures of experts allow them to derive better solutions than non-experts. In the realm of organizational politics, experts (i.e., the highly politically skilled) are able to generate and implement better solutions to political situations than their novice counterparts. Using their prior experience in the form of cognitive structures, those experts in political skill invariably will be able to maximize their outcomes based on the patterns or opportunities they recognize in a given situation. Just like well-trained leaders, experts in political skill differ from those less trained in their “unusual ability to appreciate the dynamics of complex [situations] and quickly judge whether a [strategy] is promising

or fruitless” (Kahneman & Klein, 2009, p. 515). Thus, it is not only that experts will be able to identify and execute a greater number of solutions, but also that they will achieve objectively better outcomes.

### 5.3. Developing expertise

If people are constantly competing, it is likely that they are also constantly improving their ability to compete. The expert performance literature would argue that simply engaging in an activity does not necessarily yield improvement, and certainly not expertise. Specifically, researchers have found that the length of one’s professional experience does not lead to better decision making (Moxley, Ericsson, Charness, & Krampe, 2012). Instead, skill acquisition occurs when individuals engage in deliberate practice that results in accurate feedback as well as opportunities for future improvement (Ericsson et al., 1993).

How, then, does political skill improve over time? There is evidence that an individual’s political skill can increase even more rapidly when coached or mentored (Ferris et al., 2007). Essentially, mentors act as mechanisms that provide accurate feedback to individuals in training. Of course, mentors also must possess sufficient ability in order to provide successful mentorship. If mentors are not capable of providing accurate feedback, then protégés will not receive the expertise-enhancing benefits of mentorship.

Political skill has both active and passive components. Passively, political skill allows individuals to understand the work environment. Actively, most attempts at influencing others can be deemed intentional, and thus could be considered deliberate practice. As such, it is expected that over time individuals consistently should improve, and that the presence of a mentor should lead to even greater advances in individuals’ levels of political skill. It is likely that political skill, like any other skill, is subject to mastery by those who practice the use of it by engaging in political activity.

Finally, the expert performance literature helps explain why the training of certain patterns will be useful in today’s workplace. The current political landscape is simply too dynamic to allow for any specific training scenarios to translate directly into the work environment. Fortunately, we know that experts use their training to develop cognitive frameworks that can then be mobilized to observe, analyze, and choose the best course of action for new and unique situations. Understanding this, the focus of political skill training should not be on just the most prevalent political situations, but should

also include a wide variety of situations that allow for individuals to build extensive cognitive frameworks that permit adaptable and fluid problem solving.

## 6. Checkmate: Making it count

*“You are not a born CEO or investor or chess grandmaster. You will achieve greatness only through an enormous amount of hard work over many years.”*

— Geoffrey Colvin

The realization that very smart and hard-working individuals are not necessarily those who always get ahead in organizations gave way to a view that organizations are political arenas. As such, political skill is a requisite attribute necessary to be effective in organizations (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981). In this section, we offer employees some practical thoughts on developing and using political skill in a way that makes their moves count.

### 6.1. Navigating the game as a novice

In the game of organizational life, we have likened the politically skilled to chess grandmasters. However, this presents a quandary for those new to the game, who may feel forced to play with others who are much more experienced. In fact, some may be alarmed by the realization that they are playing a game for which they feel ill-equipped. The board can be intimidating the first time you survey it. What is a novice to do? We suggest starting with small moves. As noted, political skill consists of four underlying dimensions: social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity. Before attempting to wield interpersonal influence (e.g., making a run at an opponent’s king), employees inexperienced in organizational politics should make connections with others and develop their networking abilities.

We are not suggesting the formation of coalitions, but rather the establishment of a network that may if necessary be leveraged for organizational influence. Think of this as positioning your pieces on the board for future moves. Networking actions are low risk, but have the potential for great reward. In addition, building and maintaining relationships with key organizational players can provide opportunities for novices to watch political experts in action, which can accelerate learning. These low-stakes engagements allow novice political players to hone a genuine presentation style, thereby developing an apparent sincerity that—as previously mentioned—is an



essential characteristic for successfully capitalizing on influence opportunities.

## 6.2. Making concessions

A great misunderstanding in the game of organizational politics is the notion that one must dominate at every moment. This is unrealistic, and would be the equivalent of playing chess without losing a single piece. In chess, as in organizational life, it is necessary to know when to concede. The expression, "Sometimes you have to sacrifice a pawn in order to take a queen," captures the reality of play. Strategic concessions are necessary, and developing a network and building political capital for future influence may require sacrifices. This could take the form of relinquishing control of a current project or acquiescing to a colleague's position on a personnel matter in order to secure a bigger win in the future.

Understanding when it is advantageous to make such concessions requires social astuteness, which employees can develop by becoming students of the game. World Chess Champion Vladimir Kramnik once said: "Every month I look through some ten thousand games, so as not to miss any new ideas and trends" (ChessQuotes, 2014). Similarly, employees should become conscious observers of their organizational environments, striving to recognize patterns and understand when opportunities may be developing.

## 7. Conclusion

In this article, we described how the underlying dimensions of political skill enable employees to achieve goals and objectives. We used the game of chess as a metaphor to illustrate how political skill drives the opportunity recognition and capitalization processes to influence outcomes in organizations the way chess grandmasters navigate the complex possibilities presented on a chess board. The politically skilled organizational grandmaster reads people and environments in ways that yield the detection of cues and thus opportunities that others simply cannot see. These masters operate on and enact with their environments in ways that create new opportunities. Finally, it is capitalization on these recognized opportunities that allows the politically skilled to achieve their objectives—much in the same way chess grandmasters leverage their skills—which translates into heightened job performance, enhanced reputation, and faster promotions. We hope the discussion has informed readers about the realities

of playing politics in organizations, and enhances their potential to be the player who gets to exclaim: "Checkmate!"

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