# Political Skill at Work

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## POLITICAL SKILL AT WORK

"Only in America do we use the word 'politics' to describe the process so well; 'poli' in Latin meaning 'many' and 'tics' meaning 'blood-sucking creatures!" Mention politics or political skill to many managers and their reaction may be, "Why play those unprofessional games?" Although political skill usually carries a negative connotation, we do not see it that way. In fact, we believe effective use of political skill will become increasingly important to a manager's career. Consider the following situation. You are recently assigned to work on a project management team that has an ineffective yet high-ranking leader. Furthermore, your team has a complex task to complete within a tight deadline. The successful completion of the project will have a direct effect on your career. What can you do to overcome the deficiencies of the ineffective leader and enhance team performance?

This situation calls for the effective use of political skill because you have no authority over the team leader. It also exemplifies a major trend—organizations are becoming increasingly more social in nature. Managers and employees don't spend their time at work toiling at individual tasks and duties that isolate them from others. Instead, they coordinate their efforts with others on teams, communicate directly with customers or clients, or reflect managerial skills aimed at negotiation, coordination, or facilitation of others. Such efforts require well-developed social or interpersonal skills, and indeed, such skills are in great demand for jobs at all levels of organizations. Reliance on tradi-

tional authority and hierarchical structures to accomplish work has given way to team-based management, and the social skills necessary to effectively facilitate, coach, and orchestrate interaction-based outcomes.

In this article, we refine and further develop the notion of "political skill," and suggest how it is absolutely critical to job and career success in organizations today. Political skill is an interpersonal style that combines social awareness with the ability to communicate well. People who practice this skill behave in a disarmingly charming and engaging manner that inspires confidence, trust, and sincerity. We also discuss how political skill is related to and differentiated from a host of other social skill concepts. Industrial psychologists and management consultants have spent a lot of time trying to identify knowledge, skills, and abilities that are predictive of job performance. We argue that political skill, along with general mental ability (i.e., intelligence), represent compatible (yet distinct) sets of adaptability-enhancing abilities. These abilities combine to form a personal portfolio necessary for success in a broad array of jobs in what we are witnessing as highly dynamic organizational environments that require flexibility in their human resources.

## DYNAMIC ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

People interested in careers in human resources management used to respond to questions concerning their choice of occupation by saying, "I want to work with people."

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Implying that the only way we can work with people in organizations is to work in the human resources department is, of course, absurd. Organizations, by definition, are collections of people working collaboratively, often on interdependent tasks, but certainly under a common set of goals and objectives. However, it was more common decades ago to find people working on jobs whereby they interacted much more with machinery or data than with people. Think of the traditional automobile assembly line.

Work environments have changed dramatically, particularly within the past 20 years, as organizations have realized nothing short of monumental transformations. In efforts to increase their competitive positions, organizations have engaged in extensive downsizing and restructuring, resulting in flatter, more rectangular structures with coordination and control mechanisms operating more horizontally than vertically. In such structures, hierarchy has been replaced with information technology, team-based work structures, and norms and controls based on the organization's culture. Employees are expected to perform in fluid and changing sets of roles instead of the static and rigid boundaries formerly placed around jobs and job descriptions. Furthermore, the demise of the bureaucratic structure and adoption of more adaptable, flexible forms has removed the barriers top management enjoyed from the division of labor and chain of command.

Consider this example experienced by one of the authors. An electronics plant that produced high tech radios for the military switched from a typical assembly line process to produce the radios to a team-based management approach. Instead of sitting at their individual work stations all day as the radio parts passed by, workers formed product assembly teams. Teams were not only assigned the responsibility of assembling component radio parts and the entire radio; they were also given the responsibility of managing their own quality control. Employees in these different work structures need to exercise not just job knowledge, but also social skills aimed at working effectively

with and through others. Furthermore, the supervisor role in such contexts has changed from direct and immediate monitoring and control to one involving coaching and facilitation of the team's efforts. This scenario has been repeated countless times in numerous industries such as electronics, automotive, steel, and even health care.

We are indeed seeing the rise of the more open, "social organization," where management is expected to be more visible and in touch with what is going on, and employees are insisting on more "face time"— where they can interact directly with each other in teams and with those from whom they need decisions and action. With such increased interpersonal interaction in organizations, social skill and political skill, specifically, are being seen as increasingly important.

## SOCIAL SKILL IN ORGANIZATIONS

For most jobs today, the very nature of effective performance is some combination of required tasks and duties, but also—and at least as important, if not more—the demonstration of extrarole or contextual performance. Although the interpersonal skill of communication has always been important, other social skills such as facilitating, coaching, influencing, and coordinating with others are now being recognized as important. Indeed, working with and through others is critical for most jobs, certainly for managers. In fact, recent research from the Center for Creative Leadership reports that one of the leading causes of "management derailment" is lack of good interpersonal skills. Executive coaches today, assigned to work with managers on skill deficiencies, report that most of their time is spent on the development of social and political skills.

Interest in social skill has been growing in recent years, and it has been presented under labels like social intelligence, emotional intelligence, ego resiliency, self-monitoring, and practical intelligence. Although each of these purports to assess something a

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little different from one another, it is fair to characterize all of them as part of this general category of social skill that indicates a facility in interactions with others. However, none of these forms of social skill was developed explicitly to address interpersonal interactions in organizational settings. Although much about the social skill exhibited in everyday life can be generalized to work environments, there are also some unique contextual dynamics in work organizations that suggest a type of social skill is needed which is developed in the context of organizational social and political realities. However, before explicitly considering the nature of political skill, we will examine some of these related forms of social skill.

## Types of Social Skill

### Social intelligence
A concept dating back to 1920, social intelligence very simply refers to the ability to understand and manage people. Despite decades of failure to develop an acceptable way to measure social intelligence, the construct remains alive and well in theory, particularly in light of efforts to expand our views of intelligence beyond I.Q. This concept probably first introduced the notion that there is more than one way (i.e., I.Q.) to be intelligent, and that social astuteness might contribute to success in aspects of life that extend beyond classroom learning contexts. We argue that general social intelligence plays a dominant role in political skill. Political skill is more specific to the work setting and deals with understanding and managing people in work or organizational settings. Furthermore, we see political skill as focusing on both the behaviors to exhibit, but at least if not more important, the style employed to make the behaviors convincing and effective.

### Emotional intelligence
Considerable interest has been generated in just the past few years in the concept of emotional intelligence, which generally refers to the ability to monitor one's own and

others feelings and emotions, and to use this information in the demonstration and regulation of emotions. More specifically, emotional intelligence can be viewed as involving the ability to control impulses and delay gratification, to regulate one's moods, and to be able to empathize. Controlling and regulating emotions is, indeed, an important part of social skill, however, there are other aspects, such as building and leveraging social capital, which we discuss later as part of political skill.

## Ego-resiliency

Ego-resiliency is a form of social skill that fundamentally contributes to effective environmental adaptation through the capacity for self-regulation of behavior to different and changing environmental demands or cues. This concept includes the components of emotional self regulation, adaptive impulse control, social intelligence, and a sense of self-efficacy (i.e., individuals' beliefs in their ability to execute courses of action required for successful performance). The ability to adapt well to different social situations is seen as contributing to political skill.

## Social self-efficacy

Another type of social skill is social self-efficacy, which refers to judgments of personal capability in social interactions and contexts. People high in social self-efficacy believe they can control the outcomes of social interactions. Those low on this construct, on the other hand, believe they lack the ability to master social interactions, regardless of their actual level of social competence or knowledge of socially appropriate behavior. Thus, social self-efficacy is a basic belief or confidence in one's ability to control social situations, which contributes to an optimistic attitude and a positive demeanor, both of which contribute to effectiveness in social situations. Political skill mirrors the concept of social self-efficacy; however, political skill is concerned with the unique contexts and interactions within the organizational realm as well as effecting change in organizations.

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### Self-monitoring

People high in self monitoring are skilled at knowing what is socially appropriate in particular situations. They demonstrate the ability to control their emotional expression, and they are capable of using these abilities effectively to create desired impressions. Thus, self-monitoring represents a type of social skill that focuses on the effective demonstration of situation-appropriate social behavior, but also reflects the unique skill of being able to read, interpret, and understand social situations. High self-monitoring social style is one that attempts to present the appropriate type of person called for in every situation. People with this orientation are sensitive and responsive to interpersonal cues to situational appropriateness. Political skill differs from self-monitoring in that political skill is often used to effect change in the desired manner, whereas self-monitoring describes individuals' attempts to behave in a socially appropriate fashion.

### Tacit knowledge and practical intelligence

Tacit knowledge refers to action- oriented relevant knowledge that allows people to achieve goals they personally value. It is knowledge acquired without the help of others—in other words, learned on one's own. It is procedural in nature (how to), and it is directly related to goal attainment. Tacit knowledge is related to practical intelligence, or common sense, and it relies on the unspoken rules one finds in the workplace. Another word for this is "savvy." Tacit knowledge and practical intelligence are closely related to each other and to political skill. Simply, if one has this knowledge, one is more likely to be able to demonstrate political skill. Thus, political skill is largely based on one's tacit knowledge and practical intelligence.

To summarize, we conceptualize political skill as a distinct type of social skill. We also see other types of social skills as influencing political skill. Exhibit 1 graphically depicts our conceptualization of political skill and other social skill concepts. As can be seen, although the various types of social skills are related to and may influence political skill, we believe political skill is a distinct concept that warrants attention in organizations.

## THE NATURE OF POLITICAL SKILL

Many subscribe to the belief that organizations are inherently political arenas – where competing interest groups, scarce resources, coalition building, and the exercise of power and influence best characterize such environments, and the way things get done. To succeed and be effective in such organizations, it seems that people must possess intuitive savvy concerning what behaviors to demonstrate in particular situations. Indeed, bookstore shelves are full of books that identify political influence tactics and behaviors designed to make one effective at office politics. Furthermore, an extensive body of work now exists showing that employment decisions such as personnel selection, performance evaluation, and promotions tend to be quite political in nature.

However, what has been missing is an understanding of how the interpersonal style with which the political influence attempts are carried out is absolutely essential to the success of such efforts. If an appreciation of which behaviors or tactics to exhibit were sufficient for effective influence attempts, we would see less management derailment and more effective supervisor-employee relationships. The style or execution of the influence behaviors in organizations is a critical missing piece, and it represents a special type of social competency and astuteness we refer to as political skill.

We define political skill as an interpersonal style construct that combines social astuteness with the ability to relate well, and otherwise demonstrate situationally appropriate behavior in a disarmingly charming and engaging manner that inspires confidence, trust, sincerity, and genuineness. We suggest that people high in political skill not only know precisely what to do in different

**EXHIBIT 1: THE INFLUENCE OF DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL SKILL ON POLITICAL SKILL**
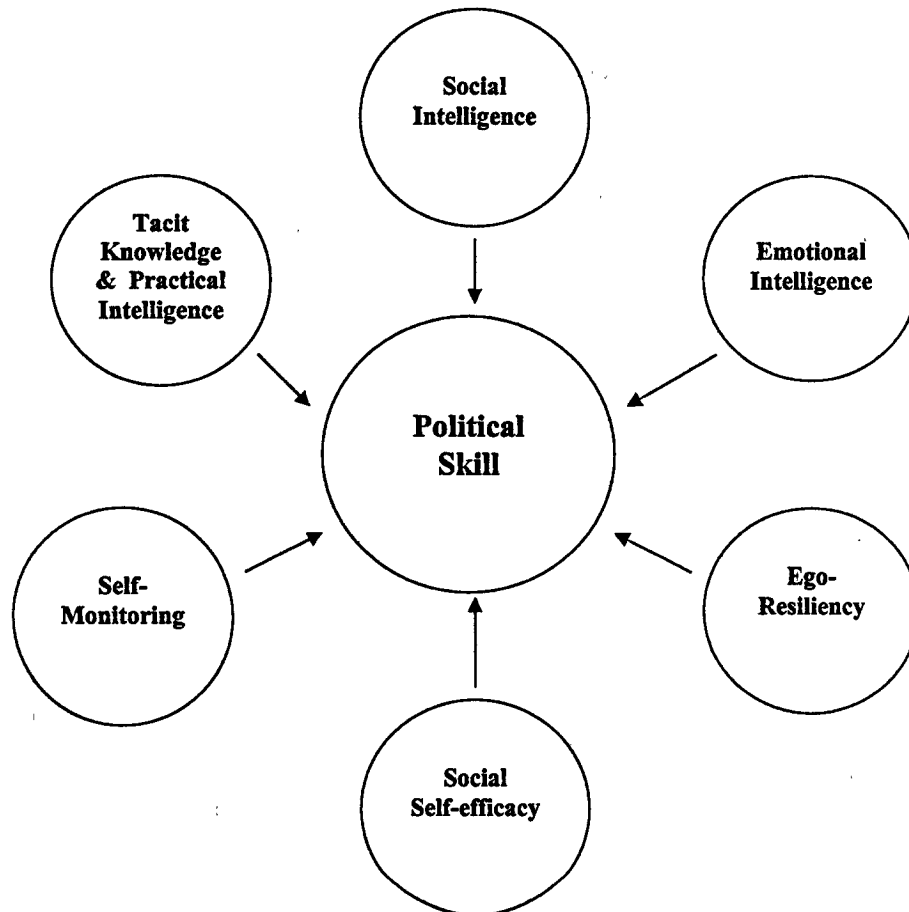


social situations at work, but they know exactly how to do it in a sincere manner that disguises any potentially manipulative motives and renders the influence attempt successful. Political skill differs from other types of social skills in that political skill is specific to interactions aimed at achieving success in organizations. Clearly, these interactions may take place outside of the organizational context (e.g., a wedding reception), however, the goal is still organizational influence and success.

The use of political skill is not limited to "face-to-face" interactions. Technological ad-

vances have given impetus to a host of communication modes such as electronic mail and voice mail. People high in political skill are able to express emotion in a genuine and convincing manner via electronic forms of communication, through such means as tone of voice, as well as in their written communication. Thus, we are not simply referring to the ability to demonstrate particular behaviors that might be regarded as contributing to effective interpersonal interactions. Instead, political skill allows people to create synergy among discrete behaviors that transcends the simple sum of the parts to realize

a set of interpersonal dynamics and effective execution that results in personal and career success.

Political skill, therefore, is not a single trait or skill. Rather, it reflects an integrated composite of internally consistent and mutually reinforcing and compatible skills and abilities that create a synergistic social dynamic that defies precise description. This is why we refer to it as a style-type of component, because the term style is defined in a manner that reflects best what we mean by political skill. The dictionary defines style as: (1) "a manner or mode of expression in language; way of putting thoughts into words," or (2) "specific or characteristic manner of expression, execution, construction, or design in art, period, work, employment, etc."

Additionally, we believe political skill is inherent in a person to some extent, but we also contend that it can be developed or shaped. This might sound as if we are hedging or trying to have it both ways. However, the integration of dispositional and situational perspectives on behavior reflects a more contemporary view, in contrast to the prior, mutually exclusive, trait-versus-situation approaches. So, we believe one is likely born with a predisposition toward political skill, but that without proper environmental stimuli or precipitants, this set of skills may never be fully realized. Furthermore, the very nature and effectiveness of political skill relies upon the ability to adjust one's behavior to the nuances and environmental demands of particular situations. In this sense, political skill contributes to the behavioral flexibility so important in today's dynamic organizational environments—similar to the way in which general mental ability or intelligence contributes to cognitive flexibility. We view both types of flexibility as critical to effectiveness, though cognitive flexibility seems less amenable to training. As we discuss later in this article, we see the development of political skill as a potentially new area of interest and activity in management development programs and in hiring and promotion decisions.

We believe that political skill has a direct

effect on the reactions and evaluations of others because of its effective combination of social astuteness about what to do, but also the ability to do it in an appropriate way. More analytically, political skill can be seen to also play a facilitative role in the effective execution of a number of types of interpersonal behaviors. In this respect, we might characterize political skill as the "BASF of interpersonal relations." Like the advertisement for the large chemical company—"We don't make a lot of the products you buy. We make a lot of the products you buy better"—we would suggest that *political skill doesn't make the interpersonal influence behavior, it makes the influence behavior better*.

## SOCIAL AND REPUTATIONAL CAPITAL

Our discussion of how political skill makes people more successful at work, to this point, has focused on the social savvy and astuteness one exhibits in face-to-face interactions. This is important, and a key aspect of how political skill leads to job and career success, but it does not tell the whole story. Another quite important feature of political skill dynamics relates to how people accumulate forms of personal, nonfinancial capital. Labor economists discuss the importance of human capital variables (e.g., education, skills, etc.) in understanding wage differentials among employees. Furthermore, organizations increasingly are attempting to develop sustained competitive advantage from the invisible assets of organizational knowledge and information commonly referred to as intellectual capital.

We now turn to two other forms of nonfinancial capital to illustrate our point about political skill dynamics. Charles Fombrun has done some interesting work on corporate reputation, and how organizations that enhance their reputations build "reputational capital"—the increased value realized by a firm that leads the consumer public to buy its products or services, leads investors to buy its stock, and talented job candidates to seek

employment there. We believe these same attributes of companies also apply to individuals who are concerned about their reputations, make investments in the development of their reputations, and hope for a good return on such investments. Indeed, this perspective reflects the metaphor of the individual employee as a private enterprise (i.e., "Me, Inc."), which attempts to make sound investments in the creation of a diversified portfolio that can reap large returns in the form of job and career success. Another important element in this portfolio is the creation of what has been referred to as social capital, or the extensive networks of connections and alliances one forms with others. Personal reputation, we believe, both contributes to the accumulation of social capital, and it is also enhanced by it.

This personal, nonfinancial capital perspective on employees is useful for our understanding of political skill. We suggest that people high in political skill are quite shrewd and calculating about the personal investments they make and the social connections they form, inspiring trust and confidence in others that allows them to effectively leverage social and reputational capital to maximize job and career success. Reputation, indeed, has been appropriately characterized as more of a political than a scientific concept, and we argue that those who are successful at developing and maintaining high quality reputations do so with political skill.

## JOB AND CAREER SUCCESS WITH POLITICAL SKILL

Political skill has been argued to be a critical factor in managerial effectiveness, and some research has provided support for these notions. Others have suggested that political skill is one of the most prominent differentiating qualities in women who succeed in managerial careers, thus breaking the glass ceiling. Yet other recent work has argued that "political skill deficiency" may be responsible for the failure of women and ethnic/racial minorities to make progress in

organizations (e.g., salary progression, promotions, and career advancement), thus posing an alternative explanation for employment discrimination. These "intangibles" are important for long-term career success. However, this latter explanation characterized political skill as focusing on learning the informal rules of the game, which are passed on selectively by the dominant coalition in efforts to perpetuate the status quo. Therefore, although this explanation implicitly makes reference to the style of behavioral presentation, it tends to focus much more on the types of behavior or the content of interpersonal interactions including networking, mentor selection, and maintaining visibility.

However, we suggest that political skill is critical to performance and success in a broad array of jobs at all levels of organizations. Indeed, one study recently reported that supervisor political skill was an important predictor of permanency or placement rate for foster children in a statewide child welfare system. The political skill of supervisors of 100 foster care teams, along with social worker caseload, significantly predicted permanency rate, which included adoptions, children reunited with their families, and children placed with a guardian. Apparently, supervisors higher in political skill more effectively orchestrated foster-care team member talents and dynamics, thus leading to more success in placement rates by the foster-care team.

Furthermore, in a recent study, we found that political skill played a pivotal role in the job performance ratings supervisors made of employees in the job of computer programmer at a large bank—not a job that we would expect to involve much social interaction, and thus one in which political skill might not be expected to affect job performance. In this study, we investigated the effects of personality traits (i.e., Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience—referred to as the Big Five or Five Factor Model), intelligence or general mental ability, and political skill on supervisor ratings of employee performance.

· Past research has found that intelligence best predicted task performance and personality traits best predicted contextual performance (i.e., job dedication and interpersonal facilitation). We found political skill to be the single strongest predictor of ALL performance ratings, completely dominating personality traits and intelligence, which were not significant predictors of any performance ratings. However, political skill in conjunction with intelligence affected both job performance ratings and salary more than political skill alone.

Therefore, we see the potential to suggest in the future that political skill as well as intelligence might serve as two generally effective predictors of performance across a broad array of jobs. Jobs will continue to change to emphasize social skills, flexibility, and adaptability. We see political skill and intelligence as enhancing adaptability and flexibility, yet in compatible but not overlapping ways. Intelligence may well contribute to cognitive or mental flexibility, whereas political skill may enhance behavioral flexibility. Both of these characteristics are critical to effectiveness in dynamic work environments, which maximize the need to embrace change and "thrive on chaos."

## DEVELOPING AND BUILDING POLITICAL SKILL

As we note above in our discussion of the nature of political skill, we see it as a set of skills that are partially inherent in the person, yet can also be developed or enhanced. That is, people are probably born with the capacity for political skill, but it may never be realized to its fullest extent unless they find themselves in situations that call upon them to exercise it, and thus further hone the skill to perfection, or unless they engage in active efforts to train or develop the skill through management development programs. Therefore, we suggest there are both personnel selection and training implications for political skill.

As we continue to refine our under-

standing of political skill, we eventually believe that trained assessors in simulations, interviews, and assessment center-type contexts can make more focused and behaviorally specific assessments and evaluations of this construct. We see this as becoming more important as organizations seek to make more comprehensive, informed assessments of candidates for selection and promotion in organizations, particularly for managerial jobs where political skill is seen as necessary for job performance and effectiveness.

## Methods for Political Skill Development

We believe that an important new area for human resource development programs, particularly at managerial levels, is the training of political skill. Because political skill involves both a social astuteness about which behaviors to demonstrate in particular contexts, and the delivery, execution, or presentation style component, we see such development programs as involving some focus on both content (i.e., what behaviors to exhibit in which situations), and process issues. Such process issues are typically best addressed through development methods that require active involvement of trainees in the learning or skill-building process. The first step to developing political skill is self-awareness and understanding of oneself. Next, political skill can be shaped and developed through established learning methods such as experiential exercises, cases, vicarious learning, role-playing, and communication skill training. Finally, periodic evaluation and feedback is recommended. Individuals who are politically inept are often unaware that their behavior might be offensive, tactless, or viewed as crass by others. One of the first developmental activities, therefore, should include self-assessment and understanding, with a particular focus on self-awareness.

*Self-assessment and understanding*
Better self-awareness can take place by understanding one's personality and how one

makes decisions. Well-established personality assessment questionnaires include the Five-Factor Model and the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF). Both of these popular instruments can provide insight into stable individual personality dimensions that are useful in determining how individuals will respond to various organizational situations. Another well-respected and established self-assessment measure is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). This instrument provides information regarding how individuals solve problems, make decisions, and their preferred interaction style.

Self assessment might also be facilitated through 360-degree feedback instruments that are becoming very commonplace in management circles. Essentially, this process involves the collection of others' perceptions of how a manager's persona or behavior is perceived in an organizational context. These are only examples of methods and instruments organizations might want to consider for self-assessment purposes. These instruments do not, however, measure political skill directly.

*Methods for learning and developing political skill*
Political skill can be learned or developed in a variety of ways. Experiential exercises involve participants in role playing and scenario simulations. For example, participants might be asked to role-play a particularly difficult situation—such as telling a superior that you believe him or her to be wrong about a particular decision. A simulation could be developed that could extend the role-play over a longer time period, with new factors and situations introduced in a give-and-take situation. This play-acting of a scenario would allow participants to see how their actions produce consequences over a period of time. Case analyses involve examining a particular case situation and discussing it as a group. For example, participants could read a case or watch a video depicting a situation in which an individual practiced particularly poor or ineffective political skill.

This could be contrasted with a situation where effective political skill was practiced.

Vicarious learning (i.e., learning by observing others' behavior) is another recommended method for developing political skill. Specifically, assigning a trainee to work closely with a mentor or coach who is a master at political skill can help build political skill. This can be accomplished by putting the individual in a task force or committee that the mentor leads or by assigning the individual to a project of which the politically skilled person is in charge.

Dramaturgy is the method of providing participants the opportunity to learn from theatrical training. This training teaches them how to emote well (i.e., strategically showing emotions) and otherwise effectively execute roles and staged performances. Indeed, we have seen executives in the past make use of acting or drama classes to hone their delivery of information in speeches, managing impressions of sincere and genuine intentions.

Communication skills training is another method recommended for shaping political skill. Managers are clearly interested not just in what they say, but how they say it, and thus how the audience perceives and interprets the message. As the focal representative of organizations, managers are very aware of and concerned about the image they convey. They devote considerable time to their political skill development as it is exhibited through carefully crafted speeches, effective orchestration of the media in press conferences, and the image management literary masterpiece known as the corporate annual report.

A good example of the marriage of political skill and communication can be see in President Clinton. We see the political skill and communication style of President Clinton discussed by supporters and detractors alike, who marvel at his amazing capacity to emerge from adversity relatively unscathed. Careful examination of President Clinton's behavioral style in televised speeches, interviews, and press conferences reveals strategic use of pauses for effect, and carefully

calculated emotion control to convey proper images that are impactful and believable. Indeed, this is not unlike the self-presentation strategy and emotion control of the TV anchorman played by the actor William Hurt in the movie *Broadcast News*.

### Evaluation and feedback

From time to time, individuals will need to have an evaluation on their improvement and progression on political skill. Evaluations by others such as the individuals' supervisor, clients, colleagues, and even spouse would provide the necessary feedback. Of course, based on this evaluation, adjustments and new learning opportunities can be undertaken.

## CONCLUSION

The use of political skill is becoming increasingly important in organizations as team-based management and related programs are implemented. Organizations, whereas not explicitly recognizing it and labeling it as such, have been selecting and promoting people based upon political skill. Political skill serves as a catalyst to enhance communication and effectively orchestrate the collective interpersonal interactions necessary for team and organization performance. Ultimately, successful people in many jobs have the political savvy to know when, what, and how to say "the right thing," and to do so in a disarmingly, charming and engaging manner that inspires confidence and trust. Many believe organizations to be inherently "political arenas." That being the case, we desperately need to develop the requisite set of skills necessary for performance and career success in such contexts. We see political skill as fundamental to performing well in dynamic organizational environments, because it allows people to effectively navigate these turbulent waters by providing the flexibility and adaptability necessary to be successful.

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Gerald R. Ferris and his colleagues have developed a program of research in political skill in which they have created a scale to measure it, and are now engaged in empirical research to establish the relationship of political skill to important work behaviors and human resources decisions. The article they wrote describing the development of the Political Skill Inventory is "Development and Initial Validation of the Political Skill Inventory," and it was presented at the Academy of Management, 59th Annual National Meeting, Chicago, 1999.

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