

Dealing with Politics around you - the ABCDEF Approach

■ Sai Kumar Chandran



The English word **politics** has its roots in the name of Aristotle's classic work, *Politiká*, which introduced the Greek term *politiká*. In this book, Aristotle discussed the city (πόλις : polis) or "political community" as opposed to other types of communities and partnerships such as the household and village.

Eventually, the word politics came to mean several things, according to dictionaries and references:

- the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power
- the activities of governments concerning the political relations between states
- the management of who gets what, when, how
- the authoritative allocation of values for a society
- the most concentrated expression of economics

The subject of politics also gave rise to the concepts of political manoeuvring, to manage one's wellbeing or the wellbeing of one's state/community. And thus, came into being the organization of people into political and ideological movements or identities. From these movements, emerged the struggles of those who have the power, and those who do not.

Those who have power are in the pursuit of keeping the power using various means of manoeuvring. They try to contain, subjugate, or eliminate their opponents. Those who do not have power, try to do one of two things: either they find a cause and trade-off to align with those in power or they find a cause and trade-off to oppose and try to take away the power from those having it. Much of these are long drawn infinite games, with the regular emergence of new parties and dynamic. Similarly, old parties and dynamics

keep falling off the grid too. There is also the formal or visible side of politics, and then there is the backchanneling and invisible side of politics. To complicate matters, there has been the introduction of so-called diplomacy to navigate using sophisticated methods of connecting and working with others. Finally, in this stable of politics and power is the coercive side of things: using power by coercion, manipulation, or brute use of force to subjugate others.

In organizations, politics has come to mean some very bad things. It has come to mean politicking, groupism, backbiting, and what not. I will not get into what it should mean or what it shouldn't. However, I will address a progressive question that comes up many times from people I am training and mentoring: **"The environment I am in, is very political and caustic. How do I navigate this, without becoming a participant in it?"**

Why do I call this a progressive question? For three reasons. When a person asks this question, it means:

1. **The person is aware of organizational politics.** This is a good quality to have and helps one to learn how to navigate. **The anti-pattern:** people who have no awareness or avoid understanding the political dynamics. Such people either get side-lined or fall prey to it.
2. **The person wants to navigate it.** This desire to navigate is helpful in a person learning and adopting means to work-through the political dynamics. The anti-pattern: people who run away or hide, believing politics won't touch them; however, it does. Political dynamics either ends up using them or eliminating them.
3. **The person wants to stay neutral and not add to the political dynamics.** This is the differentiator and helps the system have positive activists against political games. Finally, it is a group of such people who solve the organization's political conundrum. **The anti-pattern:** people who jump right in and take sides, or create a new angle to the political dynamics of the organization

Now the mindset and approach to dealing with politics around you: **the ABCDEF approach.**

- **A – Awareness:** awareness is a big gift, and it helps one to dissociate from the game, gamers, and the dynamics of politics in the organization. To build awareness:
 - From multiple sources find-out who are the players,

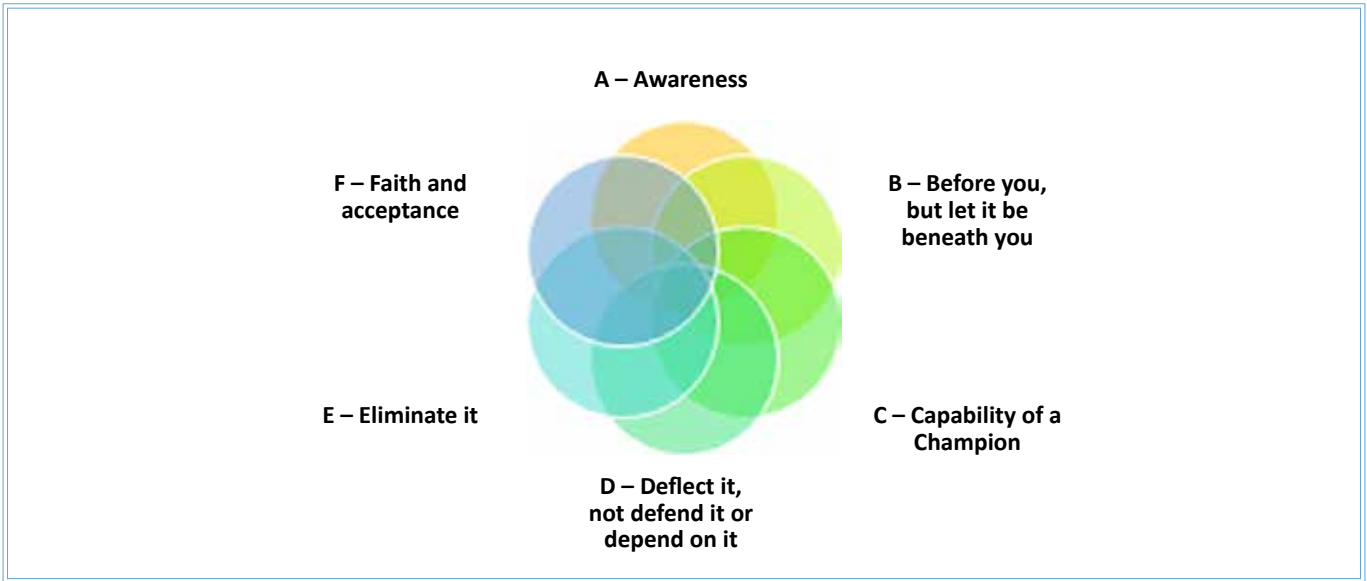


Figure 1: The ABCDEF approach, to dealing with politics in organizations. © Sai Kumar Chandran

what are their reasons and what are the dynamics of politics. Make meaning of these things in your head and know what they are playing are for. What's important is that you are as aware as you can be of what's at stake and how serious the situation is.

- If politics is being used as a put down by people who do not like each other's presence, this is a very small way of it showing-up. This is mostly the least challenging, unless these are big leaders, and they pull in their teams into these games.
- If politics is being used by people to win something substantial: like promotion, leadership, rights to a certain region, or anything else that gives control, then this is a bigger game. This is when the system really starts suffering. The individuals in this case have made themselves more important than the organization.
- If politics is being used to take revenge, or to eliminate others from the organization, the game becomes dangerous. This is where it is often an all-out war and getting work done becomes the least priority. All moves and all intelligence is used to seek and destroy. This kind of situation also has a lot of collateral damage.
- Whatever the scenario, be aware and take relevant actions, based on the next 5 steps.
- **B – Before you, but let it be beneath you:** once you become aware of the political scenarios, it is important that you never lose sight of it. The point here is to not to make it your sole focus, but to stay alert. If you take your eyes off it, it may just blindside you, inadvertently pulling you into it. This will not allow you to take positive actions. Also, resolve in your mind the values that you operate from and why it is important that you do not get entangled in political dynamics.
 - Keep talking and working with all the parties involved

in the political dynamics unless you have been formally instructed to stay away.

- Always focus your thoughts, actions, communications and moves on the strategy of the organization and what's important to the stated goals. Ensure that your approach doesn't validate or discredit in any way the parties involved in the political dynamics. Do what the strategy and values of the organization can validate. This is often the tightest rope to walk. That's why the previous point is so important.
- If you are meeting with any of the parties involved in the political dynamics, keep this openly know and have no secrets.
- If you are in a meeting with all the parties, stay to the agenda and do not let excitement or disappointment knock you over.
- Stay alert of games, and invitations in any form by any of the parties to get you engaged with them and against the others. Similarly, stay alert of any moves to threaten or coerce you into the politics.
- **C – Capability of a Champion:** capability will be your biggest ally in the game of survival, and eventually thriving. When you have the right capability, it will help you think, act, and land your actions correctly. Will you always be successful; probably not. But will you have far less challenges; yes. These capabilities of a champion are of 5 kinds:
 - **Mastery of the industry:** this will help you understand deeply how an industry operates and how the trade runs. This is where you develop a deep appreciation of all functions and people involved in the organization, and also the partner channels. A good 10 – 15% people get stuck in the trap of not knowing the industry and getting stuck and offending others. And then begins their challenges with the seasoned players.

- **Mastery of your functional skills:** helps you perform your role to the best. This is also where your mistakes will get minimized. Again around 20 – 30 % people get into the trap of politics because they really don't have the best functional skill. So, they either become prey or start playing politics.
 - **Critical thinking, and communication (especially on the feet / on the fly):** helps you with understanding others, situations and what to do in the infinite communications that happen in organizations. A large amount say almost 50% of political dynamics is born in and sustained by bad thinking and communication. This is why, leaders and organizations must develop bias free and progressive thinking and communication.
 - **High stress tolerance:** being in these environments are not easy. Stress tolerance will keep your thinking going and your efforts smooth and continuous. Exercise, mindfulness, coaching, conversations with a mentors, all have a part to play in this. You will need to develop your mix of medicines to build this.
 - **Operating from values and staying away from traps:** values help us choose responsible actions. Values like compassion, helping and integrity play a part in keeping us in the zone of positivity. Choose the right values, if you have to stay away from politics. It is valuable to **operate contractually** and **operate with boundaries** with everyone. These are also two great values and must haves for everyone in life.
 - **With all the 5 skills above being put to use, you will develop a positive and clean reputation.**
 - **D – Deflect it:** the nature of political dynamics is to suck in as many people into it. Hence, when an effort to involve you comes your way, you will need to deflect it. The only way to do this, is to not take anything personally and explicitly calling attention to the task at hand.
 - Use all the 5 capabilities discussed in the previous point to do your best at work. This is the best deflections strategy.
 - Politely respond without any personal attacks if anyone makes an attempt to draw you in.
 - If the attacks persist, have a polite conversation, inviting the person to keep their focus on the work and not to attack you.
 - The best deflection strategy to manage people in senior positions, is to make them look good through the results at work. See how you can best contribute in this way, by explicitly contracting with them.
 - Keep all your actions public and anchored to the organization's strategy and values.
 - Don't run – don't show your back. This is what gets most people into trouble.
 - Watch your back – or have partners who watch your back. You will need people that you can trust to do this.
 - Additionally, in such environments significantly reduce your social or casual engagements. This is where many people say or do things which get them into trouble.
 - **E – Eliminate it if you can:** and this is if you have power or if can establish your position with someone who has positive power and want to eliminate politics. In organizations there are always leaders, who want to improve the environment. Find them and align with them to improve the culture of the organization.
 - This can be through participating in D&I, value clarification, culture improvement, psychological safety or many such programs that many organizations run.
 - Often these programs get very little support, and hence politics prevails. This is where when you know there is bad political dynamics, you should step in through these programs to do something about the environment.
 - **F – Have faith and acceptance:** to know that some things will pass with time, and for somethings we will have to move on to a different place.
 - If you have tried all the above steps, possibly it is time to look for an opportunity that resonates with your values and approach to work. There are always organization you can move to.
 - If damage has happened – then it is because you were careless, not ready or didn't have the ways to manage. Hence, it is important to again have faith and build ourselves back.
 - Also, you may not always be in a position to do any of the steps above, and politics has caught-up with you. Even in this situation, it is important to again have faith and build ourselves back.
 - Remember, don't make an organization the be all, end all of your career or life. Change is always for the better.
- Learning ABCDEF – is learning to have **Smart Faith**, through deep preparation and being in control of whatever factors you can control of your career. Additionally, by now you would have also realized, that the ABCDEF approach will anyway help you with growing your career, so might as well do it well.
- As I sign-off, something important for you to remember: **If your reputation is much bigger than you and others, nobody can play politics with you, unless they invest time and energy in a massive plot.** Can happen, but chances are low. Hence, the best safeguard against politics is a good positive reputation. Focus on building one.
- Sai Kumar Chandran is the founder of OrbitShift. He is a coaching and consulting practitioner and an entrepreneur at heart. He can be reached at saikumarchandran@orbitshift.com.**