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HOW TO PLAY OFFICE POLITICS WITH INTEGRITY

Welcome to The Highly Valued Leader podcast where I make it simple for leaders at all levels to amplify their value. My name is Mel Savage and I went from working in the mailroom at a small ad agency to making multiple six figures in senior management at McDonald's, to running my own multiple six-figure executive coaching business. I've had huge successes in my career and epic failures. All of it taught me the world-class leadership, mind and skill sets that I simplify for my clients and share with you on this podcast. I'll help you reset your leadership style, demystify the politics, and help you become the highly valued leader everyone wants on their team. Get ready for the most honest, direct and revolutionary leadership coaching you've ever heard. Let's simplify leadership together.

Hello there, leaders. Welcome back to the podcast. It's great to have you here. I'm going to warn you I have a cold and I have been putting off recording this podcast. A little bit of procrastination, I'm going to admit it. But now the rubber is hitting the road. I've got to record it so you're going to have to put up with this slightly nasally a little husky voice as we go through this, but I'm going to do my best not to sniffle while I'm talking.

Today we're talking about how to play office politics with integrity. I think people just say office politics are sleazy. *"How can I do it without being sleazy?"* That's more probably what I hear. But I want to talk today about how to do it with integrity because it's totally possible. I know you probably don't want to play them at all. You don't want to have to, you want to be seen, you want to be heard. But you don't want to have to do anything to be seen and heard.

I want to tell you this right now, you don't have to play office politics. You just don't have to. But you also need to accept the consequences of that, which means you won't be seen and heard as much as people who are working on being seen and heard. This means basically, at the end of the day, you're not going to get to where you want to go necessarily with the speed with which you want to get there, which is totally fine. No one's forcing you to play office politics.

What I find a lot of my clients will do is complain that they're not being seen, heard, and valued by the organization but they're putting zero time into demonstrating or highlighting their own value to their key stakeholders that need to know. What I want to talk about today is playing politics with integrity so it doesn't feel slimy or weird. And what I'm going to cover is the difference between good and bad office politics. And I'm going to give you some guiding principles for activating office politics with integrity.

I think the biggest problem here is that the word *'politics'* is a shitty word. It's just a shitty word, especially in today's environment. When we think about politics or politicians, we just think of people who are being dishonest, and to a large degree, forwarding their own needs, like really just focusing on what's good for them. Politics has turned kind of ugly, especially in the last 10 years or so. So we need to sort of in our minds reframe this idea of politics.

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And on top of the word politics being a shitty word, we actually say *we play politics* like it's a game that we're trying to win or something. And I think that's why the idea of playing politics has such a bad reputation because we feel like it's a game where one person wins and everyone else loses, which is not the case. And the idea that politics is about advancing our own needs at the expense of other people, which is how we see it demonstrated to us on the largest scale in the world today. But yes, the language is to *play politics*, but just remember, we get to define that any way we want to define it.

I want to offer you first and foremost to really question the way you're defining it. The idea of playing politics and the way that you're defining it needs to be the only way it can be defined. Because politics can be just how we get along with people in the world, how we serve people in the world in a way where they want to be served, and how we talk to people so that they can hear us. I like to think of it that way.

Politics is really getting to a goal in a way that people feel comfortable. I love that because it is not only focused on me but it's also focused on the people around me. But you get to define it any way you want. The idea of playing politics, I mean, yes, it sounds a bit cheesy. But play could be just activating. Basically, what I want to tell you is you get to define things the way you want to define them based on your values, and what makes sense to you and allows you to show up in the best way possible.

I'm going to talk today about the difference between good and bad politics. And I think, overall, the difference between good and bad politics is if you are intentionally trying to hurt people to get what you want. I think bad politics is when you are intentionally trying to hurt people to get what you want, or you are completely not even thinking about other people when you're trying to get what you want, which is less intentional and more thoughtless.

Whether it's facilitated hurting other people on purpose, or if it's just being completely thoughtless to get what you want, I think that's bad politics. But politics in and of themselves, the idea of politics is everywhere. Whether you want it to be there or not, it is everywhere, not just in the office. It's in your family, with your friends, with your partner. It's everywhere. And you get to decide how you want to manage it in a way where it's aligned with your values.

I'll give you examples. Politics in your family. And I probably don't even have to give you examples because you probably already feel it. But as an example, next year, my mother is turning 80 and my sister is turning 60 and a week apart. And my mom has this huge friend network and my sister just doesn't. She's more introverted and doesn't have a huge friend network. I know that I want to do something special for both of them a week apart, but I don't want one to overshadow the other.

First of all, that in and of itself poses an issue where you could play politics. I guess, basically, what I'm trying to do is get to a solution where I celebrate each of them without making the other person feel less than me. Obviously, I don't get to control how people feel. My sister might not feel less than me. Before I even go there, I want to explore other scenarios.

So what I decided, and I offered a first to my mother to see what she would think is why don't the three of us go on a trip to Europe. Like we'll just do a little girls' trip to Europe. Instead of spending money on a big party and everything else, we're going to take that money and put it towards a trip to Europe. Obviously, they're going to have to pay some other way because I'm not super rich like that. Not that kind of rich where I'm just going to fly everyone to Europe and take them on a European vacation.

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But I do know as well that my sister has always wanted to go to Europe and hasn't spent a lot of time there. So that's part of it. I thought that was a good solution. My mom loved the solution. Now, here's the other part of the politics. If I tell my sister, *"Hey, we're going to go to Europe,"* she's going to plan everything, book everything, do everything without asking anyone because that's sort of how she rolls. So I'm going to ease into it with her, kind of work with her, and find a way to work with her so that she doesn't do that.

Again, this is part of me working with my family to get to a goal with everyone else's interest in mind. That's playing politics, essentially. By the way, we're going to go to Tuscany. So if anyone has any suggestions, just email me.

Also, you have politics with your friends. You have one friend who's like this, another one who's like that. I know with my friend Marg, the way to get her to go for a run, which she loves to do, but doesn't get out as much as she would like. The way to get her to motivate her to go for a run is to tell her that I went for a run. The minute I tell Marg I went for a run, she's out there for a run right away, which is great. I'm not doing it to be competitive with her. I'm telling her because I know what motivates her.

I have another friend who's dealing with a burnout situation but refuses help. I'm a coach, and I could help her for free if she wanted. She's my friend. But every time I offer help or give her advice, she just shuts down completely. Basically, I realize that my job with her is just to listen and agree. She doesn't want help. When she's ready to ask for help, I'll help her. And I don't have to get upset about that. I'm thinking about her and our friendship.

The best way to get her to continue to open up to me and see me as a resource for an outlet for her to share her feelings, which is my goal is to listen and agree. That's what she needs right now. Nod, listen, tell her that she's got it under control, and she can handle it. Just pump her up and be a cheerleader. That's what she needs for me.

It's not what I want to do but helping her get there in a way that she can hear it, which basically means not telling her what to do, but agreeing with her and maybe pointing out when she's talking about things, I'm like, *"Oh, that's a good idea."* I just kind of reinforced one of her ideas. Is it manipulative? I don't know. I like to think of it as like, I'm not doing it to be mean, I'm doing it because this is how she can hear the help. And I think that's for me in my integrity. I want to be there for her. And I want to do it in a way that she can hear it. That's politics.

It goes on and on with your partner, in your community, with the school, your parents. Even in your freaking book club or your golf foursome, there is politics. So let's not walk around saying, *Oh, I don't want to play politics. I hate playing politics.* Politics is there all the time, everywhere. You are playing them. Now it's just about learning how to play them, activate them, whatever language makes sense for you, in an office environment, for the benefit of your career, in a way that feels integrity for you because it's possible.

I honestly think in today's day and age, it's necessary if you want to move forward up in your organization at a pace where you have some influence over that pace. So we think about office politics specifically, I like to think that it can be understood as the unwritten rules that determine who gets what, when and how. Who gets a promotion, a budget for a project, or a say in the boss's decisions and who doesn't get those things?

And even as I'm saying this out loud, I don't think it's unwritten rules, actually. I think there are strategies that determine who gets what, when and how, who gets a promotion, who gets a budget, or a project. And a lot of the time, because I come from marketing, this is where my head goes, but it's totally true, actually. A lot of the time, it's just who is top of mind. Who can I easily think about? Who can I get everyone to agree to? Who is the easy

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yes to give the budget to? To trust to give the budget to, to get the promotion fo, to trust their decisions, that sort of thing? Who has credibility? Who has influence?

It's our job as leaders to help people know that they can trust us. Meaning, we've done all the work to make it an easy yes for the promotion. We've done all the work to demonstrate our level of trust with a budget, because not only have we done the work and achieved those things, but everybody knows it. We've done the work to have influence with key stakeholders. A lot of that is relationship building, advocating for ourselves, knowing who our stakeholders are, and making sure that they're coming along for the ride on our narrative about our career. That's all it is. It's making sure that people understand our narrative about our careers.

I think what happens to a lot of people is they get worried that people don't have a good opinion of them because they haven't been controlling the narrative of their career. And because they haven't been doing that, they're not really sure about what people think about them. And the excuse that everyone uses with me is, *I don't have time for that kind of shit. And I think it's slimy.* But that's not the real reason. We don't make time for it and we don't prioritize it. That's the real reason because it's uncomfortable to do. Because we feel like self-promotion is a bad thing. That's really the reason.

I think the more real you are with your reasons, the quicker you're going to get to a solution. The problem isn't that you don't have time, it's that you're not making the time. *Now I know what the real problem is. I'm not prioritizing this. Now I know how to go forward with a strategy. How do I prioritize this in my day? The problem isn't that politics are sleazy. The problem is, that I find self-promotion really uncomfortable because I've been taught that self-promotion is impolite. And that makes me uncomfortable. Okay, here's the problem. How do I change how I feel about self-promotion? I think we do have to change how we think about self-promotion. And how do I do it in a way that's within my integrity?* That's what we need.

I say all this just to say, get real with yourself on what the real problem is. Don't just make excuses about it. And then we know what the real problem is, then you can solve it. Then you can start to play politics with integrity. And when you do, you're going to get what you want out of your career faster at a pace that you get to have more influence over.

As I said, the difference between good and bad politics is, for me, if you're intentionally trying to hurt people to get what you want. That doesn't mean you don't put your own needs first, or advance your own interest. When you put your own needs first and advance your own interests, sometimes people are going to be disappointed because they didn't get ahead, because they didn't get what they wanted. That part you can't control.

I'm not saying try to control the feelings of everybody as you advance your own interest. Because people will get disappointed if they don't get what they want. They think the difference here is that you're not intentionally trying to screw somebody over to get what you want. You're not comparing yourself to them and saying that they're shit and you're amazing. You're just talking about yourself and what you're achieving against your own growth goals, according to what you want to achieve in your career.

Let's talk about bad politics and good politics in action. What does bad politics actually look like? Let's go through a list of that, and then I'll go through what good politics actually looks like. Bad politics, I'm going to say, are actions like lying to get what you want. Basically, telling somebody something that's not true to get what you want from them, or bad-mouthing people behind their back. Essentially, just being untrustworthy, like saying one

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thing to someone's face, and then something else behind their back, being really backstabby and basically untrustworthy or gossipy.

Maybe you're not intentionally being untrustworthy, but you are spreading information about people that may not be beneficial to them. Or maybe you're just pretending to like somebody when you don't like them. And I think this one is interesting because you don't have to like everybody. But your job as a leader is to find a way to work with everybody. So I find the best way to do that is to find the value in every person, and what they're bringing to the table. That's one way. Another way that we employ as well is understanding who those people are, why they might be acting out the way they are, meeting them where they're at, and creating safety for them so that they can actually shine.

When I say pretending to think someone is great when you don't actually think they're great, what I'm saying is don't lie and say, *"Oh, my God, you're so amazing. I love that… Oh, my God, what a great idea…"* It's just so fake. Good politics in that particular example would be looking for what you do appreciate about that person, and then calling it out sincerely. Because we can find something good about everybody. Sometimes we just don't want to, and that's our own issue. But don't pretend to think someone's great when you don't think that.

Pushing someone down to elevate yourself–that's another sign of bad politics. I would call it envy. It's different than jealousy, where you're like, *"Oh, I really wish I had what they have,"* which actually I don't find as a problem. I think it's okay to be jealous of other people as long as we keep it in the context of, *"Oh, this is showing me what I want. Jealousy is just showing me what I want."* It has nothing to do with the person themselves. It's just, *"Oh, I really want what they have."* This is great to know because that means you know what your goals are, you know what you want to work towards. But pushing someone down to elevate yourself is essentially a sign of insecurity, arrogance, and envy where we have to push other people and make them look bad to get what we want.

I would think bad politics is bottom line, basically, anything which is being dishonest and sneaky to get what we want, and really just focusing on ourselves at the expense of anyone and everything. And I'm happy to say most people aren't like that. There are people who are like that sometimes. And even when people are like that sometimes, it doesn't mean they're universally like that. I always like to think that people aren't just one thing. We are sometimes exhibiting traits of bad politics and sometimes exhibiting traits of good politics. And our job as people is just to try to continuously get better. So don't hate someone just because sometimes they do bad politics. That's on us to decide how we want to think about that.

Let's talk about some examples of good politics, kind of the opposite of what I just said. The first one is meeting people where they are. Back to finding value in everyone, understanding what people's personal agendas are here, and how to help them feel safe as we move towards a goal. Good politics, for instance, is working with a stakeholder who may have their own issues.

For instance, I had a client who had a stakeholder who was just covering her ass all the time. They were working on a big project, and she was super detailed and wanted to know everything this person was doing because she was afraid that she was going to look bad if there was a mistake, and she didn't want to look bad. That's really the bottom line. And that, honestly, is the bottom line for a lot of people a lot of the time when it comes to why they're behaving in a weird way.

So what my client and I worked through was first getting that revelation for him was like, she just doesn't want to look bad because she doesn't want to fail in this project. This is the first time she's been handed something of this magnitude. So now our job is to understand that as a colleague and help them not look bad. So in this case,

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what my client did was have a heart-to-heart with them, and talk about how they could help the stakeholder be on top of things without as much detail. How can we be proactive to help you? How can we connect with your boss to let them know what a great job you're doing? Yada, yada, yada… They found a bunch of solutions.

So meeting people where they are to influence their opinion of you is good politics. Helping people understand, good politics. Understanding them is good politics And like I said before, finding what you can appreciate about someone, is great politics because you're building a connection with them when you decide what you want to appreciate about them. Supporting others behind their back. Saying good things about people behind their backs is good politics because everything gets to everybody.

Whether you say something good or something bad about somebody, it gets back to them. I don't care what who promised you they wouldn't say anything, they say something. And believe me, my friends, I've learned that the hard way. Like the worst way. I had this person I worked with at McDonald's whom I trusted so much, and I shouldn't have. It was my own fault, not theirs. I just gave them the ammunition. And it came from a place of insecurity that I even talked about things with this person.

The bottom line, supporting people behind their backs is a great way for positive office politics. Now, here's one. Advancing your interest in alignment with the overall organization. This kind of goes back to what I was saying before. There's nothing wrong with advancing your own interests. Talking about what you want in your career, what you want on a project, or what you want to be able to achieve. But you're doing it in alignment with the organization. When it comes to your career, yes and no.

Sometimes you have to sort of decide if this is what you want for you. But when it comes to projects, you're doing it in alignment with the organization and having a strategy to do that. Like, *I want to be vice president.* And there's a bunch of other directors who want to be vice president too, let's just say. You still get to tell your boss and your key stakeholders who are going to be around the table that you want to be vice president one day.

This doesn't mean that you are hurting other people's chances. This means you're just talking about yourself. And with those stakeholders, including your boss, you are working with those people to identify the leadership gaps that you're trying to fill, the project gaps that you're trying to fill, and talking to them in a consistent way about how you're filling them, and your achievements along the way so that when the time comes for whatever it is that you're trying to get done in terms of your promotion, they're all having you top of mind, and are all in alignment with the idea of you getting promoted. This is just one example.

It can work on a project too. Maybe your department wants a project to go a certain way because you have KPIs that you need to hit. And maybe there's another department that wants it to go another way because of their KPIs. How can you work with that department to advance the interest of your department and their department? I want you to think about strategies to do that and work with that person to get that done. It is possible, we don't have to be at odds. You just need to take a moment to understand what the other person needs and why so you can advance your own interests in alignment with the organization, with the people, and all the things.

I would also say good politics is not comparing yourself to others. Back to the example of you wanting to be vice president, and there's a bunch of directors who also want to be vice president. Everybody gets to be good at their job. That's okay. Everybody can be great at their job, and you can be too. Someone else being great doesn't make you less great. You just need to focus on yourself in your lane and what you need to do to get to the VP role. What are the gaps that you need to fill and who needs to know? Don't worry about everybody else.

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If you see someone else, like one of your peers, and you see something and you're kind of jealous of the way they handled something, or they got an opportunity that you didn't get, find out how they did it. Watch for what you can learn from them. This is great, but it's not like a compare and despair thing. It's a compare-and-learn thing for the best interests of yourself.

The last thing I always say about good politics is just being direct and compassionate. You know those people who speak in tongues or something like they want to say something, but they're beating around the bush because they don't want to say the thing because they don't want to be hurting anyone's feelings or they don't want to be too direct or whatever. There was a lot of this when I worked in the UK. It's a lot of this where people don't say the direct thing. It's just not part of the culture, which I understand. I'm not beating up on the UK culture. I love my UK pals.

But is there a way to be direct with compassion? I often hear this, *"I'm told I'm too direct..."* There's nothing wrong with being direct when you can be direct and kind. You can be direct and compassionate. You can be direct and soft. When I say soft, I mean gentle at the same time. Some people think they avoid directness because they think it's rude or it's mean. But direct and mean are two different things.

I think sometimes it's just so much easier to be clear. I guess what I want to say here is to be clear with people on what you need, why you need it, what you're asking them for, and why you're asking them. Be clear about why you want to support them, why it's important for you to understand what they need, and all the things. You can just be clear, and almost in a pragmatic way with compassion. I always say being direct with compassion is important because compassion means understanding and caring without being too personal.

I think those are all elements of good politics so you should just check on yourself. How many of those are you doing? How many of those are you not doing? Sometimes you're doing bad politics, you're not doing the good politics. Just self-correct as you go.

What I want to throw in here, and I'm going to try and do it quickly, are some guiding principles for activating good office politics. Number one, make it part of your job. Meaning it's not optional to activate politics, good office politics. Politics are there so just use them anyway. Make it part of your job. You need to be activating this. Not like *when I have time*. Because guess what? There's never time. You have to make the time. It is necessary for your growth.

Don't be one of my clients. I've had many of them who have said things like, *'I don't know why no one's noticing me.'* And then in the same breath, they're like, *'Well, I don't like office politics. I don't like to talk about myself.'* The reason they're not noticing you is because you're not talking about yourself. You're not making it easy for them to notice you. That's your job. Make it part of your job, not something you do when you have extra time.

Number two, make self-promotion a good thing. I know we're taught that it's not a good thing. Particularly, women are taught that. Also, some men are taught that. But self-promotion is a great thing. There's nothing wrong with it. Just don't try to hurt anybody. What if believing in yourself and stating your goals and your accomplishments is just a normal part of doing the job? It doesn't have to be weird. It doesn't have to be achy. You just have to do it in a way that is natural.

That's what I work on with my clients all the time. And in fact, I am launching a whole program in September that is all about self-promotion. Top to bottom, soup to nuts. It's going to be a great program. I'm excited about doing

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it. But the key thing is that we need to make self-promotion a good thing. So you need to check your mindset on that one.

The other one was something we used to say McDonald's all the time, and I love this. Lift while you climb. Stay focused on building yourself up. First of all, without taking anyone else down. And if you can, lift others while you're climbing as well. How can you support others while supporting yourself? I love that one.

Number four, don't make people a problem. I talk about this all the time. Seek to understand people and work with who they are, not who you wish they would be. I think sometimes we have this idea of how people should be acting and what they should be doing. And we get all resentful. We get our knickers in a knot because they're not doing it the way we think they should be doing it. Scrap all of that. It's a waste of time. Accept people for who they are and work with that. Understand that. Don't make it a problem. Just work with that.

Understand what's behind why they're being the way they're being like with my example, with my client, whose stakeholder was trying to cover her own butt all the time. Why is she being like that? Why is she overly demanding, wants updates all the time and is super in the weeds? Why are they being like that? Find out, help them. Don't spend your time wishing they would be different.

Number five, be clear on what you want. When you know what you want, then you can work towards that with your boss and with the other identified stakeholders. You can understand how they see your path to getting what you want and how you see it. You can get alignment, you can work with it, and you can bring forward your achievements under that umbrella. Be clear with yourself on what you want and get alignment with your stakeholders. It's a big part of good office politics because then it just becomes a constant ongoing conversation. Not like saddling up to someone and going, *"Hey, look at me..."* That's cheesy. That's weird.

Number six, consistency is more important than speed. Consistency is more important than speed. You don't have to win them all. Just have this low-grade continuous message about yourself out there that you are intentionally instigating. Pick your battle. You don't have to win them all. Consistency is more important than speed. *Oh, but I want this to happen in two months.* I get it. What if it happens in six months, is that going to be a problem? Just make sure you're showing up and being consistent. Don't try to get it all done because you haven't done it in your whole life. And now you have to do it all in two months. Chill.

Number seven, nurture relationships all the time. All the time. Next to leading your team, which is a big part of your job as a leader, nurturing relationships is the thing that should be taking up most of your time. It doesn't mean sucking up or pretending, it's about working on relationships with people and making connections and understanding them. The biggest part is working on yourself to accept the other person, meet them where they are and create those connections that you need. Because when you create the connections, then they want to help you. Do you see that's how that's not cheesy and self-serving? Yes, they want to help you when you create the connections, but in the meantime, your understanding and helping them are so good.

The last one I want to offer you here is just to trust your gut. Trust your own values. Know what they are, work within them, and if something just intuitively feels slimy, question it, don't do it. Question it first. Is it slimy, or am I just feeling insecure right now? You will know the difference when you ask yourself that question.

Okay, my friends. That is what I have for you this week. At the end of the day, what I want to offer you is office politics are already there. They're already there. And I want you to think about how you can use them to your advantage to get what you want in a way that aligns with your values and within your integrity. That is the puzzle

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you're solving. And it is totally solvable. You'd have to set your set your goal and the parameters of success. *I want to play office politics with integrity in a consistent way that aligns with my values. Fantastic.* Those are the parameters for success. Now you can solve that. Everything is solvable. Everything.

Have a great week, my friends. Talk to you soon. Bye for now.

Hey, if you want to simplify leadership while amplifying your value, then you need to get your hands on my free training. Head over to melsavage.com/simple for instant access to the training and get a taste of how I help my clients lead with ease and make more money in the process. I'll see you there.

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