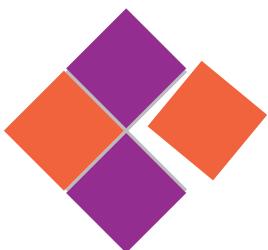


# Politics, Politics, Politics: 12 Not-So-Secret Secrets for Navigating a Political World

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Next month I am delivering a keynote on politics. The focus of the talk is the work place, but as I forced my 15-year-old daughter to listen to my secrets, she pointed out that they work in high school, as well. Our cat, Murray liked them, too. Anyway, as usual, there are 12 only because I got bored and my mind wandered to more interesting things. These tips are in no particular order unless you think they are. But, before you engage, a couple of thoughts. Politics is defined as the dynamic between any two or more people within a community. In other words, any time two or more people interact, they maneuver around each other, striving to intentionally achieve their own personal agendas. Those entangling engagements can be as large an enterprise as running a country, or as small as the inner workings of a three-person nuclear family. Politics, therefore, describes the strategy we use when interacting with others.

Secondly, the word politics often carries negative connotations. People think of it as a bad thing. This is a big mistake. Politics is neither good, nor bad. It just is. But, one can engage in politics effectively or ineffectively. And, one can engage in politics morally, or amorally. The intentional politician makes every effort to leverage politics effectively. Morally... well, I'll leave that to you.

## The Secrets

- 1. Life is about reconciling irreconcilable paradoxes.** This is a mantra my mentor, teacher, and business partner, Thiagi, taught me. As you will notice, several of the following secrets are opposite ideas. Life and business are complex and often conflicting ideas and competing agendas that force you to pick left or right at the fork in the road. Unfortunately, the human brain cannot simultaneously hold conflicting concepts. The trick is to get faster at switching between them. The faster you can consider these opposing constructs, the more flexible you become. The more flexible you become, the more agile you become. The more agile you are the more you can speed up how you modify your strategy when engaging others. And, so forth. Understanding, let alone seeing, opposing ideas, enables your political acumen to grow exponentially.



2. **It's better to be effective than right.** Too frequently, and too often for me, the overwhelming urge to point out the utter wrongness of someone else drives me to commit political harakiri. I win the battle, but I lose the war. Rather than focusing on influencing a person to my objective, I will argue vehemently to show I am the smarter of the two. Or, I will never submit until the other person gives in to me—usually he just wants to get out of the corner I placed him. This happens all the time. Instead, if I were strategic, I would choose to find a path of greater effectiveness and efficiency. I would avoid arguing and embarrassing my colleague, so I can build an alliance and garner collective agreement. For example, if a colleague presents information that is silly and wrong, but doesn't hurt anyone, should you highlight his errors? To do so, adds little value to the ensuing discussion and potentially creates an enemy. Why bother. You would be right, but not effective. If my sister asks me to do something, and there is no authentic reason not to do it, I shouldn't argue why it is illogical to do so—even though it always is. I should just do it. Keeps the familial peace and is no skin off my nose. Simply put, avoid battles whenever possible and never lose sight of the big picture.
3. **It's better to be right.** Sometimes  $2+2=4$  and the idiot in front me refuses to see or acknowledge this. Or, sometimes, one makes an argument that isn't sustainable or going to benefit the larger group at hand. Then, I am going to position myself in such a way to prove the other person wrong. I will win the battle, because not doing so is unacceptable. Sometimes I need to make a stance even if I pay a later price, because it aligns with my moral code. Effectiveness may dictate a different move, but my ethics and morality determine that I should focus on "being right."
4. Speaking of the big picture, **see the whole game board... not just what's immediately in front of you.** Life is like Chess. Sure, you can play one move at a time. But the people who achieve more, can be more proactive, and can dictate the terms of the match are the ones who see five, 10, even 15 moves ahead of their opponent. They can see all potential choices their opponent can make and respond even before the other person actually makes a move. In real life, it is about knowing all the players. It is about understanding your objectives (and theirs) and finding multiple potential paths you can take. Finally, it is about risk management... or, the identification and mitigation of potential problems before they become problems. The tendency of just seeing your singular goal and ignoring what else is around you leads to the game ending pretty quickly. Yes... you will win some, you will lose some. But, the more you understand the landscape and what game you are playing, the more likely you win.

- 5. Focus on the move in front of you.** Yes... always see the big picture, but if you don't take care of business and perform your first move well, you won't get to continue playing. You often have to execute the tasks immediately at hand, which requires you to focus, focus, focus on what is right there, now.
- 6. It ain't personal... it's business.** If there is one secret in this article I struggle with, it is this one. In business, it isn't about you. It is about the objectives, the agendas, the money. You are merely a cog in the system. If someone rejects you... it isn't you they are rejecting. It is your place on their game board. They want you off it so they can further their own strategy. If they ignore you, that is because on their board you are just a pawn or not even in their game. In business, this always feels personal, but in general, the other political players don't know you the way your family and friends do. They don't know if you like long walks on the beach, which Star Trek captain you prefer, who's your favorite Doctor, or which you prefer—DC or Marvel, whether you are a cat person or a dog person. They view you simply in their context. And, you do the same to them. If a client doesn't renew, figure out the business reason for why. If an executive snarls at you, figure out a better way to engage. In other words, don't lose sight of your purpose. And, don't take the game too seriously.
7. Conversely, **it's ALWAYS personal.** How can it not be? Any time someone rejects your idea, dismisses you, ignores you, diminishes you, crushes you as they might an ant, it is indeed personal. The notion that these behaviors are just "business as usual," is well... insulting. But, get over it. Emotional reactions undermine your ability to think logically and strategically. They certainly cause you to become myopic as you try and move forward, thus undermining Secret Two. Count to 10. Take a break. As you feel your emotions becoming uncontrollable, always step away. Sometimes, I break my communication rule of responding immediately and will wait a couple of days until I can make sounder and more reliable decisions. Yes. It feels personal! But, don't act from that place.



- 8. Winning need not be win-lose. Strive for win-win.** No one likes to lose, and no one likes feeling taken advantage of... so find ways to make the people around feel heard and supported. Find ways to help others reach their goals without being asked. People who feel supported and cared for tend to reciprocate. And those who don't will eventually burn enough bridges to sink themselves. Sincerity will always trump guile. I know... that one is hard to believe given the current state of our world, but again..., as long as we play for the longer-term outcomes, and not the short-term wins, kindness will win out. How do I know? As Yuval Noah Harari shares in his wonderful book, *HOMO DEUS*, violence in the world has plummeted. Certainly, there are still places in the world where it is dangerous, but way fewer than 75 years ago. Food is prevalent. Yes, some still starve, but we have the capacity to feed the world and with bumps in the road are continually improving. We are not perfect, but we are getting better, and history implies we will continue to do so. I know I said this article wasn't about morality, but this will be the only tip that cruises along that border.
- 9. Personal interactions are games—Strategic is good.** I am not suggesting you should be insincere. Rather, I am hoping you can manage those opposable ideas referenced above. Cunning, craftiness, wiliness, and shrewdness are good qualities when joined with sincerity. You should play the game. Enjoy the game. Think about your responses as "next moves," in the game. Never be cruel. To quote Google, "Don't be evil." But, think about how you need to pursue your agenda while at the same time supporting your colleagues' endeavors, as well. Win-Win.
- 10. Pay attention to the narrative about you. You control it... not others.** A big part of playing politics is knowing the story you want people to tell about you and selling it better than those who have counter narratives sell their version. What is your brand? What is the message you want to become pervasive? Actively share your story. Listen to others' stories and find ways to integrate them. Narrative is the way we humans make meaning. So, use it as a tool to promote your agenda. For others to care about your story, they must hear it, know it doesn't undermine their own stories, and incorporates them meaningfully. For that to happen, part of your story should include how you are of service to them—how you are indispensable (or, at least useful) to them. Foster trust in others. Your brand should appeal to people because it feels selfless, predictable in a good way, authentic, relatable, and competent.

11. Which brings us to a very important point. As Dr. House says on the TV show, *HOUSE*, everybody lies. **Become an expert liar when it comes to the little, white lies.** At the simplest level, we lie all the time when providing supportive or positive feedback to friends, family, and colleagues. If your young daughter gives you a painting, it is most likely horrible, and you tell her it is wonderful. Or, your friend asks how the chicken piccata he made for dinner was and you smile, hoping the dog finished what you dumped under the table before saying it was great. Pointing out the absolute and objective truth would be both harmful and unhelpful. In business we also lie when we tell non-fiction stories. We make our anecdotes better, taking poetic license to heightened levels. Is this wrong... ethically? No. We lie all the time. These white lies are essential to keeping the peace. Let's not forget we lie to our children all the time, too. Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, etc. Forget about the lies we tell ourselves everyday as we perpetuate the various delusions that keep us happy. PLEASE READ THIS NEXT SENTENCE CAREFULLY BEFORE SENDING ME HATE MAIL AND DEATH THREATS: Lying is wrong when it hurts someone, fudges the numbers on a financial statement, lowers your taxes, yields an unethical outcome, undermines education and fundamental understandings of history and how stuff works. Lying to protect yourself from consequences from things done wrong is... well... very wrong. But we shouldn't delude ourselves thinking lying is an absolute no-no when we happily do it every day. In other words, as with all things, the answer is more textured, complex.
12. **Build your network.** Finally, this should come as no shock. None of the previous secrets work absent a group large enough to have them work. Too tiny a network, and you are only going to play politics with yourself and a few others. You need a cohort large enough to further your agenda. To do so, you need to actively build your network. Use LinkedIn. Go to conferences. Present at conferences. Become involved in your community—business and otherwise. Socialize at work. Develop friendships across a wide span within the office and out. Stay in touch with them and adhere to Secrets 8-10. In other words, how can you be of service to them.

