The Ethical Developer's Guide for Workplace Politics

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- Customer Engineer at Microsoft
- Extensive consulting and start-up experience
- Tech Community: Speaker, Ex-Azure MVP (2016-2020), Ex-organizer Orlando .NET User Group (onetug.net) & Ex-organizer Orlando Codecamp (orlandocodecamp.com), Global AI Tallahassee, Tally Devs

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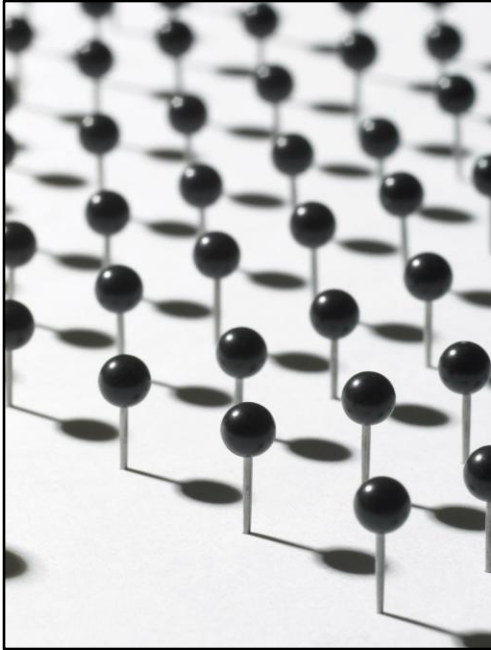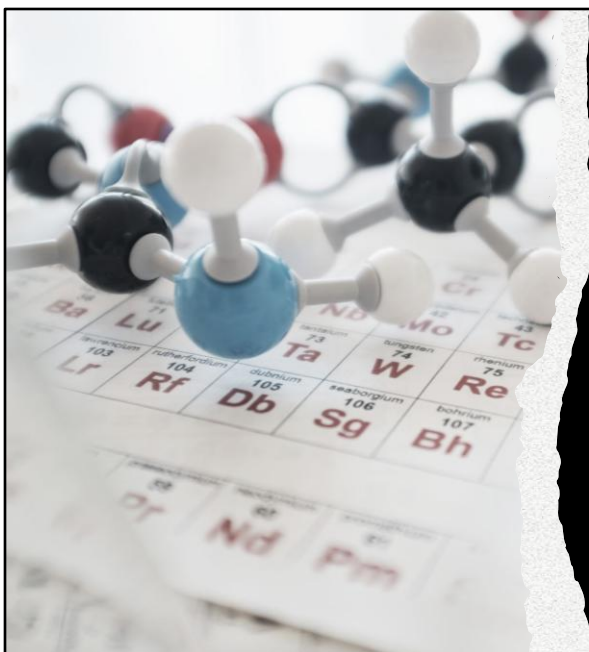**Bluesky**

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Agenda

- Define politics
- Power & People
- Build default "good" political behaviors
- Sparingly used political "tactics"
- "Jerk" politics to avoid

Reference Material

- Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion- Robert Cialdini
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28815.Influence
- Essential politics for product managers
https://open.spotify.com/episode/29ZMUdV763FaDQzu6bFC7f
- Office Politics & Toxic Behaviors
https://soundcloud.com/troubleshootingagile/office-politics-and-toxic-behaviors

Disclaimer

- Not an exact science
- Aimed at
  Individual Contributors
- Most concepts are universal
- YMMV
- Might drop a bad word or two

A. This is not an exact science
B. Most of my talk is aimed at ICs but managers will get some useful out of this talk too
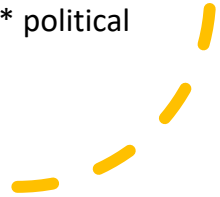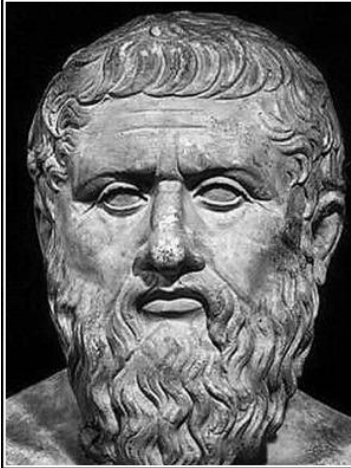C. You will see during the talk that most of the concepts mentioned are universal.
D. I'm a CIS gendered Indian male, probably 2nd most represented in US tech after CIS gendered straight white males makes so my life experience is different and if you have experienced something different, I invite you to share it with me after the talk. Ping me on LinkedIn
E. Might drop what could be considered a cuss word or two but it is relevant to the talk

Quick poll: Raise your hand if you identify with one of these quotes

- "I just want to build things, **NOT** play politics"
- "I debug my programs, **NOT** office drama"
- "I push code, **NOT** agendas"
- "I'm all about software development, **NOT** political maneuvering"

Those who refuse to engage in politics will be led by their inferiors

— Plato —

AZ QUOTES

This is a paraphrase of a quote by Plato
What this should mean to us:
Politics is the process by which human organizations make decisions
You can't escape it

Define politics

Workplace politics *NOT* national/local politics

- "Made for TV" politics
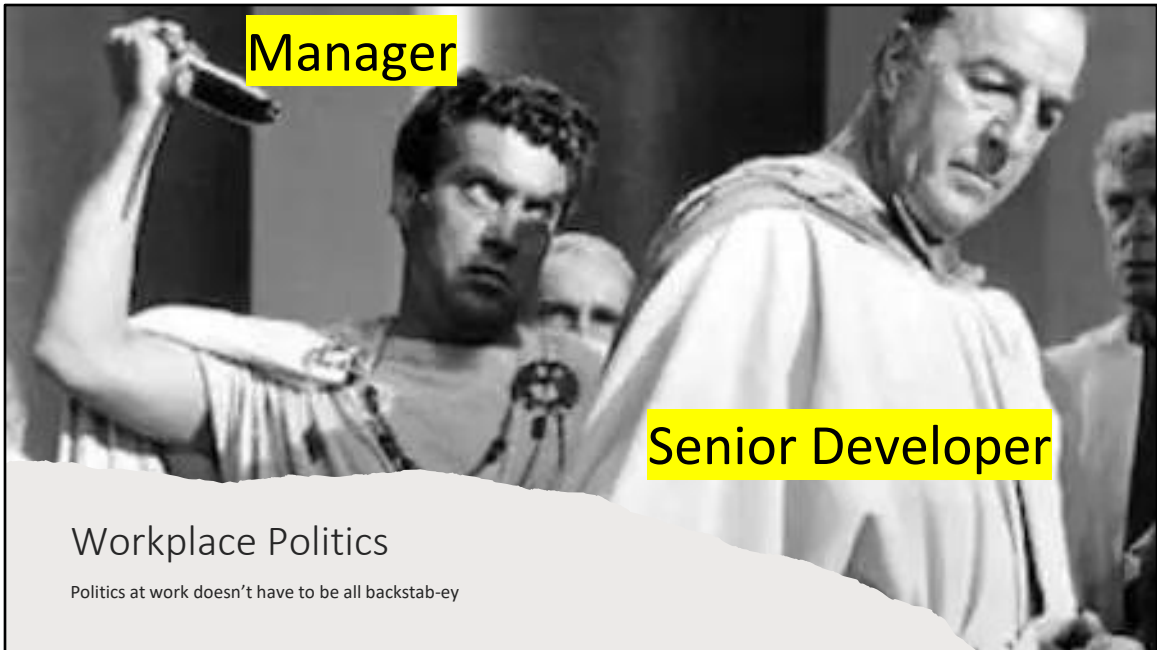- Jaded to the word
- Scope: Workplace/office

In America, there is an **overwhelming focus** by the media on national politics which leaves **people jaded** to the concept of politics.

As a result of this association, politics is often a **dirty word** in the software development world

and most software developers actively **seek to avoid it**.

I would argue that as a good citizen,

you should still be involved in local/state/national politics but that is not what this talk is about.

This talk is **about work politics** and that is something that software developers should not only be **cognizant** about but also **actively involved** in.

Workplace Politics

Politics at work doesn't have to be all backstab-ey

March 15th, anyone know what that day signifies?
That's right Ides of March
et tu Brute
Brutus and colleagues stabbing the heck out of good ole Julio in the conference room
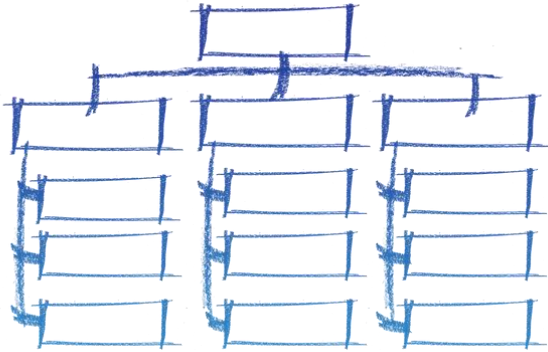When you think of office politics, this is what you think of

However, being involved in politics does not solely mean going full "et tu, Brute?" on your colleagues.
This is bad for both
While the manager benefits short term, they would become known as Brutus in the long term
The senior developer gets burned and jaded for life, never trusting a coworker again

Politics = Art of getting sh#t done

- Understand who stands where
- Organizational map
- Influence not authority/decree
- No organization free of politics

Everyone wants to get shit done

- politics = art of **understanding who thinks what**
- Being political is having a map or s**ense of what is going on and steering outcomes**
- making sure your **shit gets done Not by authority** or by decree
- **influence** that individual contributors have
- you don't have to play politics but if you want to lead and not be led then you have no choice
- **no orgs are free of politics** regardless of size or structure
- And this is due to **due to power struggles**

We will see why this is the case in the next section

All organizations have politics

- Politics = how decisions are made
- Regardless of size or structure, every company and org has politics
- Volatility leads to toxicity

Politics is the process how human **organizations make decisions**
Not inherently bad, can't escape it
However, as we go through our career and progress from job to job and position to position
we will find **varying levels** of political behaviors
Some orgs are more political and you have a higher chance of getting tangled in messy situations
You will find that **some orgs are more volatile**
which causes some people resort to **toxic behaviors**
We can understand this with some **power equations**

Power Equations

Actual Power = Ability to effect real change	Perceived Power = Title or position	Desired Power = Ambition (everyone has this to various levels)
Perceived ⬆ + Actual ⬇ = Delusional	Perceived ⬇ + Actual ⬇ = Frustrated	Autonomy = Power

Power = ability to effect change
Perceived power is the one that comes from title like CEO or seniority (like Sr Engineer)
Ambition = future power
Keep in mind, **everyone has ambitions just at various levels**
Some folks want to left alone and do the same task for the majority of their career
And others want to advance every 6 month and all of this plays into power equations

Delta between power and ability to do

When someone thinks they you have a lot of power but does not translate to real change, they're **delusional**
When someone thinks they don't have power and cannot effect real change, that leads to **frustration**

Autonomy = power
The less dependency you have on others, the less power they have over you
Develop your ability to get stuff done, to have more power

Individual Power

Differential (Perceived, Actual, Desired)

Power is relative

Perceived ⬆ Actual ⬇ Desired ⬆ = hurried

Perceived ⬇ Actual ⬆ Desired ⬇ = inertia

Individual power diff = diff between perceived, actual and desired power

All power is relative
Your manager has a lot of power over you but almost no power over someone they don't manage

Why is this signigicant?

Consider a manager (high perceived power), has high ambitions (desired power) but cannot do much at organizational level (actual power)

OTOH consider a tenured network admin happy with their current position (low desired and low perceived power) but high actual power.

When the above manager tries to work with this person it may come across as high inertia which makes the **situation volatile**

And this is the type of **volatility that leads to toxicity**

Politics and Power in organizations

- Org/Team Politics = Individuals Power * Relationships
- Volatile orgs are more toxic
- Alliances

Politicalness of an org = sum of all individual power diff

Some orgs are more political and you have a higher chance of getting tangled in various situations
You will find that these orgs are the ones that are **more volatile**
Volatility some people resort to **toxic behaviors**

We can **navigate politics by forming alliances**.

What a novel concept right? Working with people instead of writing code to solve it

Alliances = **soft skills**.

Like it or not working in a team involves working with other people
And often aligning yourself with some or most of them to get stuff done

Creating Alliences: Connectors, Mavens, and Sellle

This is where it helps to identify and classify people, particularly ones that can help boost the impact of your work.

I first read about connectors, mavens and salesmen in Malcolm Gladwell's Tipping Point.

My distaste for Malcolm Gladwell had grown over time because of his love for using anecdotes as evidence
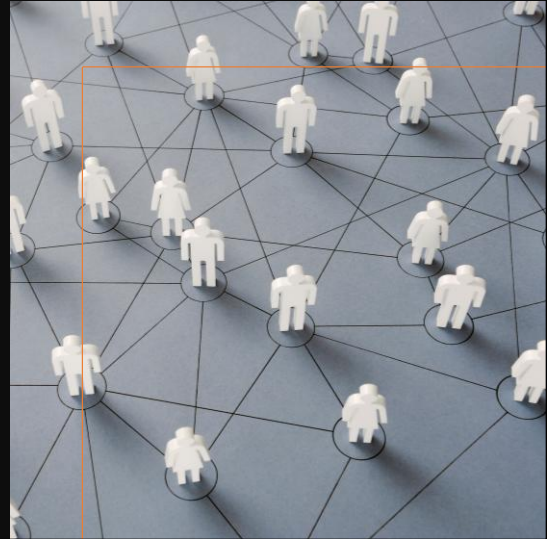
but his classification of people is still on point.

Identifying the connectors, mavens and sellers is key to politics at work.

Forming Alliances: Connectors

- Connectors make the intro
- "To solve X problem you should probably talk to Y person"
- Connect and be connected to

Connectors are people, as the word suggests, who are **ultra-connected** within an organization.

An easy way to identify this type of person is to seek out someone who often uses terms like

"to solve X problem you should probably talk to Y person".

A connector who volunteers this information freely is often the helpful kind and someone who you can go to with general problems.

Once you cultivate a relationship with a connector, remember that you become part of their network and they may direct someone to you.

So make sure you do not treat this as a single lane road, **if you ask for help, be willing to help**.

Forming Alliances: Mavens

- Mavens are the librarians of your organization
- Subject matter experts
- Freely share information and connections

Mavens are people who c**onnect you with information**, instead of people.
Mavens are the people who often know w**hat was said in the company town hall**
or know where to **find obscure information** regarding the organization, product, or project.

They will actually read the internal documents and the monthly update emails.
A **helpful maven** again will be seen volunteering this information
and is definitely someone you can go to in order to figure out how to obtain information.

Again, this is **not a *"take only"*** relationship,
you should be willing to voluntarily **share useful information to a maven** like updates
in their area of interest that they may not know about yet.

Sellers

- Salespeople use Jedi mind tricks to get everyone to agree to their proposals
- Bolster your proposal with their help
- Share information and connections

Salespeople in this hierarchical context are **persuaders**.
They have this **magical ability to get others to agree with them** without resorting to nastiness or pulling rank.
An **example** of a salesperson would be someone who is excitedly talking about new product/technology the team should try
and fast forward few weeks and the entire team is using it.
What happened was the salesperson **used their superpowers/Jedi mind tricks** to push their agenda
 but also made us feel excited about adopting it.
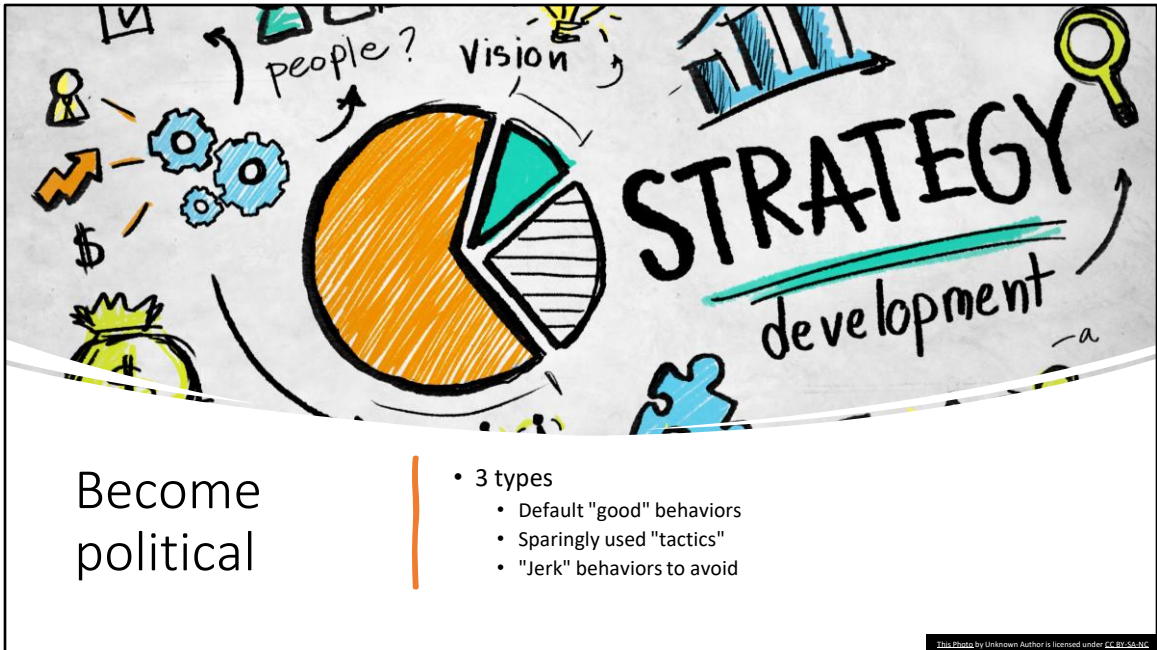This archetype of person is **harder to find** in a software development setting.
So once you find one, put the proverbial ring on it and never let them go.
Share information and connections freely with them
Salespeople do have a reality distortion field around them
and as such we should exercise caution to make sure it **does not turn into a *"give only"*** type relationship
where you're the one giving all the time.

Become political

- 3 types
  - Default "good" behaviors
  - Sparingly used "tactics"
  - "Jerk" behaviors to avoid

You can do this by building some default "good" behaviors
We will also discuss some powerful behavior which while ethical could rub people the wrong way
And finally we will discuss jerk behaviors to avoid

Good Behaviors – Be Non-Transactional

- LinkedIn is a hive for transactional behaviors
- Care and connect with colleagues, customers and community
- Do things without expecting anything in return

One of my pet peeves (and most of yours I'm guessing) is the **transactional** behavior "Hello I connected with you, now hear my sales pitch and I will message you to buy my stuff 10 times"
Good Behaviors are good Good behavior, **good being a relative word**
One of the good behaviors is making your interactions non-transactional
Do these not because you want to succeed at work but rather because you want to be a **better human**

Here's an alternative: **Care** about colleagues, customers and community not in a gossipy way
If they mentioned a **sick kid or pet**, check on them the next day to make sure they're ok
If there is an email that someone **got promoted**, have you ever reached out to them and offered a simple congrats
connect, relate and know what's going on with them

Be non-transaction, **occasionally do things without expecting anything in return**
If their **docs has a typo** or glaring error that can be easily fixed, do it
All of this **costs zero dollars**, maybe a few minutes and I argue should be default

behavior

Good Behaviors –
Influence Not Authority

- Individual contributor
- Lead by influencing not commanding
- Know who to influence

I'm an **individual contributor**, no direct reports
There is nothing inherently authoritative about my job title
Yet people like me – consultants, program managers, architects continue to have **outsized impact**
Individual contributors should **learn how to lead without authority**
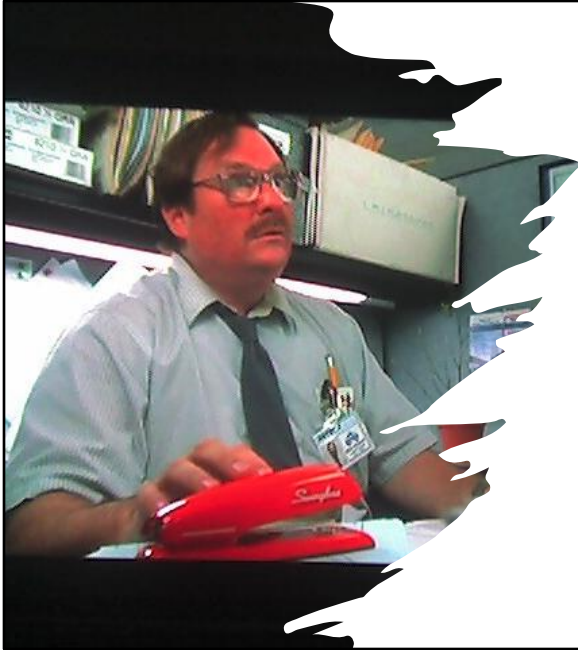Influence not authority

Key to this is knowing **which parties** to influence.
If you're an **architect** and need to streamline delivery, you have to be able to **orchestrate the dev and the ops team** together
The truth is **you don't know in advance** who to influence
hence follow the Good Behaviors to influence anyone you come in touch with

Good Behaviors – Go beyond your immediate circle

- Connect within, across and outside
- Provide unconditional value freely
- Relationships >>>>

Connect **within and across org** - outside of group business unit.
Do 1 on 1s, show up for social events, participate in company activities and ERGs
Plant seeds
Provide **Unconditional value** to them
The **more relationships** you foster the more influence you gain
Get to **know them personally**
If possible, help them succeed
if you **know more people, easier to find answers to even sensitive questions** about projects and org

Good Behaviors – Know Thy Boss

- Immediate boss = biggest ally or detractor
- Do you know who your boss looks up to/trusts?
- Will they back you up?

Boss:

This is the **single biggest factor that will help or hinder your career and impact**

Know boss politics

Do you know your **boss' priorities – reducing bugs or pushing features**

Do you know **who your boss listens to – project manager or senior developer**?
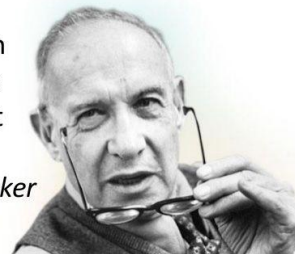
Single most consequential backer

Understand the environment your manager operates in

Good Behaviors –
Follow Internal Comms

- Know company "news"
- Read content and between lines
- Areas of growth or otherwise
- Executive priorities

"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."
– Dr. Peter F. Drucker

Follow **internal comms**:
Know what's going on around the company
Things like announcement emails, newsletter, reports, memos, TPS reports
Read what's in it and try to **infer what is not being said**

Connected people know what's in these memos
Where is the **growth**
What **products** is ceo interested in

Read wikis
Reach out to people who get promoted and congratulate them
Exec townhall - **exec priorities**
Understand org OKRs are and how you fit into the overall picture

Good Behaviors - 50% done > 0% done

- Compromise sucks but 50% done > 0% done
- Incorporating others' feedback puts skin in the game

More people required on a project = more opinions and resistance

Hurts to compromise

However **50% better than 0%**

Include other people's opinion in your own

Embrace feedback and show people their opinion matters

Once People have **skin in the game** will fight for you

Sparingly used "tactics" - Campaigning

- "Real politics" minus the backstabbing
- Uncomfortable

These are more **controversial** and you will see why.
But this is not about someone under the bus or backstabbing.

Politicking
Time to time **high stakes**
Fired up about your **cause**
Put **neutrality aside**

Campaign for your cause
And make no mistake this is **uncomfortable**
It will cause **friction**

This is where making all those **connections comes in handy**
Imagine cold approaching someone versus approaching someone you have a **warm relationship** with

Sparingly used "tactics" – Set the stage for a decision

- Orgs are not a democracy
- Understand Where & Who
- Optimize decision settings for increasing success

Orgs not a **democracy**
Not decided in a single day or one vote per person
Important to understand these factors

Understand w**here decision will get made by who and what parameters**
Where - meeting or on the go
Who - senior person in the room or decentralized
You can find out using relationship building exercises

(set the stage) **Venue shopping - decision setting optimizes chance of success**.
For instance, if your improved **DevOps pipeline will increase speed to market for product**
Understand who to approach first, maybe it a **product manager**
Make sure your plans are presented in a setting where product people who are **onboard** are present

Sparingly used "tactics"
– Highlight strengths

- More attention to strengths
- Weakness should be recognized, and effects mitigated
- Occasionally, it is ok to let others win

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strongest parts of proposal need to receive **most attention** and weakness should not become detractor.

Do not deliberately hide weakness, address it but having a mitigation plan ready

Your **DevOps pipeline will speed product delivery.**

If decision setting is monthly review with VP, try to incorporate **speed of product delivery and a tech discussion in the agenda**.
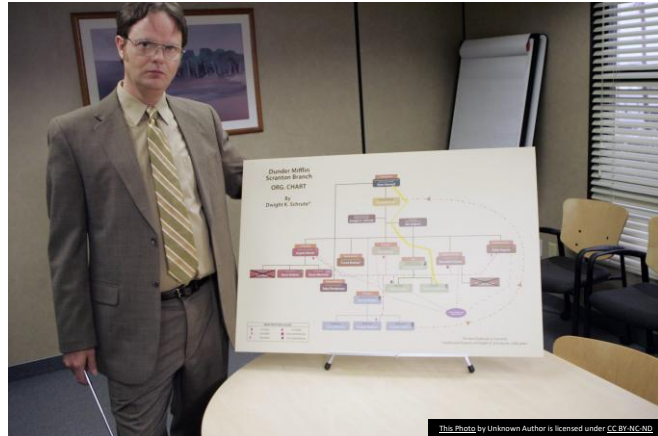
Speaking of winning, occasionally someone will point to a **major weakness**

and if the proposal is not that important **you can let them take the win**.

This will make others feel better and trust you when you refuse to take a loss

Sparingly used "tactics" – Poll your audience

- Who is with you and against you
- Not all votes are equal
- No "yes" = "no"

Politicians are constantly polling their audiences on various topics to figure out their future strategy

Counting votes - know who is with and against you.

Not all votes are equal.

Focus on votes that matter most.

Campaign and count votes.

If you don't get a yes that is a no.

At this point you should decide if it's important to keep following or not important to let go

Sparingly used "tactics" – Solicit feedback to put skin in the game

- Be flexible
- Incorporate others' feedback

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(Be flexible) with your ideas not rigid

Listen to other people and always be prepared to make changes

Your **first version** should never the final version

To do this **early Because feedback** will come later and if you did not consider it, it could come in a **negative way**

respond to feedback along the way.

When you add others' feedback you put their **skin in the game**

Sparingly used "tactics" – switch to winning side

- Recognize when to quit
- Remain relevant by switching to winning team

sometimes the tide is against you - technology trends, company decisions, major decision makers.

For instance, Microsoft is going all in with AI and ditching metaverse

Someone in the metaverse space may feel threatened

Not the end of the world.

No point in expending energy on a lost cause .

Remain relevant by switching to a winning team.

Jerk behaviors to avoid – Lack of transparency

- Holding back information
- Temporary advantage
- Irreparable damage

When you act in bad ways, you create a lot of problems for yourself and others.

You make enemies, you ruin your reputation and you hurt your chances of success.

*For example, **don't hide information** from your colleagues or clients – be honest, generous, and ethical with what you know.*

*Even if you think it gives you an edge for a while, it **will backfire in the long run**.*

*People will **discover your secrets and lose trust in you**.*

Jerk behaviors to avoid – Talking behind back

- Avoid speaking negatively
- Private lives off limits
- Decline to participate

Don't speak negative about others especially when they're not there - it will eventually get to them.

Cause enemies.

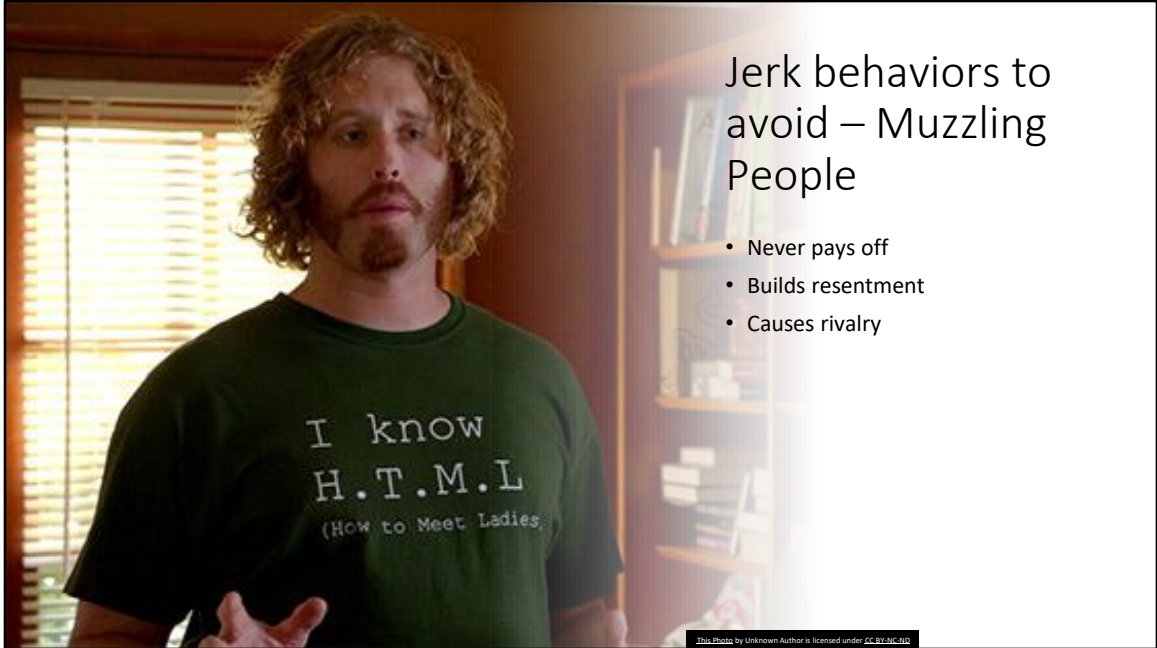**Just decline** to talk negatively.

It's a **dopamine hit** but avoid it.

Praise publicly criticize privately

No gossip - sharing people's personal life is off limits.

No sensitive info like salary.

Not interested in these discussions.

Jerk behaviors to avoid – Muzzling People

- Never pays off
- Builds resentment
- Causes rivalry

Do not muzzle others - never pay off.

Let others have their say - it's always better.

If you silence someone it Builds resentment and causes rivals

If you try to shut someone up, you will **make them angry and bitter.**

They will become your enemies and work against you.

Jerk behaviors to avoid – Taking Undue Credit

- Taking credit is good
- Avoid claiming credit for marginal work
- Credit build allies

Credit - **don't take credit for something you did not do.**

Be honest about your achievements - don't pretend you did something you didn't.

Self promotion is fine but don't claim credit where your contribution was marginal.

*It's okay to show off your skills and talents, but **don't exaggerate or lie about your role**.*

Give credit freely and build allies

Appreciate and acknowledge *the work of others and make friends.*

Jerk behaviors to avoid – Sore Winner

- Hoarding information
- Speaking negatively or gossipping behind someone's back
- Muzzling others
- Taking undue credit
- Sore winner

Avoid victory lap. Don't brag about your success

Winning is **only important strategically** and only useful if it helps you achieve your goals.
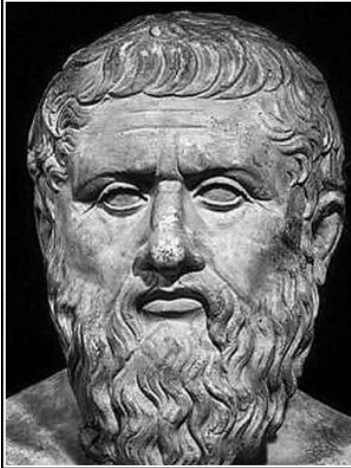
If you get your desired outcome you **don't need a medal**.

If you get what you want, you don't need to show off.

Reality is what you want it to be. **Win graciously**

Be humble and kind when you win.

Quick poll: Raise your hand if you one of these quotes now resonates

- "I just want to build things, **BUT** will get political, when needed"
- "I debug my programs, **AND** also stay cognizant of office drama"
- "I push code, **AND** some agendas I deem important"
- "I'm all about agile development, **AND** also ethical political maneuvering"

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