

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# MASTERING ORGANIZATIONAL POWER AND POLITICS: THE FOUR STRATEGIES EVERY LEADER NEEDS

**Nano Tools for Leaders®** are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

**Contributor:** John Eldred, affiliated faculty, University of Pennsylvania's College of Liberal and Professional Studies; instructor in the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Organizational Dynamics program; co-founder of the Wharton School Family Business Program; co-president, Transition One Associates.

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### THE GOAL:

Confront politically charged situations like a pro by using the right strategy for the situation.

### NANO TOOL:

Leaders who don't like organizational politics try to avoid them at all costs — but that strategy doesn't work for long-term career success.

It's true that politics take up valuable time, and you can't afford to get mired in pointless organizational debates. So savvy leaders make it a point to strategically decide when and how to engage. They don't try to win at all costs, but rather work to maintain and build relationships, and reach their goal at the same time.

How do they do it? First, they clarify their ultimate goal, and then reframe what "winning the situation" means in terms of that goal. There may be a tangled political mess, but if it's irrelevant to their specific goal, they don't engage.

Even when a situation is relevant, it still might not make sense to engage. Politically wise leaders know they can't take on everyone. They are selective about when they're willing to fight. When they do, they don't use the same approach for every situation. They develop their ability to use different strategies, and then choose one based on specific circumstances.

The four situations and strategies described in the Action Steps below are based on decades of research on organizational politics, which reveals that relative power and goals are critical factors in any political situation and help to clarify your approach. If you strategically decide when and how to engage, and use the right strategy for the situation, you'll find that politics really don't need to be any more complicated than that.



## ACTION STEPS:

1. **Clarify your ultimate goal.** What is most important to you overall regarding the situation?
2. **Decide whether or not to engage.** What will happen if you don't get involved? Will that hurt your chances of achieving your goal? If not, then there's no need to take on the political risk. Save your political capital for the situations that really matter.
3. **Choose the right strategy.** If you've decided you need to get involved, then it's important to consider two critical dimensions as you choose your strategy: balance of power and goal alignment. First, understand how much power you have relative to the other person, and, if it's unequal, which of you has more power. Second, determine whether your goals are aligned or at odds with one another (hint: they don't have to be the same to be aligned). Then, choose the strategy that matches the two dimensions in your situation. These strategies include:

Power relatively equal, goals not aligned <b>NEGOTIATION</b>	Power relatively equal, goals aligned <b>COOPERATION</b>
Power and goals not aligned <b>DOMINATION</b>	Power unequal, goals aligned <b>INFLUENCE</b>

**A. Domination** (power is unequal and goals are not aligned). The more powerful person gets what he or she wants and isn't concerned about whether the other party gains or not. Usually a manager faces being dominated because of two conditions: lack of demonstrated power or failure to advocate for his/her goals. Address one or both to minimize your chances of being dominated in the future. If you are the more powerful person, consider your relationship with the person you are going to dominate. It might be worth giving that person a concession in order to set yourself up better for a future encounter. In this quadrant, consider the following questions: if there is conflict and distrust, why is it happening, and can I work to resolve it?

- What am I doing to contribute to the negative feelings?
- Have I considered the impact on other, less powerful people — and all the ways it might affect them?
- If I feel threatened, am I genuinely threatened, or should I learn from the situation and put it behind me?
- What can I do to move beyond conflict and resistance, and bring my goals into closer alignment with those of other people?

**B. Influence** (goals are aligned but power isn't). The more powerful person, who has a greater ability to get things done, works to get the other person to go along with him or her. When dealing with people in this quadrant, consider the following options:

- Ask yourself how you can help each other.
- Look for ways to support the other person publicly.
- Consider a mentoring relationship.

- C. Negotiation** (goals are not aligned but power is balanced). When you are both key players, but can't agree on which way to go, you have to negotiate. This strategy isn't about getting buy-in. Negotiation can be tough and time consuming — which is why it's an appropriate strategy only in this scenario — and it can only be done if both parties willingly participate. If you are facing a negotiation, consider these options:
- Try to establish common ground and find out if there are areas where you can work to common advantage.
  - Call a truce (establish "peace") if you've been in a power struggle.
  - Keep the lines of communication open.
  - Try to see beyond your own goals and look at the big picture.
- D. Cooperation** (goals are aligned and power is relatively equal). Your options for this quadrant include:
- Build a coalition to achieve your goals.
  - Work on maintaining relationships.
  - Promote the outcome of your collaboration.
  - Use it as a model for goal-achieving behavior in others.

## HOW COMPANIES AND THEIR LEADERS USE IT:

**Domination:** Albert Dunlap (nicknamed The Chainsaw) successfully led a number of companies, including Scott Paper, by drastically reducing their workforce and belligerently managing those who were left. But Wall Street embraced him as a master of turnarounds. Dunlap eventually became CEO of Sunbeam, where he was given control of the board and again slashed the workforce and hit record stock prices. His style of ruling with fear and intimidation, though, wasn't what got results. After years of little or no oversight, he was engaging in questionable accounting practices that were uncovered during an SEC investigation. He was forced out and never again allowed to serve as an officer or director of a public company.

**Influence:** The importance of influence (as opposed to power-wielding) is growing in response to younger workers who seek a more dynamic and egalitarian work environment. Leaders like Insureon CEO Ted Devine make themselves available and listen to everyone regardless of rank. Devine made the switch to an open floor plan and can see, hear, and respond to his workforce. His supportive and nurturing style allows him to get results while keeping morale high and turnover low.

**Negotiation:** After a contract between the two companies ended, book retailer Barnes & Noble tried unsuccessfully to negotiate better terms with publisher Simon & Schuster. Deadlocked, Barnes & Noble began limiting the number of Simon & Schuster titles it stocked, and the publisher's authors could not hold book signings in their stores. The lines of communication remained open, however, and with the big picture in mind, a truce was declared about nine months after the conflict began.

**Cooperation:** Co-branding partnerships are often great examples of cooperation. When Pottery Barn and Sherwin-Williams joined forces in 2013, both companies wanted exposure to new audiences of consumers. They co-designed an exclusive line of paint to coordinate with colors in Pottery Barn furniture. This mutually beneficial relationship continues today, with both companies declaring it a success.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- *Political Skill at Work: Impact on Work Effectiveness*, Gerald Ferris, Sherry Davidson, Pamela Perrewé (Davies-Black Publishing, 2005). Explores how people high in political skill are more successful at getting hired, building a reputation, and establishing leadership. Offers techniques for enhancing this powerful ability.
- *Power Up: Transforming Organization Through Shared Leadership*, David Bradford and Allan Cohen (Wiley, 1998). Explains a new “leadership system” based on reciprocal behavior between managers and subordinates. Dismissing the fundamental assumption that leaders are responsible for everything within a company, suggests that management is the responsibility of everyone and offers ways to encourage such behavior even when resistance exists.
- John Eldred teaches in the Executive Education program [\*Leading and Managing People\*](#).

## **ABOUT NANO TOOLS:**

*Nano Tools for Leaders®* was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. *Nano Tools for Leaders®* is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.