

In management, politics comes with the territory

Make sure decisions aren't motivated by self-interest

By Rick Conlow

Q. Why do people in top management positions allow company politics to influence their business decisions – resulting in actions that, at times, don't appear to complement the overall company?

A. Being political means seeking to use or gain position, power or influence. Why is upper management political? Like it or not, politics is partly inherent in their jobs. Executives are constantly making decisions to gain advantage for the company over competitors, creditors, customers, investors, vendors and, at times, employees. One way to evaluate decisions you think are political is to ask this key question: "Are the decisions being made for the good of the organization or for the executive's self-interest only?"

Then, too, you must keep in mind that employees usually don't have access to the same information as upper management and may misinterpret an executive's actions.

Management can minimize the perception that a decision is being made out of political self-interest by constantly communicating to clear up any misunderstandings. When employees draw their own conclusions without management's input, the result will often be a poorly performing group.

Some managers have a skewed understanding of how to influence employees. Here's how the owner of a mid-size Twin Cities company operated: "Employees are children," he said. "Give them sweets once in a while and they'll be happy and do what you want." Now, there's an example of a leader who has low regard for his employees and treats them accordingly. It's no surprise that there's high turnover and low morale in his company.

In another example of misused power, another owner deliberately pits his managers against one another. What's the result? The customer receive bad service because internal business departments aren't cooperating.

Why are managers so political? Part of the reason is certainly human nature. But from a management viewpoint, playing a political game can be short-sighted and create a

win-lose situation. There are a few enlightened companies that are breaking the traditional political mold to forge new standards in quality and service. Companies like Motorola Inc., Eastman Kodak Co., and L.L. Bean – which are all near

zero defects in their operations – are submerging self-serving political ends in favor of company-to-company teamwork. That approach is resulting in an astounding cooperation among American competitors.

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