

# Leading with political awareness

Developing leaders' skills to manage  
the political dimension across all sectors

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*inspiring leaders*



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Executive Summary  
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# Acknowledgements

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# Foreword

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This pioneering research programme sets out to measure and reposition the perceived value of political skills within the context of leading successful organisations.

The aim of this project has been to build on the growing recognition of the vital contribution that effective political leadership can make to delivering business results and to achieving improved delivery of public services. We hope to add to the current body of knowledge and to use the outcomes to develop practical tools for managers.

No organisation operates in a vacuum, and the impact of its business and the day-to-day activities of its employees will have many ramifications across a diverse set of stakeholders.

I believe that political skills cannot be viewed as the domain of the specialist, but as a mainstream element of leadership needed across all sectors. Effective political leaders are like the Roman god Janus. They wear two faces – one looking outward and the other inward. They have a strong vision and sense of direction for their organisation, know what's happening in the marketplace and anticipating what's ahead, and can balance this against the internal capabilities required to operate both in competitive and collaborative environments.

Lack of such political awareness can have lasting repercussions. Many people have identified Brent Spar as a key moment in the UK environmental debate, but for me professionally, it was also a personal turning point that forced me to think about how corporations interact with their political environments.

The history books and newspapers are filled with stories of organisations that have made mistakes and misjudged their communities. But it is not just those who participate in today's highly visible, global economy who are vulnerable to such scrutiny, judgement and in some cases, attack.

If you really want an organisation to achieve success in today's complex environment, you cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the political dimension of your business or service.

This new report serves as a timely exposition of the deeply-seated and differing views about the value of political skills.

Alongside my colleagues on the research Steering Board, I hope that this new research agenda will cause those responsible for leading organisations of the future to pause and reflect, and to start to value the importance of developing political awareness skills.

**Sir David Varney**  
**Chair of the Leading with Political Awareness Steering Board**

# Introduction

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An understanding of policy and politics is an increasingly important skill for managers, whether located in the private, public or voluntary sectors. There is a pressing need for managers to be able to work not only with the formal institutions and representatives of the state, but also across and with a diverse range of organisations. Many managers have to work with stakeholders who advocate or lobby on behalf of consumer, pressure and political groups. Other managers may have to understand and work in a complex and dynamic environment of legislation, regulation and policy advice. A globalising world creates a range of uncertainties about world governance, national stability or local priorities which managers need to understand and to take account of, and which may have unexpected or substantial repercussions which have to be addressed.

The impact of politics (both formal and informal) may vary according to the sector in which the organisation operates; the degree to which it has a high and visible public profile; the sensitivity of some of its activities; and its accountability and governance structures. However, all organisations must take account of politics, and senior and strategic managers in particular must be sensitive to the interplay of politics with organisational purpose. It may also help operational managers if they have awareness of some of the key political forces acting on the organisation.

A range of skills for leading and managing in these environments is important for private sector managers as much as for public or voluntary sector managers, given the complex and increasingly media-visible world in which they are located. The rising interest in corporate social responsibility, for example, means that many private firms are under increasing scrutiny from politicians and the public alike, and therefore political astuteness about strategic and operational choices becomes more salient.

Recent research in the UK notes that many public sector managers do not feel they have sufficient skills to manage in a political context. The Chartered Management Institute's 2003 report, 'Leading Change in the Public Sector', (Charlesworth, Cook and Crozier, 2003) noted that:

*"Greater priority needs to be given to developing leaders with the capacity to manage the political dimension. They need an ability to see and communicate the big picture, make connections, be credible with different groups and broker relevant political and strategic relationships" (page 13).*

Political skills are starting to be recognised in the management academic literature as elements of effective management. A new literature is emerging about their use in the workplace in the private and public sectors. However, there is still too little conceptual understanding of political skills. Sometimes there is a tendency to view political skills narrowly as the pursuit of self-interest rather than as an influencing leadership approach that takes account of varied interests and motives in different business and political contexts.

The topic was felt to be so important that a very senior and experienced Steering Board was convened for this project. Testing the waters with workshops at the Chartered Management Institute's National Convention in 2005 also confirmed that this was a significant and under-researched area.

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## 1. Research aims and method

The research set out to answer several key questions:

- What skills do managers have in managing with political awareness?
- What, if any, are the skills they need to acquire?
- In what contexts do they use political skills?
- Do skills vary by context, type of organisation, and type of manager?
- How do managers develop political skills?
- What should organisations do to develop political skills in their managers?

The research is based on a large set of data. It used the following methods:

- A literature review of academic and policy literature on managing with political awareness. This was been published separately by the Chartered Management Institute in 2006 (*Hartley and Branicki*).
- Three focus groups with 41 managers in London, Birmingham and Cardiff. The groups explored what managers understand by 'managing with political awareness', in what contexts they use these skills and how they acquire or develop such skills.
- National survey of directors, senior and middle managers from among the membership of the Chartered Management Institute. This received a positive response, with 1,495 responses from across the UK. The sample has healthy representation from across all sectors (private, public and voluntary), from all regions and with a strong variety of managerial background and current organisational circumstances. This is a strong base on which to examine the components of political awareness skills.
- The research followed up the survey with 12 detailed interviews with managers from a wide variety of organisations in order to explore in rich depth some of the contexts in which political skills were exercised, how they had been used and how they were acquired.

### **The research has developed understanding in five main strands:**

1. Defining and establishing the importance of the main political skills required to lead and manage with political awareness.
2. Designing and developing the first model/framework for political skills which reflects the complexity of management of external as well as internal contexts.
3. Analysis of the skills as used and seen by a large and varied number of UK managers at middle management level upwards.
4. Mapping of where such skills are used – the contexts in which managers see these skills as important.
5. Providing important insights into how political skills are acquired and developed.

# Executive Summary

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## 1. Redefining political awareness

The variety of views expressed by the 1,495 senior managers responding to the national survey identifies a clear need for developing a shared understanding and common language for political skills among managers:

- The most common understanding of 'politics' – agreed on by 59 per cent of managers – is of alliance-building to achieve organisational objectives.
- 40 per cent of managers identify with a definition of politics based on interaction with the formal processes and institutions of government.
- Fewer managers view politics solely in terms of people 'protecting their turf' (31 per cent) or pursuing personal advantage (21 per cent).
- A smaller proportion of managers in the private sector subscribe to this "self-interest political perspective" compared with both public and voluntary sectors.
- Analysis shows a statistically significant gender bias. More men view politics as the pursuit of self-interest than women, who are more inclined to view politics as alliance building and reconciling conflict.

These findings suggest that despite the focus on self-interested "politicking" within much of the management literature, there is already an emergent majority view where managers see politics as a means to achieving collaboration or reconciling difference that can help to deliver their organisational objectives.

## 2. Why political skills are important

There are several critical dynamics including the impact of globalisation, greater transparency, accountability and media visibility, the increasing demands of politicised consumers, and the connectivity and convergence enabled by new technologies that require ever greater political skills among all those responsible for delivering services whether working in the private, public or voluntary sectors.

Managers currently view the most important activities requiring political awareness skills as:

- shaping key priorities within the organisation (64 per cent)
- building partnerships with external partners (57 per cent)
- promoting the reputation of the organisation (54 per cent)
- managing risks for the organisation (53 per cent).

Looking at the challenges for the next five years, the largest increase in terms of priority concerns the need to influence external decision-makers – rising from 43 per cent to 53 per cent. There is also a significant shift in the need to build external partnerships (from 57 to 63 per cent). This perhaps reflects a shift to a more external focus which recognises an increasingly complex and inter-dependent world.

### 3. Developing the political skills framework

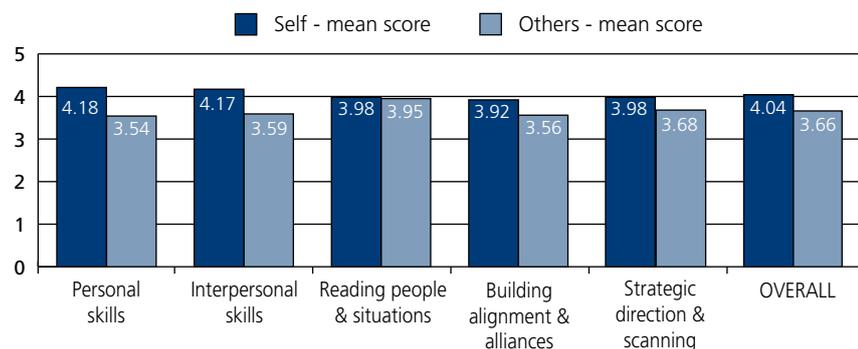
A key outcome of this research programme has been the design and development of a 50-item political skills framework to enable the first systematic measurement of the skills needed for political awareness across an extensive senior management population. The framework has five dimensions, as indicated below.



These dimensions of political skill are inter-connected and together may be considered as a meta-competency, rather than as single dimensions of competency. Personal and interpersonal skills are the foundation of building trust and of understanding the needs and interests of other people and organisations. Reading people and situations is being able to interpret people's motives, agendas and interests in different situations. There is also a need for the skills of alliance-building across different perspectives and interests and being able to sense or interpret wider changes in the external environment which may have an impact on plans and objectives.

### 4. How do managers rate themselves and others in terms of political skills?

Managers completed the questionnaire, rating themselves and their senior managers on each item in terms of the effectiveness of their respective political skills on a 6 point-scale from 'weak' to 'excellent'. The results provide a first mapping of the quality, extent and type of political skills in UK organisations at the present time.



**Chart 1:** Self and other ratings on the five dimensions and the total score

- The overall mean score across all managers is 4.08. This means that 58 per cent managers rate themselves overall as 'good' at political skills. Less than 1 per cent say they are excellent. 18 per cent or nearly one in five say that they are 'average' in terms of political skills.

- Given that self assessments are usually found to be fairly generous, this suggests that the respondents were modest in their rating of their levels of political skill. Managers report that their least strong dimension is being able to build alignment and alliances.
- The overall level of political skills observed by respondents among their senior managers – who might be expected to have quite well-honed political skills if they are leading their businesses and organisations – is also concerning. Overall, these managers are given a score of 3.7, which is between average and good.
- On the specific dimensions of building alignment and alliances and strategic direction and scanning, there are more ratings of ‘weak’ than of ‘excellence’. 11 per cent were described as having weak or below average skills, and a third (33 per cent) were described as having ‘average’ skills. Only one in six (16 per cent) were reported to have ‘very good’ skills and a mere 2 per cent were viewed as having ‘excellent’ skills.

## 5. Key differences by experience and sector

The more detailed analysis explored whether some types of managers are more likely to have political skills than others.

- It appears that it is experience in particular roles, rather than maturity as such – as indicated by managerial level rather than age – which has a primary impact on self-rating of political skill.
- Managers who define politics primarily as a means of pursuing self-interest have significantly lower scores for political skill.
- Managers who have experienced working in a different industrial sector (75 per cent of the sample) report higher total scores on political skill.
- Managers who have worked outside the UK (66 per cent) report higher scores on the total score and on all dimensions, indicating that there is a definite advantage to having gained exposure to different organisational and societal cultures.
- Some differences exist between managers in different types of organisation. Public sector managers rate themselves significantly higher than private sector managers in being able to read people and situations. Voluntary sector managers rate themselves higher than the private sector on building alignment and alliances.
- A breakdown of the results by seven selected industrial sectors showed higher ratings across the dimensions for those working in consultancy services. The lowest scores were for those in manufacturing and production.
- On the dimension of reading people and situations, local government managers report significantly higher scores for their senior managers than do any other industrial sector.

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## **6. Political skills and organisational performance**

As well as a number of case examples from the interviews and focus groups, there is evidence from the national survey that having greater political awareness skills is also associated with stronger organisational performance:

- Analysis found that those who came from growing organisations (55 per cent) reported higher scores on the political skills framework in terms of their own self-reported skills; the results are even stronger for the ratings of others.

This provides some evidence of a relationship between political skills and organisational performance. However, from a survey undertaken at one point in time it is not possible to determine the direction of causality, but certainly these are intriguing findings which deserve further research to explore this relationship in the longer-term.

## **7. The contexts and challenges of using political skills**

One of the questions this research set out to investigate was whether political skills are needed in particular environments. If so, the research aims to explore what these contexts are and how they may be changing. Part of the impetus for the research is the recognition that the external context of organisations is dynamic and rapidly changing, and that astute managers need to keep abreast of not only what is happening inside their organisation but also in those environments which might impinge, sometimes rapidly and unexpectedly, on their organisations.

- Working with influential people within the organisation is rated as the most important situation for the use of political skills – 76 per cent rating political skills as very or extremely valuable in this context.
- This was closely followed by 73 per cent of managers rate political skills as very or extremely valuable for working with partners and alliances.
- The other areas in which managers view political skills as most valuable are in thinking about how public opinion has an impact on their organisation, working with regional or local government and influencing regulation in their sector.

## **8. How political skills have been developed**

- Development of political skills has been highly dependent on learning by experience. 88 per cent report that learning from mistakes has been very or extremely valuable in developing their political skills; 86 per cent highlight experience gained in the job; and 85 per cent highlight lessons learned from handling crises.
- Informal observation of senior managers – whether offering good or bad examples of the use of political skills – is viewed as a common development route.
- Exposure to alternative organisational and societal cultures appears to be beneficial for the development of political awareness skills.
- Observation, reflection and questioning enquiry of one's own behaviour and the behaviour of others when dealing with politically sensitive situations is viewed as critical.

# Recommendations

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This report provides a strong basis for providing pointers to practical action to improve the quality and extent of political skills. These recommendations for the enhancement of political skills are set out for individuals, organisations and those responsible for providing training and development opportunities.

## 1. Individual managers

Given that strong political awareness skills can create distinct advantages in delivering both personal and organisational success, it is important that individual managers consider how to develop and hone these skills to ensure that they are best placed to manage the various political dimensions of their work.

1. Check whether your political awareness skills are as good as you think they are: consider using 360 degree feedback.
2. Develop good skills of observation, reflection and questioning to maximise the learning from mistakes and crises – and from the example of other managers.
3. Consider how you can gain exposure to situations which demand political sensitivity – perhaps initially as an observer or in a minor role.
4. Have a mental debrief on all key meetings to consider how well you read people and situations.
5. Think about further study or taking a qualification to gain exposure to new ideas, different ways of thinking and to challenge your own mindset.
6. Improve your strategic scanning skills. Keep up to date with relevant trade press and go beyond your usual network of contacts.

## 2. Organisational level

Organisations should use this report to help demonstrate the vital contribution that effective political leadership can make to delivering business results and to achieving improved delivery of public services. Organisations should consider how to assess, develop and measure political awareness skills more systematically. This could involve managers from team leaders up to senior managers and directors.

1. Analyse the key contexts within which your organisation operates. Do you have the right political awareness skills to handle these contexts? How will the context change in the next five years? Is your organisation prepared for the new landscapes which may emerge? Ensure that relevant managers gain exposure to these – with reflection and debriefing so that learning is shared and is made explicit.
2. Consider political awareness skills across whole teams, not just individuals. Use diagnostic instruments to help assess skills across a team or board.
3. Create an organisational climate which tries to learn from mistakes and crises.
4. Develop a system to mentor and coach less experienced managers.

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### **3. Professional bodies and training & development bodies**

There must be a revitalisation of the understanding of how political awareness skills can help to transform performance. Government at all levels, professional bodies, improvement agencies and those responsible for the training and development of others share an obligation to take this forward.

1. The Chartered Management Institute and Warwick Business School are developing a diagnostic toolkit to help managers identify their strengths and weaknesses in leading with political awareness.
2. Use a political skills framework to help managers develop a language and understanding of the range of behaviours and qualities which enhance political awareness.
3. Expand the political awareness dimension in management courses to include learning about the political context of organisational performance and develop scenarios to help managers explore political contexts.
4. Commission further research into the development and use of political awareness skills. This research project has mapped some key ground but further work is needed to examine, for example, the links between political skills and organisational performance in more detail.

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