



The politics of L&D

New demands on L&D practitioners mean they have to become more political, says **Mike Phipps**

I f you want to be good at L&D, you are going to have to get political and you are going to need to do it right.

And you probably don't want to hear that right now. It is likely that you love your work as a trainer/coach/facilitator etc as much as I do. You probably got into this work because of a passion for seeing people learn, grow and develop. You might be enthused by leading edge thinking, excited about concepts and learning models, and see clearly the link between learning and improved organisational and personal performance. And in a moment's honest reflection, even I would confess to enjoying the excitement, energy (and yes, the attention) of successfully leading a group.

But the challenges we now face are outside of, and go way beyond, the training room or the L&D department. The significant changes that our organisations are demanding of us mean that we are working ever more as consultants and business partners, and this requires new skills and attitudes. A short survey conducted as background research for this article tells its own compelling story (see box overleaf) and I can't help but note that not one response had to do with a concern for the quality of training delivery, coaching or facilitation, but nearly all focused on the need for L&D professionals to become more active across the organisation and add value beyond the training room.

So the challenge for us all is not getting better at what we already do so well. It is about being influential partners working more closely



alongside the key business players. And if we are to be successful, we are going to need more than influencing skills and a dollop of persuasion technique. The challenge is to get political, in the best sense of the word.

And getting political is probably not what was on your mind when you made your career choice. Hence, we are none too great at it. You may even have arrived in our profession because you wanted out of other functions because they were too political.

But the politics of L&D is where the work is right now, unless we are to become a marginalised support function.

Challenges facing L&D – survey responses (in no particular order)

- Generating senior manager support for programmes and L&D activity
- Motivating senior managers to buy into development that would be good for them and the organisation
- Delivering e-learning that works effectively
- Making self-managed learning work against a backdrop of decreasing time and increasing work pressures
- Transitioning from trainers to business partners like those in HR
- Shifting L&D into the OD space where we can add more value
- Becoming less reactive and more strategic
- Challenging a reticence to book on courses due to work pressures
- Resisting pressure to 'do it in a day' or 'in a morning'
- Responding to a demand to become more commercial and business-focused
- Mitigating against loss of learning due to declining traditional courses
- Getting managers to thoroughly brief delegates before and after development
- Getting line managers to appreciate the value of development
- Influencing managers to see that learning is not just 'training'
- Resolving the battle over who should fund L&D
- Creating compelling evaluation and proof of ROI
- Inspiring those most in need of development to take action
- Shifting the mindset that development is not a privilege but a vital activity.

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Politics is a mindset thing

Check your attitude. What comes to mind when we talk about getting political? We all know someone in the organisation who has been branded a political animal, and this is not normally intended as a compliment. Paradoxically, we also reserve a small measure of pity for those whom we deem politically naïve. This polarisation is not helpful.

Do you see politics as a self-serving, back-stabbing activity in which selfishness triumphs over service? You would not be alone in that. And politics can certainly take these forms.

But have you ever thought carefully about the wording of a communication in order to get the right impact? Have you ever gone to pre-meetings with important stakeholders to enlist their support? Have you ever avoided a confrontation in a meeting in order to follow up one-to-one at a later date? Have you ever given someone an earlier-than-needed deadline in order to generate momentum? Have you ever reluctantly abstained or voted yes because of overwhelming odds?

To have done any of the above would be to act politically. But that wasn't so bad, was it? In modern matrix organisations, we are all competing for resource and influence as well as personal and team success and, like it or not, this is the environment in which we find ourselves.



To hold up our hands and declare that we 'don't do politics' is to immediately hand the advantage over to those who do. This non-political attitude does not serve the L&D agenda and, if we truly believe in the value of L&D, does not serve the organisation either. The fact is, we are all political animals and have been influencing, persuading (and perhaps even manipulating) people and events ever since we acquired language skills. Ask any parent with children aged three and over about our human instinct to influence and how quickly and naturally it develops!

The question should not be 'am I a political animal?' A better question is 'what kind of political animal am I?' In a famous model, Baddeley and James help us by identifying political types as Owls (wise), Foxes (clever), Sheep (innocent) or Donkeys (inept)¹. The time has come for L&D professionals to make some good choices.

Good politics or bad?

The difference between good politics and bad is mostly perception. If you and I have competing ideas that we want to get signed off (and we are both working sincerely with the organisation's best interests at heart) and I see you holding pre-meetings with the influential inner circle, getting our boss's boss to talk up your idea, and I see you presenting to the board, it is too easy for me to



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resort to accusing you of being political. If our positions were reversed, might you not accuse me of the same?

Politics is simply the tactical way that we go about influencing and negotiating for what we want or need. Yes, politics can be competitive, self-aggrandising one-upmanship, but it can also be a natural and legitimate way of working closely with the business to make the stuff we really care about happen. To believe that we can be influential as business partners without dealing with the political dimension of work is simply naive.

If we are passionate about getting the L&D agenda advanced, we need to get political. But where to start? How do you 'do organisational politics' and, perhaps more importantly, how do you do it right?

Finding the fourth level of influence

There are four levels to the design of most modern organisations. Level one is the official organisational chart, the formal reporting structure, usually showing names in boxes connected with solid lines. Level two shows the matrix and dotted-line reporting structure. Then, if we start to consider all the project teams, business partners and other interdependencies, we get emerging clarity over level three.

While these three levels create increasing complexity, none of this is news. But if we start to identify the 'inner circle' of influencers and decision-makers; the movers and shakers of the organisation; the people who can open doors, grant access, make introductions and recommendations, and give permissions; the real influencers with real power, we arrive at level four.

And this group is not clearly identified as such on any chart. They do not have an office that we can 'drive by' in the hope of an informal meeting. Indeed, the inner circle folks are not necessarily always near the top of the level one chart. But here is where the action is and where our work will take us. The first step in our new political activism will be to identify who is in this inner circle, to notice

Reference

- 1 Baddeley S, James K *Owl, Fox, Donkey or Sheep: Political Skills for Managers* Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham

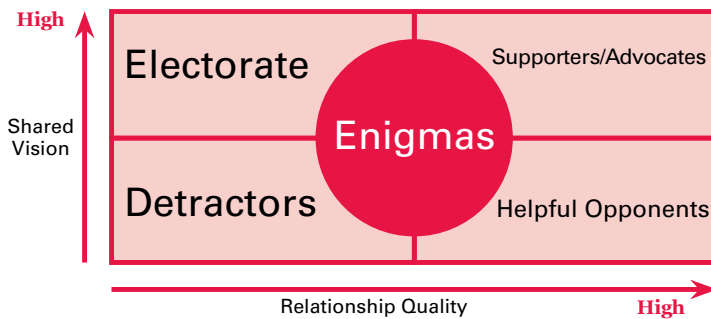


our connections – or lack of them – and start building relationship here. We are going to need to think tactically and strategically about people if we are going to be successful. We are going to need some new stakeholder management tools.

Applying new stakeholder tools – beyond Mendelow et al

Contrarily, I don't like stakeholder management. I am uncomfortable with categorising people and putting them into boxes that loosely describe their levels of usefulness and that reduce our

Planning a campaign of influence



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relationship to the tactical level. It feels like anathema to my diversity and equality values. But this is one of the first steps in mounting a successful L&D influencing campaign.

Thinking tactically about people – who they know, how they are connected, what they want, what they believe in, what they will be influenced by and why they might support us – is fundamental to good politics. It is central to how our democratic governments work and, while it is far from a perfect system, it is at least a way of working that is familiar to most of us. Diplomacy might best describe the behaviours I will display – and the good news is that diplomacy is usually an L&D strength – but politics is the strategy behind what I am practising.

Famously, Mendelow advocates stakeholder analysis based on levels of interest x levels of power². His model has served us well for many years and is still fit for purpose. However, if we have identified an inner circle, we should already know who the powerful people are. What is needed is a new model that reflects the complexity of matrix reporting. I advocate new x and y dimensions of shared vision and relationship quality (see diagram above). This, in turn, can give us a hierarchy of influencing activity for our campaign.

Enlisting supporters and advocates

Anyone we can confidently place in the top right-hand area will be the base camp of our supporters or advocates. They are the people who not only share our L&D vision but with whom we enjoy a high-trust, high-quality relationship. Any influencing campaign begins with conversations with people in the upper right-hand area as the first priority.

Even if, at this early stage, there is no direct correlation between these supporters and advocates and the inner circle folks we identified earlier, we need to be consistent at building and maintaining these relationships because these people can still be of service to us by making introductions, sharing information and intelligence, and helping us shape our strategy.

So much influence happens with our supporters and advocates indirectly intervening on our behalf (in government it is called lobbying or caucusing). As an additional benefit, when we are unsure, confused and need to think out loud, perhaps even making ourselves vulnerable by sharing heretical ideas, these are the people to call on. They keep us sane as well as supporting us and keeping us on track.

Engaging effectively with helpful opponents

People we have categorised as not sharing our vision, but with whom we nevertheless have a high-quality relationship (anyone bottom right on the map) also become immensely valuable to our campaign. Curiously, they are our second port of call. While it might be desirable to influence them into agreeing with us, we must be realistic that they might not be for converting, but this is to miss the point and underestimate their value.

No, the great value that helpful opponents bring to our work is that, when we meet with them, they will be candid and constructive about what is wrong with our vision and campaign because of our relationship. They simply ask us the questions that others will be thinking – but not asking until it is too late. And while this might not be what we want to hear, their challenge is invaluable in shaping our thinking and next actions. We must have the courage to really listen to their challenges and have the grace to thank them for disagreeing with us. This is not easy as it risks damaging our ego but it means that, when we meet with someone in the inner circle who is open to influence, we are better rehearsed.

Converting enigmas

As our role evolves into business partners and consultants and we reach out across the wider

organisation, we will encounter enigmas – people we just don't know or have any real relationship with. Our supporters, advocates and even some helpful opponents can be of service here by sharing information about the enigmas – what their interests and agendas might be – and, in some cases, they might even help us with introductions and referrals. As mentioned earlier, we need to accept that it will not be possible for us to influence everyone directly – especially where there is remote management and matrix reporting – and we need to be willing to accept that sometimes there is better leverage in having our supporters and advocates influence on our behalf. This may well increase our chances of converting enigmas into supporters.

Dealing with detractors

We need to be more circumspect with anyone in the bottom left-hand side of our model. Where there is no shared vision and the relationship is damaged or strained, perhaps even broken, detractors are unlikely to support us (indeed they may even be gunning for us) and spending time attempting to convert them will probably bring few benefits. It may even invite sabotage, if we are careless.

Where we have reluctantly but confidently plotted people towards the bottom left of our model, we need to do what we can but the leverage will come from working with those on the right side, who will help us build sufficient political momentum so that our campaign reaches what Malcolm Gladwell has elegantly termed “the tipping point”³. Then, when faced with overwhelming political will and momentum, many of the people on the left side of the model will want to get with the programme or at least not be seen to be blocking it.

Managing the electorate

The people we identify as the electorate are those who tell us that they share our vision and goals. They say that they will vote for us. However (for whatever reason) we do not share the high-quality, high-trust relationship with them in the same way that we do with our supporters.

While their votes of agreement and support fill us with hope and give us a warm feeling, this needs to be tempered by the fact that they might still be open to persuasion from elsewhere. Every politician knows that the electorate can be fickle and can lose sight of the vision without logic or reason. The work is in remaining in touch, continually building and updating the relationship, and finding ways to reassure them about our progress and alignment.



Summary: What to work on

If we are to truly be of service to our organisations, we are going to need to move from being excellent service providers into being influential business partners. This is going to require positive political skills and more tactical thinking.

For your PDP, I advocate the following checklist for developing your political skills:

1. check your attitude. Politics is simply the tactical way we go about influencing and using our personal power. It is both legitimate and appropriate if we are to be of service
2. get out of the training room and even the L&D department. The work is out in the matrix, not in there!
3. identify the fourth level of the organisational chart and get linked in with this amorphous group
4. use these new stakeholder tools to ensure that, when you have something you really care about that you want to get implemented, you have the most effective influencing campaign possible.

Good luck. Let me know how you get on. **TJ**

References

- 2** Mendelow
A L *Power-Interest Grid* Kent State University, Ohio (1991)
- 3** Gladwell
M *The Tipping Point* Abacus (2001)

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