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[Political Acumen: Easier and H...](#)

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A good working definition of “politics” is “the ability to influence another person’s thinking or actions”. The athletics director must be a master of politics – getting others to support the funding and other needs of the athletics department. Developing political acumen should start with a self-assessment. Ann Richards, the now deceased former Governor of Texas, once said, “You can say anything to anyone as long as you dress like a lady and smile.” This statement was not sexist. It was her way of saying that dressing professionally and having a positive and smiling demeanor influences someone’s first impression of a person, before they even get a chance to interact verbally. Even after meeting someone and beginning the verbal interaction process, the effective influencer remains calm, smiling and positive, even when imparting negative information. This commitment to a positive and professional style of dealing with others on the part of everyone in the organization is very important. The athletics director is expected to be a role model in this regard, especially in a crisis where all eyes are looking for guidance and leadership from the head administrator.

The athletics director should have a policy that is explicitly communicated to every employee, “The only person in the athletics department who can make an enemy or engage in conflict is the athletics

director.” In effect, what this policy says is that nothing is more important than the reputation of the organization and no employee has the right to risk that reputation.

Influencing others to respect the athletics department and provide it with what it needs requires the athletics director and other employees to master the following influencer skills:

1. Do your homework. Knowledge of the needs you will express, the rationale behind policies or procedures you want adopted, or the facts of situations you want to resolve requires a mastery of the knowledge surrounding the subject of your interaction. Before meeting and interacting with others, do everything you can to know more than who you are conferring with regarding the issue to be discussed.
2. Demonstrate respect for those you are trying to influence. Respect is demonstrated by tone of voice and professional and cordial greeting and departure, by asking for the opinion or advice of another, listening to that opinion or advice and accepting or rejecting that recommendation based on good and unbiased reasoning. Respect is demonstrated by always thanking the person for their time as a first order of business and again thanking them for sharing their time and knowledge as closure to the meeting and again, more formally, in writing by electronic or snail mail the day following the meeting.
3. Be able to explain why the person you are dealing with will benefit from the action you are proposing. Commonly referred to as designing a “win-win” situation, the effective influencer always thinks about the needs of others and how those needs intersect with the influencer’s proposed action.
4. Show how the proposed action is consistent with and advances the mission of the educational institution.