

# Organisational Politics



**Melody Cheal**

# Organisational Politics

Getting on at work is just about doing a good job, being reliable and working hard, right? Or is there more to it than that?

If I told you that below are the three ingredients for getting on in organisations what percentage would you give to each category?

**Performance** \_\_\_\_\_

**Image** \_\_\_\_\_

**Exposure** \_\_\_\_\_

In his book "Empowering Yourself", Harvey Colman describes how the "game" of organisational politics is played and what you need in order to progress. He calls this the "PIE", the formula for success.

- ✓ Perform exceptionally well (10%).
- ✓ Cultivate the proper Image (30-40%).
- ✓ Manage Exposure (50-60%).

In order to explore this model more fully it may make sense to look more at the more common behaviours seen in the work place.

One model worthy of exploring divides the population into two types, sustainers and achievers.



According to Dr. Adel Scheele, these two categories can be divided by the different behaviour traits that each displays. In a nutshell, Sustainers apply what is known as the "good student" model in that they have a tendency to work hard and hope that someone will reward their industriousness with promotion, bonuses or pay increases. The Sustainer waits for recognition and then may become resentful or cynical when their efforts go unnoticed.

In contrast, the Achiever is prepared to take action to get noticed. They will tell people of their achievements, display their skills and look for opportunities to demonstrate their worthiness for reward. Their behaviours are proactive and are about taking initiative.

In our culture, the Achiever's proactive stance may well feel uncomfortable to many and in particular social training for women in the past has actively discouraged this kind of "blowing your own trumpet". Despite this cultural bias Achiever behaviour can still be seen as more effective for those wishing to climb the corporate ladder than Sustainer behaviour.

Gender differences in Office Politics have been the subject of much research over the years, in particular the work of Arroba, James and Baddeley. They developed a model to explore what they called the darker side of organisation politics which described four categories; the Donkey, the Fox, the Sheep and the Owl. The four animals form the basis of a quadrant diagram with two key axis, integrity and political awareness.

The integrity axis runs from low integrity through to high integrity. A person/ animal with low integrity is likely to put their own agenda first above anything else in the work environment. On the other end of the scale, the person/ animal will have the best interests of the organisation in mind even when pursuing their own agenda.

The second scale starts with politically naive at one end and politically aware at the other. Political naivety in its extreme would mean a total lack of awareness of the undercurrents, dynamics and various agendas running around them. Someone who is very politically aware would know what was going on; they would be "in the know" and able to interpret subtle signals within the organisation structure that indicate change and power.

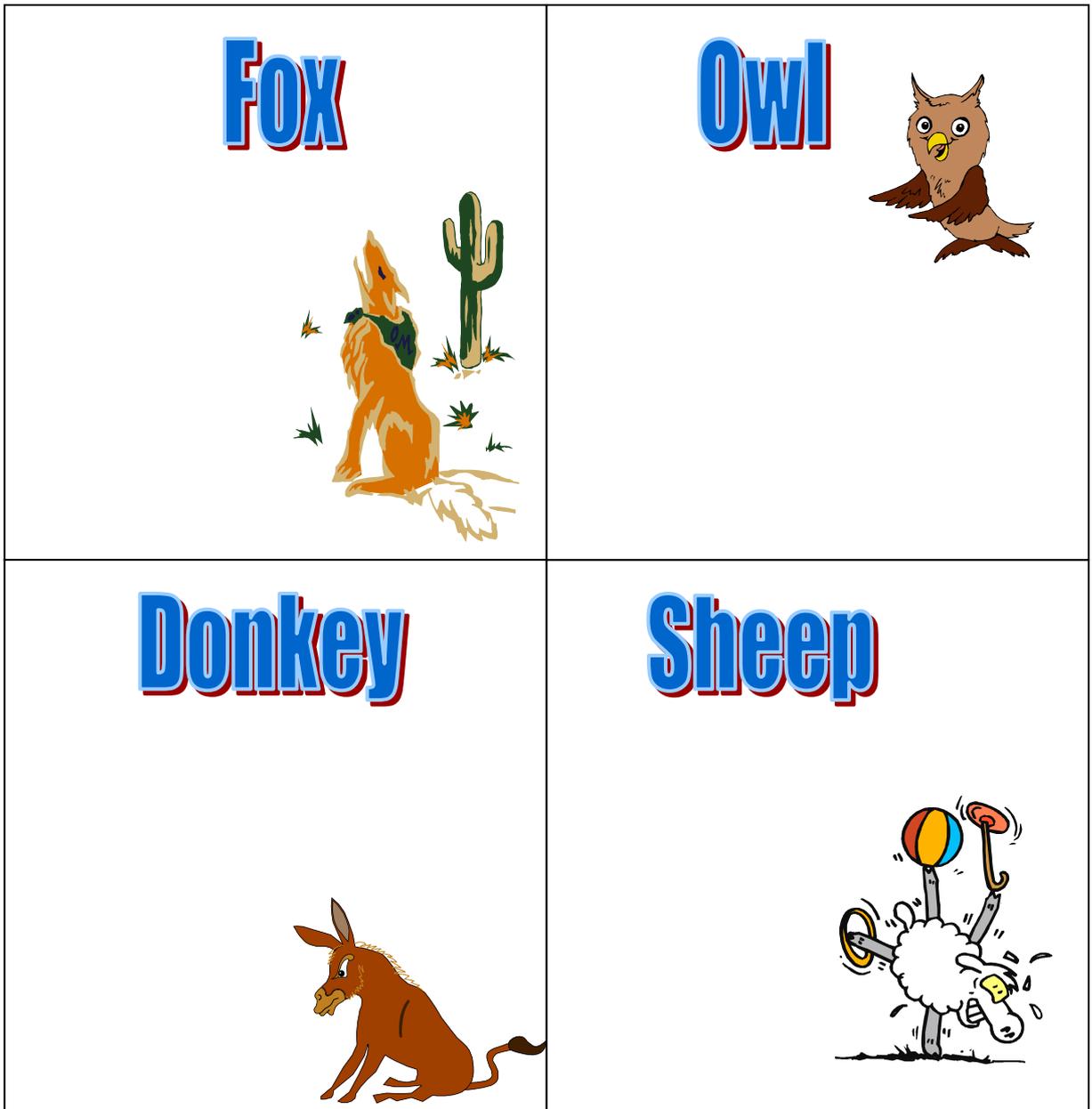
**The Clever Fox:** The Fox is high in political awareness but low on integrity. This means not only does this animal focus on their own agenda they are likely to be highly skilled in the arena of organisational politics. They are often charming, charismatic, good rapport builders with excellent networking skills. They will be good at managing both their image and their exposure. They will be good for an organisation all the time their aims are in line with that of the company.

**The Inept Donkey:** By contrast this animal would like to be a Fox but is not clever enough as they are both politically naive and low on integrity. There may well be a sense of the Donkey "putting their foot in it" possibly creating enemies instead of allies. This type of animal may actually cause the organisation harm and is often described as inept.

**The Innocent Sheep:** It is the Sheep that keeps the organisation going and who make up the back bone of the work force. Their high levels of integrity make them hard workers, reliable and trustworthy. However their low political awareness often creates problems for them when they do not see change coming and are not

prepared shifts in power. There is a danger that Sheep will be kicked by Donkeys and eaten by Foxes.

**The Wise Owl:** The Owl is politically aware and high integrity. This combination provides for a dynamic animal capable of managing their profile, image and exposure while at the same time inspiring trust in others. Owls prefer to develop win/win relationships; they are mindful of the organisations aims and objectives as well as their own and place a high value on a good reputation.



Owls and Foxes seldom work together for long, small companies tend to be one or the other. In larger companies there are likely to be clusters of Foxes and Owls in various departments or divisions. If a Fox tries to operate in Owl country they are likely to be exposed because Owls will challenge behaviour that lacks integrity. Owls

who find themselves surrounded by Owls and Foxes seldom work together for long, small companies tend to be one or the other. In larger companies there are likely to be clusters of Foxes

and Owls in various departments or divisions. If a Fox tries to operate in Owl country they are likely to be exposed because Owls will challenge behaviour that lacks integrity. Owls who find themselves surrounded by Foxes will often leave if they are unable to facilitate change.

## **Developing Your Skills**

All three of these models are useful as a way of first understanding organisational politics and then looking at how to improve your own career prospects. An action plan can be drawn up using the "PIE" formula and must start with a frank and honest appraisal of your current position.

## **Performance**

- ❖ What are your current levels of skill, competency and talent?
- ❖ What is your career path?
- ❖ What do you need to develop?
- ❖ How are you going to develop?
- ❖ How will you measure success?

Use these questions to plan your development programme and consider what the next smallest step is that you can take in your career progression and then take it!

Do you have a mentor? Mentoring serves two purposes; firstly the right mentor will help you develop skills and competency so that you will be performing at the top of your game. Secondly mentoring may provide you with a way to raise your profile and thus your exposure. Choosing a mentor is critical in this process, you need someone who has an understanding of your business and industry and who is also able to guide you in your career progression. It is worth noting that a Fox mentor may be very motivational and could boost your career tremendously. This is because the Fox will benefit from your success by bathing in your reflected glory. If you choose a Fox for a mentor just make sure to protect yourself should your agenda move into competition with theirs. An Owl on the other hand will genuinely be happy to help you succeed (while still understanding how being a successful mentor is good for their career too).

## **Image**

This needs to be tackled on two levels. Firstly there is your **internal self image**, if you do not believe in yourself no one else will. This may mean working on self esteem, self confidence and assertiveness perhaps using something like NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming). Information about NLP can be found in books, audio tapes, from your mentor or by attending a course in self development (e.g. NLP Practitioner training). You might also consider establishing a relationship with an Executive Coach to help you develop this and other skills.

The **external image** is very much about controlling and managing how others perceive you. This includes being aware of the impact of first impressions.

A Harvard university study suggests that we can all accurately assess the competence of another person to within about 80% in just 30 seconds! After about four minutes our opinion of that person is pretty much set forever. When we first see someone we register some basic information about them:

- Age
- Gender
- Race/skin colour
- Height/weight
- Other physical characteristics (e.g. beard, disability, hair colour).

These assumptions and decisions are all made within the first four minutes of meeting a person. There are a number of things you can do right away to manage how others see you:

#### **In the first 30 seconds:**

- Walk into the room directly without hesitating.
- Introduce yourself to others by offering your hand and saying your name.
- Maintain good eye contact with people when you speak to them.
- Smile when appropriate and remember to use the person's name.
- Keep your head up and your shoulders relaxed.
- Avoid fidgeting or putting your hands in your pockets.
- Speak clearly and be confident about speaking first.

#### **In the first 4 minutes.**

- Make a point to be interested not interesting!
- Ask lots of open questions.
- Take the lead in introducing others you have just met.
- Maintain confident, open body language.
- Use active listening – reflecting, summarising, clarifying etc.

Awareness of your body language and appearance after first impressions is just as important in terms of projecting confidence, competence and belonging. Notice the clothing uniforms that come with each level of authority within an organisation. One well worn piece of advice is to dress for the job you want rather than the job you have. This way you look like you belong to that level already!

Colman, although American, credits the "British Empire" with setting the agenda for how things are done and setting the "rules of the game" at the highest levels of corporate and social power. Whether you agree with this or not, or whether this is

something you perceive as good or not it poses some interesting questions about what you need to do to be accepted by the highest levels of the corporate pyramid

He suggests that at each of the seven levels of power there are social activities that are part of the "game" of politics; golf, sailing or yachting, tennis or horse related activities. What are the activities that signal the senior people in your organisation? Are they the same or different to Colman's big four? Do you do any of these activities yourself?

## **Exposure**

The most important part of exposure is being seen by the right person in the right way at the right time!

Much of this is about developing extraordinary networking and rapport building skills. This will include:

- ✓ Mixing with the right people.
- ✓ Volunteering for committees and action groups that raise your profile.
- ✓ Having a mentor.
- ✓ Being a good team player.
- ✓ Seeking opportunities to take a leadership role.
- ✓ Contributing in meetings effectively.
- ✓ Giving presentations.

Writing articles, papers and books that raise your profile while not obviously part of networking will bring you to the attention of a greater number of people. Within the organisation itself being prepared to propose new ways of doing things in the form of reports can also raise that all important profile.

## **References**

- Harvey J. Colman, Empowering Yourself
- Dr. Adele Scheele, Skills for Success,
- S. Baddeley & K James, Owl, fox, donkey, sheep, political skills for managers, Management in Education and Development. Vol 18, No 1, Spring 1987

## **About the Author**

Melody Cheal has an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology, a degree in Psychology, a diploma in Psychotherapy and is an NLP Master Trainer. She studied Transactional Analysis for five years and is also a Myers Briggs Type Indicator Practitioner.

Melody runs courses in both the private and the public sector, focusing on interpersonal skills and self-awareness. Over the last ten years she has worked with international committees, directors, senior managers, teams and front line staff in groups and one to one as a coach. She specialises in emotional intelligence, personal effectiveness, understanding behaviour and leadership.