

A large, stylized illustration of a hand in shades of orange and yellow, with four people (two men and two women) standing inside the palm. The people are dressed in professional attire and appear to be in conversation.

Political

Astuteness

by Performance Frontiers

Over the years, political astuteness has become somewhat of a “dirty word”. Perhaps tarred by the schoolyard tactics of modern-day politicking, mere mention is often met with a negative response. However, the political partisanship, digs, and sleights of hand seen today are counter-intuitive to what it really means to be politically astute. And leaders, whether in public or private sectors, would do well to reinstate value in both the idea of political acumen, and in developing this vital skill.

Spotting the Political Savvy

Political astuteness refers to having the ability to build connections and leverage relationships within social systems. This not about manipulation. In fact, those who aren't politically skilled are the ones who come off as manipulative or self-serving.

Instead, politically savvy leaders display behaviours that are genuine, forthright and effective. They require a nuanced mix of personal relationship acumen, an understanding of workplace politics, a keenness of judgement or insight into both broad and specific contexts through environmental scanning, and skills in organisational and stakeholder partnering.

Consider, Jacinda Ardern, [New Zealand's oft lauded Prime Minister](#). Her authentic presence and transparent communication style; her ability to intuit what is needed by the local and global community, and to partner with multiple stakeholder bodies to orchestrate it; and her track record of savvy, bold and decisive action, such as New Zealand's swift COVID-19 response, is political astuteness personified.

The Value of Political Skill

Being politically skilled is incredibly valuable, particularly for those in higher levels of leadership.

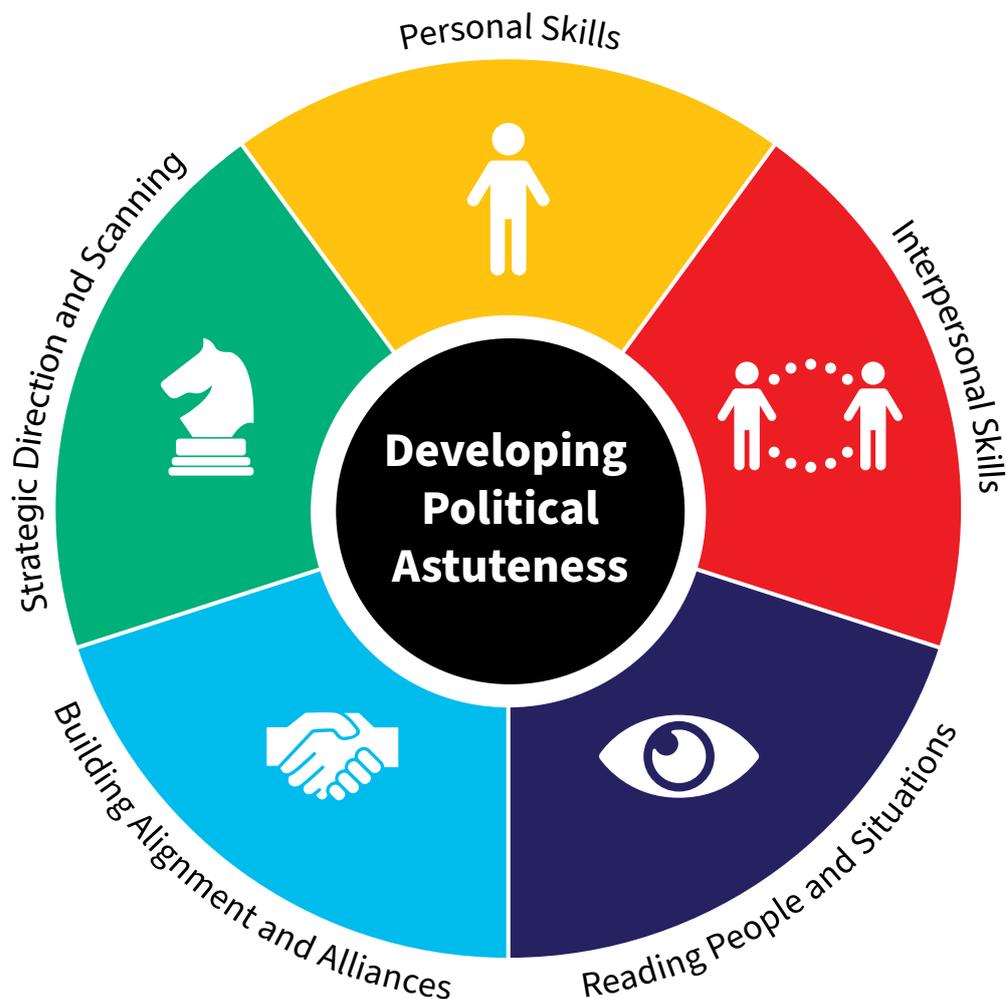
In these VUCA times of increased Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity, we need leaders who can sense what is needed – not only in the political terrain of their own business, but the broader context of the global economy and government – and respond with agility. Leaders who can step outside the silos of vertical management, and work horizontally to influence whole systems. Leaders who can solve problems and catalyse movements through the power of collaboration and partnership, fostering trust and agreement between stakeholders of differing incentives, objectives, values and beliefs.

The value of political astuteness has been substantiated across a number of studies. Take, for example, [the studies conducted by Professor Jean Hartley](#) and her team at the Open University Business School between 2006-2013. Their leadership surveys found that political skill helped leaders 'build alliances to achieve organisational objectives, rather than ones dominated by self-interest', with most respondents witnessing the value of employing political skills to: shape key company priorities, influence external decision makers, build external partnerships, manage risks, and compete for resources. Or [Andrew Wefald of Kansas State University](#) who in 2016 who found a correlation between those with political skill and those with transformational leadership traits and high levels of work engagement.

Developing Political Astuteness.

To develop political astuteness, leaders can look to a number of personal, social and strategic skills. Through their decade-long study, Hartley and co. identified 5 core skill areas:

1. **Personal skills** – a high degree of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, anticipation and initiative
2. **Interpersonal skills** – the capacity to influence, balancing curiosity and empathy, with advocacy and presence
3. **Reading people and situations** – understanding social dynamics and context, such as intersecting agendas, impact/threat assessment, points of influence
4. **Building alignment and alliances** – bringing together people with diverse values, motives, goals, to work in partnership, collaboration and harmony
5. **Strategic direction and scanning** – a clear sense of purpose, in thought and action, the ability to read external signals in the environment, and a honed sense of timing



Most people learn these skills “on the job”, and often not effectively. Organisations can achieve heightened ‘political’ awareness through a multi-pronged approach:

1. An audit of political skills and context:

Ask: How might we assess the current state-of-play in each of the 5 areas of Political Astuteness? If we scan our whole system, what can we perceive?

2. Reflection and visioning:

Ask: From our findings, what within ourselves are we called to change, as individuals and as a collective? What is possible if we sharpen our political acumen?

3. Creating an environment of experiential learning and political play:

Ask: How might we expose our team to politically diverse situations that they can reflect upon, and be simultaneously coached in?

The result would reduce the gap between the rhetoric of leaders and the reality of effective leadership. These skills also provide a springboard for making ethical judgements for the good of whole systems.

But perhaps the first step is reclaiming the integrity of the words.

Are you interested in developing political astuteness? Performance Frontiers can work with you to create your very own bespoke development or coaching program. [Contact us](#) for more information.

Further Reading

<https://www.themandarin.com.au/67674-political-acumen-why-do-public-managers-need-to-be-political/>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/12/19/political-savvy-and-emotional-intelligence/#7a92c5148a98>

<https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/UsingPoliticalSkill.pdf>

<https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/9465-political-skills-happiness.html>



©Copyright Performance Frontiers

STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[E] info@performancefrontiers.com

performancefrontiers.com



Please read on screen to save paper,
but if you must print, please print
only the pages you need.