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A Campaign Strategy For Your Career

Practical lessons from electoral politics *by Dorie Clark*



ILLUSTRATION: OLIMPIA ZAGNOLI

This year's presidential campaign has subjected us to the usual barrage of negative ads, divisive wedge issues, and minor misstatements amplified beyond all recognition. There's a reason it's such an insult to be accused of "playing politics." But as a corporate strategy consultant who previously served in senior or advisory roles in the presidential campaign of Howard Dean and the Massachusetts gubernatorial campaigns of former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich and current governor Deval Patrick, among others, I believe that executives can—and should—learn from electoral politics to position themselves for career success.

The point isn't to become a Machiavellian power monger; manipulating or using others will only hurt you in the long run. But if you take the time to build authentic relationships, improve your work skills, and provide real value to others, it's possible to succeed at office politics with integrity. You can model the behavior of the best politicians: Set clear goals, reach out to supporters, build and exercise influence, and then execute relentlessly to achieve your ambitions. In short, you can devise a campaign plan for your career.

Consider this year's candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. They have the same overarching goal—victory on November 6—and they have worked backward on the calendar to achieve it. Almost as soon as the 2008 presidential race concluded, their campaign teams began to prepare for 2012, calculating expected turnout and estimating how many votes would be needed to win. Their teams also charted, month by

month, the precise activities required to get there, down to the tiniest details: how many volunteers to recruit in each geographical area, how much money to raise, how many doorbells to ring, and so on.

You may hesitate to set and achieve your career goals that way. After all, the regular tasks of your job probably already consume all your time. And do you really need to be so calculating? Shouldn't hard work speak for itself? But those sound like questions asked by a political incumbent who insists he doesn't need a campaign strategy because voters already see his merits. Sadly, it just doesn't work that way. As Linda Hill and Kent Lineback explain in *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*, organizations are inherently political entities, and anyone who ignores those dynamics becomes powerless. Success comes only when you identify what you want to achieve and map out a plan for getting there.

That's what happened with Lenny Achan, who began his career as a nurse at New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center, an organization that is a former client of mine. Nursing on the night shift, Lenny decided his goal was to become a senior health care executive. So he began to plan. "I started prewriting my résumés for the next five or 10 years, so in 2002 I had one for 2012," he recalls. "I'd list the education I'd have attained, the committees and organizations I'd belong to, what I'd be doing in my free time. I put them all in writing to have a focal point to work toward."

That exercise required Lenny to research, in detail, the skills and affiliations of the people he wanted to emulate and to identify the gaps between their experience and his. When he realized that top hospital executives need a strong finance background, he sought out an administrative position that allowed him to demonstrate profit-and-loss responsibility. "I could see the missing elements because I understood what the endgame was," he says.

Lenny's campaign plan helped to broaden his perspective. "It becomes about the long-term strategic view rather

than short-term tactics," he says. "It's not about getting a promotion because I want more money in a year or two. Instead, it's what will this look like 10 years out?" Today, at only 35, Lenny is Mount Sinai's chief communications officer—a high-ranking position that would have been unimaginable to him a decade ago.

Choose Your Milestones

The first step in creating a career campaign plan is to identify your goal, even if it's provisional. (I consulted for one politician who, more than a year in advance, plotted a run for Congress, just in case the incumbent stepped down. When he didn't, my client switched to a new objective.) You can periodically update your plan—or create a new, prewritten résumé—to match your changing goals. For now, pick an end point and get started. You may be seeking a promotion to senior VP, a book deal, or a spot for your start-up in a prominent incubator.

Just as a presidential campaign focuses on the dates of the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucuses and on deadlines for filing finance reports, you'll want to write down the dates that you consider crucial. Those might include annual performance reviews, application deadlines (for graduate school, awards, or fellowships), or target dates for company initiatives in which you'd like to participate (the opening of the Singapore office or the restructuring of the IT system). It's useful to print out monthly calendars starting now and ending with the target date for accomplishing your goal. Then begin to work backward on those calendars, just as political campaign teams do.

Take Inventory

The agenda you set for yourself is the core of your career campaign plan. But how do you identify what steps to take? One executive I know decided to emulate the biographies of people he admired—in precise detail. If they'd been White House fellows, he'd make it his ambition to be one. If they were marathoners, he'd dive into

a training regimen. His résumé-building plan has worked wonders—he's successful and highly regarded in his field—but if you prefer a less extreme version, you can stick to informational interviews to learn more about the experience you'll need. Remember to be flexible, too. Savvy politicians understand the traditional career ladder: moving up from city councillor to mayor to governor. But they also keep an eye out for serendipity (if Senator X takes a cabinet position, Congressman Y will be appointed to fill the vacancy, which means I can run for the congressman's seat).

Candidates always build in time for debate prep, policy review, and training in public speaking—and you should do the same for the skills you want to cultivate. Make the most of the openings in your schedule. Lenny determined that the ability to effectively educate others is important for a health care executive, so he studied for a post-master's certificate in education. "I had time on the weekends,

Politicians understand the traditional career ladder, but they also keep an eye out for serendipity.

so I researched until I found a weekend program that worked," he says. If you'll eventually need, say, a doctorate to reach your goal, you'd better start preparing for the GRE now.

Formal graduate work is sometimes the answer, but you can often build skills using a mix of shorter, targeted programs and personal effort. Indeed, it was Lenny's own off-hours experimentation in social media—creating an app that saves battery power on mobile phones—that ended up winning him a promotion. "When I built my first app, I spent a ton of money doing it, but it was like another master's degree—things I never could have learned in school," he says. His bosses at Mount

POWER MAP FOR YOUR CAREER CAMPAIGN

Sinai were intrigued when they discovered his hobby (he was already working on his second app), and they quickly offered him a job as VP of digital and social media, which led to his current job leading all of the institution's marketing efforts.

Like Lenny, you can scope out where you need to head—with three simple steps:

- Identify the skills acquired by others who have reached your goal.
- Determine what skills you can learn on your own. For the rest, figure out how long formal study will take.
- Chart your skills-development plan on your campaign calendar.

Target Influential People

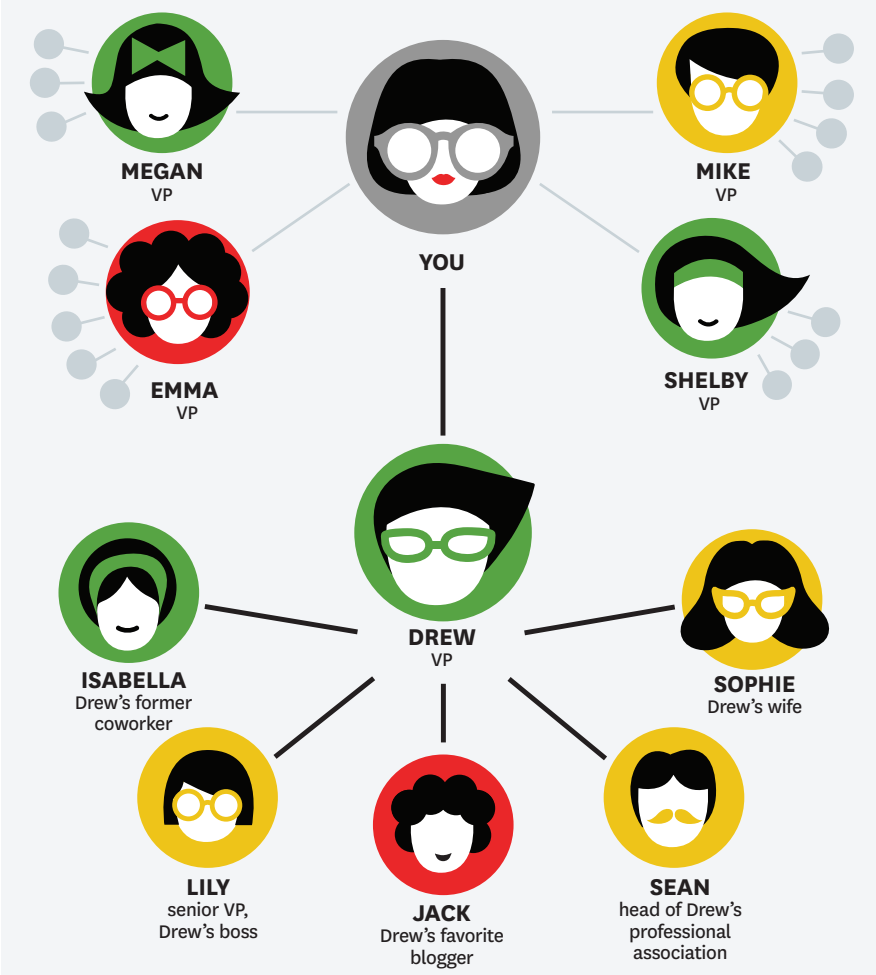
A vital element in political—and career—success is who you know. When I worked in New Hampshire for Howard Dean, he endured endless meetings to seek the favor of local officials, because they controlled votes and resources in their small slices of the state. Similarly, when Chris, a finance professional with a *Fortune* 500 firm, sought a coveted promotion to vice president, he realized that an entire committee, not just his boss, would decide whether he got promoted. “There are 20 VP positions and 50 names, so you need people to vote for you—people who want you to be there,” he explains. “If you want to be number 20 instead of number 21, you have to make sure you have backing.”

So he got to work. He printed out the VPs' bios from his company's website and color-coded them: green for his allies, yellow for people he sort of knew, and red for people he didn't. “There was a lot of red on the page,” he recalls. That had to change. “If I said something in a meeting, I wanted them to know it was Chris who just spoke, not just some guy in finance.”

Beyond those with direct power, you'll want to think about people with indirect influence. Identify a person whose opinion really matters to your boss: his spouse, a colleague in a different department, a former coworker, maybe a favorite blogger. Politicians have long understood that influence isn't always obvious, so they rou-

To create a power map, sketch out the relationships between the people who can affect your career and the people who influence *them*. Then color-code each person according to his or her relationship with you: **green** for a close connection, **yellow** for a loose one, **red** for none at all.

Let's say there are five VPs you need to persuade: Drew, Emma, Megan, Mike, and Shelby. Start with the people who influence Drew, your boss, as shown below. Then make a power map for each of the other VPs.



tinely craft campaign strategies to harness indirect power. Look at how advocates ran a successful campaign to legalize same-sex marriage in New York State last year. As the *New York Times* reported, the advocates knew they'd have trouble winning over Republican legislators. So instead they recruited wealthy Republican donors with gay family members—and let those donors do the persuading. Sometimes the right messenger is all it takes.

Finally, it's essential to join and engage with influential groups, just as a politician might look for backing from the local ward committee or the veterans associa-

tion. Think about which groups will help you connect with the people you want to meet—potential clients, higher-ups at your company, industry thought leaders—and eschew commitments that waste your time or yield minimal returns.

Here are some concrete steps for pinpointing who can help you in your career campaign:

- Draw a *power map*, using circles that show who has the most influence over your career—and, in turn, the people who have the most influence over them. (See the exhibit “Power Map for Your Career Campaign.”)

- Figure out what you can offer the influential people—expertise, assistance on a project, help with networking—and ways to cultivate unique knowledge or skills they'd find valuable.

- Make a list of the groups you should join because they hold sway or will allow you to meet key contacts.

Court the Votes

There's an adage in politics that voters have to hear your name at least seven times before they remember it (which explains the array of radio ads, bumper stickers, yard signs, postcards, and so on). To conduct your career campaign effectively, you must get people to know who you are. In Dean's presidential campaign, we mobilized voters using a "house party" strategy: A supporter would invite 10 to 20 friends to her home to hear a pitch from a campaign organizer. That worked a lot better than typical knocking on doors because we harnessed social networks and peer pressure to win more votes. Although Dean's bid for the presidency was ultimately unsuccessful, the house party approach—and social networking more broadly—has proved to be highly effective

in political campaigns, including Barack Obama's in 2008.

Chris, the aspiring finance VP, operated in the same way. He didn't just sit back after he identified the executives who had a say in his promotion. He set out to build relationships with them, even establishing quarterly progress goals for himself. "I'd

It's still a slam to be labeled "political" in the business world. But it shouldn't be.


think about what I was doing that would be relevant for them to spend 15 minutes with me," he explains. He also aimed for lunch meetings, which were highly visible on his corporate campus. "If I'm walking around this week with one senior VP and the next week with another...before you know it, it's the way to another VP," he says. This playbook perfectly mimics an effective political campaigner's: Candidates routinely meet with influential donors and have a "hit list" of opinion leaders to cultivate.

You should also strategize how to become known to all the people on your power map through the "echo chamber." In short, ensure they hear your name everywhere. Identify conferences they attend and submit a proposal to speak. Find out what social media platforms they participate in and start retweeting or commenting on their posts. Volunteer to lead a committee on one of the professional organizations they belong to. The secret is to gradually cultivate familiarity and build a relationship—not, of course, to retweet someone's messages 30 times in two days so that you seem like a stalker.

Finally, with your influential targets and your strategies identified, it's time to make appointments and set deadlines. Who's on deck for lunch this week? When will you submit that conference proposal? Your plan should include all the key elements, from externally determined markers (your annual review) to long-range goals (getting a doctorate) to short-term tactics (volunteering to lead a membership committee). All help to create a clear road map to reaching your goals.

CHRIS'S INTENSIVE campaign plan ultimately paid off. After two and a half years of laying the groundwork, he won his promotion. "A lot of companies say you're responsible for your own career," he says. "But people often aren't aware they're failing to make the right moves—and they let years go by." You can't afford to make that mistake.

It's still a slam to be labeled "political" in the business world. But it shouldn't be. Thinking like a campaign strategist will help you set clear goals, develop new skills, and build relationships with the people who matter to your professional life. Creating a career campaign plan ensures that, every day, you're taking small but important steps to better position yourself for a winning future. ♥ **HBR Reprint R1211L**

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CARTOON: P.C. VEY



"Eventually I'd like to have a lot of passion for what I do."

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