



IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

Developing political awareness skills to influence practice

Kathryn Waddington

University of Westminster
Email: k.waddington@westminster.ac.uk

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Abstract

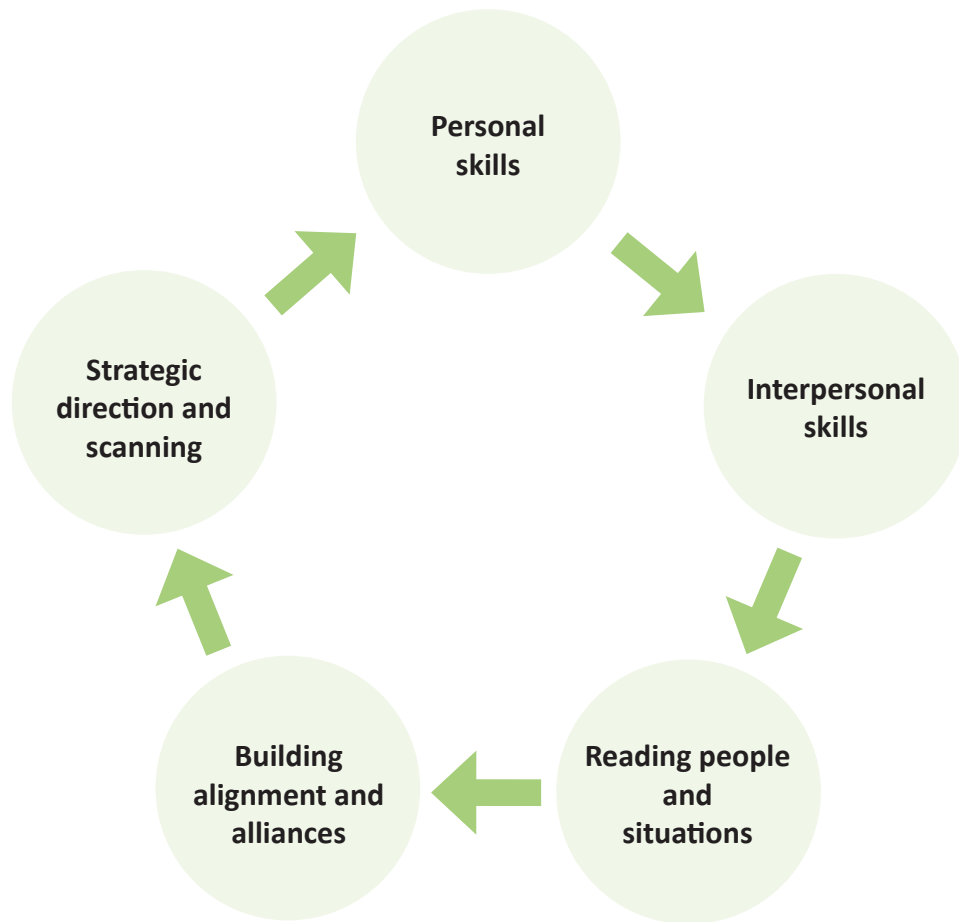
The aim of this article is to illustrate how an evidence-based conceptual framework for understanding political skills/awareness in public sector management can be adapted and applied to practice development. Jean Hartley and her colleagues' work has influenced my practice as an academic leader, and my approach to the development of compassionate academic practice. Here I reflect upon how the framework can be used to enable practitioners to develop skills of political awareness in an interprofessional practice team context.

Keywords: Political awareness, reflection, leadership, interprofessional teamwork

A framework for developing political awareness

This evidence-based framework (Hartley et al., 2007, 2013) is based on research with managers in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, in a variety of organisations and sectors (public, voluntary and private). The research used focus groups, survey and interviews to determine the main political skills required to lead and manage with political awareness. A key outcome of the research was the development of a political skills framework with five interconnected dimensions, summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Political Skills Framework (Adapted from Hartley et al. 2007, p 6)



The framework was initially designed for systematic measurement of the skills needed for political awareness in a senior management population. However, I consider it also has value as a reflective framework that can enable practitioners to develop skills to enhance practice development in an interprofessional context. It is particularly applicable as three of its dimensions are crucial to person-centred ways of working within teams and workplaces: personal skills, interpersonal skills (McCormack and McCance, 2017) and reading people and situations.

In order to raise awareness of attributes and skills beyond the personal, interpersonal and situational dimensions of person-centred practice, this article focuses on the wider strategic dimensions of:

- Building alignment and alliances
- Strategic direction and scanning

Defining politics in and around organisations

Hartley et al. (2013) argue that political awareness is an increasingly necessary skill for managers in the public sector. I argue that it is also increasingly necessary for practice developers who are leaders striving to achieve sustainable change and transformation. For this it is helpful to have a definition of politics in and around organisations that is broad enough to be adapted and applied to the practice development field. Drawing on academic and policy literature on managing with political awareness, Hartley and Fletcher (2008, p 158, emphasis added) take the view that:

*'Politics is about mobilising support for, and consent to, **action** in the context of **diverse, and sometimes competing interests** and may involve either **collaboration** or competition depending on purpose.'*

The above definition is sufficiently wide ranging to encompass the interests and views of patients, families, interprofessional teams and others.

Using the framework in practice

Table 1 describes the core political dimensions of building alignment and alliances, strategic direction and scanning.

Table 1: Dimensions of political awareness (adapted from Hartley et al., 2013, p 18)	
Dimension	Characteristics
Building alignment and alliances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive leadership and management attributes • Clear communication strategies and structures • Sharing of appropriate resources and information • Creation of a supportive team climate • Individual characteristics and strengths that support interprofessional teamwork • Clarity of vision • Quality and outcomes of care • Respect and understanding for roles and responsibilities • Understanding of power dynamics
Strategic direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic thinking and action in relation to purpose/s of practice development • Long-term thinking and a road map of the journey that ensures short-term pressures do not act as diversions
Scanning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking about longer-term issues in the environment that may potentially have an impact • Attention to what is over the horizon • Awareness of small changes that may herald bigger shifts in delivery of care/services • Analysis and management of uncertainty • Flexible options rather than premature decisions

I have used these dimensions of political awareness in my own leadership practice, thinking and reflexive approaches to developing compassionate academic practice (see Waddington, 2016, 2017). This includes creating supportive team and organisational climates, analysing and managing uncertainty and paying attention to ‘critical moments’, which occur wherever people make meaning and coordinate actions with each other. The framework for developing political awareness skills outlined in Table 1 provides a valuable evidence-based tool for practice developers. It can be used to guide individual and team reflection and action, and provides a sound basis for a practice development in health and social care organisational contexts, where the skills of political awareness are increasingly necessary. I strongly recommend that readers look to developing and incorporating these skills into their practice.

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Kathryn Waddington (CPsychol, Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy), Head of Department of Psychology, University of Westminster, London, UK.