



MINEFIELDS, HIDDEN AGENDAS, AND ALLIES

EPISODE 2: THE MAP

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Cast of Characters & Episode 1 Summary

EPISODE 1 IN SUMMARY

- Through hard experience, Ben discovered the First Law of Influence: Know your colleagues.
- Through conversation with a mentor, Ben learned an approach to discovering his colleagues' hidden agendas and interpersonal preferences.
- Ben started down the road to more constructive relationships with key colleagues.
- We offered a proven pattern for discovering the business agendas of your key colleagues.

Most successful leaders say that building productive working relationships with key colleagues is among the most important activities a leader can engage in during the first few months in a leadership role. What does that look like in real life? In this series of articles, we follow the path of Ben Scott as he begins work as Chief Marketing Officer for Software Magic, a fictitious technology consulting firm.

Here is the cast of characters you met in the first episode:

- Ben Scott has fifteen years in increasingly responsible marketing roles in professional services firms. He has an MBA from a leading business school and plays jazz guitar in his spare time. The Software Magic role is his first firm-wide marketing role.
- Jan Thomas came to Software Magic from the parent company, NovaStart. As managing director, she has overall responsibility for Software Magic's business performance. She has a reputation for being a no-nonsense leader and performs exceptionally well with clients.
- Jim Hopkins leads the largest office in Software Magic. The prototypical hard-charging rainmaker, Jim has risen through the ranks at Software Magic and has enormous influence with his peer group.
- Paul Morris runs Software Magic's Financial Services group, the firm's largest industry sector. He came from the industry five years ago and quickly distinguished himself as a sought-after resource by leading clients.
- Terry Dennis was Ben Scott's first boss at an IT shop across town. He remains a respected member of that firm and of the consulting community in the city.

Ben Scott began his new role as Chief Marketing Officer at Software Magic, a Chicago-based technology consulting firm. Early in his tenure at Software Magic he was confronted by two powerful peers, Jim Hopkins and Paul Morris. They were unhappy with Ben's execution of the Principals Meeting, a gathering of the firm's top people.

Ben turned to Terry Dennis, a mentor, for counsel. Together, they reviewed the reasons for the breakdown with these important colleagues. They discovered two factors, interpersonal style and differing business agendas, as possible causes of the problem. Ben made it a priority to understand Jim's and Paul's styles and to learn what business agendas drive their behaviors.

Episode 2: The Map

Another Lunch with Terry

Nearly a month passed since Ben and Terry lunched at this same sidewalk café. Today, a brisk autumn wind makes sitting inside the restaurant an obvious choice.

“So, how’s the new guy?” Terry begins with a sideways grin.

“Much better,” Ben replies. “And I finished my homework.”

“Great!” Terry says enthusiastically. “What did you learn?”

“For starters, I understand the reason why Jim and Paul were so peeved with me about the Principals Meeting.” Ben pauses, smiling. “It’s actually amazingly simple. You know the saying – ‘hindsight is 20/20’. Well, they were banking on using the Principals Meeting to drive their own agendas. Jim’s agenda is putting an account planning process in place for his office. Paul is using that same process to launch a hot, new service offering for his practice group. My last-minute changes to the agenda cut the time allotment for both.”

“You successfully discovered their business agendas,” Terry comments.

“Yes, I did. It was a little rough at the beginning because they were both guarded. But I carefully defused their fears and we got into some good conversation.”

“What did you learn about their styles?” Terry asks.

“Well, Jim is a tough nut. He is all business, straight facts, and likes to be in control. I’ll need to work hard to earn his trust and respect. Paul is different. One-on-one, he seems to want to work well together. And, I think he felt bad about the ambush.”

Ben pauses for a moment. “I noticed something else about Jim. Once I gave him some choices about how to handle the Principals Meeting, we made some real progress.”

“Aha! That’s important,” Terry says. “Fact-oriented, direct people like options. Remember that for the future. Did you talk to any other peers?”

“I spoke to most of them – the head of finance, my sales counterpart, and few other geographic and practice group heads. Most conversations were positive. I learned a lot about their business agendas. I also saw differences in how they like to interact.”

Trying to Get Traction

“So it all worked out. That’s great,” Terry says, sipping his coffee.

“Yeah, but something still bugs me. I feel as though I’m missing something important.”

“Why do you say that?” Terry inquires. “Did something happen regarding the Principals Meeting?”

“No, that’s long gone. It’s something deeper. I’ve been looking things over in the business. From my first analysis, it looks like the firm really needs to re-think its brand in the marketplace, but at a much more fundamental level than we’re focusing on right now.”

Ben gives a quick survey of the facts – a mid-size firm struggling to differentiate itself in a competitive market.

“It sounds as though the firm has a hard time articulating how it’s special – and that becomes a problem for you as the Chief Articulator!” Terry says with a slight smile.

EPISODE 2 IN SUMMARY

- Ben discovers the Second Law of Peer Influence: Know the network.
- Ben learns this rule after struggling to move an important initiative through the organization.
- Through a simple mapping tool, Ben identifies key themes and disconnects between his colleagues—and issues/ignored he has missed entirely.
- Ben finds his focus again and starts planning how he will influence Software Magic over the coming weeks.

"Exactly! So I've started to nudge people toward identifying target markets, offerings, anything that might set us apart."

"How's it going?"

Ben idly stirs his spicy tomato soup. "Not so great. I started by subtly asking questions. My questions spurred sporadic conversation, but no real action. Then, I began bringing the topic of branding up at executive team meetings. I even put a brand positioning study in my budget –to get a reaction."

"And..."

"I got a reaction alright – sticker shock! The firm's leaders aren't accustomed to investing in brand management. And with the financial pressure we have, our CEO, Jan, wasn't immediately willing to drop that kind of cash."

"What happened next?"

"Fortunately, Jan asked me to serve on her strategy team. In team meetings, I argued that branding is much more than pretty pictures on brochures. I argued that branding is staking out a space in the market that the firm can own. It is what sets us apart and what we frame our operations around – our offerings, people management, communications; you name it."

"How did they respond?"

"Great, until I tried to get them to pinpoint our target markets. Then, the conversation went dead. No matter what I said, they refused to choose any one market focus." Ben pauses, obviously re-living the meeting. "I was so frustrated. I'm convinced that we have to strengthen our brand if we want to succeed. I can't get the group to budge."

Discovering the Network

Terry realizes that Ben has stumbled upon his next learning opportunity: to discover how decisions really get made through the organization's informal political structure. He decides to press the point.

"Let me ask you a question," Terry says. "When you interviewed your colleagues about their business interests, what did you learn about the network in your firm?"

"The network? What do you mean?"

"You know – the web of relationships that determines how things actually get done. Some people call it corporate politics."

"I'm still figuring that out. Do you think the relationship web has something to do with the firm's paralysis?"

"Who knows, but I'll bet uncovering it will assist you in breaking the log jam. Discovering the network is the second rule of building relationships that I referred to last time we met."

"Speak to me," Ben says laughing and picking up a pen.

"OK, if you want to change the marketing focus of the entire firm, you're going after a pretty big fish. Don't be surprised by the inertia. You have to convince a number of your colleagues to agree there's a problem. Then, you have the daunting task of getting a quorum to agree upon a solution. The network drives the change."

Ben's antennae instantly go up. "Are you saying that I have to become a Machiavellian politician to make the change happen?"

Terry smiles. "No, you're not trying to stab anyone in the back or manipulate anyone. However, if you are unaware of the politics, good luck moving your company forward! In the best sense of the word, politics simply influence decisions for the common good."

"If you are unaware of the politics, good luck moving your company forward!" -

Terry

"OK, so what do I do?"

"Fortunately, you've already done some good work. You've begun to understand your colleagues' business agendas. Now, just add a second layer to your discovery. Look at the alliances among your peers. For instance, you mentioned that Jim and Paul approached you together about the principals meeting. From what you know about their histories and goals, is it possible they are allies?"

Ben thinks for a moment. "Well, not completely. They sometimes spar a little. They both want resources for their own areas and join forces during budget discussions."

"OK, so that's a *potential* alliance," Terry says. "If you look through your notes on your colleagues, you'll probably discover other clues about potential alliances."

Making Sense of the Mess

"I'm glad you brought up my meeting notes." Ben pulls out a legal pad. Its top fifteen pages are full of barely legible scribbles. "I think there is important information here, but I'm trying to figure out what to do with it."

Terry smiles. He realizes that Ben is drowning in a sea of useful information. "Have you tried mapping it?"

"What do you mean?" Ben asks.

"The notes are interesting, but the power is in the relationships *between* the information and the people. When I am in a similar situation, I summarize these interviews into an Agenda Map." Terry sees Ben's quizzical look. "Here, give me a clean sheet from your legal pad."

Ben obliges and Terry draws out a matrix with five columns and four rows.

"You can get a lot fancier than this, but I'm a simple guy. I list the functional groups I met with along the top columns. For example, let's list finance, practice groups, geographies, and sales. Then I put three organizational levels down the side: senior executives, middle managers, and field-level staff."

Terry begins to fill in the map.

"Now, I fill in the map with a content summary from my meetings. For instance, you say you met with Jim. He's the geography head in the Eastern region, right?" Ben nods. "OK, so we list him as a senior leader under 'Geography.' Now I fill out what I know about him in three simple categories: style, agenda, and alliances. I know his style is direct and task-oriented." Terry notes Jim's interpersonal style. "Now, what do we know about his business agenda?"

"Well," Ben responds thoughtfully, "he has to hit his sales numbers. His strategy is to increase our presence in target market accounts through issue-oriented cross-selling."

"Good so far," Terry says, noting it all down. "But what are his numbers specifically?"

"I didn't ask him for a precise figure," Ben answers.

"Well, no big deal. You can always get that information later. The more specific you are with establishing goals, the better you can establish a business case for action later on."

"Got it," Ben says nodding.

"Now, we come to 'Alliances.' We're not sure, but it's a good guess that Jim and Paul are allies – at least allies of convenience. So we should note this as well." Under Jim's name in the matrix, Terry notes the salient points. "Of course, you probably have additional details in your notes, but you get the idea. The point is to glean the most important information about style, agenda, and allies from your notes about each person. Once you have information listed for each person, you can

"I'm glad you brought up my meeting notes... I'm trying to figure out what to do with them."

-Ben

Agenda Map

| Level/Function | Finance | Geographies | Practice Groups | Sales |
|------------------|---------|--|-----------------|-------|
| Senior Leaders | | Jim Hopkins: East <u>Style:</u> Direct, Factual <u>Agenda:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve X? in billings • Target accounts • Issue-oriented cross-selling <u>Alliances:</u> Paul M? | | |
| Managers | | | | |
| Staff/Associates | | | | |

“The map gives clues about projects that have momentum and projects that may flounder.” - Terry

look back for . . . “

“Trends!” Ben interrupts.

“Exactly,” Terry smiles. “For the people whom you list, look for natural connections among the goals, critical success factors, and initiatives. This map gives you clues about the projects that have momentum. It also signals the projects that may flounder.”

Putting It Together

“Before we leave, let’s take this concept across the finish line,” Ben says. “I have this brand initiative.”

“And they have sticker shock.” Terry chuckles.

“Yeah, that’s the problem. How can Agenda Mapping help me?”

“Well, it *is* possible that you bit off more than you can chew. It’s common, when starting a new role, to feel pressure to make a big splash when maybe you should enter the water a little slower.

“Putting that possibility aside, fill out your Agenda Map and ask yourself a few questions:

- Whose support do I need to get resources for a branding initiative?
- How does my idea tie into their agendas and help them get where they want to go?
- If they’re not supporters right now, do they have an ally who may benefit and who might influence them on my behalf?”

Ben spins his pen in his fingers. “And I can always interview other people if I find out I’m missing information.”

“Exactly,” Terry says.

Gaining Clarity

Ben leaves the lunch meeting with a new level of clarity. He marches back to his office, closes the door and takes out a dry erase marker. On his whiteboard, he begins to sketch a matrix. An hour later, the board is full of his summary notes drawn in several different colors. Sweeping arrows connect information about the agendas, styles, and personal alliances. Large, purple question marks show where his information is incomplete or puzzling.

And most importantly, a bright green box at the bottom right has five, clear action steps. These actions may be just what are needed to move his brand initiative forward. He feels clear, relieved, and focused. Traction may be just around the corner.

It's Your Turn

Like Ben, you may not have fully considered your organization's political network and how to constructively handle it. Understanding is the first step. Take out a sheet of paper and write down what you know about the styles, agendas, and alliances of your key colleagues.

Styles:

- Are your colleagues direct or indirect when they influence people and situations?
- Are they people-oriented or task-oriented?
- Do they respond to facts or relationships?

Agendas*:

- What are your colleagues' business goals? Try to be as specific and measurable as possible.
- What must go well for them to achieve their goals? (Critical Success Factors)
- What initiatives are moving these Critical Success Factors forward?

Allies:

- With whom do your colleagues have common history, interests, and/or business agendas?
- With whom do they consistently compete for resources or influence?

Now look for any themes, trends, or disconnects. How does the Agenda Map help explain action or inaction in your organization?

See the attached "Short Course" for a summary of the mapping process Terry outlined in this article. Why not pull out your notes on your key colleagues and see what you can learn? Then share your experiences with others on our blog at www.noondayventures.com or write to us at real-time-learning@noondayventures.com.

In the next episode of *Minefields, Hidden Agendas, and Allies*, Ben learns first-hand another Law of Peer Influence.

*see *Episode I: the Ambush* for a detailed *Business Agenda Discovery* process

Noonday Ventures helps leaders rise above ordinary performance in “bet-your-career” roles. Founded in 2004, we combine deep experience and proven intellectual property to turn everyday work into a master class.

The Short Course—Business Agenda Mapping

A lot of incoming leaders have key initiatives stalled because they do not fully understand the network of relationships and agendas among their colleagues. The *Business Agenda Mapping* process brings order to the confusion. Here’s how the mapping process works:

Discover the Agendas

- Identify the colleagues whose work most directly touches yours or whose support you anticipate needing most.
- Use the Business Agenda Discovery Process to learn what drives them.

Map the Information

- Summarize the style, agenda (Goals and Critical Success Factors), and alliances for each person
- Create a map appropriate for your organization with levels and functions to organize the information
- Plug in the summaries to appropriate boxes

Analyze the Map

- Look for themes, trends, and disconnects among the different perspectives
 - *Themes* are Goals/Critical Success Factors that appear in the agendas of several colleagues
 - *Trends* are style connections or alliances among colleagues
 - *Disconnects* are Goals/Critical Success Factors that appear to be different or in conflict
- Ask yourself a couple of questions:
 - How does this information explain action or inaction in my organization?
 - What can/should I do to influence this situation?