

# COUNTER CULTURES

SUCCESS IN GOVERNMENT DEMANDS A DIFFERENT SET OF SKILLS THAN MAKING IT BIG IN BUSINESS.

BY MARTY LINSKY

**M**y third tour in government was as chief secretary to then Republican Governor Bill Weld in Massachusetts in the early 1990s. My portfolio was politics and personnel—aka “patronage.”

It was the early days of the merger and acquisition craze. As a consequence, there were a slew of men and women with highly successful track records in business whose jobs had ended on someone else’s schedule. With impressive resumés, paid-up college tuitions behind them, and enough money squirreled away to get by on a public sector salary, they “wanted to give something back” by serving in an important position in state government. Status was still important. For example, if you had been the president of a successful local bank that had been swallowed up, you might well be addicted to a certain level of authority.

We recruited lots of those folks into the Weld administration. Anecdotally, it seemed as if they either blew out pretty quickly or they made the transition well and made significant contributions to the public good, at least as we defined it. Almost no one was just so-so.

I remember noticing the pattern at the time. It got me to thinking about the difference between exercising leadership successfully in business and doing so in government and politics, and why it was so difficult for many in business to match their private sector success in the public arena.

What are the cultural and value differentiators between these two worlds?

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While my academic colleagues might be eager to attack that question with an elaborate research design, I'm too much of a journalist—and politician—to resist taking a stab at naming the most important of these many differentiators.

So based on what I have experienced and observed, here are four key differences I see between succeeding in the world of business and politics.

#### **NO. 1: DATA VERSUS ANECDOTES**

For business, systematic data are powerful. In politics, anecdotal evidence is not an oxymoron.

People in government and politics—for our purposes here, let's use "politics" or "political environment" to cover both elected and appointed officials in the public sector—have different ideas about the utility of systematic data versus anecdotes in decision making. At one end of the spectrum, academics and scientists use many, many cases to come up with a general theory, which is then applied to a particular situation. Legislators, on the other hand, are forced by the nature of their work to use individual cases to make general rules. To a scientist, systematic analysis trumps intuition or any individual case. To a politician, intuition is a resource, and individual cases are legitimate pathways to general laws. Business people fall somewhere in between.

#### **NO. 2: POLITICS IS NOT THE PROBLEM**

To be successful in a political environment, you've got to acknowledge, respect and engage in the politics of policymaking, not disdain it. In business, the politics is just as present, but being explicit about the politics is, well, politically incorrect.

I was a three-term member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. It was the most honest environment in which I have ever worked, including, among others, law firms, academic institutions, consulting firms and newspapers. It was honest because politics, which pervades everything from families to corporations, was upfront and explicit.

In most organizations outside of government, politics is very much present but below the radar. When I first joined the faculty at the Harvard Kennedy School nearly 30 years ago, a trusted colleague and I were having a candid conversation about my career when he suddenly stopped and said, "You know, I will

have this conversation with you any time you want, but we can never have it with anyone else in the room."

The message was clear: Normal, human ambition and strategizing about it were not appropriate subjects for public conversation. The Kennedy School was founded to train people to speak truth to power on the assumption that the world would be a better place if we could only take the politics out of policymaking.

Many of our unsuccessful appointees from the private sector had the same idea. They thought their job was to eliminate the politics, instead of engaging in it because it was so real and relevant to making progress.

The central difference between functioning well in politics and functioning well in business is not whether the politics exists, but whether politics is accepted as an appropriate and public factor in decision making.

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#### **NO. 3: EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED**

Once you accept the legitimacy of politics, certain other differentiators result. The most important of these is No. 3: In politics, there are no discrete issues. Everything is connected to everything else.

People who are successful in politics think systemically. If I am coming to a meeting with you, I want to know what else you care about besides what is on the agenda, who your friends and your enemies are, what other pressures you are facing, and whether I have done anything for you lately, or vice versa. People in business tend to want to hold on to the fiction that they can solve a value-laden problem in one place without ramifications everywhere else. Unexpected consequences are the result of lack of good political or systemic diagnoses.

One of the reasons that people in business

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can ignore the politics is they tend to work in more or less homogeneous worlds, with clear lines of authority and a shared objective, namely the bottom line. Working in a political environment, you are thrown together every day with people who have very different values, priorities and preferred outcomes.

Personal power derives as much from relationships—and the informal authority that comes from those relationships—as from formal authority. And people are where they are because of their differences, be they policy preferences, issue advocacy or geographical constituencies.

#### **NO. 4: A WORLD OF AMBIGUITY**

In business, you can enjoy the comfort of being on a team and agreeing on your role and scope of authority. But to be successful in politics, you have to revel in being in an environment of ambiguous authority, and relish confronting the "other."

In this space, I can only touch on some of the most important cultural, value and structural differences between government and business, and how the willingness and capacity to overcome those differences affect the success of business people in government and politics. This is a mother lode of a subject, and I have only scratched the surface here.

But, ironically, in the turbulent times in which we live, some of those distinctions will blur.

With huge challenges and diminished resources, government bureaucrats and politicians will have to look more to rigorous analysis on which to make—and justify—hard choices.

On the other side, with such rapid change and future uncertainties, people in business must increase their tolerance for ambiguity and less clear lines of authority, collaborate with people who hold very different values and perspectives, and make more intuitive decisions based on insufficient data. ■