



Career Tactics, Leadership Effectiveness and Progression



Key Words

Leadership potential, impact, effectiveness and excellence; 360 feedback; MBTI, tactics for career progression and satisfaction; six career strategies

Summary



Leadership progression, impact and excellence are not simply the result of talent and hard work, important as they are.

“Results do not always speak for themselves”. And the “cream of organisational talent” doesn’t always get to the top.

In a world of uncertainty, competition, and conflict, Career Tactics - self management skills and political insight into organisational realities - are important to success.

This digest outlines the impact of Career Tactics:

- **in shaping perceptions of leadership effectiveness and excellence**
- **as an important factor in high potential**
- **as components of career progression and satisfaction**

“Keep your shoulder to the wheel, your nose to the grindstone, your ear to the ground, and your hands to yourself. And if you can get a damn thing done in that position, please let me know how you did it.”

Marcel Rocca

Career Tactics was developed in 2002 to complement competency-based approaches to assessment, talent management and leadership development. Its focus: to measure those self management, organisational and political stratagems that help individuals advance in the world of career realities.

Career Tactics grew out of our realisation in facilitating succession reviews that talented individuals were often being overlooked by organisations. Highly capable individuals who were making a significant impact on organisational performance, were being out-gunned by their more savvy peers - those individuals with a shrewd sense of how life is, and how organisations operate.

Since its launch Career Tactics has been widely used across a range of sectors and applications, most notably in high potential programmes and executive coaching.

Career Tactics is not the endorsement of “The Way of the Rat” and other exercises in the expanding market of techniques in cynical exploitation. Career Tactics represent that perspective to conduct a mature debate with your professionals and managers about life as is, and how to operate with talent and character in surviving and thriving in the real world.

If Career Tactics represent the self management skills to support career progression, do they “work” in shaping others’ perceptions of effectiveness and excellence?

How do different “stakeholder” groups, up, down and across the organisation, view the impact of Career Tactics?

What is the relationship between Career Tactics and the MBTI?

How do Career Tactics and the MBTI stack up in the identification of potential?

Which Career Tactics drive career progression and satisfaction?

Career Tactics and leadership impact



A group of 150 middle-senior managers in an overseas bank participated in a development programme during the course of 2005 and 2006. The activity incorporated a number of assessments, including Career Tactics and a 360° feedback instrument. The 360° tool - Leadership Impact - measures nine themes of leadership effectiveness, capturing the views of individuals, their line managers, peers and team members.

The Career Tactics Framework



The different expectations of stakeholders in 360° feedback



360° feedback and leadership convergence

How much convergence was there around leadership effectiveness? Were line management evaluations of effectiveness consistently aligned with those of peers and team members? How did peer perceptions stack up with team member views? What is clear from this analysis is that:

- there is no one absolute criterion of leadership effectiveness. Although there is reasonable consistency around the theme of organising resources to achieve results - task management and outcomes - for the most part, each stakeholder group has a different set of expectations and standards.
- line managers tend to focus on some aspects of leadership and can assess reliably some themes, but not others. Similarly for peers and team members.
- leadership then is largely about managing and responding to different and often conflicting expectations. This is leadership as “the art of juggling” and managing the competing demands of line managers, peers and team members; a tough challenge which probably explains why exceptional leadership sustained over time is rare.

How are these different expectations of leadership played out in the Career Tactics assessment?

Career Tactics and the leadership impact



How are Career tactics viewed by work colleagues, up, down, and across the organisation?

Line management perceptions

The tactics line managers “like”:

Managing Corporate Politics and **Flexible Curiosity**.

Individuals reporting greater use of these tactics were evaluated as more effective leaders by their line managers.

And the tactics they don't: **Projecting Confidence**, **Gravitating Towards Success**, and **Mastering the Art of Timing**. These tactics were associated with lower evaluations of effectiveness from line managers.

For this organisation, line managers rate individuals higher if they are interested in wider trends and alert to new possibilities, and shrewd in navigating political dynamics. They are less keen on the tactics that help individuals establish their own personal reputation (is this a suspicion of impression management skills?), and who are more reflective and thoughtful in their judgement (is this seen as overly cautious?)

Peer perceptions

Peer evaluations of “bottom line” effectiveness are associated with the tactic of **Focus on Priorities**. Those individuals clear about their aims and organised in time management are viewed positively by their peers (presumably because they don't over-burden their colleagues with unnecessary work).

And peers rate as less effective those individuals displaying the tactic of **Gravitating Towards Success**. Like line management, peers may see this tactic as self-serving and an avoidance of the potentially troublesome organisational issues (problems they as peers may need to address).

Team member perceptions

In this organisation, team members don't like **Using New Challenges to Speed Development**. This tactic is associated with lower evaluations of bottom line impact. Two scenarios come to mind. Team members value stability and are suspicious of those individuals who seem more interested in the next career challenge than in current work effectiveness. Alternatively, this is a work force that is getting too comfortable with the status quo and feels threatened by the change and disruption that ambitious managers keen to move on might create.

Career Tactics and Exceptional Leadership



The review of correlations across the total population is useful in highlighting overall trends. However the tactical themes associated with the full spectrum of effectiveness may be different to those that shape leadership excellence*. We therefore looked at that subset of high impact leaders, individuals rated especially highly by line management, peers and team members.

For **line managers**, the high impact leaders follow the pattern of being higher on **Managing Corporate Politics** and **Flexible Curiosity**, and lower on **Projecting Confidence**, **Gravitating towards Success** and **Mastering the Art of Timing**.

However an additional tactical theme emerged: **Managing Ego Emotions**. Here emotional control was less likely to be associated with exceptional leadership, at least in the eyes of line management within this organisation.

For **peers**, leadership excellence is more likely to be associated with **Projecting Confidence** and **Using New Challenges to Speed Development**. This seems to indicate that individual who conveys personal confidence in embarking on new activities, a combination that peers

may perceive as charismatic conviction. The likelihood of appearing in the top 15% is less however where the tactics of **Gravitating towards Success**, **Controlled Delegation** and **Managing Corporate Politics** are in display. Peers seem to respect enthusiastic confidence as long as it appears to be about work challenges, but not if it seems to be about “me” or what is perceived as the avoidance of any difficult issues, the abdication of responsibility or political gamesmanship.

For **team members**, excellence picks up some new themes. It is associated with those tactics that drive relationship management and communication: **Projecting Confidence**, **Balancing Stakeholder Groups** and **Building Broad Based Commitment**. Exceptional leaders manage positive relationships - up, down and across - proactively, and look for ways to engage the wider work force. And excellence, at least for team members, won't be driven by the tactics of **Managing Ego Emotions** and **Using New Challenges to Speed Development**.

* The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders, John H. Zenger & Joseph Folkman

Leadership, the “art of juggling” and Career Tactics



This is a snapshot of one organisation. The profile of 360° feedback and Career Tactics is more than a summary of a leadership population. It is a reflection of a corporate history, a distinctive culture and dominant operating style. Generalisations to other organisations with a different operating culture are therefore difficult. What does however emerge from this analysis is:

- **leadership is in the “eye of the beholder”**. Whilst there is consensus about some leadership themes, there is also a divergence of opinion about other qualities. Line managers, peers and team members, by virtue of the differences in working relationships, have different expectations and standards. Meeting them all is no easy task.
- **Career Tactics “work”**. They enhance perceptions of “bottom line impact” and leadership capability and excellence. But they come at a price. There are few tactics that line managers, peers and team members consistently endorse. Instead the tactics valued by line managers can be different to those viewed positively by peers and team members. The stratagems and manoeuvres to speed progression, whilst popular with line management, may be viewed negatively by peers or team members. And vice versa.

The beginnings of a career game-plan. A potential career strategy emerges for those ambitious individuals in this organisation:

- when working with **line management**, don’t avoid the political dynamic. Be alert to wider trend and developments and be proactive in managing relationships across the organisation, particularly where there may be opposition and conflict. But don’t overdo it by seeming too confident or successful. Line management might see this as arrogance and a threat to their own position.
- in conversations with **peers**, keep it simple by summarising with confidence the focus of your efforts. Don’t over-burden work colleagues with complications. And you should avoid the impression of “fair weather friendship”. Be willing to take on the troublesome stuff, not just the high profile and organisational glamorous assignments.
- with **team members**, be careful about how you discuss your career aspirations. Take on new challenges but don’t talk about them too openly. Far better to project confidence about current success within the work area than disturb your team with uncertainty about your future ambitions.

Career Tactics and high potential



A global investment bank introduced a high potential programme in 2006. Participants completed an on line personal review, covering their past accomplishments, current organisational profile and career intentions and aspirations. Successful candidates - a group of over 100 - then undertook a number of development workshops and events, incorporating Career Tactics and the MBTI*.

Additional evaluations were made during the course of the programme to identify the “stars”, those high potential participants with that “extra something”. Subjective no doubt, but an index of organisational investment.

* For reviews and critiques of the MBTI, Furnham et al, 2003 (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3852/is_200301/ai_n9213480) and Pittenger, 1993 (<http://www.indiana.edu/~jobtalk/HRMWebsite/hrm/articles/develop/mbti.pdf>)

Career Tactics, MBTI and high potential



The MBTI is a broad-based personality instrument based on Jung's theory of psychological types, generating the familiar four letter type (e.g. ENTJ) based on an analysis of the themes of Extraversion-Introversion; Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, and Judging-Perceiving.

The Career Tactics assessment is designed to identify the tactics that have helped career progression. As such, the results are likely to be wrapped up in a variety of factors, outside of temperament, e.g. life experiences and choices, organisational culture and working pressures and priorities. Although very different in concept and content to the MBTI, nonetheless, some association with the MBTI might be expected.

For this group of high potential participants, a clear set of MBTI preferences emerged. Indeed 4 of the possible 16 type combinations accounted for 66% of the group types; ENTJ (22%), ENTP (21%), ISTJ (14%), ESTJ (9%). Overall a clear bias towards Extraversion and Thinking.

Six of the twelve tactical themes show a relationship with the MBTI:

Projecting Confidence: Extraversion, Judging

Building Broad Based Commitment: Feeling

Focus on Priorities: Sensing, Judging

Controlled Delegation: Judging

Managing Ego Emotions: Sensing

Using New Challenges to Speed Development:
Sensing, Perceiving, Thinking

Here the correlations are significant and also intuitive in evaluating the impact of personality in career management (e.g. Extraversion is positively correlated with Projecting Confidence; Feeling is associated with Building Broad Based Commitment; Judging with Focus on Priorities and Controlled Delegation; and Perceiving with Using New Challenges to Speed Development)

Career Tactics, MBTI and “stars”



Within the total high potential group, 35 individuals were highlighted as “stars”. Whilst this evaluation is loose, based on informal observations rather than any structured and systematic assessment, arguably, this is organisational reality. Judgements are made about individuals which will shape the nature and speed of their career development.

A comparison of “stars” with the wider participant group:

For Myers-Briggs, few differences were apparent, apart from a tendency for “stars” to be slightly more Extraverted and lower on Sensing than the broader group.

For Career Tactics, differences emerged, with “stars” displaying the tactics of:

- **Balancing Stakeholder Groups**
- **Building Broad Based Commitment**
- **Using New Challenges to Speed Development**

- and less likely to report **Focus on Priorities**

This is a profile of potential in which organisational relationship management tactics - up, across and down - are deployed, with a willingness to take on new responsibilities.

It is a powerful career combination, in which positive relationships with work colleagues at all levels are utilised to support the entry into new roles and to make a quick impact. This tactical combination not only provides exposure to different parts of the organisation and the opportunity to acquire new skills, it builds networks, the kind of networks that extend into future power and influence.

This sub-group of “stars” is lower on Focus on Priorities; an understandable trade-off in their career dynamic. Focus on Priorities has many virtues; but it can be reluctant to step into new and unfamiliar challenges.

Career Tactics: headline summary



The previous case studies provided an in-depth analysis based on two organisations. Whilst the results may be informative about the factors that drive leadership potential effectiveness and potential, they are also a reflection of distinctive organisational cultures.

Based on our consolidation of research findings from over 100 organisations spanning utilities, financial services, media, retailing, professional services, some overall findings:

- **the tactics that “speed up” progression**
- **the tactics that make for career satisfaction**
- **age and gender differences**

Career Tactics and Progression

Here we looked at an analysis of those individuals who, for their age, “out- performed” their peers, in salary. A crude index no doubt, but one that highlights one element of career success: speed.

Speed of progression is associated with **Managing Corporate Politics, Controlled Delegation** and **Balancing Stakeholder Groups**. This tactical profile describes the shrewd deployment of time and effort in the face of organisational reality; specifically, the importance of:

- engaging with the political dimension, not “standing on the sidelines”
- operating with and through others, not doing it all yourself
- managing the interpersonal dynamics of complex relationships – up, down and across the organisation, not getting locked into one set of working relationships

Career Satisfaction

What is the relationship between Career Tactics and levels of satisfaction?

An intriguing cluster of trends. Firstly, dissatisfaction is associated with lower scores on **Managing Corporate Politics**. Failing to engage with organisational realities and the dynamics of power and influence makes for a less happy career life.

Dissatisfaction is also connected to **Flexible Curiosity**. Whilst this tactic has many virtues, that impulse that keeps alert to new trends and developments and is motivated to learn, it doesn’t necessarily make for career contentment.

In addition, **Playing to Strengths** doesn’t seem the best route to career satisfaction. As Gallup’s research consistently points out, a strengths based approach has its benefits. But an ongoing focus on existing skills and current expertise may, in career terms, be a bad Move.

Age Trends

Older professionals and managers are more likely to report higher scores in: **Building Broad Based Commitment** and **Controlled Delegation**.

Age seems to bring the wisdom that you can't do it all by yourself. Instead you need to operate with and through others and to ensure that the entire organisation is behind your efforts.

Gender Differences

Males are higher on the tactics of **Gravitating towards Success** and **Controlled Delegation**. Is this a profile in which male professionals and managers direct their efforts sensibly towards the promising activities of corporate life and ensure they keep in control of projects and assignments? Or is this the stereotype of male managers "hogging" the best projects to keep in the limelight and ensure no one else can claim credit?

Female professionals and managers display greater tactical awareness in **Balancing Stakeholder Groups**.

Are female managers more effective in multi-tasking to juggle the competing demands of different working relationships? Or is this a response to demanding expectations, from line management, peers and team members?

Career Dynamics: Career Tracks complements Career Tactics



Career Tactics addresses the **how of career management**. Which stratagems and manoeuvres are more or less likely to help individuals advance their careers?

As we have seen in the case studies and research findings, although some tactics may be key drivers, it is more likely that tactics need to be deployed within organisational context, a context shaped by

- corporate culture and what determines the “rules of the game”
- organisational level and the balance of power at different levels
- and working relationships, the political dynamics which shape expectations from line management, peers and team members.

Importantly, for individuals, Career Tactics also needs a personal context: this is the **“what” of career management**. Tactics can only be deployed towards an end.

In 2006 we reviewed a range of career frameworks and strategic models. Six themes emerged from our content analysis as a coherent model, covering the range of different career aims. These six overarching themes - Career Tracks - represent the typical strategic options facing professionals and managers at different points in their career development.

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” Sun Tzu

Protecting Niche Expertise

A focus on your current technical know-how allows you to play to your existing strengths, making it easier to build proficiency and optimise your impact; occupying that niche which is in demand raises your organisational profile and enhances your marketability

Building Professional Mastery

The ability to make connections across an important professional discipline provides a platform to think strategically and develop coherent plans that make a business impact; professional mastery also opens up a range of options in the market-place, giving you freedom to move across different sectors and industries

Betting Big on the Big One

The potential to progress to a position of power with the scope to make critical decisions about the organisation's future; operating with the status and financial security to "call the shots" and exert personal influence

Proficiency as the Organisational Fixer

Building organisational credibility as the "trouble-shooter" who can take on any challenge; opening up career options – internally and in the market-place – as someone who knows how things work and how to get things done

Continual Reinvention to Maintain Options

An overall strategy which keeps all options to explore possibilities in life; achieving that balance of financial security, organisational status and personal freedom through ongoing development of your talents and skills

Planning an Early Exit

Planning a career move to open up new options outside of conventional corporate life; the opportunity to pursue different life possibilities in line with your own deep-seated values and interests

Career Tracks are the overarching strategic options for professionals and managers.

Each has its opportunities and gains- the way forward for a fulfilling and rewarding career.

Each Track also incorporates its distinctive hazards and risks.

But Career Tracks utilised in combination with Career Tactics opens up a dialogue about the two big story lines of career success

Know what the right thing is for you: strategic thinking to make the smart decisions. Know how to position yourself to direct your time and effort productively to create "career space" in a competitive world.

And do it superbly well: draw on your tactical strengths and minimise the impact of any tactical limitations. Build excellence around your current talents whilst managing around any tactical constraints.

AM Azure Consulting Ltd works with a broad portfolio of clients in the design and implementation of on line services in recruitment and selection; management assessment, development and career management; performance management; and talent and succession management.

If you are interested in Career Dynamics and Career Tactics, the assessment and its applications, call us on 44 (0) 1608 654007 or email admin@amazureconsulting.com

- **we're professionals but we're not pompous.** We are at the edge of the latest research and thinking in the field of people management, but we're not precious about the "one thing". We have some good ideas to help your organisation perform even better, but we know that you may have some better ones, but want support in making them work. We don't impose the "solution".
- **we design but we also implement.** Our content, design and technology can build cost effective solutions quickly. Over-engineered consultancy solutions don't interest us, and they are bad for organisations. Our consultancy experience of "real world" implementation will move things forward from initial concept to results rapidly.
- **we start things to build momentum but we also follow through.** Results come from the discipline of "making it stick", of evaluation, learning and continual improvement. And we maintain ongoing relationships with our clients to keep achieving positive outcomes.