While politics is a way of life in most organizations, a new study reveals that it plays an especially sinister role in executive performance appraisals.

**Delving into the Dark Side:**
The Politics of Executive Appraisal

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It is a well-worn axiom that politics often plays a dominant role in important organizational decisions and actions. Both mainstream and specialized writers have offered descriptions of, explanations for, and recommendations concerning politics in the corporate environment. Yet much of this work tends to come across as superficial, especially to those who have been victims of politically motivated decisions. Certainly, little of this writing captures the wrenching impact that political actions have on managers' careers.

This article explores the use and abuse of politics as it affects executives. We focus on a key recurring event in the executive experience: the performance appraisal, whether formally or informally rendered. Organizational politics often has a significant influence over the executive appraisal process. Thus, our discussion uncovers one of the little-discussed dark sides of organizational life.

**POLITICS AS PARADOX**

Although virtually every experienced organization member will acknowledge that organizations are political arenas, that almost everyone is at one time or another a political player, and that politics might even be necessary to make organizations "work," corporate politics is nevertheless regarded as an underhanded activity. Most organization members believe that politics somehow should not be involved in corporate decisions—that the use of politics subverts a game that ought to be played by fair and forthright rules. At the same time, people also recognize that virtually everyone seeks some form of influence; otherwise, they relinquish all control to others. Most corporate veterans adhere to the venerable boxing adage, "Defend yourself at all times"—in other words, protect your own interests.

Such beliefs are woven into the fabric of most personal and organizational value systems, even though they are contradictory: Although everyone wants to be treated fairly and wants others to observe the rules, a surprising number of people will bend those rules to satisfy a personal, departmental, or divisional agenda. Organization members, for example, may reveal confidential information about a new project in an effort to gain favor, yet may demand that others keep the project secret. They may circumvent corporate policies to expedite the completion of their own
THE POLITICS OF EXECUTIVE APPRAISAL

Although politics is associated with many events in organizational life, the political nature of these events is either too elusive or too cleverly concealed to be discerned easily. The politics involved in executive appraisals, however, is more easily detected, since it is revealed in conversations concerning performance. Therefore, although the role of politics in executive appraisals is not "public," it is nonetheless accessible, especially if executives are willing to talk about it (and, as it turns out, executives are surprisingly willing to open up when they believe they have been hurt by political actions).

Before we continue, however, it's important to offer a definition. For the purposes of this article, the term "politics" in the area of executive appraisal refers to any deliberate attempt on the part of a higher ranking executive to enhance, control, or protect self- or organizational interests via the appraisal of subordinate executives. Higher ranking individuals usually use such actions to seek or maintain some kind of advantage.

Many organizations either ignore the existence of politics in the appraisal process or assume that its impact can be minimized if they refine their appraisal instruments (contrary to our expectations, many organizations use some type of appraisal form, even for executives). Our previous research suggested, however, that an attempt to develop an appraisal instrument that would lead to greater rating accuracy is a futile pursuit, mainly because the managers who use these instruments often actively pursue agendas that are incompatible with highly accurate ratings. Executives admit that, in appraising others, they often intentionally avoid meeting the goal of accuracy in favor of achieving goals that have more to do with exercising discretion and
maintaining departmental effectiveness. That is, they view the appraisal process as a way of achieving desired results, and this priority supersedes their concern for accuracy or playing by the rules.

Ironically, these same executives lament that the appraisals they receive often do not accurately represent their abilities and performance. Those we interviewed in previous studies felt that their own reviews had been fraught with nebulous or ambiguous language, unclear standards, and inaccurate perceptions of their performance. Worse, they suspected their appraisals often were driven by a superior’s ulterior, political motives. And despite their general frustration with the overall low quality of their reviews, these executives were most disturbed by the political undercurrents they perceived. This political dimension to their appraisals made them feel less in control of their jobs, which they thought were already complicated and difficult enough.

As a point of departure for our current examination of politics in executive appraisal, we might simply note that despite a widespread fascination with the topic and a general belief in its negative effects, few systematic accounts of the details of executive appraisal politics are available. The main purpose of this article, then, is to explore in some depth executive perceptions of the dynamics of executive appraisal politics; to draw out some of the personal, professional, and organizational consequences of this type of politics; and to offer recommendations for minimizing these consequences.

TAPPING EXECUTIVES’ EXPERIENCES WITH POLITICS

In beginning our study, we determined that the closer we could get to firsthand experiences of executive appraisal politics, the more insightful our analysis would be. For this reason, we interviewed 82 executives from 8 large manufacturing and service organizations representing 12 functional areas. The organizations all had corporate performance appraisal systems in place at the time of our interviews. The inter-

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EXHIBIT 1
EXECUTIVE APPRAISAL POLITICS:
FIVE MAIN THEMES

1. The higher one rises in the organization, the more political the appraisal process becomes.
2. Because of the dynamic, ambiguous nature of managerial work, appraisals are susceptible to political manipulation.
3. Performance is not necessarily the bottom line in the executive appraisal process; ratings are affected by:
   - the boss’s agenda;
   - the “reputation” factor; and
   - the organization’s current political climate.
4. Senior executives have extraordinary latitude in evaluating subordinate executives’ performance; the pitfalls associated with this latitude include:
   - a failure on the part of superiors to specify meaningful performance goals and standards;
   - a lack of communication between superiors and executives about the desired style and means of goal accomplishment; and
   - the “good-but-not-good-enough syndrome.”
5. Executive appraisal is a “political tool” used to control people and resources.

Viewees averaged more than 23 years of work experience and 15 years of managerial experience. All were managers of managers and were classified as executive-level personnel in their organizations’ hierarchies, but all also reported to at least one higher level executive.

Because of our thorough analysis of these interviews, we are confident that our observations are not merely idiosyncratic impressions, but accounts of experiences shared by a substantial number of executives. We discuss these observations below, in a fashion intended to capture the richness of the executives’ overt and covert confrontations with politics. Throughout, we include direct quotes that represent the gist of the group’s shared views. Our five main themes, or summary observations emerging from our interviews, appear in italics, and are summarized in Exhibit 1.

THE NATURE OF POLITICS IN EXECUTIVE APPRAISAL

1. Politics is prevalent in appraisal, and the higher one rises in the organization, the more political the appraisal process becomes. The interviewees unequivocally stated that politics plays an influential role in many decisions affecting them, and that role increases in importance as a manager progresses up the corporate ladder.

This perception was especially strong when executives discussed how performance and contribution to the organization are evaluated. As one respondent put it:

As you move up the ladder into the executive ranks, everything becomes more political and subject to game playing . . . . Appraisals, bonuses, promotions, and perks are all affected by somebody’s maneuvering. And the higher you climb, the worse it gets! A lot of stuff other than pure performance affects your PDR [performance/development review] when you’re up high.

According to the interviewees, the role of politics in the review process is a frustrating fact of executive life. Although performance is an important factor in the review process, it is by no means the sole or even the dominant factor. They indicated that as an executive rises higher, a greater number of factors other than actual performance affect his or her ratings and corresponding rewards.

For example, several executives in the same organization cited the recent selection of a new director of quality improvement. A committee reviewed the performance records of four internal candidates and recommended two to the CEO, who disregarded the rec
ommendation and selected one of the other nominees. The CEO explained, according to the interviewees, that “his” candidate “better fit my sense of the requirements for the job.” The committee believed, however, that the individual was the weakest of the four and was chosen because he would not stand up to the CEO on critical issues, which would allow the CEO to parry resistance to his unpopular plans. One executive commented that the selection was “as transparent as it gets” and had nothing to do with the candidate’s past performance or his ability to achieve results: “It was purely political; it was ugly; and it angered a lot of people.”

2. Because of the dynamic, ambiguous nature of managerial work, appraisals are susceptible to political manipulation.

Executives characterized the work they perform as “dynamic,” “uncertain,” “ambiguous,” and “ill-defined,” involving “fluctuating goals and fluid responsibilities.” On the one hand, this makes the work stimulating and challenging; on the other, it fosters and facilitates an “executive rating game,” the essence of which is captured in the comment, “Any rating a manager receives can be justified in some way, even if it’s inaccurate.” The executives themselves acknowledged, however, that accuracy is a difficult and elusive criterion at their level because of the nature of their jobs. Said one:

We all know we [managers] wear a lot of different hats, chase a lot of different goals, have a lot of different projects, and work in an environment that is always in flux. That makes the business of determining what we’ve really contributed very subjective, and that subjectivity opens the door not only to evaluation apprehension, but also evaluation manipulation.

Furthermore, they noted that executive work and success almost invariably depends on the performance of other people, often in other departments or divisions. But despite their recognition that assessing their performance is no easy task, they still suspected that the inherent ambiguity of their jobs works against them and allows their superiors to use executive ratings for their own political purposes.

One executive related the events that led to his resignation from a prior position. Asserting that his former boss “was successively hammering me on different aspects of the job to keep me off balance,” he explained that his boss originally told him to “Get production up,” which he did—only to receive a review that said, “You need more focus on quality.” The next year quality was up and production was good—but the review read, “Your customer relations stink.” A year later, quality was up, customer relations were good, and production was maintained; the boss’s response was, “You can’t do it all, can you?” The executive quit.

3. Performance is not necessarily the bottom line in the executive appraisal process. The executives said that on occasion, they had received high ratings and bonuses that they did not feel they deserved. Their suspicions that their performance did not earn such rewards were occasionally confirmed by superiors who, in the words of one interviewee, “said they were taking care of me.” More often, however, the executives spoke of being “towed,” “low-balled,” or “intentionally downgraded” even though they felt their performance had been strong:

I’d like to think that if my performance is good, it will be reflected in my evaluation and the rewards I receive. It usually doesn’t happen that way because of self-interests, power struggles, coalitions, and competing camps that develop. It’s unbelievable, the things you need to look out for. No pansies need apply here.

The executives indicated that their ability to understand the relationship between performance, ratings, and rewards is further hampered by an apparent failure on the part of superiors to discuss what they expect in terms of total performance (e.g., long-range goals and plans, special projects, management style, “knowing the ropes,” vision, etc.). As one marketing vice president stated, “If we
are unclear on what the chief truly wants, almost any rating will come as some sort of surprise." This point is important both because factors other than actual performance clearly have an influence on ratings, and because executives find the air of mystery that surrounds the appraisal process frustrating. As a director of quality control put it, "It is easy to be kept in the dark if you don't know what counts, so you become apprehensive and suspicious that you are being used for someone else's ends."

According to the interviewees, three factors affect the ratings they receive: the boss's agenda, the reviewed executive's reputation, and the company's political climate. The boss's agenda, they said, may be influenced by a variety of issues, including the boss's (1) own performance rating that year, (2) desire to reward or punish a subordinate executive, (3) desire to enhance subordinate loyalty, and (4) desire to drive an executive out of the company. As one manager stated, "...the boss's agenda is a big factor in my own review. A lot of issues affect his game plan, and I seem to hear about them most at review time."

An executive's reputation, these managers said, has to do with whether he or she is perceived as having the "right stuff" in terms of personality, work history, and associates. Specifically, the executive should have (1) the ability to get along with others, (2) no "mortal sins or skeletons in the closet," (3) a record of good performance, and (4) a good network within the organization, or the right "pedigree." As an example of the right pedigree, consider the case of a fast-track Wharton MBA who was supposedly being groomed for a position at the top of his organization. He was promoted three times in five years, finally ending up in a position that was clearly over his head. Nonetheless, his boss (recognizing that the CEO, also a Wharton grad, was the "Boy Wonder's benefactor") elected to promote him once again, granting him a better-than-deserved review. According to the promoted executive, the boss said he did what he did to "keep himself off the CEO's [expletive deleted] list."

Executives used terms like "golden child," "fair-haired boy," "rising star," and "crown prince" to describe other executives whose reputations did not necessarily match their performance records, but who nonetheless seemed destined to succeed. Conversely, some executives had inexplicably damaged reputations and were sidetracked or derailed—often without the benefit of a formal performance review. As one executive concluded, "Your performance alone is not enough to make you a star unless it is deemed that you have 'it'"—but finding out what "it" is often becomes a long-term, frustrating, and fruitless pursuit.

Finally, the organization's current political climate—including the CEO's or division head's management style, other superiors' power and status, the organization's financial flexibility, recent company successes or failures, and, perhaps most notably, the condition of the industry or national economy—constitutes the third major influence on ratings.

4. Senior executives have extraordinary latitude in evaluating subordinate executives' performance. Executives said that because of the high stakes involved, the nature of executive work, the prevailing power structure of their organizations, and current political and economic realities, their bosses exercise sole control over the ratings process. As one executive put it:

In the end it still comes down to this: My boss can give me any rating he wants and there isn't a lot I can do about it. I can hit my numbers, but he might think I should have exceeded them. I might have a good year, but maybe the division didn't. Perhaps he didn't like my style or the way I handled a certain deal. In the end I'll get what he wants me to have. He knows it and I know it.

Executives called their evaluations "too subjective to be effective," and associated three pitfalls with the appraisal process: first, a failure on the part of superiors to specify meaningful performance goals and standards (as one interviewee said, "It seems as though we al-
ways clarify what was important last year, after the fact); second, a lack of communication between bosses and executives about the desired style and means of goal accomplishment ("If there is nothing else to pick on," one executive said, "he hits on me about my management style"); and third, the "good-but-not-good-enough syndrome," a colorful variation on the old saw that "you can always do better."

The interviewees said this "syndrome" is on the upswing because of the increasing tendency in business to emphasize efficiency, productivity, and "continuous quality improvement" at all levels. To neutralize the belief that they can always do better, executives said that they are motivated to "present an image" to the boss of working long hours and pushing their own subordinates hard. Nonetheless, the general belief that people can always do more gives the boss tremendous control.

The senior executive's latitude in rating performance helps fuel the junior executive's apprehension, suspicion, and frustration over the performance review process, and contributes to the dysfunctional belief that:

5. Executive appraisal is a "political tool" used to control people and resources. The interviewees characterized executive appraisal as a legitimate process often used for illegitimate ends. Because executive raters have a great deal of autonomy, they are in a position of influence. Ratings have an impact on pay, promotions, power, and career paths, so they can be used to enhance the rater and protect his or her self-interests:

   As the stakes go up you expect the political contests to go up too . . . . Because everything can be affected by the evaluation process, it becomes a means of control for the person doing the evaluating. Sometimes it's crafty, but sometimes it gets nasty.

   As an example, a divisional general manager described how his former boss would regularly promise better appraisal ratings and corresponding benefits—if the manager would more closely follow the boss's agenda and support his pet projects. The manager pointedly noted, "The review process itself is not power, but its use to influence, justify, and administer rewards and punishments is."

   Other executives also described situations in which they believed the executive appraisal process was used in an unfair, underhanded, or coercive manner because of the rater's political motives. One general manager, for example, said he had been struggling in his job for eight months when his boss delivered an early, informal, off-the-record review. Several days later the manager received a scathing written evaluation in the mail with a note attached: "Had the review been for real, this is what it would have looked like on paper. Get your act together!" The written review was extremely negative, filled with damning, career-ending comments such as "incapable of thinking long-term," "poor sense of the big picture," and "fails to grasp the importance of market share." At 12 months, no formal review was forthcoming, which made the manager nervous; at 16 months, the manager received a satisfactory review, which nonetheless gave him the feeling that things were not totally above board—after all, what had happened to the initial negative review? "Tucked away in case it was ever needed," he was told.

   This story, perhaps more than most others, points up the dark side of organizational politics. The interviewees described the undercurrent of fear, or, perhaps more accurately, the Machiavellian sense of apprehension ("It's more like a low-grade paranoia," said one) they feel about being manipulated for someone else's benefit or serving as an unwilling participant in somebody else's subterfuge or power play. They also said they fear making the inadvertent misstep, saying or doing something that will be interpreted negatively by their boss—but raised only at review time.

   We often believe executives are somehow less vulnerable to everyday emotions than other people, because of their demonstrated ability to cope with difficult jobs and unusual situations; yet the experiences of these interviewees suggest that when organizational politics are involved, emotional reactions are

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typically strong, although concealed. However, the executives we interviewed explicitly conveyed the belief that their fears and apprehensions have implications for their development and success.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CORRUPT EXECUTIVE APPRAISAL

The word "corrupt" may seem melodramatic, but the manipulative practices described in the previous section unquestionably undermine the designed purposes of executive review, sacrificing fairness and benefiting some people at the expense of others. In addition to producing consequences and costs for individuals, these practices almost always hurt the organization as a whole. As one executive said:

The costs associated with appraisal politics at the executive level can be high. Really high. Anytime upper management people start to monkey around with honesty and accuracy, and especially justice, in dealing with the people who are running the day-to-day show, things start to fall apart.

To explore the implications of executive appraisal politics, we again enlisted the help of the interviewed executives, asking them to describe specific consequences. Those they provided are discussed below and summarized in Exhibit 2. We follow this discussion with a series of actions organizations can take to minimize the effects of politics on executive review.

1. Political appraisals undermine organizational goals and performance. As one executive stated:

People respond to rewards, and the appraisal process is, at least on paper, the main means of allocating rewards. Managers who fake the numbers to give good ratings and raises and bonuses end up subverting the entire reward system and just about guarantee future performance problems at every level.

Some executives pointed out that reviews manipulated for political purposes encourage them to "engage in our own form of politics, just to keep up." For example, they reluctantly admitted trying to learn ways of appeasing or even duping superiors, even if that meant not doing what was best for the company. The review process can motivate a junior executive to figure out the superior's underlying agenda, then find ways of supporting it, or at least appearing to support it. The review can transmit a powerful meta-message: "Follow my lead or your next appraisal will reflect that you didn't." The consequences for organizational performance are obvious: Goals and actions are sub-optimized, and performance is evaluated according to personal preferences, rather than organization-level effectiveness—which, ironically, should be a main criterion in assessing executive-level performance.

2. Political appraisals undermine organizational goals and performance. In the words of one executive:

When people don't do a good job with the review process, especially in terms of clarifying standards and providing feedback, the links to merit increases and bonuses become very murky...People develop a second-guessing mentality.

Not only did the interviewees feel that the relationship between their performance
and their ratings is often nebulous; they also thought the relationship between ratings and rewards is similarly unclear. The "second-guessing mentality" arises because executives are confused about what superiors deem important. They regularly use the past as a predictor of the future which, because of the dynamism of the work environment, is not necessarily an effective strategy. Thus, the executives said that when they are rewarded, they are seldom sure of what they are being rewarded for. Although they have a great deal of bottom-line accountability, they are often unclear as to "which bottom line is the real bottom line" and "what means should be used to achieve which ends."

Moreover, broaching the issue of ambiguity with one's superior is not easy. Executives said they fear running into disagreements over differing views of appropriate goal/action/performance/reward linkages. Most junior executives avoid clashing with their boss, because the confrontation amounts to an unequal power contest they cannot possibly win. As a consequence, ambiguities persist and the junior executive's performance suffers.

3. Appraisal politics inhibits executive development. When appraisals are inflated for political reasons, they give the junior executive a false sense of security, and often reward undesired behaviors; when ratings are intentionally deflated, frustration, self-doubt, bitterness, and withdrawal can result. A CFO summarized the interviewees' concern:

I want to believe that my superiors will tell me when I'm doing well and when I screw up . . . I can tell you that we all need honest feedback, even at my level, or perhaps especially at my level. We all want it, even though we know the truth can hurt, because without it, it is hard to improve. Besides, if you don't get it, you either turn into an egocentric or a paranoid.

What does it take to improve in an executive job? It takes a good sense of direction, good resources, and good feedback—and when any of these is missing, development becomes difficult. Executive development requires candid, specific feedback, despite the fact that executive work is by nature unstructured and ambiguous. If information about a performance problem is soft-pedaled or ambiguously communicated, development gets sidetracked; if good feedback is not forthcoming at all, development is simply derailed.

4. Politics at the executive level begets politics in the rest of the organization. As one executive said:

When games are played at the top of the heap, be forewarned: The rest of the heap soon will follow.

If the top of the organization is characterized by politically driven promotions, bonuses, and rewards, similar practices are sure to occur at lower levels. The net effect is blanket cynicism and suspicion about the appraisal process itself. The example cited earlier concerning the individual who was promoted to director of quality improvement despite the fact that two others had better track records is instructive on this point. The promotion created ill-will and, according to one interviewee, "led to an uprising that still hasn't been settled."

When there is no good model of executive appraisal at the top, "creative engineering" occurs at the next levels down. Enterprising junior executives soon find ways to impose their own preferences on what they take to be a tarnished system, again encouraging actions that support personal, rather than organizational, interests. Furthermore, politically influenced appraisals also encourage coalition formation, since politics becomes understood as the means by which things get done, and coalitions breed political power. The political appraisal thus becomes a triggering event, with politics eventually showing up in other organizational domains.

5. Political appraisals can expose an organization to litigation when executives are terminated. One executive explained:

Firing executives has become commonplace. But the screw is turning. Fired executives are now suing organizations big time for "insufficient
cause." If an executive has a documented performance history and is fired, that documentation often will be used against the company. . . . If it doesn’t square with the ratings, then the company is exposed and susceptible to punitive damage judgments.

Interviewees discussed the issue of executive termination less frequently, but more somberly, than they discussed any other consequence of executive appraisal politics. They were seriously concerned with this issue, contending that political activity in the evaluation process has played a key role in the national upswing in unlawful termination lawsuits. In general, executives are more likely to sue an organization today than in the past for two primary reasons: First, finding an equivalent job is increasingly difficult in the face of lean economic times and increasing global competition; and second, retribution for the shock and humiliation associated with termination is now more easily redressed through the courts. In any event, documented cases of intentionally manipulated executive evaluations increase the likelihood of a judgment going to the plaintiff. (The average settlement for an unlawful executive termination lawsuit in 1990 was more than $650,000.)

COMING TO TERMS WITH EXECUTIVE APPRAISAL POLITICS

What can organizations do about executive appraisal politics? One answer is simply “nothing”—a response that affirms both that political behavior comes with the territory, and that any attempt to stamp it out is naive and destined for failure. Indeed, many interviewees expressed these very beliefs. However, if the issue is framed not in terms of eliminating politics, but in terms of managing its occurrence and minimizing its detrimental effects on individuals and organizations, then a number of workable suggestions apply. Specifically, the organization’s top executives should be encouraged to:

1. Articulate goals and standards as clearly and specifically as possible. Clear expectations for future performance reduce the likelihood that ratings will be manipulated.

2. Link specific actions and performance results to rewards. Basing rewards and promotions on factors other than explicit performance goals subverts the appraisal process and produces detrimental long-term effects on the organization that are difficult to overcome.

3. Conduct structured, professional reviews, providing specific examples of executive performance and explanations for executive ratings. Informality during the review lends an air of collegiality, but the ambiguities associated with informal reviews set the stage for politics. The citation of specific results sends the message that ratings are anchored by observable actions.

4. Offer performance feedback on an ongoing basis, rather than once a year. Infrequent feedback leads to ambiguity and anxiety. As a result, junior executives engage in the practice of “making monsters”—assuming the worst and launching their own political activities to parry expected or invented criticisms.

5. Lead by example. The top management team should develop and communicate a commitment to equitable executive appraisals. It should stress the importance of openness and forthrightness to foster credibility and trust in the process.

6. Make politics in general, and appraisal politics in particular, an executive-development topic. Managers of managers need to consider the implications of executive appraisal politics. They should be trained to conduct effective appraisals of their subordinate executives, and to use the review for executive mentoring.

7. Acknowledge that executive appraisal politics exists. Denying that one’s organization is susceptible to such unseemly practices is a way of sweeping the problem under the rug—which actually allows political activity to flourish.

REPRISE AND REVISITATION

The evaluation of executive performance, a complex process in its own right, is further complicated and clouded by political activity. The executives we interviewed harbor frustration, trepidation, and even fear over what they
characterize as the "executive rating game." Specifically, they are concerned about (1) the difficulty they face in understanding the rules of a confusing but powerful process, (2) the uncomfortable political climate they increasingly confront as they climb to the upper echelons, (3) their inability to be masters of their own destinies because of compromised links between performance and rewards, and (4) the fact that their own personal and professional development may be undermined by political considerations. These concerns about the use of politics in the appraisal process are at best disquieting and at worst dismaying.

Is the executive review process really as political as our interviews suggest? We believe it is undeniable that politics sometimes plays a significant role in the evaluation of executive performance; we also believe, however, that the frequently lax and unstructured nature of executive appraisal makes the entire process seem more political than it actually is. Because executives often perceive performance standards as nebulous and receive surprisingly little ongoing feedback about their performance, they become suspicious of the process itself. The typical executive culture—consisting of highly motivated, highly educated, highly paid people striving to be successful in a competitive-but-ambiguous environment—fosters the belief that the process is driven by politics.

Consequently, junior executives often believe that executive-level performance is judged according to some mysterious, secret criteria known only to those higher in power. They come to perceive executive appraisal as a game infused with politics, and they often see themselves as little more than unwitting pawns in an arcane contest, the rules of which are cryptic and obscure. If managers question their superiors’ motives and intentions, are unclear about their own accountabilities, and do not receive good performance feedback, the outcomes of appraisal become troublesome indeed. If such doubts are widespread in an organization, decisive action must be taken to reclaim the appraisal process from the realm of politics.

Organizational politics is a quintessential tar-baby: Once key processes are perceived to be mired in politics, it is very difficult to end their association with this dark side of organizational life. Time and effort are needed to reestablish executives’ trust in the system. Although politics in the appraisal process can affect virtually all levels in an organization, it is perhaps of greatest concern in the upper echelons, because of the arguably more important work that executives do and the potentially more serious organizational consequences that poor executive performance can entail. When politics damages the confidence that executives have in a system they are managing, their performance is compromised. These days most organizations are actively seeking to enhance executive development and performance; the executive appraisal could be, and perhaps should be, one of the main means of achieving this end.

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The problems and challenges associated with executive appraisal are explored in two articles by C. O. Longenecker and D. A. Gioia: "Neglected at the Top—Executives Talk About Executive Appraisals" in Sloan Management Review (Spring 1988) and "The Executive Appraisal Paradox" in the Academy of Management Executive (Spring 1992). These articles demonstrate the frustrations executives experience over the absence of effective appraisal, feedback, and review procedures in the upper levels of organizations.