

Mastering IT Politics and Power.

The Real “Revenge of the Nerds”?

by Karen Kanakanui

The students arrive on time for MSIS 652, a University of San Francisco Information Systems masters’ level class. A quality assurance team leader, a project manager, a software engineer, a department head. They’re all working professionals, so they’ve put in a full day of work before they show up for this four-hour class, from 6:00pm to 10:00 pm.

The other thing they have in common, almost invariably, is that they dislike the concept of “politics” in their chosen field of Information Technology. So what are they doing in a graduate-level class called “Mastering IT Politics and Power”?

Allyn McGillicuddy, a Director of Software Engineering at FileNet, was interested in the course because “how you successfully interact and collaborate with other people is a

key determinant to being successful. For many IT people, the credo is to do everything yourself, it’s an analytical and sometimes introverted environment, so to work with others is a struggle.”

Julia Loewecke, a Database Administrator at Advanced Data Processing, had a consulting background with Accenture and a good sense of the importance of politics in getting things done. “I think the fast-paced nature of IT escalates the whole ‘politics’ process, so I was interested in learning more.”

Renee Hunter, who works for Inovant as a Quality Assurance engineer, was most interested in seeing “how the political game was played at the senior level.”

Still others are there because they’ve taken other classes from the instructor, Helene Dublisky, who greets them the first night with these words: “Hi, I’m Helene Dublisky, I don’t like to lecture and I don’t give exams. That’s the good news. The bad news is you have to work hard, write well, keep commitments.”

Dublisky, a certified business coach, IT management consultant, and founder of Omega Coaching, brings substantial real-world experience to all the classes she teaches. She’s coached CEOs, Vice-Presidents, Directors and Managers at Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Universal Studios, ZapMe!, Vertical Net Solutions, PolyCom, and other organizations in the US and Europe.

And a virtual visit to her “Mastering IT Politics and Power” class re-

You walk into class the first night to hear the professor say, “I’m Helene Dublisky, I don’t like to lecture and I don’t give exams. That’s the good news...”

veals an innovative approach to managing politics and power in the corporate world.

The crafty person wins...

Dublisky begins by addressing the starting perceptions the students have of workplace power and organizational politics. On a whiteboard, she writes down the current thoughts and ideas students have about “power” or “politics.” After the list is generated, the class goes back through the items and divides them into “pros” and “cons.” The “Cons” stack up pretty quickly – back-stabbing, hidden agendas, dishonesty, “The crafty person wins.” The students have to think to come with some Pros: “networking, collaboration.”

Dublisky is not surprised. “Many IT people think that organizational politics is ‘bad’ and they shouldn’t have to deal with it because they have technical skills,” she says. “But what I’ve seen is that a lot of times, the person with the best technical solution is often left in the dust. It’s not always about the most logical solution.”

For others, the concept of politics has to be viewed from a world perspective. For Ana Maria Mendez, a system level test planner, “politics” was a charged word. “Being from El Salvador and having experienced the political uncertainties of that country, I already had bad connotations of the word. I couldn’t imagine how politics would help me in my career. What I learned is that in order to help the organization move forward, excel and be effective, I needed to master this skill.”

Dublisky challenges students to think about politics in a new way: “Politics is the exercise of power to get something done, manage relationships, and enhance/protect the vested interests of individuals.”

Over the next eight weeks, Dublisky will lead the students through in-class lectures, exercises, and case studies; she’ll ask them to interview executives in their own companies. And she’ll seek to change their perception of politics, to view it as an ally instead of an enemy.

“My goal is to get them to see that you can become politically skilled without compromising your soul,” says Dublisky. “You can’t change the process, but I help the students to see, I hope, how politics can be a positive force in the work environment.”

The lecture part of each class usually consists of 15-20 minutes worth of talking about concepts presented on slides. The two required texts: “Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations” by Jeffrey Pfeffer, and “Getting to Yes: Negotiating without Giving In,” by Roger Fisher and William Ury, serve as frames of reference for Dublisky’s lectures, but she stresses the experiential over the academic.

Getting to know you, getting to know all about you...

Dublisky utilizes senses to help retain and remember. In another first night exercise that works on networking skills, students “interview” each other. Each student is responsible for collecting from his or her classmates the answer to one question – either personal or professional. “Tell us about your favorite movie.” “Tell us about your worst day at work.” “What is your favorite vacation spot and why?” “What do you want out of life?”

Then they go around the room, round robin, each student adding one answer to create a complete snapshot of the classmate. “This is so-and-so, her favorite vacation spot is “____,” her worst day at work was “_____.”

“This really loosens people up,” says Julia Loewecke. “As part of the cohort [a group of Master’s candidates who enroll, progress through a defined program of study, and graduate together] system, we’d already been in several classes together, but none of us really knew each other.”

Dublisky agrees. “What you learn in this exercise is 1) there’s a lot we don’t know about each other, and 2) if we don’t ask questions, we’re not going to find out anything. And this has huge implications in a corporation with lots of people competing for the same resources. What’s needed is a constructive way to resolve those constraints among diverse interests. The first step is being aware that other people are part of the process.”

Power, power, who has the power?

The first night of class, students divide into teams of two and try to tie a complicated knot called the Japanese crown knot. But only one person can look at the directions and only one person can touch the rope. Most of the students are successful in tying the knot, although it takes a little time and there’s some giggling around the room. At the end, Dublisky asks “Who has the power in this relationship?”

Sometimes each student in the pair believes they have the most power; other times, they believe that the other has the most power.

“What’s interesting,” says Dublisky, is ‘why’ they assign power to themselves or the other. They’ll say ‘Well, I had the power because I had the vision,’ or ‘I had the power because I had my hands on the ropes.’

“As an IT professional, there is often a set of technical knowledge, skills, and conceptual distinctions that you bring to the table that is a source of power. This exercise helps students to remember what it’s like when you don’t understand the concept the other person is talking about, a valuable skill for IT folks to remember when working with non-IT pros.”

Getting to know me, getting to know all about me...

The second week looks at power as coming from one of three sources: positional power, granted by virtue of title or place in the hierarchy, personal power, derived from an individual's personality or charisma, and relational power, based on the quality and nature of relationships in the workplace. Students use self-assessment questionnaires to discover their current sources of power.

For project manager Tim Fogarty, this was particularly helpful. “I had a military background, where everything is planned and regimented – all expectations are known. I expected people to act in concert with their titles. When I hit the corporate world, I found it's much more fluid. I assumed if a meeting had a subject, we were all there for the same reason, which is not always the case. People within a meeting may have pre-existing relationships which cause them to act certain ways – the impact can be positive or negative.”

Dublisky also encourages students to look at how the results of their interactions can vary widely based on the relative power of the parties involved and how much their goals are in alignment.

“Collaboration is best achieved

when the power in a relationship is balanced and the goals are aligned,” she says. “You'll need negotiation skills when power is balanced but goals are not aligned, and influence skills when goals are aligned but power is not. The biggest challenge, and a scenario that often leads to one person dominating a meeting or project, occurs when power is not balanced and goals are not aligned.”

I'll take Whoopi Goldberg to block, please.

The next week, there's another exercise in power and negotiation, Venture Capital Funding. Each student becomes the CFO of Company A, B, or C, and Dublisky offers them this challenge:

“You're invited to meet with a wealthy venture capitalist who offers you up to \$121 million to fund your three companies, but only if you can decide how to split the money. Your goal is to get the most money for your company, and you will also receive a personal bonus that is a percentage of the company's take.”

Several scenarios are offered – in one, the money is split evenly, in others, two companies take the most money and leave a pittance to the third. It's also possible for two

companies to work together and cut out the third one completely, but the money is less than if all three share. Always, of course, is the “catch” that all three CFO's have to agree to the split before any money is allocated.

Sometimes this exercise alters people's views of themselves. Andy Noma, Inovant Department Head, came in with enough management experience to understand the importance of negotiating in getting things done.

“I always thought of myself as a good negotiator,” he said. “In our scenario, the team wasn't at the top or the bottom in terms of funding, but in the middle, and I thought, ‘OK, if we could just improve or better our position, then we will have been successful in this effort.’ I found myself dominating the negotiations in a way that was surprising to me and I thought, ‘I've stated in the past that I didn't like political games and here I am negotiating fiercely, and politicking for the team's benefit.’”

At the end, Dublisky asks students to consider the power of “no.” “You may think you don't have much power if you're being locked out by the other two,” she says, “but you may have the power to block the whole deal.”

Oh, gosh. Now what?

Each week, one or two case studies are presented, which draws upon the coaching part of Dublisky's background. Students bring in stories about themselves or their co-workers. The stories are often familiar:

You have a new manager who wants to reorganize the department. You have 10 years experience, but he brings in his own people to head up projects. For 6 years, you've been working a flexible schedule where you complete two

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weeks work in nine days and take the 10th day off, but that's out the window - "sorry, we really need you here every day." You're having screaming matches with your new manager across the cubicles.

And sometimes horrifying:

You're thrilled to start a new job at a great salary, but your new co-workers aren't all that friendly. After your first month, you find out that someone on the management team shared your salary information with his direct reports, and now your peers know you're making substantially more money than they are, and some of them resent you.

These real-world examples lead into interactive discussions - "Who has the power here?" - and an examination of options - "What can they do?" Dublisky says students learn that there's always more than one way to respond, and are often surprised to hear how many options there might be. At the end of the class, the student shares what he or she actually did in the situation and what the outcome was.

In the "new manager" case study, Dublisky offered the following as options the employee might consider:

1. Change the orientation of communication so that it's not in the middle of the room, not in public. The employee could say, "I'm not comfortable with you raising your voice and embarrassing me in front of my co-workers. Can we talk it out over lunch?"

2. Talk about options that are available. If the flexible work schedule is the most important thing - is there any room to move? If taking every other Friday off is problematic, what about another day - Mondays, for example?

3. Try to take the attitude of "how can I burn the least bridges in this situation?"

"Her [Dublisky's] process really opens up conversations, and brings a different perspective to the table," says project manager Tim Fogarty. "We really explore all the options to try to come up with a politically positive experience."

And not just Pollyanna-positive either. By the time the "new manager" case study was presented, the unhappy employee (who was not in the class) had already chosen to take a pay cut and join another department - a result Dublisky says is all too common.

"Many employees come to feel they're backed into a corner. You might feel like you're beating your head against a brick wall, but you have to step back and see if you can go around the wall, or under it, or over it," she says. "There's not always an option that's your first or second or even third choice, but there are options. Sometimes, just the process of identifying them can be a source of personal power."

Some students use the case study opportunity as a way to plan for the future. "Presenting my case was particularly helpful to me, since the situation is one I'll likely be in soon," said Julia Loewecke. "Having the feedback and idea generation from the class gave me at least a dozen ideas on how to handle the situation in a more positive way than what I would have done alone."

Last resort - push?

The next class focuses on different influence styles and their role in persuasion. The students use a self-assessment instrument to see which of a number of different influence

styles (assertive persuasion, building relationships, bargaining, or coercion) they most often use in the workplace.

And then Dublisky asks them to try something different.

She tells students a real life story about a thorny AS400 consolidation. In the scenario, Dublisky is project manager. Each student is given a card with an influence style on it and the characteristics of that style. Their job is to influence Dublisky to change the project in a way that's beneficial to them - and their only tool is the influence style.

"At the end of this exercise, if I ask them who did the best, coercion often wins," Dublisky laughs. "And sometimes it's a good choice. If a building is burning, are you going to build a consensus to get people out? No, just push them. What you learn is that different situations require different styles and actually it's appropriate to use them at different points."

Again, the key for Dublisky is having students "experience" what it's like to try on new modes of behavior. "They get lots of chances to practice - different management styles, ways of negotiation, influencing other people, handling conflict - they get to see how it feels in their bodies. I get them to go against their natural inclinations - work against type - it's a visceral experience."

Allyn McGillicuddy agrees. "As masters of the left brain, IT folks have to learn that some ideas can't be grasped analytically. They may have to get the experience of it to really be able to incorporate it in their work lives. You can't just read it and go 'Oh yeah, I got it.'"

For some of the students, seeing that there are different influence styles available to them is liberating. One

student said, “This class provided us the choices we thought we never had. I tend to use strategies that focus on building positive relationships and supporting organizational goals. Thank goodness I have not needed to use coercion, but if I had to, I could do that, too.”

Role, Goal, and Context

Examining the different styles of influence leads naturally into discussions of networking and collaboration - how teams are formed, the group process, and how leadership is developed. “We start by looking at why we put people together in teams - they get built because an individual can’t do it all. Either a project is too big for one person, or requires a great diversity of skills. Sometimes we bring people together to complete a task because we want a diversity of opinion in solving a problem, and then that diversity leads to problems of its own!” Dublisky says.

Drawing on systems theory and group development models from organizational behavior and psychology,

Dublisky introduces the concept of “role, goal, and context.” In its simplest form, the premise is that any time that more than one person is gathered together for a reason, they’re in a certain “context.” Within that context, each person takes a “role” in order to achieve the “goal.”

Recurring problems that appear to happen in all groups can often be explained in terms of this model, Dublisky says. “Let’s say we’re brought together for XYZ, but I’m remembering what happened when we worked together on ABC, so it’s hard to manage staying in the same context. We may have misaligned or unclear goals, and sometimes we lose our roles.”

The class spends time examining and dissecting some of their case studies according to the “role, goal, context” model. “This part of the class was most helpful to me,” says Tim Fogarty. “Role - What do the people do? Goal - What do they want? Context - What is the setting? When I’m in meetings now, I’ll sit and consider ‘What is of most value to this person?’”

Another student reports, “I worked with a CIO once who would scream - I mean really scream - “One meeting!” when a meeting seemed to be veering off-topic. At the time, I just thought he was a bully. In retrospect, I still think he could have expressed himself with more finesse and grace, but after studying with Helene, I had more of an appreciation for his intent to keep the meeting on track!”

The secret of great leaders?

Dublisky says companies may be missing huge opportunities by not recognizing the importance of politics. “In a dysfunctional organization, resources are awarded haphazardly and people are miserable. The more that people in leadership roles can demonstrate a fruitful approach to managing constraints and embracing diverse interests, the more productive the corporate culture is.”

The challenges faced by teams, she says, “limited resources, ability to work together, competing agendas - often lead to conflict, but learning to manage the conflict in a positive way is key to being able to lead teams, companies, families, even governments.”

“For the last four weeks of class, we really focus on ‘how’ things are done rather than ‘what’ is done,” Dublisky says. “Once you have a frameset that power is not ‘bad,’ that it can be an ally, I challenge students to consider that conflict can also yield positive outcomes.”

And again, Dublisky asks students to consider their own predispositions to managing conflict. “It’s like when they look at the word ‘politics’ at the beginning of class - there are similar reactions,” Dublisky says. “Their initial reaction may be that conflict is never beneficial for them, but they’re also halfway through the class by this

A teachable moment....

On March 19, 2003, Dublisky’s students got a real-world look at the Role, Goal, and Context process when Operation Iraqi Freedom began. “A student in class had received a news alert on his PDA that America had started bombing Iraq, that people in San Francisco were protesting, and that Market Street [well-traveled San Francisco thoroughfare] was closed,” Dublisky remembers. “Now, the student shared that information so that those who use Market Street to go home would think about alternate routes, but for me, all I could think of was that the last time America was at war with Saddam Hussein, he lobbed SCUDS at Israel - and I have family there.

“We ended class early that night, but the next week, it served as a good example of our topic. We were in a master’s level class [context] to exchange information [goal] and when I heard the news that America had started bombing, I lost my professor hat [role] and took on my family hat.”

time, and have already had the experience of flexing some new muscles. I ask them to consider the need for creativity and innovation when dealing with conflict.”

A self-assessment allows students to identify a predisposition towards three different strategies to handling conflict: 1) control oriented, where achieving your own goals is paramount, 2) solution oriented, which focuses on the problem rather than the individual, and 3) non-confrontational, which focuses on avoiding conflict by either avoiding the other party involved or avoiding the situation.

“For a number of years, I just avoided confrontation at all costs,” says one student. “And I think I paid a high price, in terms of my effectiveness in a corporate environment, and also in terms of personal happiness. What I came to realize was that there were going to be times when I had to confront a situation, that re-treating was not a good option for me.”

Once students are familiar with their own patterns, Dublisky leads them to consider alternatives, choosing a path along a continuum where the better results – collaboration and compromise – require both parties to assert their needs and consider the needs of the other. “When you see that there’s value to a variety of opinions,” she says, “you’re more likely to want to manage the group process so that no one feels like less of a person, and you can both come out the other end of the process having treated each other with respect.”

Dublisky says that this realization represents a great first step. “Understanding how dysfunctional behaviors limit our ability to resolve conflict collaboratively is so important. We often tend to focus so much on our

Consensus

1	→	It's the greatest thing since sliced bread.
2	→	I can support it.
3	→	I have reservations, but as long as they're addressed, I can support it.
4	→	I have serious reservations and can't support it.
5	→	Over my dead body!

Consensus is not the same as unanimity. Rather, it is a state of affairs where communications have been open and the group climate has been sufficiently supportive to make all members of the group feel they have had a fair chance to influence the decision.

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own ‘narrative’ and what that does is dehumanize the other side. There’s no chance that they’ll ever be right, and oftentimes, we may feel that they don’t even have a valid existence, that they’re just wrong. And of course, this attitude is not going to yield any great results – either in an organization or the larger world beyond!”

Defend your boundaries “fiercely”

Discussion of the group process includes the potent topic of boundaries. “It’s important to know where your boundaries are, and let other people know where they are – don’t let people cross them without consequences,” says Dublisky. “Just knowing where your boundaries are can be a great source of power.”

She draws a stick figure on the whiteboard, surrounded by something that looks like an amoeba. “OK,” she says, “The space between

you and the edge of the amoeba is defined by your values. What’s important to you? How will people have to behave if they’re allowed to ‘play in your circle’? Here are some of the values in my circle: treat me with respect, meet your commitments, have fun, enjoy life.

“The shape is an amoeba rather than a circle because there isn’t a hard and fast line. The boundaries are fluid, depending on who you’re dealing with – vendors, customers, family, managers. I may put up with something from an important customer that I won’t be willing to put up with from a co-worker.”

Dublisky draws arrows up against the outside of the amoeba boundary. “This is what it looks like when your boundaries are tested. Sometimes, it’s intentional. If you don’t defend your boundaries, people will think they can get away with it and do it again.”

And, Dublisky believes, “it’s cer-

tainly appropriate sometimes to defend your boundaries ‘fiercely.’ You can do it in a way that’s nice and yet respectful, and yet what you’re saying is ‘No, this is not an area where I’m negotiable. These are my values and this is what’s important to me – if you respect these boundaries, we can have a nice relationship; otherwise we’ll have to disengage.’ You have to determine if it’s important to retain the relationship. Not to confront in some situations is to lose power. To confront is to gain power.”

For some in the class, this is a real eye-opener. “I was raised not to say ‘no’ to people,” says Sheralyn Fowler, a Senior Technical Writer from Oracle. “So it’s amazing to hear that not only is it appropriate to say ‘no’ sometimes, it’s imperative. I can say no in a respectful way and be nice or even inject humor into a situation, but still get my point across that ‘no, I’m not OK with this.’ This was a tremendous insight to me.”

And of course, the boundaries change from situation to situation. “I challenge a vendor’s boundaries to the hilt on behalf of my internal clients,” Andy Noma says. “With my managerial peers, I do push boundaries but I don’t push as much as I could. I remember the importance of maintaining good internal relationships.”

And yet, Noma maintains his boundaries in cross-departmental projects. “Recently,” he says, “my boundaries were challenged by another manager when our groups had to collaborate on a project. He kept trying to push some work to my group and I just had to maintain my posture and say, “No, we’re not doing that - that seems clearly to be your responsibility - but what we will do is...”

Dublisky says all the concepts taught in class, and perhaps especially those of influence styles and boundaries, are

also applicable across life. “In fact,” says Dublisky, “there are probably more immediate opportunities to practice these techniques in real life.”

And that “practice” leads to varied results. While one student reported that she had successfully set some boundaries with her children to create personal time for herself, another student learned, “Things that work with your peers and coworkers don’t necessarily work on your spouse and children. My wife was always in control before and she is still in control now!”

How do we split the bill?

Dublisky offers the students the chance to meet for dinner at the end of the semester because, she says, “It’s an important business skill to be comfortable out to dinner with people. It also gives us a festive environment in which to debrief and see how people’s perceptions may have changed. The ‘catch,’ as it were, is that the students have to decide as a group where to eat and how to split the bill, otherwise, no dinner.”

For some groups, this is a big challenge. Allyn McGillicuddy: “We had a long discussion about this – our cohort did not have a good process in place to come to a decision. What I realized was that we were going to have to risk disapproval or negative comments, but without somebody taking a lead, there was no way we’d ever be able to come to a decision as a group.”

At the dinner, the students talk about how they’re different after the course. One student tells the story of how frustrated she used to be with a co-worker who did great work, but did it very, very slowly. “I used to just stew while waiting for her to finish the work. Now I go to her and say ‘Look,

I know how important it is to you to be thorough with an assignment, but go for just 70% thoroughness on this project, please, because I need it back tomorrow.”

Renee Hunter wishes the lessons were available to the newly minted graduate. “Young people just starting their careers are often thrown into the corporate world without a clue as to the new rules. After always being rewarded for staying within the lines and making good grades, entering a world where recognition and accolades aren’t just handed to you for doing a good job is quite disconcerting,” she says.

Tim Fogarty, who came into the class frustrated by what he perceived as ineffective processes at work, leaves feeling “much mellower.” Now, when Fogarty attends a meeting, he says, “I realize power is tied to personal boundaries and I have to look at the system people come from to understand why they’re acting the way they are today. I really try to look at what’s of value to this person and what are they most interested in getting out of the meeting.

“I think the more empowered an individual is, the happier they are in their work, the more effective they are in their work. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t reflect on something out of one of the Helene classes I took. I just learned so much about perspectives and motivations, and that power is okay and looked different than I thought.”

In addition to Julia Loewecke’s good technical skills, she also had a passion for personal fitness training, and was undecided about her future career track. Drawing on her class experience of examining all options, Loewecke found a way to combine her two interests. She volunteered to do a corporate fitness program for ADP,

offering employee presentations on fitness and food choices.

You mean they're not widgets?

Some of the IT professionals recognized a tendency among themselves and their peers to think of others in the organizations as simply small cogs in a bigger machine. Allyn McGillicuddy: "It was a big change for me to recognize the need to regularly consider other people's ideas, wants, and needs in the workplace as well."

McGillicuddy came into the course aware of a need to better manage power and political relationships, especially with her own manager, who she confesses, she had been "completely ignoring." McGillicuddy is remote from her direct manager, which certainly doesn't help communications, but she realized after the class that she was missing opportunities. "Since the class," she says, "I've been much more interactive with him, and he knows me and my team a lot better. I'm happy to know more of what he's thinking, and this is a direct result of my taking the initiative."

McGillicuddy has also taken the lessons she learned in class in terms of her direct reports. "I've tried to take on more of a coaching style with my team," she says. "In one instance lately, I disagreed with a decision a manager made, but told him I would support the decision as if I made it myself, because I could tell it was important for him. He really appreciated the support."

As far as working with cross-departmental teams, McGillicuddy says, "I do what I call 'shuttle diplomacy.' I try to go and find out what one group needs or wants. I may change a proposal to reflect their interest and con-

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cerns. I try to build support ahead of any endeavor now through negotiation and bargaining. Helene also encouraged us to meet with others, so I have some standing appointments now and I have people I make sure I call once every couple of weeks."

Dublisky stresses the importance of meeting with folks on a regular basis. "You have to be interested in other people's goals and desires if you expect them to partner with you. And you can't be interested if you don't know what their goals and desires are."

And you can start small. "Start with three people. Work at making contact with them on a consistent basis," suggests Dublisky.

Of course, moderation may be in order. As one student reported: "I gradually changed my networking behavior and now I have a lunch scheduled almost every single day. The positive thing about this is that my networking skills are at an all time high and the flip side is that I am gaining weight, which is not very flattering."

The dinners end with most groups splitting the check, maybe dividing into subgroups and designating a "point" person to collect the money.

As they get in their cars to go their separate ways, Dublisky reflects on her topic.

"Someone asked me once if these classes could transform a corporate culture, but it's really less about changing organizations and more about changing individuals. One person can only change an organization if they happen to be in the right position to do so. But they can always do a lot to change their own situation. And if I can help them to travel through work with a sense of feeling good about themselves, and not at the mercy of others, to know that they have power, and can use it, then I think I've done my job."

And meanwhile, there will be another section of MSIS 652 next semester and Dublisky will try to bring another group of IT "moles" into the light.

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