

/// Office Politics and the Games People Play

How do you avoid the pitfalls of politics in the workplace to advance in your career?

Shirley

Shirley, this is a great question! All organizations (and families) engage in politics and political intrigue. As much as we wished it were not so, to ignore this fact is to put yourself at a significant disadvantage. Not all political initiatives are bad. Becoming effective at building teams, influencing key leadership, and leading teams of people all require you to develop significant political skills and abilities.

Our first challenge is to distinguish “office politics” from legitimate attempts to influence and convince. This can be exceptionally difficult at times as some political power players are very subtle in their approaches. As Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said in 1964, “I know it when I see it”. This is often times our most reliable evidence that something is not quite right. The key thing to look for is evidence that someone is being manipulative or destructive as opposed to being influential for the good of the organization. The political ploys that are divisive or corrosive are the ones you should be most concerned about and/or work to counter first. If you are not able to see the strategies in play and react/counter them effectively, you may slow your career progression or even take yourself out of the running for further career advancement and will not be taken seriously by others. You do not have to become a “player”...far from it. But you DO have to be able to recognize the strategies and plans of those who are, and do so in a way that allows you to ensure they have a minimum impact on you and your team’s ability to be effective.

There have been several cute (but accurate) categorizations of the way people go about implementing their political strategies. I will not reiterate them here but they are worth learning if you have not seen them. While it is an older book, I also highly recommend “*The Secret Handshake...Mastering Politics of the Business Inner Circle*” by Kathleen Kelly Reardon. In addition, take the time to truly learn the personalities and habits of your key leadership. What do they stand for? How do they respond to the political machinations of the organization? What do they allow and what do they punish? Answers to these questions will guide you in the cultural aspects and rules of your organization. This is extremely important as you need to know what is acceptable and what is “out of bounds” both for yourself and for judging the actions of those you are trying to understand. Also study the informal leaders of your organization. For the same reasons, they can and often do play a bigger role in office politics than the people with the titles!

There are some key skills you can develop or improve to help you better manage office politics and increase your chances of promotion. Learn to be more observant. Use meetings and off-sites to observe how people interact and work with each other. No organization is static. It is constantly changing, growing, or declining in direct relationship to the activities of the people that make up the organization. The more effective people are at building alliances and being influential with each other and customers, the stronger, more competitive the organization becomes in the marketplace. The more destructive and corrosive the relationships become, the less effective the organization is in the marketplace. Don’t allow yourself to make hasty assumptions; especially when you may not fully understand the other person’s strategy or objective. Remember, they are deliberately hiding their true objective from you and the rest of the group. You have to play detective to figure out the real objective behind the smoke screen! I’ve witnessed people who try to shortcut this and get into worse trouble than before. You can do the hard work and figure this out yourself or “copy off somebody else” and take their word as to what the truth of the situation seems to be. Just like in school, those of us who do the work ourselves

learn the material and can apply it to other situations. Those who take the shortcuts never truly learn how the answers can be applied in the real world and fail life's bigger tests, especially in the office!

Avoid the office “gossip” at all costs! There is never anything good that can come out of being a party to this sort of thing and many bad things that can happen. They are not only tearing down the reputation of someone else in the organization, but destroying their own reputations as well. And if it becomes known you were a party, your reputation takes a hit also. Three strikes and you're done.

The strongest strategy is easy to understand, but very difficult to consistently achieve. Always follow the Golden Rule and treat others like you want to be treated. If you treat others with respect you will always maintain your honor and dignity. Be authentic and sincere in all things. Strive for respect, not recognition by using dishonorable tactics. You can play politics without getting yourself dirty. I have found that executives who play by these rules always seem to get extraordinary results and their people will follow them anywhere. “Players” may achieve a short-term victory or may get that promotion you wanted today, but conducting yourself with honor and dignity will always win in the long run and will mark you as someone others want to do business with and can trust in difficult situations. And isn't that what it's all about?

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