

## Coping with Office Politics

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published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

You've heard the old saying that, *who* you know matters as much as *what* you know. Even more importantly, *who likes* you counts a great deal in getting ahead in most organizations.

When you think about it, a workplace really is a series of interconnected relationships—we get our work done by working with other people. So the better you connect with others, the more likely you are going to get along, and maybe even get ahead.

When everyone in an organization tries earnestly to get along with each other, everything tends to work pretty well.

Unfortunately, as you know, some people try a little too hard to get ahead by emphasizing their workplace relationships instead of their work. Misplaced loyalties and perceived obligations can embroil people in all sorts of interpersonal and political maneuverings that eventually lead to a politically-charged work environment.

If you work in an environment where relationships and loyalties trump competence and accomplishment, it can be more than a little challenging and frustrating.

### What You Need to Know

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#### **I have unwittingly become involved in a political situation. I'm afraid this could compromise my reputation in the business. What should I do?**

First, make sure you're reading the situation accurately. Is it really "overly political"—or just an interpersonal situation that you don't fit into so well at the moment? Sometimes, some coworkers get along better with each other than they do with us. We feel a bit on the outside, but, hey, that's life. Try to work through the situation directly. Talk to the people involved. Are you sure that "politics" is overtaking "real" work? If you are convinced that it is, go through the correct channels to avoid compromising yourself further. If direct conversation with the involved parties isn't making sufficient progress, communicate with your supervisor or manager and explain what has happened. If the political situation involves your boss, you may want to approach your human resources department to ask their advice. A mentor, if you have one, is often a good sounding board for helping you resolve your dilemma.

## **I am a woman with a management position in a large organization, and I am always battling “male” politics. How can I continue to succeed without getting drawn in to ugly gender battles?**

For a variety of social and historical reasons, male networks have controlled the power in institutions for hundreds of years; even in today’s modern businesses they sometimes seem impenetrable. You may find it helpful to find a mentor, male or female, inside or outside the business, who will champion you and steer information and opportunities your way. Consider hiring an executive coach to provide you with a helpful perspective and useful feedback on your situation.

Remember, it is your responsibility to build relationships, to find ways in which you can make connections that bring perceived value to your male colleagues. That’s not fair, but that’s how it is. To be a successful woman in what still is a very male-dominated domain, you need to take the lead. To do that, be a constructive contributor. To receive appropriate credit for your work, follow up on your suggestions and ask for feedback on your performance. Don’t expect your work to speak for itself. To build the respect of your colleagues and hopefully attain parity (or better) among them, you need to receive the credit you are due. Document your work performance carefully; then in your performance reviews you can assess your standing (in terms of pay, promotions, and so on) in relation to male counterparts.

Most thoughtful people of both genders wish power politics were gender-neutral, but we all know that’s not yet the case. For now, the onus is on the newcomers to the inner circle of power—women—to strike a fine balance. In trying to move the men to play fair, you don’t want to be perceived as a whiner or a hyper-vigilant score-keeper. But you do need to have a sense of where you stand so that you can point out, if need be, just how fairly your performance is being assessed. A positive outlook and a fact-based record will help you do just that.

## **I’m tired of the politics of big corporations, yet I love what I do. How can I find an environment where I can just concentrate my energy on my work?**

Maybe a change of scenery will meet your needs. That doesn’t necessarily mean you need to bolt from your current organization entirely. Think about transferring to another, perhaps smaller, business unit or specialized department where the likelihood of a different political culture exists. Smaller work units are very often structurally simpler and less political than large ones. When you are looking for a place to transfer, keep yourself attuned to your information networks inside and out (vendors and consultants may be good sources of “inside” information). Note areas with great and not so good reputations. Seek to land yourself in an environment that’s going to feel a lot more like a good home for your work.

## What to Do

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### Watch for Signs of Office Politics

Politics—the intersection of relationships and power dynamics—plays a part in all organizations. It's inevitable when you put human beings together in some sort of hierarchical arrangement. In some organizations, office politics don't matter much at all; in others, they are a blood sport. How can you tell how important politics are to an organization? Watch for signs such as how open or secretive the overall environment seems to be. Do employees freely communicate within their team or department or are they whispering among themselves? How's the quality of communication between work groups or departments? What's the level of employee complaints about discrimination or other unfair treatment? If you notice that people seem to succeed by flattering their superiors and devoting their energy to self-promotion, you've learned something about the organization's culture and how it rewards behavior. The protective people seem, the more they “kiss up” to the boss, the more you know that politics counts more than performance.

### Find Ways to Discourage Political Behaviors

In any workplace setting, decision making based on politics encourages hypocrisy, double-dealing, cliques, self-interest, and deception. These are the behaviors that need to be reined in if the business is going to thrive. Here are a few ideas for how managers can create change that mitigates the negative influence of organizational politics:

- **Promotions** should go to individuals who have both a relevant track record of success and the requisite skills and talents for success in the position. Conduct structured formal interviews with qualified candidates to specifically assess for the characteristics and qualities you're looking for in the job. Consult with others affected by the decision. Be willing to promote someone who thinks and acts differently than you do if that's what's best for the job and your workgroup.
- **Rewards and recognition** must be based on performance, not personal relationships or favors. Have clear performance standards, and fair and accurate measures; give promotions and pay raises on the basis of an employee's actual level of achievement. Give employees access to their own performance data and provide them the bases for their reviews. When performance assessments are based on objective standards and specific accounts of achievement, there should be no room for hidden agendas or illegitimate evaluations.
- **Communication** should be open and transparent. Communicate directly, personally and forthrightly anything that affects your employees and their performance, including bad news, challenges, and initiatives for change.
- **New projects** should be initiated based on their value to the business, not on the basis of furthering a personal relationship or the potential for your personal benefit. A formal process for proposing new initiatives and evaluating their feasibility generates confidence in their legitimacy and inspires team buy-in.

- **Resist temptation.** Politicking can be tempting, especially when you can see an opportunity to benefit yourself. If you manage people based on favoritism, even when it seems in your short-term interest to do so, you'll destroy your team's trust in you and their collective performance will deteriorate.

## Guarantee Your Own Survival

If your organization is rife with politics, improve your chances of survival by following these simple rules.

- **Observe** the organization's political style without getting involved in political struggles until you're sure you know what's going on. If you notice inconsistencies in the way the organization operates, continue to watch until you can more completely understand what the patterns and motivations are.
- **Build a network** of trusted allies—not for political battle but moral support. During your observation phase you can identify who these people might be. Build a network outside the organization to create options and opportunities for yourself. There's always perspective—and options for potential new employment—beyond your current organization. Use your network to broaden your focus beyond your own company and reconfirm or realign your values.
- **Be discreet** during the observation period and stay true to your own values. Don't betray your own sense of what's right merely to fit into the organization—it will eventually lead to internal conflict and stress. You can't please everyone all the time; use your own integrity to make decisions that you are comfortable with.
- **Expose**, gently with finesse, other people's politically motivated behavior. When coworkers say one thing and do another, or seem to be trying to sabotage your decisions or work relationships, challenge their motivation using your assertiveness skills: "You seem to be unhappy with the decisions I've made, would you like to discuss them?" They may deny your suggestion or be confrontational, but at least the issue will be out in the open.
- **Find yourself a mentor** with whom you can discuss your observations and concerns. You may gain a deeper understanding of the political processes at work and some insight into how you can manage these more effectively.

## What to Avoid

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### You Misread a Situation

At best this reveals your naiveté, at worst your own politicking or neuroses. If you think a coworker is politically motivated, observe the person's behavior until you are sure you understand it. You may wish to share your thoughts with someone you trust or if it serves a purpose, bring the behavior in

question to the attention of your coworker. Sometimes, however, it's best to do nothing, and let a political scenario play itself out.

## **You Network Purely for Your Own Ends**

Some people try to short-circuit the path to promotion by building what they believe to be critical relationships. There's a big difference between building professional networks and using your contacts shamelessly in headlong pursuit of your own selfish ends. Remember that if you launch yourself into an early promotion without having developed the skills to be successful, you may be setting yourself up for a very public and career-damaging failure. Build your networks prudently and use them to help develop your skills and open up new opportunities. It may take a little longer, but it will pay off in the end.

## **You Get Involved Too Early**

When you first join a new organization, try to remain politically "unattached." Your newness in the business will allow you to ask naive questions that will help you create a picture of the political environment. Keep your relationships open and friendly and build your network with a variety of people. Observe the patterns of relationships closely to understand the power structure. After a few months you will probably have a fairly accurate idea of what is going on and can then decide to what extent you want to get involved in organizational politics.

## **You Fall Victim to Poor Communication**

Politics in the workplace is sometimes an intentional activity engineered by misguided people. In other cases, the politics is largely unintentional. Poor communication is probably the most common unintentional cause of a destructive political culture. In the absence of information or explanation, people fill the gaps with speculation and rumor, which produce bad information, and often distrust and resentment. The best way to combat this is to maintain clear channels of communication. Internal newsletters, intranet bulletin boards, and companywide meetings are all useful vehicles for getting the word out, along with more personal activities such as team meetings and one-on-one briefings.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Books:**

McIntyre, Marie. *Secrets to Winning at Office Politics: How to Achieve Your Goals and Increase Your Influence at Work*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

Moats Kennedy, Marilyn, and Linda Mitchell. *Office Politics for Dummies*. New York: Hungry Minds, 2002.

Phipps, Mike and Colin Gautrey. *21 Dirty Tricks at Work: How to Win at Office Politics*. New York: Wiley, 2005.

Puder-York, Marilyn. *The Office Survival Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

### **Web Sites:**

"Power and Office Politics: Rumor and Reality":  
[www.naa.org/DiversityPages/Power-and-Office-Politics-Rumor-and-Reality-\(Fusion-Summer-2004\).aspx](http://www.naa.org/DiversityPages/Power-and-Office-Politics-Rumor-and-Reality-(Fusion-Summer-2004).aspx)

"Surfing Office Politics," CareerLink.com: <http://careerlink.devx.com/articles/hc1199/hc1199.asp>

"Surviving Office Politics": [www.beachpsych.com/pages/cc53.html](http://www.beachpsych.com/pages/cc53.html)