

How to Win at Office Politics

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published on BNET.com 7/02/2007

Like it or not, every workplace is a political environment. But operating effectively within it doesn't have to mean sucking up, lying, or slinging dirt. In its purest form, office politics is simply about getting from here to there: securing a promotion, seeing an idea come to fruition, or gaining support to make an organizational change. Playing the game well is about defending your position, earning respect, exchanging favors, and keeping your sanity amid the chaos. To get started, you need to know what you really want from work, then orient your political moves toward those goals. It all starts with strong relationships and helping others; those people in return make up the support system that helps you realize your goals. Here's how it's done.

Things you will need:

- Thirty bucks every few weeks for the occasional lunch with a colleague to build and maintain relationships.
- An hour a week, give or take, for coffee breaks, lunches, and impromptu chats in the hallway — time for you to offer help, ask for it, or socialize with people whose relationships you value.
- **Game Plan:** Know what you want to accomplish now and down the road, so you can tie the work you do — and the alliances you forge — to those goals.
- **Allies:** Find the people who will listen to your ideas and support your ambitions. Remember: those with the power to help you may be peers or support staff.
- **Chits:** Before you can ask your allies for favors, you first need to give them genuine support. What skills, insights, or information can you offer that will have real value to them?
- **Thick Skin:** People may try to block your goals to advance their own. Don't take it personally. They're probably not out to get you — they're just out to save themselves.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written on it in a handwritten style.

Figure Out Why (and If) You Want to Play

Goal: Let what's most important to you guide your actions.

Office politics gets a bad rap because the most obvious practitioners often do it for the wrong reasons: They enjoy the ego trip, or they like to compete for the sake of competition. But the people who quietly succeed at work are also political operators — they just do it better. Those who play the game well map out their career or workplace priorities and align their politicking to those goals. "Political moves are the navigation through your career — not the driver," says Susan DePhillips, former vice president of human resources for Ross Stores.

Start by writing down your top five career goals and priorities. These could include switching departments, making more money, unloading some of your responsibilities, or becoming the

go-to person for your area of expertise. Then write down the five things you've spent the most time and worry on during the last six months. Do they match up? If not, you may be caught up in your colleagues' goals instead of your own.

Next, prioritize your goals. Maybe you're seeking a promotion, but you recently had a child and want to start leaving the office earlier. It's not that you can't have both, but you're not likely to get them at the same time since new positions usually entail more responsibility and a learning curve. Decide which matters most to you right now, and start thinking about who you'll need to persuade or influence in order to get it.

Big Idea

Getting What You Want

It's tempting to think that the best way to get ahead is to buckle down and work extra hard. You'll be recognized and rewarded for the effort, right? Don't count on it. You can't expect other people to magically know what you want in return. Be clear on your goals, and don't feel shy about going after them.

- **If:** You want a promotion...
- **Then:** Find out how to get one.
- Ask your boss what she wants from you and what skills you need to demonstrate to get promoted. Document the conversation in a follow-up email, then master those tasks and skills. This puts you in a better spot to open the conversation again — and get the promotion.
- **If:** You want buy-in from another department when you propose an idea...
- **Then:** Ask for support.
- Ask your counterpart in that department when and how he would first like to hear about new ideas: Over coffee? In an email? As soon as they come up? Once they've gained approval in your department? See if he wants to be included in related meetings. Involving him earlier will increase your chances of gaining support.
- **If:** Someone's blocking you from your goal...
- **Then:** Stand up to them — nicely.
- Dan Coughlin, a management consultant whose clients have included Toyota, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola, remembers a regional operations head who was frustrated because her boss finished all her sentences in group settings. "He was stepping in to make sure she succeeded," Coughlin says, "but in doing so he wasn't giving her enough room to operate." The woman confronted her boss privately, and he backed off. With her increased autonomy, she gained the support of the managers in her region, and her boss recommended her for a promotion shortly thereafter.

Create Strong Relationships

Goal: Build the personal network you will need to reach your goals.

Successful politics starts with relationships: You'll need your coworkers' support — or at minimum their respect — to accomplish anything. Your colleagues all have their own information and allegiances that they can put to work for you — if, and only if, they're so inclined. "Relationships are built on reciprocity," says management psychologist Karissa Thacker. "If you do someone a favor, 90 percent of people return the favor." Likewise, if you exclude someone or block their progress, you'll get similar treatment in response.

In seeking allies, don't just look upward. Coworkers below and equal to your position often have the power to support — or thwart — your goals. Admins may know tricks about how and when to approach the boss with a request. And your direct report in marketing could move to the accounting department and nix your spending budget next year.

The political payoff for forging these relationships may take months or years, but the effort doesn't need to take much time from your day. Here are a few alliance-building techniques:

Listen without interrupting. Hear your coworker out, particularly when the topic is important to him. It shows respect for his beliefs and opinions. And it gives you time to formulate a clear response if he's asking you an important question or disagreeing with you.

Acknowledge a colleague's point of view, even if you disagree. Again, you're showing respect, and by doing so you can be more persuasive of your differing point of view. If you dismiss her position outright, she might interpret that as you dismissing her, which builds animosity and makes you look arrogant.

Offer a favor when you have expertise to share. When offering favors, look for opportunities where you truly have value to add — rather than focusing on what you'll get in return. For example, if you've been at your company for a few years, help a new hire by clueing them in on how much the CEO hates long emails.

Ask questions. It will spark conversation and help you connect, says Glenn Renner, chief operating officer of HomeSphere, which makes construction-management software. Visit a coworker's office and ask what he's working on or why the company does something a certain way. "By seeking to understand, you'll develop a friend," says Renner, who spent 17 years moving up the ranks at Sherwin-Williams. Plus, you may learn something that benefits your own goals.

Don't overdo it. The line between a strong professional relationship and a friendship is a blurry one. "Employee" is your primary role, Thacker notes, so keep relationships "business personal." Share only the personal information you're willing to accept as part of your professional reputation. For example: "My kid has to have surgery" is OK to share, but "I'm on medication for depression" is risky.

Beware flying solo. If you never collaborate or delegate, coworkers may see you as a ball hog. Your chances of scoring are better with teammates. More importantly, excluding people may get you excluded from opportunities down the road.

Hot Tip

Reconciling Venus and Mars

Though it's considered politically incorrect to acknowledge gender differences, it's true that women and men generally handle conflict and leadership differently. Susan DePhillips, author of "Corporate Confidential: What It Really Takes to Get to the Top," shares some ways to bridge the divide:

Arguments:

Two men can get into a heated argument during a meeting, then be reliving highlights of last night's hockey game at lunch an hour later. A woman in the same argument might be too upset to eat lunch at all.

If you're the guy: Tell an upset female coworker you understand her point of view and acknowledge what's good about it. For many women, it's as important to be understood and respected as it is to win a debate. "A woman is only going to get pissed if she's getting dismissed or shut down," DePhillips says.

If you're the gal: Remind yourself this guy is probably not attacking you personally. Even if you're exploding on the inside, focus the conversation on the facts of the work problem and make your points as succinctly as possible.

Teamwork:

Women tend to be more willing to collaborate than men. They can also stretch a meeting or a project by straying from the subject and discussing things in minute detail. Men tend to be more process-oriented, looking to take the fewest steps to reach an outcome.

If you're the guy: You may not like to collaborate, but in some cases you'll have to get over that. Women derive a lot of satisfaction from sharing ideas and relating with colleagues — in part because they want to make sure what they're doing is right. "Allow other people their own thought process until it becomes counterproductive," DePhillips suggests. At that point you might say: "I hear what you're saying and I think that's important, but let's move on to the other items we need to accomplish."

If you're the gal: When you're asked to recommend a course of action on a project, don't come into a meeting with several possible approaches for everyone's review. Step up and make a decision. If you're not confident in one recommendation, run your ideas by a coworker ahead of time. If you need participation on a team project from a guy who prefers to work alone, give him actionable steps or break the project into pieces, so he can do his part on his own, his way.

Observe and Listen

Goal: Gain the insight to predict and avoid roadblocks, and take advantage of scoring opportunities.

The most important tools for negotiating workplace politics are your own skills of observation. “Watch who gets promoted, ignored, patted on the back,” Thacker says. “Who holds the power? Who do people listen to and not listen to?” Understanding who is influential and how they do it can teach you what works, what’s inappropriate, what’s rewarded, and what’s punished.

You’re watching for style, Thacker says, which on a broader level can translate to company culture. If the blunt people get promoted or rewarded and you’re timid, work on being more direct. Obviously, you can vary your style only so much, but with a critical eye and ear, you’ll learn what to work on and what to avoid. For example, if you notice that the CEO seems irritated with long presentations but you have a complex issue to present, mention that your update may raise questions and give her the chance to decide whether it’s worth discussing at length. Likewise, if you notice that an influential colleague is shy and prefers to communicate via email, don’t barge into his office when you need help — send a polite message instead.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil

In the course of learning more about the people and dynamics in your workplace, you may end up hearing things you wish you hadn’t. Here are three situations to watch out for, and what to do in each one.

- **Situation:** A coworker starts venting about other people in the office.
- **Danger:** You get sucked in and contribute to the trash talk, which may be passed along or overheard.
- **Your Response:** Say as little as possible and frame your responses around the coworker’s needs, not the people he’s talking about. For example: “I can see why you’re frustrated” or “If you feel like Mike is stepping on your toes, maybe you should talk to him about it.”
- **Situation:** A colleague tells you something you feel you should not know about, like an affair between coworkers or a rumor that someone may get fired.
- **Danger:** Irrelevant or false information could prejudice your attitude toward coworkers and compromise your working relationships.
- **Your Response:** Pretend you’ve got something crucial to attend to, politely excuse yourself from the conversation, and walk away.

- **Situation:** You hear news you need to act on, such as a claim that one coworker is harassing another.
- **Danger:** “It can adversely impact you and the organization if you’re perceived as someone who didn’t do anything about [harassment],” DePhillips says. “It looks like the company condones the behavior.” If you’re a manager or supervisor, you may also have a fiduciary responsibility to report harassment allegations.
- **Your Response:** Pass it up through proper channels immediately. Tell the person who reported the harassment that she needs to tell human resources — or you will. If your company doesn’t have a dedicated HR function, report it to your supervisor, says DePhillips, and if you run the show, talk to your attorney.

step 4

Promote Yourself, Tactfully

Goal: Make yourself visible and indispensable.

Even if you don’t consider yourself a player, the workplace is competitive: you have to get into the ring in order to succeed, sometimes even just to keep your job. As in most things, the best defense is a strong offense. Don’t dwell on your shortcomings or others will, too. Look for ways to do your job better by focusing on what you do best, handing off work that someone else does better, and asking to work on projects that incorporate several departments or where you can apply your expertise on projects that tie into company strategy. You’ll be able to demonstrate your ideas and capabilities and make contact with a broader cross-section of decision makers.

Most important, remember: just because you’re doing a good job doesn’t mean other people realize it. To some extent, you need to get comfortable with tooting your own horn. That doesn’t mean you have to brag in the break room. The key is to show, not tell. Here’s how:

The Replay: You’ve done something well. Offer to do it again for a different department, client, or product. Your prior success sells your idea.

The Handoff: Credit “we” instead of “me,” says Renner of HomeSphere. Colleagues will still see your accomplishment, and you earn respect from your team by praising them publicly.

The Fast Break: When a colleague bumps into you in the hallway and asks how things are, don’t hesitate to tell them work is going really well. Often they’ll ask why and spread good news for you.

Plan B

Build a Solid Defense

Even the most seasoned competitors have their off days. Here’s how to defend yourself against bad plays — and recover when you’ve fouled:

- **Use sportsman-like conduct.** Don't argue, discuss. When you're mad, explain firmly but calmly what upset you and why. If the other person wants to argue, let him vent and yell. Once the blood drains from his face, return to your point or address their concerns.
- **Know when to call your fouls, and when to keep quiet.** When everyone in a meeting goes silent after you speak, don't apologize or backpedal: you'll only draw more attention to the mistake. Leave it alone, come up with a new plan, or support someone else's. People quickly forget small missteps. If, however, the mistake is personal — you've insulted someone or hurt her feelings — she won't forget. Apologize promptly.
- **Beware the "good sport" label.** There's a fine line between working extra hard to get ahead and becoming the company doormat. Unless you know what your goal is (i.e., you're an associate attorney trying to make partner), don't say yes to an unmanageable workload or give 110 percent to get noticed. Chances are your only reward will be the expectation that you continue to work that hard.
- **Don't talk to the kicker.** Thacker, the management psychologist, cautions against hanging around a colleague whom senior leadership doesn't like. "You can get painted with the same brush," she says. "A lot of people miss that one." If it's more important to you to make a stand, fine, but be sure that the friendship means that much before you compromise your own position.
- **Get back in the game.** Your boss passed you over for a recent assignment or a colleague forgot to invite you to a meeting. Don't complain about missing out. Make yourself more visible by offering to take on a project that will demonstrate your knowledge or skills.

step 5

Help Your Colleagues

Goal: Gain respect and leverage, and get help in return.

You're bound to need advice, an extra hand, or someone to bail you out of a jam now and again throughout your career. Do for others, and they're more likely to return the gesture. Helping is probably built in to your job description; the political benefit comes with offering help before someone requests it. There are several supportive roles you can play:

The Ally: DePhillips says she made an important work ally when she intervened to help a colleague who had bombed during a presentation. DePhillips approached him after the meeting, hoping to help without deflating his ego. "The key was to depersonalize it," she says. Because he was going to start presenting regularly, DePhillips suggested he hire a consultant she knew to help him prepare. His presentations improved measurably, and he became one of DePhillips' best workplace allies. "The moment you show someone you can be trusted, you end up forming a close relationship," DePhillips says.

The Fixer: Business and career columnist Penelope Trunk recalls how she made the move from online marketing manager to vice president at a California software company. To prove herself worthy of the promotion, she offered to overhaul operations in the technology-services department, knowing that the person in charge didn't want to deal with it. Concerned that the staff might resist interference from an outsider, Trunk asked each employee how she could make his or her job better, then asked, "If I help you reach your goals, will you support mine?" One woman wanted to manage, so Trunk trained her on management techniques. Another staffer wanted to spend more time with his daughter. Trunk took some work off his plate and showed him ways he could be more productive. In return, they rallied behind her; the overhaul succeeded, and Trunk was named VP. "The smartest person does not get promoted," she says. "The person who helps the most relevant people gets promoted."

The Mentor: Helping your staff is critical not only in gaining support for your goals but in impressing those above you. Company leaders want managers who are well-liked and can motivate people to action. Jon Nordmark, founder and chief of eBags, an online luggage retailer, says this approach paid off for one of his marketing executives. She often sat with employees at their desks, helping them on projects and crediting them for successes. When her boss quit, Nordmark had to pick between promoting her or another staffer, a man with an MBA from Harvard. "We chose the one we felt the team would rally around," Nordmark says. "The woman who had helped her employees."

The Customer's Friend: Particularly in large organizations, people get caught up in doing their small piece of a larger process, says Emmett Murphy, business consultant and author of the soon-to-be-released "Talent IQ: Make or Break Strategies for Winning the Talent Wars." Departments can lose sight of the big picture and disagree about how things should be done. Murphy's response in such situations is "serve the customer." If you must mediate when two teams or employees disagree, base your decision on what's best for the customer, and explain your reasoning to both parties. It'll gently remind them why you're all there in the first place.

Nitty Gritty

Gossip for Good

We all know trash talk is a dirty business. Aside from the ethical questions it raises, spreading gossip can threaten your job and your reputation. But not all gossip is negative — especially if you act on what you hear rather than spreading it. Use information to do someone a favor, and the good will come back to you later. This is called strategic gossip, and here are two examples of how it's done:

- **What you hear:** In a meeting tomorrow morning your boss will assign an IT staffer to a highly desirable new project.
- **What you do:** When a respected coworker from IT tells you at lunch that she's skipping tomorrow's meeting because she's too busy, you tell her "just be there."
- **What you hear:** A prized employee is looking for a new job.

- **What you do:** Don't mention the rumor, but meet with him and ask what he's looking for at your company in terms of opportunities, responsibilities, or compensation. Tell him what he needs to do to earn a raise or a promotion, for instance, and that you'll help him in that process.

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