

Top Seven Workplace Plays and Maneuvers

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All office politicking relies upon a simple concept: the biggest help (and the biggest hindrance) to reaching your goals is other people. What's the right way to win friends and influence people? The most effective moves build alliances, sell your ideas, and solve problems. They also involve risk — so proceed with caution. With the help of top managers and management consultants, we've devised a list of the seven best office-politics plays and maneuvers, when they work best, and what to watch out for.

The Hand Off

Share credit for wins, says Glenn Renner, chief operating officer of HomeSphere. You'll earn respect from above and below you, while tactfully promoting your own accomplishments. "If you can emphasize the 'we' aspect, that's how you can talk about it," Renner says. Spread the news through email, a company newsletter, or by personally speaking with the people your coworkers most want to impress.

Caution: Don't overdo it — you'll look like a suck-up. When your team fails, take the heat yourself. Spreading blame is petty.

Works best: For team projects, particularly those that required extra work or involved conflict.

The Huddle

Ask a coworker to coffee or lunch. People lighten up when they get away from the office, and small talk nurtures relationships. Ask about the fun stuff first — what she did on her vacation, how his kids like school. "If he asks about my family or my background, I follow suit," says longtime human resources executive Susan DePhillips. "If she doesn't ask much about my personal life, I will tread lightly."

Then move on to work. What he's working on and how it's going? Casual conversation establishes the rapport you need to speak openly about a work problem or an idea you have. You can also tactfully promote yourself by relaying recent accomplishments in the context of what you're working on.

Caution: This is your coworker's downtime, so keep the discussion light unless she enlists your help on a problem. If you want to ask a favor or her opinion, state up front that you'd like to buy her lunch and explain why. Otherwise she may feel duped when she realizes lunch was about advancing your agenda, not about making friends.

Works best: Anytime you want to work on a relationship or for dealing with an important issue in a more relaxed environment.

The Critical Inch

Dive in and spend most your time and energy on the company's most important problem or initiative. If you succeed, the 15 smaller issues you're charged with resolving become a lot less important to the CEO. Show you're someone with vision and someone who takes action.

Caution: Before you do it, you must be confident your effort will make a significant difference for the company. Otherwise, you'll be that person with the monumental flop who also fell short on a long list of responsibilities.

Works best: When the problem or initiative is mission critical and time sensitive, and when those around you can't or won't make a decision on how to proceed.

The Power Reverse

Use reverse psychology. Let's say your company's other offices have installed new software that reduces customer response time. The team in your office is resisting it. Instead of pushing harder, pull the idea away from them, says management consultant Dan Coughlin. "You say, 'This software has worked for five offices, but it might not be right for everybody. Maybe this group isn't ready for it.' People think, 'Why isn't it right for me?'"

"You're redirecting their energy," he says. "Now they're going to fight to do the idea."

Caution: By offering options, you run the risk that they'll choose "no."

Works best: If the employee or team has already shown resistance to the idea you're advocating.

The Option

If you've got teammates who get defensive when told what to do, give them a choice about how to approach a task or which task to do first. This requires them to think it through, it acknowledges their capabilities, and it gives them a sense of control.

Caution: Some people want to be told what to do. Watch how people work: Do they like to make decisions, and do they make good ones?

Works best: When the relationship-building benefit of giving someone else a choice is greater than the consequences of them making a bad decision.

The Silent Strategy

When you present a new idea, it's human nature that some colleagues will play devil's advocate. Let them. They're not necessarily against you, they're just stress-testing your idea. Say enough to show you're receptive ("I see your point," or "right, uh-huh, yes ...") but don't argue. "The more you talk, the more they come out with counterpoints," Coughlin says. "If you just stay quiet, a lot of times the group or the individual will come up with reasons they should help you."

Caution: Your audience may not come around or may interpret your silence as a lack of zeal for your idea. If they don't come around on their own, ask an open-ended question like, "That's great input. So how can we integrate these suggestions into the proposal?" "You're not fighting them, you're redirecting the flow of the conversation by changing the question," Coughlin says.

Works best: When you feel confident that you have a great idea. Also good when a colleague is upset with you. Let the person vent. It shows respect, and while you wait for his blood pressure (and maybe your own) to drop, you can formulate your response.

The Chance Meeting

Use chance encounters to your advantage. Say an influential leader asks to share your taxi at a conference. Introduce yourself and explain what your job is, who you work for, Renner says. Mention a point from the conference you found valuable. "Then, stop talking," he says. You've offered enough to prompt a question or two. "Once that happens, just relax and have a good conversation. Keep them talking more than you do," he says. "This isn't about telling them about you, it's about making a positive impression, and the best way to do that is by asking questions."

This means you need to be prepared. Who are the 10 most important people in your industry? Do you know what they look like and what they're working on? Would you know enough to chat one of them up, should the opportunity arise?

Caution: Be genuine. She's used to employees sucking up at every opportunity. If you're not on your game, talk about the weather or follow her lead. If she asks you about ideas for her husband's birthday gift, go with it.

Works best: When it's truly a chance encounter, not an orchestrated opportunity for you to get a minute of her time. If you need to discuss a problem or want to propose an idea, schedule a meeting.

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