

Techniques of the Office Politics Masters

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A large part of climbing the corporate ladder depends on defining a political style. Sure the CEOs at America's biggest corporations have smarts, confidence, a good track record, and a gut sense for when to take risks and when to sit tight. But underscoring their decisions and actions is their political style: how they handle power and control, build relationships, and manage diplomacy. Here's a look at some of the highest-profile CEOs of the last decade and how their political styles have shaped their careers.

Steve Jobs

CEO,
Apple

Political Style:

The charismatic visionary

Passion is Jobs' greatest asset in motivating employees, negotiating deals, and cultivating a consumer following that's as attracted to his zealotry as it is to the next great Apple product. His ceaseless energy and excitement stirs passion in his people, too, convincing them the impossible is possible. Some are also motivated by fear: Jobs is famous for telling employees, "This is shit!" But after a few days pass and improvements are made, he may hail the same idea as an amazing innovation. Articulate, unyielding, and direct, he's been labeled a micromanager — a product of his extremely high expectations. He's also known for eschewing formalities: he speaks in plain language, wears Levis, and works right alongside his employees.

Pros:

His passion is contagious, persuasive, and inspiring. His informal dress and straight talk make him seem accessible. He's admired for his demanding expectations and commitment to details.

Cons:

As with many a famed artist or chef, his passion has a flip side: when things aren't perfect, he may throw a hissy fit. That drama can drive people away, as can his micromanaging and perfectionism.

Jack Welch

Former chairman and CEO,
General Electric

Political Style:

The straight-talker with a big heart

Early in his career, Welch didn't hesitate to tell his superiors what they were doing wrong and how they could do it better. As a decision maker, he eliminated redundancies in staffing, which caused many people to view him as callous. But he earned the respect and loyalty of peers and employees by rewarding bright, passionate hard workers with stock options, autonomy, and a collegial relationship. Welch did away with formalities and the chain-of-command business structure characteristic of most corporations. "I tell people to never allow themselves to become victims in an institution," he told the Wall Street Journal in a 1999 interview. "I encourage them to raise their hands, to be seen, to make a statement."

Pros:

He got things done, and people respected his candor. Employees liked that their opinions and ideas could be heard. Even when people didn't agree with his actions or approaches, they could see that he was genuine and that most of his decisions paid off in the company's bottom line.

Cons:

His direct, in-your-face style was risky before he got to the top — he sometimes appeared arrogant and lacking in compassion. Welch later admitted that his own hubris (and ongoing distaste for bureaucracy) led him to move too hastily at times, as in the failed acquisition of the investment firm Kidder Peabody & Co., a deal two of his directors warned him against.

Indra Nooyi

Chairman and CEO,
PepsiCo

Political Style:

The competent insider

Indian-born Nooyi got the top job at Pepsi in large part because of the key role she played in orchestrating several major deals while she was CFO. Direct and confident but not overbearing, she drives people hard by inspiring them. Nooyi also speaks plainly about things, including her own missteps: After recently visiting India, Nooyi said she should have visited three years earlier, when Pepsi was accused of using unsafe water. Nooyi is known for singing at the office and, at times, going barefoot, which sends a message about being oneself in every context. It also makes her approachable.

Pros:

Her confidence commands respect, and her forthright nature and willingness to admit to her mistakes makes her human and admirable.

Cons:

Her frankness has backfired. In a commencement address at Columbia University, Nooyi used her five fingers as a metaphor for various regions. North America was represented by the middle finger because it stood out the most and anchored the hand's functions. "This is a really good thing, and has given the U.S. a leg up in global business," she said. "However, if used inappropriately — just like the U.S. itself — the middle finger can convey a negative message and get us in trouble." Drawing heavy criticism for being anti-American, Nooyi later apologized.

Michael Eisner

Former CEO,
Disney

Political Style:

The Nixonesque paranoid

Eisner believes failing is part of succeeding, particularly in creative pursuits like film and television. At Disney and throughout his career, this philosophy led him to take risks that many wouldn't. His creative instinct and business acumen catapulted Disney from a theme-park company and movie studio to a major media conglomerate. But some of Eisner's risks turned out badly, like outsourcing much of Disney's creative work and forcing out studio chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg. He also gained a reputation for duplicity when he hired friend and talent agent Michael Ovitz as his No. 2 guy — then immediately began plotting Ovitz's ouster. Much of Eisner's success came from his strict control over all aspects of the business — which eventually brought about his downfall.

Pros:

By hoarding information, Eisner held a lot of power, keeping Disney under his thumb for more than 20 years.

Cons:

His controlling style manifested itself in power plays with other executives and, most notably, in his refusal to build a succession plan, which fueled shareholder and board opposition and led to his resignation.

Carly Fiorina

Former CEO,
Hewlett-Packard

Political Style:

The agent of change

Focused and intense, Fiorina made no bones about her strategy: generate financial results. She came to HP with strong communication and marketing skills and little financial expertise. But as executive vice president at AT&T, she had proven she could set a goal and jump in headfirst. At HP, Fiorina was charged with turning a stodgy and disjointed company into a faster-moving innovative competitor. But change is hard, and her style didn't make it any easier. Where the company's previous engineering-centered culture valued workers for their dedication, Fiorina's HP focused on productivity, sales results — and longer work weeks. Longtime employees saw their sense of community dissolve. At the old HP, decisions were made by consensus at lower levels. Under Fiorina, decisions came from the top.

Pros:

She's effective. She unified disparate businesses within HP and improved financial results — for a time, anyway. She also upped the pace of innovation, from less than one patent a day to 11 a day.

Cons:

In her single-minded focus on productivity, she alienated peers and employees. Her distant, top-down management style led to her dismissal after HP's merger with Compaq failed to live up to her promises.
