



Winning with Workplace Politics

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When people talk about office politics, we usually assume they are talking about something you find in a big corporate organisation. In fact, organisational politics can be found in any type of organisation – your typical corporate, an NGO or NPO, a government department, a church and a hospital among others. Wherever there are people there is going to be politics. People are not neutral. They come into the workplace with all their wants and needs, insecurities and fears, and previous experiences, not to mention expectations, and so the drama that always happens when people are together unfolds.

The root causes of political activities in organisations is most often due to scarce resources, time pressures, social and structural inequalities and individual personal motivations.

What does this mean? Organisational politics are a fact of life. Unless you intend to be a one-man-band, there will be people and there will be politics. In fact even if you are a one-man show, you cannot really escape people. So what you want to do is learn how to make it work for you. You don't have to become a highly political person yourself. You do need to learn how to work your way around office politics.

Some strategies to navigate your way through organisational politics

1. Accept there will be politics. No hiding your head in the sand ostrich style.
2. Get hold of an organisational chart and analyse the people in different positions. Who holds the senior positions? Who holds key senior positions in the organisation? It

could be the CFO or COO. Who are the real influencers? Who has authority and uses it a lot? Who has authority but tends not to exercise it? Who is respected at the top? Who is respected lower down the hierarchy? Who is the brains behind everything? Who do people listen to? Who gets things done?

3. Then map out the informal network. This is where power and influence lie, without the necessary titles. What social networks exist? Is there a group that plays golf every weekend? Is there a group of people who go away for regular weekend trips? Understand the interactions and relationships. Watch who gets along with whom? Look for in-groups, out-groups, cliques. Where are relationships strong and where are the conflicts.
4. Understand who the gatekeepers are for positions – for instance the PA to the CEO, IT, etc.
5. Then build a strong and supportive network. You now know how the existing relationships work so you can start building your own. Don't just focus on your immediate colleagues or team. Look across functional areas and different levels of seniority. Don't be afraid of politically powerful people.
6. Be friendly but not over-friendly – this is still work after all. Don't flatter, don't engage in gossip. Be real. Try and not align too much with just one person. If they leave, you could be out in the cold. Especially if no one else liked them. Do not badmouth people ever, especially in their absence. Not only does this leave those present wondering what you are saying about them when they are not around, but you are the one who looks bad. Keep your conversations about the goals of the organisation. Don't play people. Express solutions rather than criticism. Be assertive and not aggressive when standing up for your ideas. Decisions should always be about what is best for the organisation, never the individual.
7. This is about interpersonal relationship skills. If yours are not great then do some work on them. It is also about emotional intelligence, so if you have some gaps in EQ work on filling those gaps. Included in this is investing in your listening skills. People like people who listen to them. Constantly adjust your approach. You need to be reading the situations all the time and adjusting your approach as necessary.
8. Once you have a network make the most of it. Build your personal brand. Raise the profile of your team and department. Let senior people and influencers know what you are doing. Talk about your business and achievements. Talk about your plans and ambitions and goals within the company.
9. Always remain professional
10. In many, if not most organisations there will be people that are clever and dangerous – in psychology they are known as the Dark Triad. These are the narcissists, the sociopaths and the machiavellians. They do not respond like normal people. Good relationship skills won't work with them. You will end up constantly doubting yourself and wondering if you are sane if you have too much interaction with them. If you can, have as little as possible to do with them or get away completely.

And never forget to use a lot of common sense and listen to your intuition and gut feel.