

Politics Come With the Office

Politics don't only make for strange bedfellows, they can make for uncomfortable work situations

by Michelle Neely Martinez

When Susan Kropf was named president and chief operating officer for Avon Products Inc., earlier this year, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter asked her during a press conference, “How did you avoid being hurt by office politics?”

Kropf's answer: “I have never really been involved in office politics that much. I try to keep egos out of things and stay focused on doing the best job I can. I'm direct with people, and I let them know that I don't have any hidden agenda. When you demonstrate that, other people play back to you in the same way.”

Kropf's use of the term “that much” infers a lot about workplace life. In fact, “the deeper the infrastructure and the older the company, the more chance of facing corporate politics,” says Blaine Pardoe, author of *Cubicle Warfare: Self-Defense Strategies for Today's Hypercompetitive Workplace*. As Pardoe explains, in today's highly competitive, ever-changing business arena where jobs aren't for life, office politics flourish.

U.S. executives say they waste 19% of their time—at least one day per week—dealing with company politics, according to a survey of 150 executives of major U.S. firms by OfficeTeam, a California-based staffing service. The executives surveyed said they spent a bulk of that time dealing with internal conflicts, rivalry disputes and other volatile situations at work.

With years of consulting experience under his belt, Pardoe, currently the director of technology education services for Ernst & Young LLP worldwide consulting firm, has seen practically every kind of power play and political move possible.

“Even if you are a person who takes no active part in [office] politics,” he advises, “knowing how the game is played means that you stand a good chance of surviving the depredations of those who undertake the lifestyle of cubicle warfare.”

Admittedly, Pardoe's writing looks at the cutthroat, steamier side of office politics and provides readers with an impressive survival guide. But, office politics don't always have to be a dirty word.

“All politics really boils down to is the play of human interactions at work that can make your job either easier or more difficult,” write co-authors Ronna Lichtenbrug and Gene Stone in their book *Work Would Be Great If It Weren't for the People*. “Being a good office politician means that you know how to turn individual agendas into common goals.”

So how can you be a good office politician? Here are four starting pointers:

1. **Politics are about power.** And there's no standard definition of power. You have to pinpoint the factors considered "powerful" within your organization. "Every company on the planet has its own way of determining or gauging how much power someone has," says Pardoe. "Sometimes the index is tangible, such as a unique benefit or perk; sometimes it is perceived, such as having a slightly more desirable office than a peer."

He provides these varied examples of how companies measure power:

- The headcount index—how many people are reporting to one manager
- Prime location in the office building, such as a corner office
- Company-paid country club memberships
- Company-sponsored trips and promotional meetings
- Amount of budget control
- High-profile project assignments
- Individuals with the most profitable customers
- Better benefits/executive perks
- Most powerful computer hardware or system
- Bonuses for performance
- Individuals who receive a higher degree of acceptance by upper management for failures

2. **Learn from the past.** The unofficial history of your organization can be more important than information publicized in the annual report. "If you heard a story about Manager Bob who was allegedly demoted after an incident regarding a secretary and a sexual harassment allegation, this tells you that your company protects its upper management, even against charges that might normally result in dismissal," writes Pardoe. "Or it can indicate that Bob must have had some information in his possession that allowed him to survive such an incident. Checking out how your company has handled similar complaints can help you arrive at some strong conclusions."
3. **Don't ignore (or believe everything you hear from) the grapevine.** Today's youthful employees don't take to the grapevine as readily as older workers, says career coach Marilyn Moats Kennedy, because they don't plan to stay with the company for very long. Or, maybe they don't participate because they see themselves as more independent thinkers, concludes Claire Raines, a consultant and co-author of the book *Generations at Work*.

Whatever the reason, employees should keep in mind that although the grapevine is an unofficial communication channel, it can be a rich source of company information. It's wise to find out—and become friends with—those who nurture it. Often it's the secretary with 20-year tenure or the receptionist who is tapped into choice departmental information.

4. **Start with your boss.** Part of everyone's job is learning how to make the boss look good. Learn what the boss expects from your performance and then evaluate

ways in which you can add more value to the team. If advancement within the organization is a priority for you, knowing the answers to these questions is important to becoming more politically savvy: Do you work in a department that is integral, i.e., adds profitability, to the organization? Can you measure, in numbers, the results of your work? Is your boss a team player? Does he or she have the power to make decisions that affect your goals? How is your boss perceived within the organization?

Centuries ago, Philosopher Plato knew the importance of managing the perils of politics. He advised: “Those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber.”

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