



Chapter 12

How to Manage Workplace Politics

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A politician is a person with whose politics you don’t agree; if you agree with him he’s a statesman.

David Lloyd George, U.K. Prime Minister, 1863 — 1945

Each of us wants to bring value to the workplace and to be rewarded for our effort. We want to be paid for what we do best. For many, this simple proposition falls apart in the face of “politics.” Politics can involve aligning interests, cajoling and accommodating and/or sandbagging, lying and undermining. These are skills that we may not have, we may not choose to exercise and that we are not comfortable dealing with when they are used to undermine our efforts. Politics gets in the way of our providing value.

Politics is often seen in its most negative light:

“Our proposal was rejected because Sam has never liked our department.”

“Terry only got that promotion because he plays golf with the head of marketing.”

“Alex always takes credit for projects, whether or not she had anything to do with them.”

People who act in this way are called “political.” Being political is associated with individual prejudice, hidden agendas, saying one thing and doing another, backstabbing, scapegoating, sabotage, etc. If this is what politics is, no wonder we avoid it. Why would we want to be involved in something like that? Yet, by avoiding politics, we discard much of our ability to accomplish what we want to achieve on the job. Achieving our goals requires more than our simply doing a good job.

Our purpose in this chapter is to take a closer look at politics, its relevance to getting our job done, and perhaps surprisingly, to lay out how we can participate in politics—ethically, as a part of working smart. Not all of politics is destructive and bad. It can be used in the interests of shareholders or the organization as a whole and not be solely based on self-interest.

Let’s look a little more closely at the distinctions between ethical politics, where the values of all participants are weighed, and unethical politics, where interests are narrower and the means of reaching decisions are manipulative or worse.

Understanding the nature of politics

“The savvy see the organization as a human system trying to act in a rational way—rather than as an economically structured entity that happens to need people to make it go. That may seem to be just a bit of semantics, but it turns out to be fundamental. When you understand people—and realize that an organization is a human system—then you know that you’ll always do better if you strive to create win-win scenarios.”

Joel DeLuca, Savvy Politics

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, politics is “the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power.” Wikipedia more broadly describes politics as a process by which groups of people make collective decisions. In other words, politics is the process by which people get things done and how we get things done is by allocating time and resources (our own and others’). The ability to control the allocation of time and resources is the dictionary definition of power.

A formal organizational structure is the official expression of and conduit for power. People in organizations entrusted with leadership positions make decisions about how to allocate resources, how to produce and/or achieve things. Formal hierarchies and organizational structures serve their intended needs fairly well, but imperfectly, not always, for instance, getting the product out the door before you have to leave for your daughter’s soccer game.

The full assessment of the interests of various stakeholders and accommodation of their views—to ensure the success of the project—is better suited to an informal structure, one that can adapt to individual quirks and requirements. Even when all parties are acting in the best interests of the organization, there are differing opinions as to any issue’s relative importance, what resources should be allocated to it and when. Politics is about using power of relation-

ships, loyalty, personal charisma and access to formal power to affect the change we want (or do not want) to see.

When I first arrived at Morgan Guaranty in the late 80s, I was advised to be nice to our assistant, Ellie. I thought that was odd advice; why would it occur to anyone to do otherwise? I subsequently learned that important information flowed among the assistants and that an assistant’s opinion of you affected the attention your information received.

Some information doesn’t warrant going through official channels and yet is still important for management to keep an eye on. If there was a message you felt management needed to hear at Morgan, you could pass it by your assistant who could share it, for instance, with the assistant of the managing partner. Information went both ways. If you were dropping the ball, a quiet comment by your assistant could refocus you before the issue was raised in your annual review.

This informal network served as a way to be in touch with senior management and they with us. Working up the chain of command was still, ultimately, how decisions were made. The assistants’ network served to provide a back door to the existing, formal command and control structure. It provided a mechanism for outside influence, and was, as such, political; ethically political and political, just the same.

Making the best decisions about impossible situations and a lack of resources, incorporating the needs of all stakeholders is always complex and requires more than a formal structure can provide. Not all informal structures are as clear as this one was. Some networks and alliances arise to address a single issue. The Morgan system represents one example of a place where people recognized that a formal structure could not bear all the needs for communication of differing interests. The resulting informal communication may not have had the precision and clarity of the formal system, but it let outside opinions influence decisions that were made.

Some networks can be toxic. Some unofficial

networks exist to serve narrower and counter-productive interests. There are individuals whose primary focus is on other agendas that serve to keep them in power, to undermine people they do not like. This is unethical politics. It is unethical not only because it is based on selfish interest and relies on deception, but also because of the strain it places on the organization.

Management may not acknowledge informal power structures, yet they will often choose to leave them alone or perhaps even access them on occasion. Because accommodating people's needs is complex and important, politics is often the most effective way to meet those needs, as uncontrolled as it is. What it loses in control, it makes up for in subtlety and comprehensiveness and complexity. Human beings are enormously complex and any system that fails to take that into account, will fail itself. There are as many ways to approach these complexities as there are people and situations. How you can practically and ethically build and exercise power and practice politics is the subject of the next section.

How you can usefully and ethically participate in politics

It should be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to arrange, more doubtful of success and more dangerous to carry through than initiating change.

The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support is forthcoming from those who prosper under the new. Their support is lukewarm, partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the existing laws on their side, and partly because men are generally incredulous, never really trusting new things unless they have tested them by experience.

In consequence, whenever those who oppose the changes can do so, they attack vigorously, and the defence made by the others is ineffective. So both the innovator and his friends are endangered together.

Nicola Machiavelli, *The Prince*

So here you are, a part of an organization. Perhaps you have some influence. Perhaps you have an acknowledged position that allows you to make some decisions. Whatever cards you hold, you probably need more allies and/or resources than you have to realize your vision on the scale you envision it. You can stick your head in the sand by relying on someone else or ignoring anything outside the official organization structure, but this is not effective. To do your job, you need to be political.

Dealing with politics is a way of stepping up to the plate. By being political you demonstrate your commitment to your idea by fighting for it. Arguably, if you are not willing to fight for it (using your own and soliciting others' political capital), the idea isn't that good, isn't worth the resources needed to make it real. If you want to succeed, you need to enter into politics.

Why Politics is important to you

Politics is important for you because you are in an organization with others. For your plan, whatever it is, to succeed (for the overall benefit of the organization), there are going to be others in the organization who must be accommodated, negotiated with, befriended and perhaps even evaded or outwitted. If these other players are not engaged, you will fail to achieve your objective.

You will fail to fully achieve your objective or you will be at risk to be undermined in some future objective. It may be tempting to concede some of your success to avoid these realities (and that is part of organizational life), but by embracing politics and choosing to enter into politics in an ethical way, you will minimize unnecessary shortfalls and sacrifices. Doing this is not as difficult as you think.

What we will assume about you

We assume for the purposes of this chapter that you are accomplished in your field and have

good things to contribute to your organization. You are master of your subject matter.

We also assume that you have the best interests of the organization at heart. Such assessments always involve judgment. You and those holding official positions of power may not have recognized the same interests. Nor do your interests have to be without self-interest. Just because something is good for you or those you are close to, does not mean that it is not also good for the organization. All of that notwithstanding, this is a guide for acting ethically in the political realm. Ethical politics is about achieving a result while working to minimize the places where you have to spend time and effort to keep secret.

Into politics one step at a time

The steps recommended here require work and attention. When confronted with resistance to an idea, it often seems simpler to battle it out or avoid a confrontation (fight or flight). If you are master of the subject matter, you may feel your expertise should be sufficient for your project to succeed.

One way of thinking about the political realm is that it recognizes human factors. If you are master of both the subject matter and human factors, then you are much more likely to achieve your goals. Some people who dislike politics characterize it as hard-working subject matter experts against the manipulative, lazy, credit-seekers. You do not need to think this way. If you take the time to see where people seem to be coming from, you may be able to present things in a way that avoids a pitched battle.

Step 1 – Shift your attitude

The first step is to recognize that human beings are involved and that that can be messy and that it is important to deal with their issues in one way or another. Dealing with an issue can involve sharing information, negotiation, sharing credit, delay, acceleration, avoidance or even, though rarely, attack. The point is to exercise pa-

tience and anticipate reactions (where possible), thinking through options rather than engaging in a tactic that may have negative consequences down the road.

Step 2 – Lay the groundwork

The second step, having realized that you give yourself an advantage by taking the time to think things through, is to start to build the currency you will need to engage and succeed in politics. That currency is relationships.

Having a relationship with those who have an interest in what you and your department are engaged in makes everything easier. If you have taken some time to get to know someone, what they are doing in their area, what is important to their success or simply what they want to tell you, you will have a better idea of what to approach them about and how to approach them.

With some people you get to know, you will go further and develop trust. They can become allies, providing a sounding board for new ideas or colleagues to whom you can turn for support in developing strategies for furthering the initiatives you think are important.

Others who you get to know may be less interested and some you will learn to avoid, unless you have more carefully thought through the potential consequences of sharing your ideas and plans with them. You don't trust them, so you will want to be careful.

Still others may be particularly important to develop a relationship with. There are people who are tuned into people's priorities and motivations and who can be hubs for information. If you are not attuned to the organization in that way, you may find these colleagues particularly valuable in executing your plans.

Whether the person with whom you build the relationship turns out to be an ally or someone you do not trust, building the relationship is the key. The relationships will be different. Whoever said, "keep your friends close but your enemies closer," was wise.

You may sometimes wonder why people

should be drawn to you. To some extent, they just like you. In a corporate environment, where people are working to achieve, people form relationships because of advantages they see you bring to them. You may have knowledge they need or a position or resources. Perhaps, you have relationships they see as important, perhaps to someone with influence or access. You may be seen as reliable, trustworthy or credible. Awareness of these factors will be useful in your developing relationships important to you. In the world of politics, these factors are seen as sources of power.

Supporting a colleague's interests and initiatives is a key way to demonstrate your commitment to them and your relationship with them. Demonstrating your support serves to strengthen the relationship, making it more likely they will support you in turn.

Lending your support to your allies is easy. It can be more difficult and often ill-advised to be seen to support someone whom you do not trust. If their idea is a good one in your judgment, you may want to find an acceptable way to support it. It is a good practice to maintain cordial relations with all.

Step 3 – Practice good politics

Step 3 begins when you have an initiative in mind. I say in mind, because this is not a process that begins when you have completed a plan that will save the organization a great deal of money and will need to be rolled out. When you have an objective in mind, that is the point when you will want to engage your allies. This does not mean you want to turn to them empty-handed,

asking them how to proceed; have command of your facts and ideas about what you want to do and seek their suggestions. It is a well-worn truth that engaging people up front will engage them in the outcome.

Keep in mind and listen for what people are interested in, the ways they are (and are not) interested in supporting your project. Being sensitive to this is the essence of success in politics.

For any given initiative, there will be some people who are natural allies. Networks and alliances can shift with time and come together around particular interests. Once the change is in place, the network recedes. Sometimes when a person who is a hub for information loses interest, the network evaporates.

For those whom you don't trust, you will naturally share less with them. There will be times when dealing with those who like to take credit, where you will want to be out there ahead of them, letting people know about the project and what is going on with it before they are in a position to take credit.

Good practices back up your alliances.

- Give credit when you can to others who have earned it; find nice things to say.
- Document the work you do (a good career practice).
- Send notes confirming discussions (avoids misunderstandings and provides a paper trail).
- Prepare. Do your homework.
- Avoid unnecessary interactions with people with whom you have to be on your guard.

Three Steps summarized

The steps laid out above do not represent everything you will ever need to know about politics. There are many books written about politics and many more to be written. What these rule provide is a way to begin. Change is difficult as is pointed out in the quote beginning this section. Recognizing the human factors in bringing your changes to your organization will increase your odds for success.

Step 1 – Shift your attitude

Step 1, recognizing that human beings are involved and that that can be messy, is an attitude adjustment that sets a foundation and motivation for entering the political realm.

Step 2 – Lay the groundwork

Step 2, building a relationship, is an ongoing practice that makes any subsequent action more informed and easier to execute.

Step 3 – Practice good politics

Step 3, listening for and including the motivations and priorities of others in your strategy increases your likelihood of success.

Summing up: Key factors to remember to become a more effective contributor

This chapter is designed to allow politics back into the conversation of people you want to be with, to show that politics needn't be done in the back room and under the cover of darkness. It is a bias towards openness and a willingness to deal discretely with human foibles that characterizes ethical politics.

However you decide to approach making things happen in your organization, I invite you to approach it as a game. The Five O'Clock Club recommends approaching the interview in this way and it is equally useful for politics. There will be days when you are up and days when you are down. There will be days when it is easier and days when it will be harder. Play it as a game and you will sleep a little better.