



How to Master the Art of Office Politics to Advance Your Career

Whenever people gather, politics are created. Competence, loyalty and long hours of work alone will not advance your career. The basic nature of life at work is competitive and political behaviour is one of the keys to advancement, career protection and enhancing your continued employability. How you participate in office politics determines who will help, hinder or resent you.

Participation in political behaviour is risky but necessary, unless you have chosen to take hazardous risks within your workplace. There is nothing mysterious about why office politics occur—it is simply another phrase for interpersonal relationships which develop when people congregate in one location on a regular basis, such as being employed by the same organisation.

Career Setbacks

Losing out in a merger or take-over, being passed over for promotion because of the enmity of a boss or being beaten by a more politically forward person to a reward we have coveted, all demand special strengths from us. How to persist in an unfair world when situations seem out of our control is the kernel of office politics. It is on these occasions that we need to know how to act politically and recover. Career setbacks should stimulate us to ask whether our work and personal lives are as we would like them to be, to determine what actions are required to enhance both and then get on with implementing them. Inactivity or dwelling too long on feeling the victim of circumstances is not fulfilling our obligation to manage our own careers.

If you wait forlornly to be rescued from a setback, you may be left waiting for a long time. If you vow to be single-minded, focus your efforts on adopting attitudes which protect your pride and self-belief, and search for alternative career goals to accomplish, your 'down time' will be considerably shorter. Once you have worked out your revised work life goals, you can assess who may help or hinder your achievement of them. Then you can promote your case with a new sense of purpose and take care to disassociate yourself from those of questionable competence or integrity.

If you create emotional distance and say, "I am stopping caring about my job" you are highly likely to experience a repetition of the career setback. It is more sensible, pragmatic and politically wiser to act positively in the face of a career setback. A sense of our own values can help us cope with this and react with forgiveness, understanding, and tolerance when adverse behaviours towards us are experienced. Be generative rather than destructive or mean. We can transcend pettiness and personal setbacks and fall back on our self-resiliency anchored by our values. The opinion of others whilst important does not need to govern our self-esteem.

Managing Office Politics

The areas of study for you to manage your own way effectively amidst office politics are:

- Interpersonal relationships
- Thinking politically
- Grapevine information
- Competition among colleagues
- Appropriate assertion

Interpersonal Relationships

The alert, career-conscious person acknowledges the existence of office politics and sets out to study the nature of interpersonal relationships. By acquiring an understanding of why people behave the way they do, you should be able to adjust your behaviour and influence events to favour, rather than disadvantage, your career progress.

Those who have not given attention to increasing their skills in interpersonal relationships often have considerable difficulty improving their work life situation. Hard work and a virtuous image alone may not advance your career or change things to enrich your work life.

Politics at work is about the power to influence others and interpersonal relationships. Where two or more people focus on problems in order to make and implement decisions, coalitions are formed. Rarely do these coalitions remain static. The essence of the political contract between two or more people is: "I'll support your efforts if you'll support mine."

The social forces that are involved in these interactions form the kernel of office politics.

Thinking Politically

Such thinking may involve:

Visibility Making sure that your accomplishments become well known by sending memos, circulating reports, making presentations at meetings

Attention Getting the ear of people who are in positions of influence and power.

Association Forming friendships and networks at lunches, seminars, conferences, etc with valuable contact people.

Information Gathering inside information from such diverse sources as PAs, work colleagues, managers.

Aspirations Making career advancement ambitions known to those who can assist.

Demonstration Finding opportunities to demonstrate abilities by volunteering for committee assignments, special projects, oral presentations.

Determined career strategists learn where and how to voice their ideas so they are implemented and not left to wither and die. They know when it is possible to let someone else move on their behalf. They know that changes in an organisation rarely occur because of their actions alone. Change requires the support of several people who feel that the change might bring some good for them as well.

Grapevine Information

The grapevine and office gossip where you work are very important in protecting and advancing your career. It is a key source of information about the informal power structure that operates within your organisation. As people continually make, undo and remake alliances, coalitions and deals for mutual help within the world of work, your awareness of the current gossip is very useful.

If you neglect to pay attention to it could be unclear whom you need to ask for advice or recruit to help get things done. This will invariably affect your ability to maintain proficient performance of your job tasks. The grapevine can inform you with whom it is best for you to spend time in order to establish a relationship that you can influence in your favour. It is not essential that you feed data into the grapevine, but it doesn't cost anything more than a little time to be a good listener.

Competition Among Colleagues

Many believe that career success can be measured only in terms of increased responsibility and higher pay and status. They think that only these can produce work satisfaction. This belief often causes them to compete aggressively with their colleagues. A growing number of people, however, are more interested in the quality of their living. They are seeking ways to make their work, careers, leisure interests and personal development contribute equally.

You must find your answer to this critical dilemma in order to cope better with behaviour at work that is not cooperative. Some put off this self-assessment until a crisis in their personal life or employment circumstances prompts a hurried review.

Work is a series of alliances with colleagues, which continually form, break up and re-form. To ignore this is not being unambitious but simply foolish. Friendly teamwork and continuing harmonious relationships are an unrealistic expectation in work life, an expectation that fails to acknowledge that people are essentially self-seeking in their behaviour

Appropriate Assertion

The negative effects of office politics can be minimised if we are able to communicate with people without misunderstandings. We also need to object effectively when an action or statement is made which could set back our career or the feelings of others towards us. If you have come away from a confrontation at work feeling that things were left unsaid or unclear, or that you were tricked, used or made to feel guilty, then you need to develop your skills at appropriate assertion.

Assertiveness is a way of behaving and speaking in interactions or confrontations. It is not a means of getting your own way on every occasion or of winning a battle of words against another. Appropriate assertion is the way in which you approach interactions, remain in charge of yourself during the process and influence the outcomes in a positive way for all involved.

Appropriate assertion should not be confused with aggressive behaviour that is domineering, self-centred and without regard for the feelings of others. This hinders effective interpersonal relations because it does not allow openness and is unreceptive. The opposite of aggressive behaviour, the style known as being passive, does not contribute either as it involves sublimating your needs and feelings in order to satisfy other people. Many employers include assertiveness training as part of their training courses offered to staff. In addition, there are many community-based organisations that can provide this skills development training at a reasonable cost.

So, skill at office politics is not restricted to particular personality types but more to those astute employees who acknowledge it as a fact of life and study how to improve their employability, not surrender to fate.

These skills can be studied through

- selected reading;
- mentoring; http://www.sixfigures.com.au/job_seekers/resources/articles/why-you-need-a-mentor-in-all-economic-climates-and-how-to-find-the-right-mentor
- with a coach on a one-to-one basis; http://www.sixfigures.com.au/job_seekers/career_services/coach_profiles or
- within a small group training environment.

Summary

To ignore the career strategy of politics and to neglect seeking out skills-building experiences in interpersonal relations could jeopardise the journey to improved well-being and the feeling of being more in charge of your own career, whichever career direction you choose. Remember, many careers flounder simply because the individual does not try to build support for them or plan how their aspirations are to be achieved.



Employees have to be entrepreneurial today as never before. You have to self-define, self-motivate, self-promote and self-defend. You need to find ways of going about these things that are consistent with your values http://www.sixfigures.com.au/job_seekers/resources/tags/career-assessment

so that you can look yourself in the mirror comfortably at the end of your working day. Politics at work are neither good nor bad; they are to do with as we will. We must take care that respect for the individuality of others should be maintained. Politics are the basis of trust and distrust, giving and withholding, contact and avoidance. Without the informal political systems that exist within an organisation, it would come to a halt.

Sourcing a Career or Executive Coach

You can source a career or executive coach via various industry associations. Other channels include your HR department and/or ask for referrals from friends or colleagues.

About the Author

Paul Stevens, B.Bus., founded The Centre for Worklife Counselling in Sydney in 1979 following a 21 year career in Human Resources Management and The Worklife Network – a national and international affiliation of adult career specialists – in 1986. He wrote his first published contribution to adult career development in 1981, Win That Job!, closely followed by Stop Postponing the Rest of Your Life. Over 35 further titles, booklets and career assessment instruments have been published since, the latest being A Passion for Work: Our Lifelong Affair and My Third Age: Work & Life Choices. Paul Stevens is a regular contributor and author for Six Figures www.sixfigures.com.au the executive site for jobs, news and services.