

Managing Organisational Politics

Office politics, whether we like it or not, is an integral part of life in and around organisations. In order to get things done, advance your career or gain support for making changes, knowledge of how office politics works, and a strategy for how to get the best from it, is extremely useful. This article explores office politics in more detail, offering some useful guidance on how to navigate through the minefield.

The hidden organisation

Politics may be defined as the art and practice of obtaining power. The political network of office affiliations will not be on any organisational chart, but it is most definitely present. In fact, office politics forms a secondary or shadow organisation that can be difficult to map, created with obscure territorial boundaries and networks of influence. Navigating this hidden organisation is vital to personal survival and the maximisation of working relationships. Office politics can be used in a way that corrodes the structure of the organisation proper, or alternatively in a way that enriches the working environment.

The basic structure of office politics consists of informal and tight-knit groups that can spring up according to a variety of affiliations. These may occur between departments, those who are geographically close, people with common features of character or outlook, employees from similar sectors, or amongst friendship groups, such as regular golfing partners. Whatever the reasons for the formation of these groups, once established they can be hard to identify, even harder to infiltrate, and powerful to unexpected levels.

Of course, informal groups may not be aligned in order to generate influence and allegiance within the organisation. For instance, where management is respected and trusted, informal groups may form due to similar attitudes and interests alone, and may merely wish to socialise and create meaningful bonds in their working hours. However, where levels of management are perceived as overly authoritarian or otherwise unfair or untrustworthy, these informal groups or 'cliques' can form a role of protection of their own kind, often at the expense of the needs of those external to the group, or of overall company goals. There are many degrees of influence and power between these kinds of informal groups.

Modern organisational politics

In a contemporary context of constant change, downsizing and mergers, the formal allocations of organisational power have been deconstructed. Procedures and channels that could formerly be counted upon to pass the power and get things done in a predictable way have been replaced by structures that are more flexible, yet at the same time, more problematic. It can often seem that to get something done in today's organisations you have to negotiate with doubt, uncertainty, and poorly outlined flows of power and control. As power bases become less obvious, the hidden organisation of political affiliations can be an invaluable resource.

When engaging in the inevitable activity of office politics, it is important to identify the groups or cliques, understand their powers, infiltrate them where necessary, or make strategic use of their influence from an outside position. It can be complicated business, but a structured and determined approach can help to make this complex system work.

Positive aspects of office politics

Like the broader concept of influencing, the notion of office politics can create a negative impression. It is often perceived as scheming and unfair, attributing power in a way that does not correspond to seniority or ability. It can also be considered a selfish person's game. There are, however, some potentially positive outcomes of an office political system:

- It is a way of gaining more power if you are officially less powerful or lower in the pecking order.
- You can negotiate the resources you need through the channels of the system.
- You can learn to defend yourself and your team in the event of a political disaster.

How to recognise political animals in your workplace

These tips will help you to recognise some of the political animals that may exist in your workplace, with some quick tips on how to recognise them.

The Magpie: steals whatever is shiny and new – including other people's bright ideas. They take the credit for other people's work, while pretending that they are 'the only ones who do any work around here'. To prevent the magpie from gaining power, make sure you don't broadcast your ideas to colleagues unless you are sure you can trust them. When you come up with good ideas, put them

in writing and distribute them to the appropriate people. If you are managing a team that includes a magpie, give credit only where you are sure credit is due, and try not to single people out for praise individually – recognise the efforts of the team instead.

The Leech: leeches are famous for the power of suction and the workplace leech is no different. The leech spends most of its time pandering to the people they work for. A leech will make sure they look good, join the right clubs and speak to the right people in order to get ahead. Make sure you don't give a leech any ammunition that they could use against you when they are hanging around the power players and don't become a leech yourself – stick to your morals and your ethics, as hard work and honesty are far better ways to impress people.

The Shark: the shark will beguile you with its big teeth and big smile but it will ultimately betray your trust and bring you down with one big bite. The shark is a backstabber, so be careful what you divulge to sharks as they will use this information against you to sabotage your working relationships and career.

The Monkey: in the jungle, monkeys spend most of their days swinging on vines and chattering – much like the monkeys in the workplace who spend their time hanging off the office grapevine. These people are rumour-mongers, who spread gossip around in a flash. To counteract the monkeys, make sure that whatever messages they hear from or about you are modified to your advantage.

The Squirrel: believes that information is power. Squirrels tend to be experts in their field, but they hoard away information and are loathe to share it. They won't volunteer answers to your questions. The fact that you have to go to them and ask is what makes them feel important. You can reduce a squirrel's power by ensuring that open communication channels exist for all information.

The Geese: As the old saying goes, 'birds of a feather flock together' and the workplace geese are a clique of people with the same interests. These interests can be absolutely anything, from working on the same project to a shared interest in knitting. Whatever it is that binds them, they talk to each other often and will share information freely amongst themselves. If you are not a member of the group but want to be, then try to cement a relationship with one or two members of the group at first – broader acceptance will follow naturally. If, however, you have no interest in becoming part of the clique, the best way to handle them is to remain impartial.

The Lioness: Although the lion may roar about being the king of the jungle, everyone knows that the lioness is the real power behind the throne. Some managers won't do anything unless they have consulted their personal advisor(s), so if you want to influence this manager, make sure you influence their advisor first.

The Dinosaur: in some organisations where the structure is so old it is practically prehistoric, you may find the dinosaur. You will also find them in organisations where rules rule. Procedure and processes are vital to dinosaurs and there is no situation in the world in which they would be willing to bend the rules. Make sure that whenever you deal with them you do it through 'official channels', otherwise they may ignore you completely. By playing their game, you will rise in their esteem and they will be more likely to treat you favourably in the future.

General tips for office politicking

- Be aware of the levels of office politics, formal and informal.
- Be aware that not everyone will become a friend or ally, but everyone is thinking politically to some extent. Thus there will be times when people help out simply to be seen doing so, and will disappear when the limelight moves on.
- Be aware that people will be trying to find out what you can do for them. Try to work out who is trustworthy, dependable and interested in a relationship of equality.
- Do not become a sycophant, or a yes-man/woman.
- Avoid hypocrisy.
- Try to identify those who play the office politics game to the exclusion of all else, and stay out of their way.
- Develop relationships with those who have access to information channels, e.g. secretaries and managers.
- Develop relationships with those at the centre of key cliques, and cultivate mutual respect and dependence with them if you are unable to gain access to the group yourself. The opinions of these few key players can swing the opinions of large sections of the organisation in your direction.
- Beware the related effect, in which favour lost with key players can turn vast groups against you.
- Do not withhold details of important developments unless absolutely necessary. An advanced rumour mill accompanies the office political system, and will fill silence with rumour unless you are quick to fill it with fact.
- Network with peers, use lunches, seminars and conferences to build up a network, but bear in mind that this is a reciprocal relationship.