

How To Handle Politics Smartly In American Corporate Environment

Workplace or office “politics” means the use of influence, power and social networking within an organization to achieve goals or changes that benefit the organization or the individuals within it. Many of us view it as a dirty word, even immoral. We view the people engaging in work politics as selfish, dishonest people who play dirty tricks, backstab, “suck up” to the right people and do whatever they need to do to get what they want, regardless of what damage they cause. We don’t want to get anywhere near these people. If you are one of the people who view “politics” this way, I would like to present a different view, one based on my professional experience and that of many people I’ve worked with.

Politics exists to some extent in any company and organization. Politics is about human interactions and relationships, and as long as there are people interacting and working together, politics is part of life. It’s not the office or buildings that create political behavior, it’s people. While many of us associate political skills or behavior as undesirable, it’s up to us to practice “good” politics or “bad” politics. For sure we have seen undeserved people who got promoted by using their political skills, by scheming their way and by sucking up to the right people. However, from my professional experience and talking to many executives, high performing and successful employees are skillful politicians who practice “good” politics with the right intention – striving to achieve win/win, influencing people in a positive way and thinking team first. The people who achieve some success through practicing “bad” politics by backstabbing, spreading false rumors, bullying with “me first” attitude eventually will be exposed and they won’t be able to sustain their “success” in the long term. Be confident that you can definitely participate in workplace politics without compromising your value or integrity. Especially in American business and corporate environment, having good political skill is crucial to your being able to get your work done, and to achieve great results and success throughout your career. This skill is a must in American business culture.

In this chapter, I’ll describe what skills and qualities are required to be good at workplace politics, and I’ll show effective strategies to play office politics.

Required Skills and Criteria To Be Effective at Workplace Politics

I explained in details many of these skills throughout this book and I’ll summarize them here for you. I strongly encourage you to review these relevant chapters from time to time, and to continue to improve these skills. It’s highly unlikely that you can succeed at workplace politics without them.

- **People/teamwork skills.** As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, politics is about human interaction and relationships. While you don’t have to be best friends, you must be able to work well with people. These fundamentals include communicating, collaborating and negotiating skill (conflict resolution included). Having patience and really listen to people is a key part of being a good communicator. All good communicators are good listeners. Your colleagues will appreciate you when you go out of your way to help them when they need it. This will also earn you a lot of goodwill that will come in handy when you

need it later. Being able to resolve issues and conflict in a professional manner without getting personal will endear them to you and earn their respect. I cannot emphasize this skillset enough.

- **Credibility.** Building credibility is something you earn over time. Credibility is earned by meeting our commitment, delivering excellent results on time, being dependable, and helping out when needed. This applies to everyone you work with, including your team members, colleagues, managers and executives. You need to do this continuously. Keep in mind that while it takes continuous track records to build credibility, you can lose credibility quickly. So remember to continue maintaining and building your credibility and not slipping up on your commitments.
- **Trust and loyalty.** You can earn trust and loyalty by being a good team player, by putting the team ahead of yourself and by showing genuine care for your co-workers. People will more likely give you the benefit of the doubt because they believe you are honest and you put the interest of the team ahead of your own. Respect what people say and genuinely seek to understand instead of being condescending and talking down to them. People in turn will reciprocate their respect to you and their trust in you. When you speak up, people will listen, take your words at face value and not have to wonder if you have any hidden agenda.
- **Goodwill credit.** You can accrue goodwill credit that you can use when you need help getting your idea through the corporate political process in the future. You can achieve this by helping your boss and other people succeed and making them look good. I once had a manager who said my most important responsibility is to help him succeed. If your boss is respected and has credibility with their peers and bosses, they can be your advocate in helping you sell your ideas. And by helping other people succeed, they know you put the team's success first and would be more than willing to support and carry your idea forward. I covered this in details in the "How To Standout At Work" and "How To Manage Up" chapter.
- **Expertise in a key area.** Being viewed as an "expert" in a key area expands your sphere of influence. You are seen as a "go to" person. Important people in the company and executives rely on you for your opinions and recommendations. A person could be an expert in a new and emerging technology, a master presenter or a business analyst guru while someone else could be recognized as a creative marketing expert. When I was in Product Operations, we had a person who was responsible for Business Analytics and Metrics. She was the person our manager and other executives went to when they needed a thorough analysis on a business problem, or company reports to prepare them for upcoming meetings with industry analysts. Everyone knew her as the go to person in the business analytics area. Having "power" or "influence" is a key element to succeed in playing the office politics.
- **Visibility.** If people don't know you, you will have a very difficult time persuading people in the company to buy into your idea. If you are recognized and are viewed positively by important people in the workplace – your manager, other managers, executives, influencers, key decision makers, etc., they are much more likely to meet with you and listen to your ideas and opinions. Getting an opportunity to meet with them to sell your idea is halfway through the battle. You must seek out opportunities to get visibility with "key" people in the company. The "How To Standout At Work" and "How To Manage Up" chapters give you practical ideas and ways to gain visibility with people at work.

Effective Strategies For Workplace Politics

I described in the above section the skills and qualities you need to have to be effective in office politics. Now, let's look at practical strategies to navigate workplace politics (Mindtools).

- **Identify "powerful" people.** Since politics is about people using their influence and connections to achieve their goal, knowing whom the "powerful" people are is obviously one critical element to your success in workplace politics.
 - Study organization chart. Begin with the company top hierarchy chart with the CEO and their executive staff. Obviously the buck stops with the CEO. However, CEOs don't normally make every decision. It's not possible even if they wanted to since they need to focus on the strategy and directions for the company, and they would rather focus their limited time on the most important and strategic decisions.

While most important decisions are discussed and made at CEO/Executive staff meetings, one or more executives are responsible for driving the details in the meetings. For other decisions, certain

executives decide or have their own management staff drive the decisions. In addition to the CEO/Executive Staff organization chart, look for the organization chart of each of the executives on CEO's staff. It shows you what department they lead and give you ideas of the type of decisions they are driving. More over, you'll see the executive's management staff and that will give you more breakdowns of their department and respective reporting management staff. Depending the size of the company, the number of management layers can vary, from very flat 1-2 management layers to 6 or more. In the most recent company I was at, there were 7 layers - from the individual contributors to the CEO.

Refer to Chart 1 below for an example of organization chart of a Fortune 500 company. The CEO organization chart (blue squares) should be on the company's website. The other organization charts (for example, WW Marketing Exec/Staff chart in gray squares and middle management chart for Product Marketing group in orange squares) can be found on their respective internal company websites. If not, contact their administrative assistant for the most recently updated charts. Since management turnovers are not unusual, make sure you keep up to date organization charts.

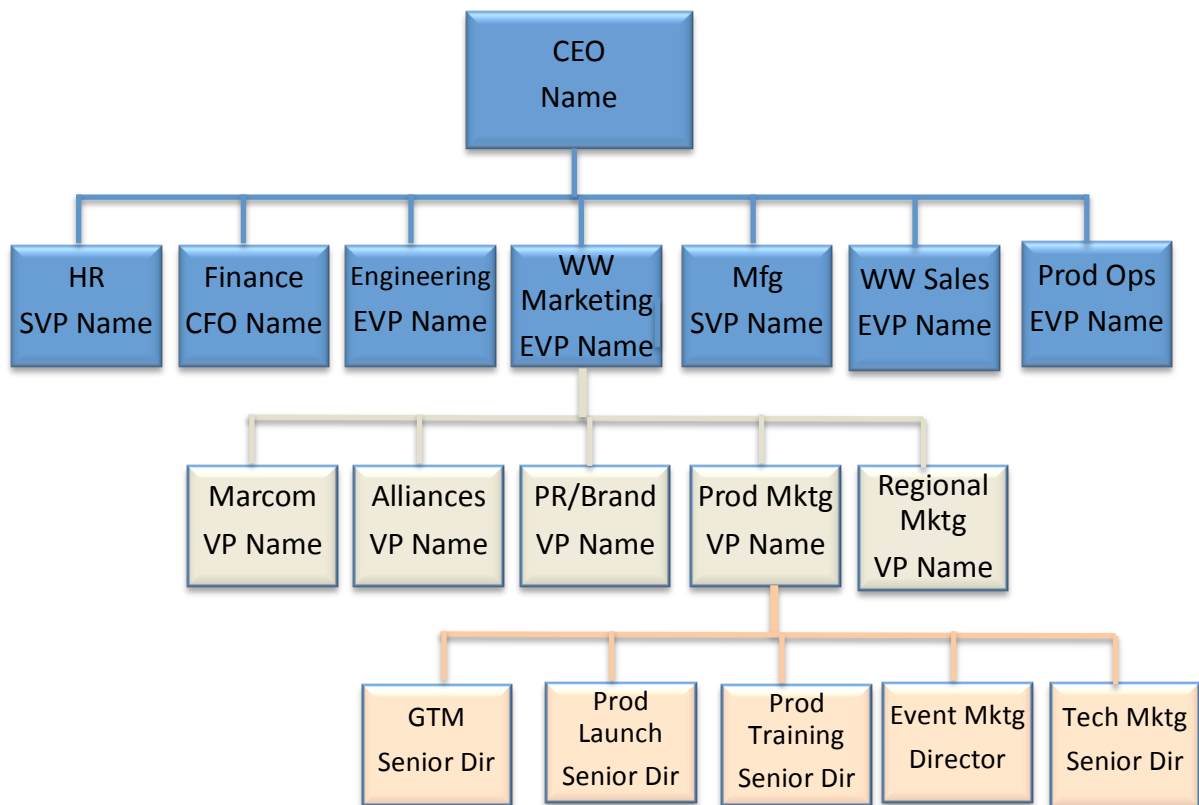


Chart 1. Sample Organization Chart – CEO/Exec Staff Chart, WW Marketing Exec/Staff Chart and Product Marketing/Staff Chart

- In addition to the decision makers you can identify fairly easily on organization charts, key influential players and gate-keepers are as or even more important for you to connect. These people may not have executive titles nor can they be identified by their titles. Executives and decision makers oftentimes value their opinions and rely on them for relevant information to help the executives make decisions. They are sometimes view as the “right-hand” people of the executives. Executive Chief of Staff and Executive Administrative Assistants oftentimes are key “gate-keepers.” They control access to executives, set and manage executive agendas, and determine the information flow to them. While they may not be involved with the content of the decision, they are no less important in determining your effectiveness and success in navigating workplace

politics. I was Chief-of-Staff (COS) for a Senior VP in the Product Operations organization of a Fortune 500 company for a year. I set up his meeting agenda, determined for the most part the issues to be discussed, reviewed people's request to meet with him one-on-one, and decided what information to provide him. So you can see while I didn't make decisions, I had a great deal of influence at managing workplace politics in his business unit.

- Find “informal” networks. These networks are not shown on the organization charts. They comprise of employees who share some common ground – such as team members on a company initiative, members working on key strategic plans, members of company social club, participating members of company sporting events or company-wide events. These people tend to share some interests, knowledge or passion in a particular area; they meet regularly or periodically, sometimes outside of work hours, including lunch breaks or after work social hours. Since company management and executives are aware of many of these networks, they pay attention to them, give them a lot of visibility, and lean on them for insight and viewpoints. As a result, these networks can have significant influence on the decision makers.

Find out about these networks, pick one or more that are of interest and benefits to you and find ways to join them. Talking to your co-workers, managers and mentor is a good way to identify these informal networks. Company newsletter or communications oftentimes include news and updates about these groups and their activities as well as invitation for people to join them. Pay attention in meetings or presentations to see who has visibility and credibility with executives. Through these tactics, you'll be able to not only identify these networks, but who the leaders are. It's always easier to join these networks if they already know about you and have a good impression of you. So it'll benefit you to continue to build credibility and trust in your workplace. Refer to “How to Earn Trust” and “How to Stand Out” chapter for more information.

- **Get a mentor who can be your champion.** A mentor can do wonder for you. A well-respected and connected mentor has a lot of insights you can tap into that you can't get easily. They know the key decision makers, influencers, important informal networks, and they know how to get things done effectively. Not only they are fantastic resources for you to test your ideas and seek advice, but they can also help you sell your idea and get buy-in from key decision makers and influencers. While I didn't think much of it early in my career, I became convinced and appreciated having a mentor. When I first met with my mentor, I had very little idea of organizational politics and how to work with different people to get work done. From over a long period of time having regular 1-1 meetings with him, sitting in executive meetings he participated, meeting key people he introduced me to and helped me join their networks, I then truly understood and appreciated how to “play” workplace politics and I am truly grateful to him to this day. To identify potential mentor, observe in executive meetings, watch speakers at company wide meetings or presentations, ask your manager and talk to your colleagues are some of the ways to find out. Ideally, your mentor should be at least at your manager's level or even above and also someone who is well liked, well respected and valued by people in the company. Once you know who you would like to have for a mentor, ask your manager to help you or if that mentor knows you and has a good impression of you, ask them yourself.
- **Understand the decision making process.** A key element of understanding the decision making process is knowing who the ultimate decision makers are so you have good insights on how to develop your game plan. Depending on the size of the company, different types of decisions may be made by different people. In a medium/large size company, decision-making is delegated to the appropriate people. For example, a decision of allocating resources to an engineering project may be made by the Head of Engineering or an Engineering Department manager, while a decision on whether to cut an important project is decided by the CEO/Executive. A decision on going ahead with a marketing event may be made by the Marketing PR manager (Public Relations), while a decision to form a key strategic marketing alliance with another company is decided by the Marketing Executive. More narrow and specific decisions may be made by middle or lower level managers or even team leaders, such as whether to do additional testing or what equipment to use for a customer demo event. At small companies, most decisions – whether big or small, may be decided by the CEO and a couple of executives.

Understanding how decisions are made is another important element. Are they made by consensus with a group of people or by one leader with input and recommendation from the working group and others? Are the decisions top-down or decided collaboratively. If you are a group leader working on a project and the decision is made by consensus, you know you need to get buy-in from all the key participants. If the decision is ultimately yours with input from others, you can structure your meetings and discussion accordingly. Similarly, if you/your team needs approval on a proposal and the decision is made collaboratively by a group of managers, including your boss and their peers, then you know you need to get the buy-in from all those participating managers. Obviously, the more consensus the decision-making process is, the more challenging it will be, and this is where you'll earn your pay with your "political" skills.

So how do you go about understanding the decision-making process. You'll be able to develop a good insight by talking and asking your manager, your colleagues, picking your mentor's brain, asking to sit in to observe key decision-making meetings at all levels, CEO meeting, department head meeting, team meetings and project review meetings. When I left a company to join another company as a Pricing Strategist, I learned from my previous experience. I requested my manager (and he agreed) to take me to his meeting with the Executive Staff. He introduced me to them and described to them my role. After sitting in the back of the room and observing several sessions, I gained a good insight on the inter-workings of the group – whom did people listen to, who asked the right questions, who was the master at working the room, who was seen as the leader/decision maker. I also learned about the decision-making process – it was very much collaborative and discussions can be lengthy with many differing points of view. I also did the same with other lower-level meetings.

- **Find common ground.** A common ground helps people gravitate toward each other and gives them a rallying point to work together. Find out what people are interested in, what they are passionate about, what their goals are, and similarities you have with them. In order to get people to gravitate toward you and to be excited working together, you first must establish your worthiness to them and to the company. You can accomplish this by exhibiting the skills and qualities I described in the first section of this chapter. Once people experience and see this first hand, they will trust you and you will have gone a long way to be effective at managing workplace politics.

With the example I mentioned above when I joined a company as a Pricing Strategist, I learned from sitting in meetings and talking to different people, that the Senior Executive VP of Strategic Planning, who was widely respected, has a serious passion for pricing. During any meeting where pricing subject was discussed, she would perk up and engage even more than normal in the discussion. Recognizing this, I asked for a 1-1 meeting with her where we discussed in-depth about the company pricing challenges and I got a great insight into her thinking. After the meeting, she asked me to set up monthly meetings with her to go over and discuss all things pricing. You can imagine my excitement about this opportunity to get such an important person to be an advocate for me. So keep your ears and eyes open and look for common ground.

- **Pick your battle and build your case.** Part of knowing how to "play" politics in the workplace is knowing when to fold, when to go for it and how to go for it.
 - Pick your battle. Throughout your career, you'll have many opportunities to take on, to lead and shepherd through the organization. Not all opportunities are equally important or strategic, and while some opportunities are attractive to you, they may not be to your manager or company executives. It's important to show strong conviction, but realize that some opportunities you think are important and beneficial to your company, your manager and/or other managers may not share the same belief.

Although your idea maybe a great idea, it may not be not a priority for the company. The first rule is to ensure the idea you want to pursue is aligned with key decision makers. When working in product management for a mid-size company in the early 2000's, I had a colleague, David, who believed strongly the company must develop a blade storage server soon. Without convincing data, he nevertheless persistently pushed his case to the VP of Product Management and even after the VP made it clear that while the idea had potential, the market was not ready for this technology and

the company had other more urgent priorities to pursue, David would not let it go. He became obsessed with his idea and grew increasingly frustrated, causing a lot of tension between him and the VP and between him and the engineering team. Out of frustration, he quit the company and did not leave in good terms. While one can argue the validity of his idea, David did not make sure that his idea aligned with the key decision maker's priorities, let his ego get in the way and did not pick his battle. I think it would have been better for David to put his idea on hold, work on another opportunity that aligned with the company's priorities and continue to gather research and go back to his idea at a better time in the future.

- Build your case with strong supporting data, credible intuition and stay with your conviction. Many executives, especially today, are driven by data and analytics. To be successful in getting buy-in to your ideas, you must prove your ideas have merit and facts. "Fly by the seat of your pants" or "swinging from the hip" proposal will likely not see the light of day. With the increasingly intense competition and the need to continuing growing in sales and profit, companies must be selective in picking which opportunities to pursue. While intuition and "gut feel" based on experience is important to consider potential ideas, it's not sufficient for decision makers. Combining intuition and analytics and showing your conviction give you the best chance of getting their approval.

When I managed a team of senior professionals at Hewlett-Packard, I hired a consultant, Robert, to research on a potential server opportunity. After extensive research, Robert was convinced that the company needed to develop a server technology to allow data center customers to rack many servers in a tight space. I scheduled a review meeting for him to present his case to the General Manager's executive staff. At this meeting, he presented a compelling case on the need to develop this technology due to financial implications and competitive threat, and to bring it to market soon. However, two key executives did not agree with his recommendation. I believed the main reason was they were conservative and did not want to take the risk of spending multiple millions of dollars for this opportunity, even though the potential financial returns would be very profitable. After a lot of going around the circle discussion and the executives still did not want to make a decision, Robert stood firm on his conviction, saying: "I'm not saying we need to do this for my own satisfaction. You hired me to do this work so you can reject my recommendation and I'll go on to the next project, but I strongly believe we must do this for the reasons I've discussed." Everyone was a bit stumped hearing this, but I think they were impressed with his conviction and that he's making his case for the right reason. That he was willing to put his job on the line showed his strong conviction. The difference between Robert and David from the earlier example is that, while both had strong conviction, Robert showed he was willing to walk away as much as he didn't want to, and David stuck to his idea to the very bitter end.

- Get frequent feedback and address issues right away. With the Robert example above, one thing I would have done differently is to have Robert meet individually with the executive staff to learn about their concerns so he would be better prepared to address them in the meeting.
- **Seek out "opponents" and strive to understand them.** Most of us have a tendency to stay away from and ignore people who oppose us, oppose our ideas and who just want to shoot down our ideas. However, this would be the wrong action to take. You probably have heard the saying "keep your friends close and your enemies closer." You want to not only know who they are but also why they oppose you or your idea so you can take counter or preventive actions. Moreover, they may have legitimate reasons or concerns about your idea and if you know why, you can find ways to address and come up with a win/win solution.

When faced with this situation, you should meet with them with an open mind. You can establish an open dialogue by telling them about your objective, letting them know that you would like to hear from them and get their feedback, and committing to them that you would address their concerns. The key word here is "listen." Don't need to get defensive, stay with the subject matter and not get personal. If they get personal and attack you personally, do not let them. Let them know that you want to focus on the business issue and want to get their feedback, not personal insults or comments that are irrelevant to the idea. Ask for specific feedback and examples, not general comments. That should reset them to focusing their comments on the issue. If that did not work, thank you for their time and let them know you're always open to their input of

your idea. At least this way you know whom you can work with and whom you can't. Refer to "How To Handle Difficult Co-workers" and "How To Communicate Effectively" chapter for more suggestions.

- **Maintain professionalism.** I've heard often throughout my career when so and so is such a professional. People view these "professionals" with respect. These people focus on building relationships, working with people to solve problems, thinking out of the box to find creative and win/win situation. They focus on the business issues, not personal issues. They seem calm, maintain their poise under difficult situations and they don't get ruffled. Moreover, they tend to be optimists - glass half full people who don't waste their time with rumors, either talking about them or spreading them. When things are not going their way or when they are facing setbacks, they don't whine or complain. Instead, they focus on not just bringing problems to management, but bringing problems as well as potential ideas to solve them.

Of course, we are all humans with a full range of emotions. However, knowing how to express and control ourselves is important to play the "political" game well. We have seen many real politicians who lost their elections because of one "emotional" or "out of control" outburst. I have seen co-workers who lost their cool and started lashing out at their managers and other managers in meeting. They later regretted but the damage was already done. Their outbursts painted them as immature people who don't have what it takes to function well under pressure. These people ended up receiving poor performance reviews and eventually leaving the company. If they did not learn from their experience when they moved on to another company, I think they'll likely repeat the same mistakes and face similar consequences. If there's one advice I have it is this: the way to keep your cool and stay under control is to NOT take what people say or criticize PERSONALLY. Focus on the business issue and even when other people get personal, you stay laser focused on the issue and push them to get back on track with the issue. Refer to "How To Handle Difficult Situations At Work", "How To Deal With Difficult Co-workers" and "How To Communicate Effectively" chapters for more information.

