

## Organisational politics *learn to play the game*

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### Abstract

Humans by nature don't like politics, and when it comes to office politics, most of us stay away from it at any cost. However, despite of being averse to it, one is affected because companies by nature are political organizations. It is an unavoidable game that one has to play and if you don't know how to play, the need is to learn it. The current study has been undertaken to understand why it is important to learn office politics. We try to differentiate between an employee who doesn't want to play it dirty and the one who adopts himself quickly to the work culture, and how their work life is affected and how satisfied are they. The study takes its inputs from various articles, research papers, books, company reports and opinions of renowned management scholars to know what bearing does office politics have on an organizational culture and why should an employee be concerned about it. We also refer to the expert opinions to get insights and practical advice to deal with the political culture in any organization. In holistic manner this study helps an employee to make an impact in an organization and affect those around.

**Keywords:** Politics, Political Organization, Work Culture

### 1. Introduction

All organizations are result of human interactions and diplomacy is part of their very nature. Humans are political, so for that matter organizations will also be. The reasons of humans being so are manifold. While working in an organization, you deal with people with different psychology. So you need to strike a balance between what they want and what you want. Humans are also emotional, driven by unconscious needs and overwhelmed by insecurities. As Dale Carnegie once observed, "When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic but creatures of emotions". These psycho-emotional interactions make dealing with people difficult and simple tasks become tedious and complex leading to work stress. As a result we often see people underperforming, given to their inability to keep up with office politics in spite of them being hardworking and talented.

For an employee to deal with politics he needs to understand what office politics looks like and how does it affect him. In this study we try to bring forth the political behavior of the organizations and study its possible impact on an employee. Being politically active doesn't mean to play it dirty just to advance your own cause. Instead, it is about how good you are at building relationships with people who can provide your assistance and information as and when you need it. As Jeffrey Pfeffer in her article, "Don't Dismiss Office Politics – Teach it", put it right, saying, "It means informing others in the company about your contributions and accomplishments, and asking for advice and help, particularly from those senior to you".

Even though politics is supported up to some level by many organizations, most of the employees take it as biasness and discrepancy between what they wanted and what was given. This is exactly what Adam Smith's "Equity Theory of motivation" entails. It demoralizes employees and leads to hatred towards the management, which of course is not a position a company wants to be in.

This study shall deal with many aspects of the subject. We shall discuss the pros and cons of the work politics both from employee and organization's perspective. We shall also suggest some ways for an employee to get along with the organization and understand the kind of culture he is working in.

### 2. Objectives

Most of the employees keep away from getting involved in maneuvering and manipulating things to serve their interest. Probably this is what they have been told about office politics and possibly this is what they think office politics is all about. The study has been undertaken to rather present the organizational politics from different dimension. The objective of the study is to highlight the importance of learning this Necessary evil (as most of the management scholars will call it). As mentioned elsewhere in this reading, it is not about playing it dirty. It is about making yourself known and letting people recognize your contribution. It is about developing contacts and relationships within the organization that come handy when needed. The study has been undertaken to show that political skills are key to build a successful career. Politics is just relevant to everyone inside the work culture insofar as if anyone wants to make a difference; he needs to have some power and authority to do so. By the end of this reading, one should have clear understanding of the importance of learning politics at work.

#### 2.1 Literature review

Dana Rousmaniere writes in her article "What Everyone Should Know about Office Politics", published in Harvard Business Review (Feb. 2015) <sup>[1]</sup>, that it is important to understand why playing politics is so unavoidable. Work involves dealing with people, and people are, whether we like to admit it or not, emotional beings with conflicting wants, needs, and underlying (often unconscious) biases and insecurities. Our relationships with our colleagues - with whom we both collaborate and compete for promotions, for a coveted project, or for the boss's attention - can be quite complex. Not

everyone is friend or foe; many people are somewhere in between. And more people than you might think are lying to get ahead or gossiping as way to exchange information, vent their frustrations, and bond with co-workers when they don't trust their leaders. Put all of this together and you've got a highly politically-charged work environment. As Marty Nemko (Feb. 2013) <sup>[6]</sup>, a career and personal coach from Oakland, CA – United States rightly says, "I know, I know. You'd like to think you can succeed purely on your merits. In some offices you can, but in many others, you must know how to play the game". Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (HBR – Dec. 2014) quotes Sigmund Freud, "although humans are social animals, living with others does not come easy. Freud compared people to a group of hedgehogs during the winter: they need to get close to each other to cope with the cold, but if they get too close they end up stinging each other with their prickly spines. As per Tomas (2014) <sup>[3]</sup>, this very rule governs the dynamic of office politics. You can't go it alone, but working with others does require some discomfort.

There are generally two times in every rising executive's career that bring the biggest tests of their ability to manage organizational politics, as Jeffrey Pfeffer (Oct. 2011) <sup>[2]</sup> mentions while quoting Bonnie Wentworth, an executive coach in the San Francisco Bay area, in her article "Don't Dismiss Office Politics – Teach it". The first comes after about five to seven years, when the person begins to take on roles that depend less on their individual performance and more on what they can accomplish through the people around them. The second is usually after 15 to 20 years, or when the person steps into a senior role with even more visibility, according to Bonnie Wentworth, an executive coach in the San Francisco Bay area.

I don't believe it when I read columns by consultants that talk about the importance of avoiding all office politics and gossip. We aren't robots (Josh Bowman, June 2014). Being good at office politics demands you being good at making and keeping relations, not just with people around you now but those who have been with you before. As Josh says, it's easy to stay friends with former colleagues and bosses on Facebook and social media. Do it. They will come in handy in the future. They will give you advice, write a reference letter, or be a reference on the phone. Somehow, power and politics are dirty words. And in linking these words to the play of personalities in organizations, some managers withdraw into the safety of organizational logics, says Abraham Zaleznik (May 1970) <sup>[8]</sup>. However, one should also accept that efficient operations demand the authority be delegated and power transferred. Not all could be given equal power. Someone has to be a boss and other has to be a subordinate. Now who gets which label will depend besides other stuff, on one's political affiliations.

## 2.2 Reasons to behave politically

Robert Hogan, a renowned psychologist observes that workplace relationships depend on three bigger needs which he calls the "Master Motives". These needs together give rise to the politics and chasing of one's own interests. He calls the first needs as "Getting Along", which makes us social. Second, need to "Get Ahead", which is the reason of power struggle within an organization or a group. The final need that according to Robert defines work relationships is "Quest For Meaning". McClelland's need theory of motivation actually proposes the similar three reasons for an employee work

relations. According to McClelland, an employee has a Power motive, an Affiliation motive and an Achievement motive. He strives towards the realization of these three needs and may actually give in to maneuvering and manipulating the people and culture to achieve this. In that sense, we may think of politics as being the inherent nature of a person and an inevitable force of nature to which a person has to adapt to survive.

## 2.3 Politics and the organization

We call office politics as inevitable force, as we follow from our discussion so far. However, does that mean we can't beat it, and if we can't, shall we then promote it?

Research does find that political skills are key to successful career - good for both organization and employees. When a performing executive combines his ability of getting things done with the knowledge of what is expected of him, the organization benefits. In contrast, when a promising employee falls because of poor political skills, companies are in losses given to the fact that they have to spend time and money to get the replacement and performance suffers in the meantime. In that sense we might as well promote the politics. If you are rewarded for playing the game, why would you stop playing? But that's not always the case. The untrammelled politics have a corrosive impact on the work culture and this can be hard for management to realize. As Tomas Chamorro rightly says it, "To most employees, politics signals a discrepancy between what should be done and what is really done, defeating their own sacrifices and efforts. This leaves most employees demoralized and united only against their bosses or senior leadership"

The organizations have to know quickly who among their otherwise-performing employees need help at learning and playing work politics and how to impart them the skills they need to be successful.

## 2.4 Being good at politics

Mediocre employees rise while more competent ones languish. When you see this kind of situation at your workplace, know that politics it at rise and you need to shape up before you are shipped out. This is the time when you need to play careful, rather play positive politics. In this section we would discuss some affordable and working strategies that can help you learn and win at office politics.

- If you face a problem/dilemma at work and need some counsel, go to higher ups. Not just that, it is does no harm to you taking counsel about a personal problem. Make them feel valued. Let them know you value their advice, they will more likely defend you when you need.
- Halo effects are quite common at workplace and an act of kindness may have a lasting effect on your coworker. Stay longer in office someday to help someone on a target. Don't waste an opportunity to make a difference.
- Come out of your normal work schedule and do some vital, important and recognizable tasks. Make sure you ask the concerned whether you can take on this task. This keeps you off the blame in case of any ill consequences and you get the early recognition. Ask your senior whether I can type this report for you.

### 2.5 Keep your senses alive

There would be people who would always want you to look bad despite you playing positive politics. Probably because they want the promotion you are eying for. To play safe you would need to know who they are. Now here is how you keep your senses alive and find out who they are.

- When you speak to them, they will always cut the conversation short.
- At meetings they will always disagree with you, at least by gestures, rolling eyes, sighing and not paying attention – if not verbally.
- If you are kept out of resources you need to do the job quite often, try to find out the person behind this.
- When you ask for their advice or support, they get annoyed.

These are some ways that help you know the person who wants to stab you in the back, but by keeping the antennae out you would hopefully know him. Now once you know him, how can we foil him?

### 2.6 Listen to your Counsel

Go speak to your buddy at work, “Hey I can see he (Mr. X) is annoyed with me, what should I do.

### 2.7 Wisdom and Response

Marty Nemko writes in his article “Win at Office Politics Without Selling Your Soul”, that if your saboteur tries to put you down, especially in front of others, don't wimp out. Make a strong response, perhaps using humor. For example, you're proposing a solution to a problem at a meeting. Throughout your presentation, Joe is slouching, doodling and rolling his eyes. You might say something like, "Joe, it looks like my idea is putting you to sleep. Either you went to quite a party last night, or you have a better solution. Care to share it?"

### 2.8 Speak to him in Person

Sometimes things can be put off by a normal one-on-one session. You could just ask the concerned, what's the wrong I am doing? If you get the legitimate answer, you will need to change and if you don't, may be report him to the boss.

### 2.9 Publicize

Let other know about his behavior. Keep some evidence ready, else they will think of you as what you wanted them to think of him.

### 2.10 The expert advice

In this section we would see what people who have expertise in understanding the organizational culture, say. We would mention few of their recommendations about how to deal with work politics.

- **Be collaborative:** Silos are dangerous. Help out your colleagues and they will help you out. (Josh Bowman, June 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>.
- **Keep Your Antennae Out:** Sometimes, despite playing positive politics, someone will want you to look bad. You can't respond to his machinations unless you know who the perpetrator is (Marty Nemko, Feb. 2013) <sup>[6]</sup>
- **Learn psychology of power:** Once people learn about the social psychology of power, they can use these principles

to become more effective in their interpersonal interactions (Jeffrey Pfeffer, Oct. 2011) <sup>[2]</sup>

- **Be emotionally Intelligent:** No matter what the challenge, one of the surest ways to improve your political power is to strengthen your emotional intelligence - it's a key differentiator between star performers and the rest of the pack (Dana Rousmaniere, Feb. 2015) <sup>[1]</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

We conclude by saying, there do arise some situations in one's work life when he has to be political rather than apolitical. This might as well be the only way to get through this situation. You need power and support when you are mad about a decision that affects you. At some point in your career, you will have to make critical comments before higher-ups that is when you need support. Not just that, your boss could be a control freak or your colleague goes postal on you. These are the times when you need to exercise your political power and turn the things to your benefit. Of course this helps you survive and thrive in the organization, but make sure you play it positive. Don't be afraid highlighting your accomplishments before people around. Keep allies across the floor, all it takes is just one staffing change to shift the balance of power. And of course, “Don't get too much involved in power and politics. If power struggles become too much to take, it might be time to look for a new job”.

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