

How to Win at Office Politics

No, it's not about stabbing people in the back or doing absolutely anything to get ahead. Office politics is really about building relationships to get things done

By Beth Weissenberger

Ask people about office politics and I bet you will get some pretty negative reactions: about people being two-faced, jockeying for favor, getting an unfair advantage, or sucking up to those who can help them.

I invite you to drop the negative connotations and think about office politics in an entirely different way. Office politics are about people interacting and building relationships to get things done. They're about getting ahead and accomplishing more, making you more fulfilled in your job. Office politics are what happens in a conversation, who wins in a conversation, who gets what they want, who says nothing, and who gets nothing.

Let me explain.

When people say, "I don't engage in office politics," I tell them there is no such thing as not being part of it. When people say they don't play the political game, what they are really saying (though they probably don't realize it) is that they have figured out their place in the company and that's where they are going to stay. They have their relationships, they know the dynamics of those, and they limit their interactions with people outside of their comfort zone. They are afraid to make waves so they limit who they deal with and talk to and what they try to achieve. So, if this is what you're doing, trust me, you are engaged in office politics. You're just doing it at a lower level, and in a way that isn't going to help you advance yourself.

Getting to Know People and Being Known

Before we go any further, let me make it really clear that I am not talking about—and I am certainly not advocating—being dishonest, sabotaging people, or ruining others' reputations. All that is just bad behavior, period. I'm talking about getting to know people and being known. About being someone people want to know and want to help be successful. It's about communicating what you want and what you see. Your superiors aren't going to know what you think or have to offer if you don't speak up.

Here's an example: A high-level executive we coach at The Handel Group who wasn't happy with his current position told us how much he hated brown-nosers and how he couldn't bear the idea of being thought of as one, so he limited his contact with people higher up in the company than he was. He didn't socialize with them, take advantage of any opportunity to get to know them better, or let them get a sense of who he was.

On the other hand, this man had great relationships with the folks who worked for him. He had a reputation for helping people who had been his employees get promoted. This seemed like a real disconnect, so we finally asked him, "Do you think the people who work for you who are friends with you are brown-nosers? Did you ever help anyone get a better job who didn't deserve it?" He said, "Of course not!"

We had to point out to him that if he wanted a bigger job with the company he was going to have to build relationships with the people above him—the kinds of relationships that people had built with

him. Why should he think of it as brown-nosing when we were talking about the same thing that people were already doing with him? Once he saw it that way, he worked on building relationships above him, not just below him, in the hope that eventually he would be able to speak up about his future in the company.

Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

He was friendlier with the top execs and eventually got to talk to them about what he wanted. His superiors were happy to hear he wanted more responsibility; they hadn't known it before. Now he is in charge of a \$3 billion division—and got a big boost in pay, not just in responsibility.

I'm not going to tell you that all you have to do to get a promotion and raise is start hanging out with your superiors, but trust me, if people don't know you, they can't think about you when it becomes time to think about who to promote.

Often, a person doesn't step out of his or her comfort zone at work and build relationships because they are just terrified to do it. What if it backfires, what if someone thinks they are a brown-noser, what if their attempts at building relationships are rebuffed? If this sounds like you, ask yourself this:

Are you any different than you were in high school? Do you diligently do your work and do exactly what you're supposed to, keeping opinions to yourself—just like you did then? If this is who you were and who you are, you first have to ask yourself if you're O.K. with it. If you are, fine. But if you're not, the quicker you see this about yourself (if that's applicable), the quicker you can change your label and develop new behaviors that actually serve you instead of hinder your progress.

If you are not actively engaged in building and nurturing relationships at work because you are afraid, you are sidelining yourself.

So, what can you do to enter the politicking/networking/relationship-building game?

1. Network, both above and below you. Yes, there are all kinds of social networking opportunities available online. I'm talking about getting to know the people you work with. Invite them for coffee, or volunteer for extra projects.

2. Get a mentor, someone you respect. I can almost guarantee the person will be flattered and eager to help.

3. Initiate something fun at your workplace. That's another way of showing leadership.

4. If you find that there are things you want to say but you can't bring yourself to say them, you need to work on that. Some suggestions: Ask your mentor for help in getting over this, take a public-speaking class, get a coach, find an ally at work who you can do a project with. You won't feel so exposed that way.

The more relationships you nurture at work, the more you can get done and the more fun it will be. Don't hate the game of politics; play it to win—but play it authentically and honorably. If you don't know how to play, learn. Remember, it's just humans interacting. So get out there, play with people, and stop hiding!

Beth Weissenberger is CEO and co-founder of [The Handel Group](#), a New York-based [coaching company](#). As head of the Executive Practice, she has worked with numerous CEOs and their teams on integration challenges, breaking down silos, and changing corporate culture