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# PART OF THE JOB: THE POSITIVE SIDE OF OFFICE POLITICS

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Backstabbing, gossiping, and the dangerously, flirtatious dance of the corporate moth around the office fire – also known as workplace politics – can be a costly affair. A 2002 British survey found that managers spent an hour a day engaged in politics. Such actions and more cost the UK an estimated 7.8b GBP in productivity loss a year.

A 2007 study by the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development) found that 60per cent of managers regard career change linked to promotion as very or extremely challenging. Nearly half of the senior executives surveyed said they were unable to cope with backstabbing, conspiracy, jealousy or plotting, while a quarter rated office politics as the toughest challenge they face.

So what should one do about it? There are generally two schools of thought: accept that it's inevitable and learn to roll with the punches, or the 'reject and avoid it' camp.

Jane Horan, author of *I Wish I'd Known That Earlier in My Career: the Power of Positive Workplace Politics*, belongs firmly to the former category.

"The sad reality is that organisations lose talented managers because they're ill-equipped to navigate the unwritten rules, or fearful of embracing politics. Most organisations do not teach savvy and few managers learn the necessary skills too late. Others put their heads down and hope 'it' will go away," Horan writes in the book.

Is there such a thing as positive office politics? Horan defined positive politics as the "building coalitions for the good of the *organisation*" without sacrificing integrity or values while negative politics is framed as "building coalitions for the good of *the self only*".

Most literature on positive office politics tend to focus on looking out for the “self” but this book looks at how a leader might potentially advance the interests of her team if she knows how to get management to back a good idea, and recognise the contributions of the team.

### **Savvy = Success**

To Horan, being able to navigate the often-murky political waters of organisations is a critical leadership skill and a building block for success.

This means one needs political savvy: being aware of the unwritten rules of operating inside organisations, embracing the political nature of organisational life, and having the skills and intuition to navigate successfully.

The book is peppered with cautionary tales of how talented people can be “passed over for promotions, made redundant, or leave organisations because they don't understand how to work with politics or they refuse to do so.”

Case in point: A hard worker with a brilliant idea buries himself so deeply into developing this idea that he doesn't realise that his boss does not have his back. He discovers too late that he's been a victim of office politics. He loses a job while the company loses a talented individual.

If he had political savvy, he would have had a better grasp of the political landscape (who has power, what are the power dynamics, and how to access power). This could have helped him to sell his ideas, get management's backing, and put his ideas into action.

But how does one become savvy? Horan says the first step is to understand and connect to power – the cornerstone of savvy. Next, learn to self-promote and gain visibility within the organisation.

### **Understanding power shifts**

Horan uses in-depth examples to illustrate her points. She wrote about how two talented executives, who were not in-tune with the ebbs and flows of power, failed to “read” the power shifts and were eventually beaten out of the game. This is particularly relevant for executives in the throes of mergers and acquisitions.

Throughout the book, the author would often stress that putting your head down and getting the hard work done based on technical skills and experience is a good thing – but only up to a certain point. Once a person ascends the corporate ladder, there is a need to understand social dynamics because power and politics are inextricably linked.

Here, Horan calls for readers to reframe “power” by thinking of it not as a contrived, coercive force, but one that aids decision-making and organisational effectiveness.

Simply said, when you know how power works, it should be easier to collaborate and to get things done. And if you don't have the ability to suss out the power dynamics, Horan offers up a practical, systematic approach: map out the network in the organisation and make notes of who holds power.

Study how one person is connected to another, and how that links back to you and your team – directly and indirectly. Also, examine who might have a stake in your success, who might view you as an obstacle, and your 'visibility' to the powerful. With these relationships mapped out, one can then make sense of one's place within the power grid, so to speak.

### **Be your authentic self**

The second thing one must do is to acquire the savvy is to learn authentic self-promotion. It should not be about bragging, Horan insisted, but about making sure good work is visible. "It's about reframing your thinking, understanding that your knowledge and what you do is vital to the business."

If you cringe at the thought of "self-promotion", think of it as "story-telling with substance," She advised. "Even if you don't like the sound of self-promotion, the ideas (that you share) are important for the organisation and your team. If you manage a team, they depend on you to promote and guide them."

Self-promotion can be in the form of sharing thoughts and knowledge from one's field of expertise that can benefit the organisation. This can be done in an authentic manner if you take a genuine interest in connecting with others and sharing your insights. Also, choose a medium that comes most naturally: one-on-one meetings, small group discussions, email or even blog posts.

Next, having a recognisable and personal brand will help a person to communicate his or her strengths, skills and performance.

If your brand is strong, there is less need to self-promote – so those who are averse to self-promotion could put more effort into building that brand. "A powerful brand provides a connection and elicits a feeling from others. This emotional connection based on authenticity makes for a trusted brand," said Horan.

To leverage positive politics, Horan believes organisations and employees need to reframe their thinking and return to the "original definition of politics" which is to build coalitions for the greater good.

She recommends that organisations should strive to create a culture of positive politics, where staff are trained to develop savvy skills and paired with mentors to guide them effectively through political waters. This, she concluded, will not only help with talent retention, but also leadership development.