

Office Politics: Playing the Game

Politics, whether we are discussing George Bush and Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair, or the Shanghai mayor, usually carries a negative connotation. When encountered in discussions about what happens in companies, politics is described not just as negative, but as counterproductive and even, destructive.

A definition of politics is “the process by which a community's decisions are made, rules for group behavior are established, competition for positions of leadership is regulated, and the disruptive effects of disputes are minimized.”* Notice that this is a neutral definition; politics is one of the structures of behavior - common to all human relations.

Understanding politics - the process by which decisions are made - enables a manager to get things done in an organization. Politics become counterproductive only when self-interest of the individual is the main driver, or when the methods employed lack integrity.

Entering into office politics becomes a game of figuring out why people do what they do. It would be ideal if everyone worked from the same assumptions and beliefs, and based every decision on logic derived from those beliefs. Instead, underlying most decisions are varying beliefs, wants, needs and relationships, which influence the outcome. Your trick is to become an organizational observer uncovering the rules, power structure, and nature of the competition.

Begin by looking at the informal structure of relationships.

- Who went to school together? Who golfs, goes to church, plays cards or lunches together?
- Who gets along with whom?
- Who is respected?
- Who has influence?
- Who is feared?

Be curious about people and events.

- Why did they do that?
- Why did they think that?
- What will happen now?
- Why is this no longer in favor?
- Who will look bad, or good, if this happens?

Build your areas of influence.

- Who can give you insight into what is happening?
- Who needs your help?
- How can you give help and then seek help in the future?
- Can you anticipate what will be of value to someone and provide it?

Use your network to develop greater understanding of the organization.

- What do they think happened at the meeting?
- Identify possible objections in advance.
- Allow others to test ideas.
- Gather and share more information.

It is rare when someone shares with you the rules of the game. More often, you need to develop the skills of watching, listening, questioning, gathering and sharing information, collecting and calling on favors, building and leveraging your network. If you can combine these activities with a strong sense of your values, then you too

can participate in the game of politics with integrity and focus on getting things done.

* www.anthro.wayne.edu/ant2100/GlossaryCultAnt.htm

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