

Chapter One

POLITICAL RIVAL

You've always played it straight and gotten good results. Now you're up against a strong and cunning political rival who seems determined to derail your success.

The workplace is a competitive environment, and while team spirit and collegiality are widespread, competition is never far below the surface. While it might be comforting to think that as a team we are all pulling together with the same aims and objectives; this is only ever partially true. There will always be individual agendas, rivalry, and competition. And there will be politics. Appointments and advancements should be made solely in proportion to contribution and talent. It is reasonable to want this sort of simple meritocracy, but it is unrealistic and naive to trust that we will get it.

Not everyone plays by the rules. For some, winning is everything—and they use politicking—if that is what is required. For them, work is not an opportunity to contribute

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A Political Rival Dilemma

Someone has to replace Donna, so why shouldn't it be me? I have the track record and the experience, my evaluations are consistently top 10, I am in the top quarter of the talent grid, oh, and I would look great behind the desk of the Sales vice president.

I know life isn't always fair, but it would be a major injustice if I didn't get a shot at it. Donna has always been supportive of me, and the subtext of our conversations was always *when* rather than *if* I would succeed her. The time is right, and I am ready.

The only trouble is that Jane is going for it too, and she is one ambitious woman. To see her in action is something else; she seems to have no shame. I guess she would call it networking or stakeholder management, but to me she has just become a major kiss-up. She always has the perfect political sound bite on her lips, and she bends whichever way the political wind is blowing. It is amazing, but it seems that she agrees with everything our bosses say—even if they are saying different things—and no one seems to notice her duplicity. They don't see beyond her obvious charms.

She snipes and puts down any contributions that I might put forward. She excels at finding fault with everything I propose, and just *will not* let me get the credit for my ideas. I worry that even in a fair fight, she still might win. But playing the game her way, I don't know how I can compete. I just don't do politics—this is new to me—and would lose all self-respect if I played the game her way.

—Bill Lazelle, Head of Consumer Sales

for fair reward, it is an arena for self-advancement and gain. And when faced with a tough opponent who seems determined to derail our success, then we have a *political rival*.

Everyone Does Politics—So Get Used to It

There is no such thing as a nonpolitical organization, stop searching for it and learn to cope more effectively in the environment you have. Organizations—both by nature and design—are political, so to deny the existence of politics is to immediately hand an advantage to your political rival. Politics is a fact of organizational life, and it is not going to go away. To ask, “Is this a political organization?” is okay, but better questions are “What kind of politics do I have here, and how do I learn to deal with it?” Holding up your hands and claiming that you “don’t do politics” is no longer an acceptable excuse for not learning.

Have you ever been to a premeeting with a stakeholder to ask for his or her support at the next important forum? Ever thought carefully about the exact words to use in a communication to have maximum impact? Have you given someone an earlier deadline than you really needed in order to apply pressure for results? Or perhaps you have avoided a public confrontation and instead followed up with a private meeting. Maybe you have agreed to pick up a cost on your budget in exchange for a favor in return. Or have you supported a motion you disagreed with simply because the consensus was overwhelming?

Doing any of these things means you have behaved politically. But it wasn’t so bad, was it? Politics can certainly be bad, and most people can usually think of examples where the politics of self-interest have triumphed over common sense or decency. To label someone a “political animal” is usually to infer a slur on his or her character

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rather than deliver a compliment. But politics can also be a positive influence. Organizational politics includes all the behaviors you use to exert influence. You can have influence where you do not have power in this way.

In these days of matrix management and dotted-line reporting, politics is vital. Politics is how you make things happen and get things done in the gray areas and informal infrastructure of the organization. Politics is how you negotiate with your boss and peers, how you influence them and are, in turn, influenced. Politics is a key skill—not just for leaders and managers—but also for everyone who is working in the modern world.

If you want to be successful, then it is important to be influential, and this can only be achieved by recognizing politics at work, and by accepting that there is such a thing as positive, helpful politics. You may feel ambivalent about this, but you are already a political animal. What you need to decide is what type of political animal you are.

Of course there are bad politics, and in our example, it seems that Jane is not shy about using any influencing strategy. Whatever Bill thinks of her tactics, the fact is that she recognizes the reality of politics and is not afraid to use this to her advantage. Unfortunately for Bill, he seems both unwilling and unable to respond. While he continues to insist on not *doing* politics, he is unlikely to be able to resolve his dilemma and will continue to be outflanked by his political rival.

Action to Take . . .

- Stop searching for a nonpolitical organization in which to work.
- Recognize the reality and importance of organizational politics.

- Change your mindset if you only see bad politics at work.
- Recognize that politics is a skill set that can be learned.
- Get in an influencing skills program that explicitly deals with politics.

Play to Your Own Strengths—Not to Your Rival's

Organizations are full of political animals, the question is, what kind of political animals are they, and more important, what type are you? Because you have learned from people you have worked with, your style has evolved and developed over time. It is unlikely that you have taken a politics course and learned formally, so your political style will be based largely on what you have observed and selected from others. You have picked up both good and bad habits. And you have strengths and limitations.

The key to success is to identify and play to your own political strengths. Compensating for your limitations is worth it, but you have more potential if you play to your strengths. When you have political rivals, they use their own preferred style of influence, whatever comes naturally and easiest to them. When you see them in action—and especially when their style seems to get results—it is easy to be tempted into copying whatever they do. But in doing so, you hand them an advantage, especially if what they are doing does not come naturally to you. To copy your political rivals is to play the game by their rules and to potentially limit your chance of success.

Playing the game by your rules and to your strengths increases your chances of success. It moves the struggle

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with your rival from their home territory to yours. Politically, it moves you to a higher ground.

Your political style is also influenced by your personal values: what you believe in, what you understand as the difference between right and wrong. Your personal values act as a moral compass and must be aligned to your political style. To ignore this—or override your values—is to struggle with your own conscience and to invite stress. Being clear about your personal values—perhaps in the form of your own political charter—enables you to influence from a position of strength, with conviction and confidence.

Bill is allowing Jane to set the rules of the game. He correctly observes that by playing the game her way, he is almost certain to lose. Bill mistakenly believes that he has to copy what she does, but this would limit his own personal effectiveness. Being clear about his own influencing strengths and ensuring that these align with his personal values means that he is able to start an influencing campaign on his own terms and not those of his political rival.

Action to Take . . .

- Analyze your political style to find your own unique strengths.
- Ask Human Resources if they have an influencing style questionnaire to get a quality diagnosis—or go find one on the Web.
- Use your strengths—do not copy the tactics of your rival unless those tactics work for you.
- Be clear about your personal values and act in line with them.
- Create a personal political charter about what you believe in and how you will behave.

Use Your Energy to Influence the Decision Makers—Not to Fight Your Rivals

When confronted with politicking that you feel is unfair or offends you, it is easy to consider revenge and retaliation. It is normal to feel aggressive in the face of aggression, and because you are human, the fight-or-flight reflex drives you.

In a competitive environment, it is natural to keep score, and just as you are aware of those to whom you are indebted, you also keep track of those who offend. Only the most magnanimous and emotionally intelligent folk don't harbor grudges, and most people—somewhere deep down in their psyche—have a little black book where they keep track of the balance.

It is possible to spend more time fighting the many small political battles that come your way than doing good work. When there is a strong political rival to compete with, there are many opportunities to fight. But the energy that goes into fighting could easily go into building an influence campaign with the decision makers. Yes, it is important to defend yourself against the worst political fallout, but contrary to popular myth, attack is not always the best form of defense. It is too easy to concentrate on winning the battle but at the same time, end up losing the war. Why put energy into scoring points over a rival when you could be influencing the people who could help you, the people who actually make the decision?

Infighting between political rivals—however clever or subtle you think you are being—always has an audience. Mostly these bystanders are your colleagues, who might be viewing the ongoing politicking as a form of organizational sport or soap opera. But there may also be bosses,

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key stakeholders, and decision makers who will be less impressed. To them, it is more likely that the politicking between you and your rival resembles childish squabbling, which leads them to question your maturity and readiness for a more senior role. Most leaders have doubts about inviting quarrelsome children to become colleagues of theirs.

Jane has clearly chosen to go down an adversarial route by undermining Bill and inviting him to retaliate. Bill can decide to fight back, but as he admits, he is neither experienced enough, nor confident of success, and he seems to have run out of options. The time has come for him to start his own influencing campaign with the decision makers and focus less on infighting with Jane. He worries about what he regards as her blatant politicking, but perhaps he needs to focus on the facts that decision makers are seldom politically ignorant and most know a manipulation strategy when they see one.

Action to Take . . .

- Don't fight all political battles that your rival invites you to join.
- Spend more time with the decision makers than your rivals or adversaries do.
- Develop an influencing campaign aimed at the decision makers rather than at your political rival.
- Remember that blatant manipulation strategies are just that—blatant.
- Ask yourself, "If I was the boss, would I appoint someone who was a self-interested, politicking manipulator to be my colleague?"

Promotion Is Seldom a Right or an Inheritance—It Must Be Earned and Influenced

What is your career destiny? For many people, it is possible to see a clear career path. This might be a path of your own choosing, or it might be designed in partnership with or by the organization. Sometimes, it seems as if one particular role has your name on it. It could be the natural and logical progression for you and may appear to be what you were born to do. When your boss or stakeholders agree with you, and they infer that it is a case of *when* and not *if*, then destiny is compelling and easy to agree with. Securing the presidential role can easily be viewed as an inheritance rather than something that must be influenced and won. To believe the inference and subtext from the boss is to fail to appreciate the complexity of the organization or the rate of change. It creates political complacency and hands the advantage to a political rival.

It is fine, appropriate even, to have a career plan—a compelling vision of where your career will take you and what you will achieve. That is a positive mindset for success. What is naive is to assume that the role is your inheritance or your birthright. Your boss might be making supportive comments, even inferring that the job should be yours, but that is a soft promise, and you should not accept it. Bad bosses make these vague promises as part of their motivation strategies; unfortunately, they are mostly empty promises and usually more about manipulation than motivation.

In our example, Bill has a clear career plan and sees himself in the presidential role, which is positive. What needs to be challenged is the extent to which he has believed the inference from Donna that the role will be his. He believes that the role is his by right and for him not to get it would be an injustice. He believes the time is right and that he is ready, but does the organization agree with

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him? Has he done enough to influence events rather than relying on destiny? His belief in destiny creates a state of complacency in him, which his political rival can exploit.

Action to Take . . .

- It is wise and professional to have a clear career plan.
- Remember being *in line* for promotion is not the same as getting the promotion.
- Top jobs are no longer inheritances to be bestowed but opportunities to be won.

The Political Bottom Line

Stop asking if this is a political environment, and start figuring out what sort of politics the organization has. Remember that there are both good and bad politics, and you get to choose which to use. The difference between career success and failure is always underpinned by performance, but just being good at the job will never be enough. Meritocracy is not the only measure, and managing the complexity of organizational politics is becoming increasingly important. Expecting a promotion as an inheritance is simply naive—no matter how strong the inference.

Having a strong opponent—however devious—is a test, but it represents an excellent opportunity to raise our game and to practice at a higher level. Identifying our own influencing style and strengths and learning to play to these—rather than having the rules of engagement rewritten by a rival—increases our chances of success. It is vital that we align our political style with our personal values to have a clear direction and prevent us from being deflected by a political rival.