

Office Politics: All Politics is Local

I was brought up on politics. When I was in fifth grade my father ran for city council against a long term incumbent. My dad won! Months before the election, my father would go and knock on doors and hand out materials with his picture on it. Many times he would let me go with him, I loved to do that. We would go up and knock on doors and when people would answer he would shake hands with them and say "Paul, shake the gentleman's hand" (men never shook hands with a woman unless they put their hand out first). I got the swing of it; everywhere I went I would shake hands. I thought that politics and being friendly were what it was about. I guess with that definition I have been involved with politics all of my life.

Every time I go into a workshop someone will always tell me this office is full of politics. There is probably not an office that is not full of politics. All of us have heard the phrase, "it is not what you know but who you know " it seems that is what politics is all about, knowing people. The fun part of politics is when you are in the in crowd. The in crowd never complains and denies that there is politics. The bad part of politics is when you are on the outside. The trouble for most employees starts when they are on the outside of the in group. Politics works best when it includes all and all are involved with the big decisions. Politics works best when all have equal opportunity for shaking hands. People lose interest when they can't play in the game. My question for the week is: How do you handle politics in your office and how much does it influence getting your work done? All responses will be anonymous unless you say otherwise.

Office Politics Responses

One reason most people aren't in the game is because we do not know how to play the game. Everybody was not exposed to the ways of the world as it pertains to politics. How does one learn how to play? CA

The way I handle office politics is to make sure that all stakeholders have input in and access to decisions. Whenever possible, decisions are reduced to writing and distributed to all stakeholders. With buy in from staff who feel inside or outside of the main group, implementation occurs smoother. JJ -CA

About the Politics: I have been very fortunate to be able to ride the fence here but it is tricky and it does take away from my daily work in some instances just to be careful of what I say, etc. NY

I think the key to solving any office politics is communication and collaboration! When that breaks down, you have turmoil. When people are willing to share information and

work together as a team (another key word) things will run much smoother and benefit all the employees and the agencies. Agreement and trust are more words that work here. To find resolution on conflict in any situation you must state your side and listen to the other side, then craft a solution that works for everyone. And change your view sometimes, as nobody is always right. Admitting that for some is very hard. One final thought, I have seen politics in everything in life, work, home, sports, school, etc..... and I still don't like the game! TS -NY

I find it helpful to utilize the following rules.

1. Diplomacy.
2. Respond, but do not react negatively.
3. Do not get into clicks or gossip groups.
4. Be flexible.
5. Provide constructive feedback with possible solutions.
6. Be quiet and observe, when appropriate.
7. Treat every one with respect, even when you don't feel like it!
8. Never forget that your focus is to provide quality customer services
9. Focus on the problem not the person or personality.
10. Keep the communication channels open during difficult times.
11. Keep an open mind.
12. If you help to create a mess, own up to your own stuff and clean it up!! MH -GA

In reference to Office Politics-

We have worked hard at CED to build cohesive and caring staff teams that focus on providing the best service to our customers. At a recent staff training we implemented a new (to us) concept we call "Pods". (named for the groups that whales form that are composed of family members and others that travel together). Each "Pod" includes a person from the Case Management staff, Instructional staff, Management staff, Secretarial Support staff and Employer Services staff. We try to regularly share ideas and problem solve, share information and just get together informally to socialize. (and this is a challenge-CED covers the coast of Maine from Brunswick to Belfast) We have found that by applying the combined experience, creativity and wisdom of this diverse group, we can usually come up with solutions to tough cases, or create new options for dealing with issues that seemed particularly difficult. We can also share projects that require skills that we ,individually, don't possess. This system also tends to break up any cliques, and the other groups that seem to thrive on "office politics".

Of course, there still may be someone with a less than enthusiastic attitude. But, they somehow don't seem as threatened or resistant to the "Pod" as they would with some other team building method. Thanks again for the info- I regularly share your newsletter with my "Podmates".
Scott C.

Did you ever see "The best Little Whorehouse in Texas?" It had Burt Reynolds in it. Anyway the Governor...had a great way of maneuvering out of questions/politics. He called it the "Texas two step". It was great to see how when asked a question that would put him on the stop, he spoke without saying anything and while the reporters and others were trying to figure out what he said....he conveniently left.

Sometimes, we all do this two step. I try not to get involved in office politics. When asked a question, I am honest and above board with everyone. Do I sometimes tell a 'little white lie?' Yes....so I guess the answer is to know when to do the two step. Lulu-CA

Regarding Office Politics...the thing that struck me the most was your statement about "...when you're in it's fun, when you're out it's resentful."

I try to stay out of the political arena. When someone wants to share negative political stuff about what's going on in the office, I consider the source and just listen. I don't buy into their stuff and I don't take sides. I just listen. I have been lucky in that I have "inside friends" who trust me with information. I don't betray their trust. I also don't take office politics personally. If I need to "know it", it will be revealed to me, otherwise it's none of my business. If I am ousted because of politics, what good does it do me to build a resentment about it? I could scream "it's not fair!!!" Whoever said it would be? I pay attention to my side of the street and do my best to keep it clean. California

I "ignore" it. I can't be in the "in" group but I am IN the office and I don't like to consider myself as NOT in the group so I rationalize to make myself feel good by saying to myself - "I will not be involved". I have been involved with politics for so long in my life - been actively campaigning for candidates of my choice and worked in a political atmosphere. I was good at it. Now that I work for the County, I continue to do my work the best I can (I honestly know I am). I love my work and feel good about being able to make a difference in the lives of my participants - for me, this is what counts. My Supervisor is aware of it and am complimented most of the time for the many good things I do for the good of the program. I believe that when you feel good you tend to do good and people around you will know that. I have finally come to a point where "internal politics" will have to be ignored. You can't beat them, you can't join them but you can ignore them! Right? LD of CA

In reading your message regarding politics I realized that not only does every office have politics but every family as well. It is just as important to be in the in-crowd in the family or else a person may be abused or neglected whether it be a child or adult. You can almost tell if a person is a good player of politics by the way they answer questions. If the person answers without regard to how others are going to respond to them, they usually are on the upper level of the political game and no longer need to play up to the other members. If they are on the extreme lower level they usually believe they do not stand a chance of winning the political game but the need to please others is overwhelming. These are usually the persons that are abuse or neglected. They have poor self esteem and are the martyrs of the office or family. I think that it is difficult to self identify this problem making it difficult to change from being a winner of the political game. Everybody wants power and influence but once it is gained that person is target. I question is there actually

any power in families or the office? With political power there is 'extreme responsibility to maintain control. I wonder if the power is worth the back stabbing and effort? Anonymous

Office politics are office politics, with the dynamics of each office different. Taking a few steps back and watching how this dynamic works and who the players are is essential to surviving.

I have in the past tried to "buck" the system and made poor attempts and by passing the office politics. It doesn't work. The reality is that you must try to gain favor with the players to best have the office politics work in your favor.

Once you have determined who the players are making time to listen to them is essential. Find out about them, what their job is, what's their hobby, do they have children (grandchildren). Everybody likes to be complimented, talked to, and feel like you have an interest outside of work in the them. Then ask them to tell you about the dynamics of their office. Who does what, how does everyone interact. This all takes time, a couple of weeks at least.

You may feel that you are being stand offish, but not one will really notice as you are so new and still finding your way around. Once you have determined who the players are and what their roles are, you can better determine how you fit in. Should there be a group or person that you feel there is no connection with, I'd work on finding a nice way into that group or person. Being in (carefully) on negative groups (with a positive attitude) at least affords you the knowledge of what is happening to either avoid it or attempt (subtly) to counteract it. CA

As usual, you're absolutely right about the "in" and "out" crowds. But oddly, I have found that often the people in the "out" group are basically happy to stay that way and just gripe. Being in the "in" crowd comes naturally to me, but I've observed so many others who definitely want to stay in the "out" crowd by their own choosing, that it prompts me to say, "Different strokes for different folks!" Being a naturally friendly person who tries to include others in the activities or "fun", if you will, I've found that some people just want to be "observers" and some of them just want an excuse to be different or have something to use to justify their complaints. Politics are everywhere and in everything that we deal with all the time, we need to be the one to make our choices and a reasonable effort to include others. But we also need to understand that will always be the "outcasts", many by choice. Your Father, Paul, started you out right by connecting friendship and concern for others with "starting with a handshake or, if you will, extending friendship to other people". What he taught you was not to be afraid to do that and to have the confidence to make the first move towards connecting with other people (for whatever purpose). I'm sure your wonderful Father also taught you many other lessons by just setting a good example himself. You're a terrific motivator and a great person to know...I'm sure some of that came from your excellent upbringing which you mention in your seminars. Extend a hand to others first and see what great things can happen from that small simple gesture of friendship! Anonymous