



Office Politics

# You Can't Sit Out Office Politics

But you can use them to your advantage. by Niven Postma

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Illustration by Ivan Mesaroš

**Summary.** Office politics aren't something you can sit out. Most people look down upon them, but the truth is, they are a part of every organization. Office politics are about relationship currency and influence capital — and the power these two things give you or don't give... [more](#)



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**For more than two decades, I worked** as an executive across the corporate, nonprofit, and public sectors. Throughout these years, I wore my refusal to engage in office politics as a badge of honor. To anyone who would listen (and perhaps even a few who wouldn't), I said: "I really don't have the stomach for all of that stuff. Politics are dreadful, dangerous, and unnecessary, and I'm simply too straightforward for all of the subterfuge they require. I don't come to work to play games — I come to work to get things done."

Given my approach, it's unsurprising that I was entirely unprepared and out of my depth when, several years into my career, I was laid off. It wasn't because I was performing poorly or failing to meet my goals. It was because I had neglected to form relationships with people who had the power to advocate for my job.

I was let go under the guise of "budget cuts," but in reality, I had been gracefully and expensively fired without question or reproach because someone with authority wanted me gone. This is an example of "office politics" at their worst.

The experience made me realize that my head-in-the-sand approach needed updating. It was high time I became a little more *politically* intelligent at work. I immersed myself in the topic. I read every article, book, and study I could lay my hands on and sought professional guidance from a fellow executive-turned-coach.

The more I learned, the more I began to reflect on my career. Though I reached a great deal of success, there were also many opportunities I had missed and many times that I had faltered as a result of my lack of education around office politics. It's not subject covered in most colleges or business schools, despite the fact that it's essential to surviving (and thriving) in every work environment.

That's why, in my work now, as a global consultant, I've made it a priority to educate professionals at every stage in their careers on organizational politics and how to navigate them at work.

## **Understanding the myths**

Despite all the negative connotations, office politics are not inherently evil. They are about two things: influence and relationships, and the power these two things give you — or don't. Having now lectured about organizational politics to thousands of employees around the world, I have uncovered five myths that are as widespread and harmful as they are naïve and as universal as they are wrong. If you're starting out in your career and think it's best to sit politics out, you should learn the truth sooner than later.

### **[ Myth 1 ]**

**You can either be a good person, or you can play politics.**



In every lecture or workshop I run, I start by asking people to use three words to describe office politics. One hundred percent of the time, 99% of the words given are negative. “Toxic,” “frustrating,” “dangerous,” “demotivating,” “draining,” “unfair,” “unnecessary,” “cliques,” and “gossip” almost always rise to the surface. Last week, an employee used the word “heart-breaking.”

The fact that these are the words we associate with office politics explains why this first myth is so prevalent. How could any of us possibly engage in things that are widely seen as toxic and dangerous, or at the very least unethical and unpleasant, if we are not ourselves toxic, dangerous, unethical, and unpleasant?

This myth is premised on an incomplete and one-sided understanding of what office politics really are. Though office politics can be used both ethically and unethically, at their core they are just the range of informal, unofficial, and sometimes behind-the-scenes efforts that happen in all organizations as people position themselves, their interests, their teams, and their priorities to get things done.

For example, let’s say you have a big meeting coming up where stakeholders at your company are going to decide which projects to invest in — including yours. If you’re savvy at politics, you know that to get your project approved, you first need to understand the priorities and perspectives of those stakeholders. You need to engage with them beforehand and learn what they are looking for so that you can more persuasively present your idea.

This is an example of how office politics can be ethically use to help you gain an advantage.

Even so, destructive and negative politics also can — and do — exist. In the same situation, if you were to spread a rumor about the lack of scientific evidence behind your colleague's project in order to get yours chosen over hers, that would be an unethical use of politics.

By painting all political activities with the same brush, we are oblivious to the potential for constructive politics — that is, the range of perfectly ethical and appropriate activities that serve to strengthen relationships of support, expand influence, and build a powerful base that allows you and your team to be more effective.

## [ Myth 2 ]

### **You can escape office politics.**

Organizational politics are inescapable. A few years ago, I was sharing this reality with a group of young managers. One of the delegates was visibly concerned by what I was saying and so I asked him to share what he was thinking.

“I’m really struggling to accept that there is never going to be a place where I am not going to have to deal with politics. Surely there has to be somewhere?”

“Like where?” I asked.

“Well, what about NGOs? Or a church? You know — places where people work for the greater good of the world. Surely there are no politics there?”

I suppressed a laugh and by way of an answer told him the story of a friend of mine who had been a church minister. After having led a congregation for about 10 years, she decided to get into business. The

one thing that really concerned her in making the transition was the dreaded “corporate politics” that colleagues warned her about and that friends in business repeatedly complained about. Undeterred, but still quite nervous, she made the leap into a big auditing firm and after a few months, I couldn’t wait to find out how it was going.

“I’m loving it,” she told me over coffee.

“What about the politics? Are you coping?” I asked her.

“Politics? Are you kidding me? Corporate politics are absolutely *nothing* compared to church politics!”

Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal’s [research](#) hits the nail on the head when it states, “the question is not whether organizations will have politics but rather what kind of politics they will have.” As human beings, we are social creatures and the use of relationships, informal influence, and power plays is part of how we engage — for better or for worse.

### [ Myth 3 ]

**Politics don't affect your job performance or career.**



How many times have you heard someone say, or perhaps even found yourself saying, “I don’t do politics. My work should speak for itself.” [Carla Harris](#), vice chairman at Morgan Stanley, has a saying I like better: “You can’t let your work speak for you; work doesn’t speak.”

Since it is people that speak, we need to speak about our work, and we need other people to speak about it too. However, “speaking about our work” doesn’t mean reciting a laundry list of things that we are doing. Instead, it’s about framing what we are doing in terms of the impact it’s having on the organization and why it matters.

In workshops and lectures, participants and I often have lengthy discussions about whether “self-promotion” is necessary, or even desirable. Many of us have a deeply held view that talent and hard work *should* be all that one needs to succeed. I think what lies at the heart of this belief is that so many of us treat work like school. When we are at school, it is generally a given that if we work hard and master the subject material, we will get good marks and proceed to the next level. [In the](#)



workplace though, thinking like this is a risk and a mistake because the reality at work is that invisible contributions have no value.

#### [ Myth 4 ]

### **Politics disappear in virtual environments.**

In the absence of in-person interactions, surely all the power play and informal maneuvering tactics employed in office politics disappear? Anyone who has shifted to remote work during the pandemic knows that that this is not the case.

While research shows that office politics diminish in online environments, there's no evidence that they disappear entirely. This isn't surprising — most human beings are much more driven by the informal and political than they are by the formal and prescribed. Again, this can either be negative or positive, but it is a key part of human behavior, no matter what kind of environment we are operating in.

People who think they “don't play politics” are often very surprised to hear that when they are “taking something offline,” “socializing” their idea with decision makers in advance of a more formal meeting, or “just having a chat” with someone they think can help them to be more effective, they are in fact engaging in political activities. This is true whether you are doing these things in person or remotely.

#### [ Myth 5 ]

### **Political intelligence is an inherent trait.**

I am often asked whether certain people are more suited to politics than others. My reply is always the same — the skills that lie at the heart of political intelligence certainly come more naturally to some than to others. But they are still skills. They are not traits that we are either born with or not born with. As with all skills, you need to practice them to master them.

After discussing the key skills and strategies of the politically savvy in one of my workshops, a young manager who was looking at me with a mixture of exhaustion and astonishment, sputtered out, “But this is a lot of work!”

She was spot on.

With all the demands on your time and energy, it may feel like getting your unread emails down to double figures is the biggest achievement you’ve made all week. Now, you may be wondering: Am I telling you that, in addition, you need to find the time and energy to invest in relationships, get strategic about your supporters and sponsors, look for ways to increase the influence and power you have, and then use all of those things to advance your career?

Well, yes.

Doing so takes intentionality, focus, and practice — and it will come more naturally, secondhand even, with time. The alternative (i.e. failing to curate your network, build your brand, and all the other things that politically smart people do) is likely to result in an otherwise promising career never reaching the heights that it could. Or even worse, derail you career completely.

**What you can do**

Now that you understand the truth behind these myths, let's take a look at what you can do to ease yourself into playing "office politics" well.

**Reframe what "politics" means to you.**

Start to be aware of your language and how it is framing your reality, specifically how it frames the way you understand the work environment and how you choose to show up in it.

Are you *sucking up* or are you focussed on *building and understanding new relationships*? Are you resentful and irritated that you *have to have a bunch of smaller meetings before a big meeting* or do you *recognize the power in being prepared, laying the groundwork, and giving your ideas the best chance of success*? Do you view informal conversations as *lobbying* (with all the negative connotations this generally carries) or do you see them as *doing important homework*?

It's almost never about the activity itself, but rather the intention behind the activity and the interpretation and judgement we attach to both. Clearly, we tend to put more energy into something we see — and label — as positive and important, than into those things we begrudge or don't see the point of doing.

Alternatively, if the negative connotations of "office politics" are so ingrained in you that you cannot change your mindset, try calling them something else. Tell yourself, "I am building strategic relationships with my stakeholders," or "I'm expanding my coalition of support."

What you call them doesn't matter. What does matter is that you see these things as valuable and important and put effort and energy into them.

## **Evaluate your style against your organization's political environment.**

Rather than spending your time and energy bemoaning or resenting the nature of organizations (which are inherently political), focus your time and energy on understanding what kind of political environment you are in.

Is your company minimally, moderately, highly or pathologically politicized? To what degree does the political culture fit your (current) personal political style and what you want out of your life and career?

Kathleen Kelley Reardon, an expert on organizational politics, classifies political players into one of four types:

1. The purist: Do you dislike all thought of politics, and simply want to get on with the job at hand?
2. The street fighter: Do you believe the best way to get ahead is through the use of rough tactics, even at the expense of others?
3. The Team Player: Do you believe in getting ahead by working well with others and participate in the politics that advance group goals?
4. The Maneuverer: Do you believe in getting ahead by playing the games of politics in a way that is skillful and unobtrusive to those who only take things at face value?

Of course, all of us can develop skills and change our approach if we really want to but unless we make these changes, it's very unlikely that a purist will be happy or productive in a highly politicized environment or that a street fighter will be welcome in a minimally politicized environment.

**Continuously work to strengthen your “relationship currency.”**

Focusing only on your performance currency, or the credibility you build through your work, is very unlikely to get you the success you're aiming for — be it a bonus, promotion, or recognition from senior executives. However, investing time in your networks and building the connections that can speak for you and your work will get you those things. This investment in strategic relationships is not a distraction from your “real” job, but in fact, one of the most important aspects of it.

While it's clearly important to build relationships deliberately with people who can be your allies, don't make the mistake of neglecting to build relationships with people who have the potential to be your adversaries. Every additional adversary that you have lessens your political capital and your effectiveness.

You also need to understand where and how relationships are still being built, especially as the work environment becomes more virtual. WhatsApp chats? Virtual coffee meetings? Hour-long calls where there is no agenda other than to catch up with colleagues? If none of these are happening, perhaps you can start them; not only with people who are already in your network but also with those who you would like to have in your network.

Social media offers myriad opportunities to reach out to new connections outside of your organization. The value that this can offer your career is immense. A network that is as diverse and wide as possible has repeatedly been shown to be much more useful than a narrow, homogenous one.

### **Constantly improve your “political” savvy.**

To get to where you want to go, you need to be clear on where you are starting from. Understanding the concepts of political intelligence is

one thing, but understanding how you stack up against them is another.

The [workbook](#) and [videos](#) on my website offer some very useful pointers and self-assessment exercises that allow you to see yourself from a different viewpoint and gather insights that will help you come up with a political strategy. As with any strategy, the key is to revisit and update your political strategy regularly as the context changes. You will inevitably fail sometimes, but other times you will succeed. Getting up and trying again is what matters. Winston Churchill said it well, “In war you can only be killed once. In politics you can be killed many times.”

Remember that doing politics on your own terms, with a clear-eyed view of how to be effective without selling your soul or sacrificing your values, will not only benefit you but so too those colleagues and stakeholders who are counting on you to do the best job you can. All of us play some form of politics and getting better at the version that we want to play is critical to our career success and our personal wellbeing. Because it really is true — if you don’t do politics, politics will do you.

Read more on **Office politics** or related topic **Power and influence**



**Niven Postma** is the Managing Director of Niven Postma Inc and works as a leadership, culture and strategy facilitator. She’s had a wide and varied career across multiple organisations and sectors, in South Africa and internationally, including CEO of the Businesswomen’s Association, CEO of NOAH (Nurturing Orphans of AIDS for Humanity), Head of External Strategy and then Head of the SARB Academy at the South African Reserve Bank and Head of Leadership and Culture for the Standard Bank Group. She also lectures at Henley Business School and on various global leadership development programmes and is the author of the book “If You Don’t Do Politics, Politics Will Do You.”



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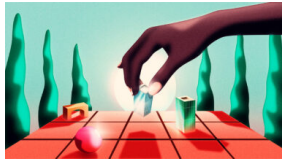


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