

Office Politics, Machiavellian Venue

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1) Preamble:

"The perfect courtier thrives in a world where everything revolves around power and political dexterity. He has mastered the art of indirection; he flatters, yields to superiors, and asserts power over others in the most oblique and graceful manner." -Law 24

The purpose of this essay is to give an overview of how to manage the politics of a modern corporate office. In truth, this piece is simply an addendum to Law 24 (Play the Perfect Courtier).

The political maneuverings of medieval courtiers and the political maneuverings of modern corporate employees are uncannily similar. As a corporate employee, you are nothing more than a 21st century courtier.

In most corporate positions your actual competence will be fueled by Intelligence and Energy; if you have a high IQ and the energy to work long hours, you will be able to competently do the work.

This essay covers those things involved with getting promoted up the corporate hierarchy that have nothing to do with your actual level of competence; managing office politics and ensuring that in addition to being competent you are *perceived* as competent. It is more important to appear to be good at your work, than to actually be good at it.

Disclaimer: The wisdom contained within this piece will be sufficient for succeeding at the bottom and middle levels of the corporate hierarchy. If you make it to the highest levels of the corporate hierarchy (VP, C-Suite), the wisdom contained herein will *not* be sufficient.

2) Parental Training:

If you were raised by a tyrannical parent, you have received the best training possible for succeeding in the game of office politics.

By the age of 10, you will have learned how to monitor every word you say (use PowerTalk), how to hide your displeasure and fake your contentment, and how to manufacture convincing lies fast with zero time for preparation.

3) Regulate Your Speech:

The office you work in is a high stakes venue; if you succeed you can be promoted up the hierarchy and be awarded millions of dollars as a member of the C-Suite. If you fail you could be fired, be unemployed, have no income, and end up homeless.

Because the stakes are so high, *you must monitor every word that leaves your lips.*

Everything you say must be carefully calculated. At the same time, for the sake of charming people your words must seem to flow naturally, with an ease that makes them appear genuine rather than contrived. This is difficult, and it is something you must master; nobody ever said winning in the game of power was easy.

If you say 10,000 words per day, monitoring the entirety of your speech is impossible. However, if you speak only 1,000 words per day, it's very doable. As such, limit how much you talk (Law 4).

A common blunder otherwise intelligent people make is regulating their speech when in the presence of superiors, but failing to do so when in the presence of equals and subordinates.

You must continuously regulate your speech even when you have no superiors in the room. Why? Because anything you say in front of your subordinates is likely to be repeated in front of your superiors. Do *not* trust people to keep their lips sealed.

4) Pretense, The Loyal Employee:

You must at all times maintain the pretense that you are a loyal employee; that you are loyal to the corporation that employs you.

In reality 'corporate loyalty' is something of an oxymoron; corporations will fire their employees without hesitation if it boosts the stock price by a penny, and employees will leave their current employer without hesitation if there is higher compensation elsewhere.

While you must be aware of this reality on the inside, outwardly you must give the appearance of being an employee whose loyalty is beyond question.

If you are interviewing for positions at a company other than the one you currently work for, you must keep these interviews secret at all costs; failure to do so could easily lead to you being fired.

5) Team Player Pretense, Zero Sum Competition Reality:

You are in zero sum competition with co-workers who have the same rank as you.

You are in competition with one another for the same promotion opportunities, and for keeping your jobs when layoff season comes. On a day to day basis, your superiors will judge your performance *relative* to the performance of coworkers of your own rank.

It is objectively in your best interest for your co-workers to fail, since this increases the probability that you will be promoted rather than them, and they will be fired rather than you. Yes, the corporate world is actually this cynical.

While intense zero sum competition is the reality, you must always maintain the pretense that you are all on the same team. You must, at least in the eyes of your superiors, be a 'team player'. If you fail to maintain this pretense, your superiors will view you as a monster and fire you.

It is a paradox, and one that you must execute without a hint of discrepancy; *intense zero sum war, while maintaining the appearance of camaraderie with the enemy.*

Generally speaking promotions are pareto distributed; the top ranked employee of a certain rank will be promoted, the rest of the employees who have the same rank as them will *not* be promoted.

1st place gets a promotion, 2nd place and everyone else get's nothing. As such, the zero sum competition you are engaged in with your co-workers has a 'Hunger Games' distribution of rewards.

6) Triangulate Your Critical Superiors:

The main strategy for winning the game of office politics will be this: triangulate who your critical superiors are, and prioritize charming them over charming everyone else.

Ideally, everyone in the company you work for loves you, and they all perceive you as being highly competent. In reality accomplishing this will be impossible.

There will inevitably be times when you must prioritize work done for one person over another, or when you must make a decision between taking a course of action that will offend person X or person Y.

As such, you must **triangulate who your critical superiors are**; the people who wield power over whether you are promoted or fired.

In some office environments it will be obvious who your critical superiors are, in others it will require some investigation.

7) Critical Superiors, Prioritize Their Work

For your critical superiors you should give A+ work as fast as possible, whereas for everyone else you should give A- work with some delays.

Don't slack too much when doing work for people who aren't your critical superiors; if you give them B- work, it could easily come back to haunt you.

8) Critical Superiors, Prioritize Charming Them:

Ideally you charm every person in the office by appearing enthusiastic or neutral in front of everyone, never unhappy or angry.

Sadly this will be impossible; there will inevitably be times when you are unhappy.

For the sake of securing promotion and avoiding firing, you must **hide your displeasure and fake your contentment and agreement** whenever in the presence of one of your critical superiors.

Appearing unhappy in the presence of people who aren't your critical superiors is bad, but acceptable. Appearing unhappy in the presence of your critical superiors is office politics suicide.

What your critical superiors think of you will make or break your career. If they perceive you as competent and likeable, the overwhelming probability is you will be promoted. If they perceive you as incompetent or unlikeable, the overwhelming probability is you will be fired or kept around but never promoted.

9) Dealing With Superiors:

9A) Look Good:

Most people are deceived by appearances; they never investigate to see what lies beneath the surface. Your superiors will not be the exception to this.

You must ensure your own physical appearance is good; dress well and keep your desk clean. Make any work you create look good; make the formatting pretty.

There is a reason investment bankers spend more time on the formatting of their PowerPoint slides than on ensuring the veracity of their financial projections;

most people pay attention to appearances and style more than they do to reality and substance.

9B) Hide Your Displeasure, Fake Your Contentment:

“A man who knows the court is master of his gestures, of his eyes and of his face; he is profound, impenetrable; he dissimulates bad offices, smiles at his enemies, controls his irritation, disguises his passions, belies his heart, speaks and acts against his feelings.” -Jean de La Bruyère

When in the office and particularly when in the presence of your superiors, you must *hide your displeasure, and fake your contentment and agreement*.

Superiors love to promote subordinates who have a 'good attitude', and as such at all times you must appear either happy or neutral.

If your superiors do or say something you dislike or disagree with, *do not show it*. Fake your contentment and agreement. If you complain, you will be committing political suicide; this is true even if your complaints are legitimate.

When a superior reprimands you for a mistake, regardless of whether or not the mistake was actually a mistake or was your fault, you must appear to be receptive to their rebuke, and apologetic. Calmly say "I apologize; this won't happen again."

This may sound like insanity, and indeed it is. However, to have any hope of winning the game of office politics or succeeding in any 'court' of power, it is a form of insanity you must execute without a hint of hesitation or inconsistency.

“If you dislike a man, do your best to hide it...” -Francesco Guicciardini

You must always maintain the pretense that you like your superiors, even if in reality you despise them. This may sound obvious, yet many otherwise intelligent people have ruined their careers by failing to do this.

9C) Calm and Confident, Not Arrogant:

In the presence of your superiors you must appear calm and confident.

If you appear arrogant, they will dislike you. On the other hand, if you appear fearful they will think you are pathetic and unworthy of promotion; not strong enough to be entrusted with any responsibilities of consequence.

Your confidence should be marked by calmness, rather than the vanity of narcissism or the rudeness of arrogance.

Most people conflate confidence with competence; if you appear to be confident, people assume you are competent. Conversely, if you appear nervous people assume you are incompetent.

It is a fallacy; in reality the correlation between confidence and competence is zero in most domains. However, it is a fallacy you ought to use to your advantage.

9D) Be Associated With Positivity:

You need your superiors to associate you with good things, rather than bad things. Ensure that you are the bringer of good news, and that someone else is the bearer of bad news.

Approach your superiors when they are in a good mood, avoid them when they are in a bad mood. If at all possible, get your superiors to associate you with great food by attending events involving fine dining.

Do not be the court cynic; the one who endlessly complains. Do be a person who is slightly enthusiastic, just not so much that it is annoying.

Express admiration for the good work of others and this will paradoxically cause your superiors to view you in a better light.

When others make a brazen mistake, do *not* comment on it; the mistake is already obvious to others. If you point it out, it causes you to look bad.

9E) Don't Approach Superiors:

Generally speaking if you choose to approach one of your superiors in an easygoing casual manner, it will annoy them. They will see right through your attempt at manipulation (charm). Instead, you must **get them to approach you**.

Be physically attractive, appear confident, deliver high quality work, and occasionally contribute an intelligent question or comment in meetings, and inevitably one of your superiors will approach you.

9F) Attribute Your Successes to Critical Superiors:

Whenever you have a clearly visible success with a certain task or project, attribute your success to the advice and guidance of one of your superiors, hopefully one of your critical superiors. This is an incredibly effective way of charming them and winning promotions.

Do be subtle though; if your giving of credit to their advice is too obvious or done multiple times, they are likely to see through the manipulative tactic and distrust you.

Whether or not the success you attained was actually helped by the advice or guidance of one of your superiors is supremely irrelevant; all that matters is that their ego is stroked.

Whenever one of your superiors gives advice, appear receptive to it even if you know their advice is useless or counterproductive. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of stroking your superiors' egos, or at least not outright offending them.

9G) Criticism of Superiors, Deliver it Indirectly:

Generally speaking if you think your superiors are making a mistake, it is best not to bother with criticizing them. The benefit you would gain from correcting them is nothing compared to the risk of offending their ego and getting fired.

However, there are times when some criticism is necessary; failure to correct them would lead to catastrophe for the entire company, including you. During such times, you must deliver criticism gently and indirectly. Ideally, find someone else to deliver the criticism for you.

If such times are *common* you should probably find a new employer; if you have superiors who are chronically incompetent with matters of consequence, you are on a sinking ship.

You may encounter a superior who is perfectly willing to accept direct criticism of their methods, and who is even happy to hear useful criticism that can help them improve. Such superiors are *very rare*.

Many of your superiors will be narcissists who are so thin skinned that they may fire you for delivering any criticism at all.

Be very careful when delivering any criticism. Deliver it only if you must, and do so as gently and politely as possible.

9H) Order Breaking:

It is almost never wise to disobey one of your superior's orders. However, there may be times when following one of their order's would lead to catastrophe, or times when 2 different superiors give conflicting orders.

In the case of 2 superiors giving conflicting orders, you should *follow the orders of whichever superior wields more decision-making power over whether you are promoted or fired.*

In the case of a superior who has ordered you to do something that will lead to catastrophe...you have a difficult choice to make.

9I) A Good End Gilds All:

“A good end gilds all, no matter how unsavory the means.” –Baltasar Gracian

If you deliver good results, but use methods your superiors find objectionable, you will ultimately be rewarded.

If you deliver bad results, but use only methods your superiors approve of, you will be punished.

9J) Law 1, Never Outshine:

You must ensure that your superiors never feel you are outshining them; nothing will inspire their wrath faster than a subordinate who has threatened their sense of superiority.

If a superior dislikes you and there isn't any obvious reason why, it is most likely because they feel you have not been sufficiently obsequious in your dealings with them.

There are instances where you can win the respect of one of your superiors by defying them, and delivering better results by doing so. Be warned that such instances are rare, and if you defy one of your superiors you do so at your own risk.

9K) Filter Your Reports:

One key tactic for being perceived as competent by your superiors is this; in the reports you give, report things that are going well that can directly be traced back to your actions.

This must be done with subtlety, and it requires skill.

If you brazenly hand your superiors a laundry list of your successes in an overtly self aggrandizing manner, it will cause them to be disgusted by you.

If you ever doubt whether you are being too subtle or too overt, chances are you're being too overt.

9L) Under Promise and Over Deliver:

Satisfaction is nothing more than results minus expectations.

For the sake of pleasing your superiors, you must manage their expectations; keep their expectations down to a level where you can blow them away.

Usually the simplest way to do this is with the *timing* of how long tasks will take; if you think a task will take 48 hours to complete, tell your superiors it will take 72 hours. Deliver in 48 hours; they will be pleasantly surprised.

9M) Quality of Work > Quantity:

You will be judged by the quality of work you deliver, not the quantity.

As such, keep the number of projects your superiors have you assigned to at a minimum. Doing 2 projects well will impress your superiors far more than doing 5 projects badly.

9N) Appear Receptive to New Responsibilities:

Whenever one of your superiors thrusts a new responsibility upon you, you must appear receptive to it. Failure to do so is likely to be viewed as an insult.

If your superiors are giving you additional responsibilities, this is generally a *good sign*; it means they are grooming you for a higher position.

Often when starting at a new company, your superiors will give you tasks that seem menial. *Do them well*; your superiors are testing your competence, to see if you are worthy of being entrusted with more consequential matters.

9O) Minimize Your Questions:

Minimize how many questions you ask your superiors, as it tends to annoy them.

If you ask stupid questions people will assume you are incompetent.

One way to make your superiors perceive you are competent is to ask *intelligent* questions.

10) Dealing With Equals:

10A) Sabotaging Coworkers:

The work of Satan himself.

Generally speaking sabotaging coworkers is a stupid strategy; it comes with a small potential reward, and a catastrophic level of risk.

If you succeed in backstabbing a coworker, you eliminate 1 competitor in the battle for promotion. Of course, if you get *caught* attempting to backstab a coworker your superiors will view you as a monster, summarily fire you, and probably destroy your reputation leading to you being unemployed forever.

In most cases, the potential risks associated with backstabbing far outweigh the potential rewards.

If you were foolish enough to directly tamper with one of your coworker's work as a means of sabotaging them, your blood will be on your own hands when you get caught.

That disclaimer aside, there are strategies for backstabbing coworkers that are indirect enough such that they can be executed without being traced back to you.

Neglect:

"It's subtler to deprive than to inflict...deprive to attack with the stealth of plausible deniability." -Illimitable Man

Actively sabotaging a coworker can easily be traced back to you, but simply failing to provide a coworker with help or guidance cannot easily be traced, and can be just as devastating.

Certainly, if you have any techniques that can be used to do the work at hand more effectively *do not go out of your way to share them* with coworkers who you are competing with for promotion.

One-Upmanship Strategy (33 Strategies of War), Law 39 Offensive Application (48 Laws of Power):

If you can get a coworker to explode in anger, it causes them to look bad. Your superiors will view them as immature at best and as a loose cannon at worst; in either case, when promotions come around they will not be selected instead of you.

In order to provoke a coworker to anger, you must do so with *subtly*.

It must appear in the eyes of everyone else that your coworker's anger is unjustified. If others perceive that their anger *is* justified, it is not your coworker who will look bad, but you.

Even methods as indirect as Neglect and One-Upmanship Strategy could still be traced back to you. They should be used with caution, and as rarely as possible; ideally never.

Many in the corporate world will attempt to backstab coworkers by speaking negatively of them in front of their superiors. This strategy is effective for damaging the reputation of your coworkers, but it is dangerous; most of your superiors are intelligent enough to see what you're doing. If you use this method, it will do a small amount of damage to your coworker's reputation, and an immense amount to your own.

10B) Keep Conflicts Hidden:

It is inevitable that at some point you will have conflicts with your equals and subordinates.

Keep these conflicts as hidden as possible; if your superiors see you having petty arguments with your equals or subordinates, it causes them to view you as immature at best and blameworthy at worst.

Superiors like to have subordinates who get along with one another, or who at least appear to get along.

If 2 of your coworkers are having a conflict, and it does not directly concern you, you should probably stay out of it.

10C) Law 10, Avoid Those with Bad Reputations:

If you have a coworker whether superior, equal, or subordinate who has a bad reputation and who is disliked, it would be wise to avoid associating with them.

You don't want to have your name associated with theirs.

10D) Incompetent Scapegoat:

It is in your best interest to always keep around 1 person of your rank who is incompetent. Not so incompetent that they will cause the entire ship to sink, but incompetent enough such that in the eyes of your superiors you always look good in comparison.

11) Dealing With Subordinates:

Be nice to subordinates, including back office people and secretaries. You never know when you'll need their help.

Some tyranny may be necessary for the sake of getting your subordinates' compliance, but use intimidation as rarely as possible.

If you are unnecessarily tyrannical, it will cause all your subordinates to hate you and become uncooperative in the long run, even those who are by nature patient and kind.

12) Romance and Women:

12A) Women, Arbiters of Status:

In many groups women are the arbiters of status. The office you work in will *not* be an exception to this dynamic.

If the women of the group like you, you might have high status and you might have low status. If the women of the group dislike you, you will certainly have low status. Winning the favor of the women in the group is necessary, but not sufficient.

Generally speaking if 1 woman in the group likes you they all like you, and if 1 woman in the group dislikes you they all dislike you; women tend to be consensus forming.

If the women of your office dislike you, it is only a matter of time before you get fired.

12B) Romance:

If you are a man who is accustomed to flirting and sleeping with as many women as possible *turn that off* when you are interacting with women you work with. You must get the women of your office to like you *platonically*.

Don't become romantically involved with anyone who works for the same company as you, or even anyone within the same industry.

If you are a man and you become romantically involved with a woman you work with, you are putting your career at risk for nothing. See the 'MeToo' Movement for details

13) Forbidden Tactics

13A) Intimidation:

In any environment the use of intimidation is a high risk tactic. In a modern corporate office, it is an insanely risky tactic; failure to maintain the appearance of civility can easily lead to your superiors firing you.

Even when dealing with subordinates whom you wield immense power over and who wield no power over you, the use of intimidation is inadvisable.

Exploding in anger in the corporate office you work in, or in any court of power (see Law 24), is likely to get you instantly fired

13B) No Religion or Politics:

It is unwise to talk about religion or politics when in the office you work in, or ever.

Avoid bringing up controversial topics.

If a controversial topic does come up, say nothing. If you are pressed for your opinion, say something politically correct, or something that the most powerful people present will agree with.

If you are forced to give your opinion on a controversial topic in any venue, whether a corporate office or a local coffee shop, simply say **"It's an unfortunate state of affairs."** This comment is perfectly neutral, and makes sense as a response to almost any controversial question.

14) Promotion:

Growth and Vacancy, 2 Mechanisms for Promotion:

There are only 2 ways to get promoted: Growth or Vacancy

14A) Growth:

The business is growing, and your boss needs a new more senior person to handle things. Instead of hiring an outsider, your boss promotes you to fill the new position.

14B) Vacancy:

Your boss or the person ranked directly above you is eliminated and you are promoted to take their position.

They could be 'eliminated' by any of the following: they were promoted to a new position, they quit their job, they got fired, they retired, they died.

So far as you are concerned, how they get eliminated is irrelevant; all that matters is *that* they get eliminated.

Getting promoted via the 'Growth' strategy is far easier than being promoted via the 'Vacancy' strategy.

If 'No Vacancy' is preventing you from being promoted, then your ability to get promoted is largely a matter of luck. You should consider jumping to another employer where you could conceivably be promoted via 'Growth'.

If your employer's company isn't growing at a fast pace, you have the wrong employer. If the industry you are in isn't growing at a fast pace, you are in the wrong industry.

Those who are in the 'No Vacancy' situation may be tempted to backstab the person above them to eliminate them, and then take their place. This is an incredibly dangerous strategy; if you do such a thing, you are playing with fire.

If you are caught backstabbing them, not only will you be fired, but your reputation will be publicly ruined...leaving you unemployed forever.

15) Competition, Rises at Each Level:

As you move up the hierarchy, the level of your competition increases.

Towards the bottom of the hierarchy, you are competing against incompetent fools; you should be able to surpass them in your sleep.

Towards the top of the hierarchy, you are competing against people who are competent and hardworking; beating them won't be easy.

15A) Entry Level Corporate:

IQs around 115 and medium industriousness. You should be able to surpass them if you put in legitimate effort.

15B) Mid Level Corporate (Middle Managers):

IQs around 120 and high industriousness. Cunning. These people are *real competitors; beating them will be difficult*.

Keep in mind, a 'Middle Manager' at a corporation might be in the middle of the micro dominance hierarchy (that specific corporation), however they are very much on the high end of the macro dominance hierarchy (society in general).

A middle manager in a corporation is at the 90th or 95th percentile of income for the general population; they are on the high end, NOT the middle.

15C) High Level Corporate (VPs, C-Suite Executives):

IQs around 130, high industriousness, high cunning.

Welcome to the Machiavellian Olympics; at this level you will encounter some real life Frank Underwoods.

If you can win at this level of competition, you can win anywhere.

Keep in mind, the people towards the top of a corporation are at the pinnacle of society; they are all at the 99th percentile of income for the general population, if not higher.

16) Bad Political Positioning, Surrender:

If for whatever reason you have bad political positioning (your critical superiors dislike you, or at least don't like you enough such that they will promote you), then it's time to find a new employer.

Don't stick around waiting to get fired or being stagnant in the same position for years with no upward promotion.

17) Relevant Reading:

Robert Greene:

Law 24, Play The Perfect Courtier ([The 48 Laws of Power](#))

Chapter 28: The One-Upmanship Strategy ([The 33 Strategies of War](#))

Illimitable Man:

[Law 1 In Depth: "Never Outshine The Master"](#)

WallStreetPlayboys:

<https://www.wallstreetoasis.com/forums/landed-your-first-job-extremely-important-thread-office-politics>

<https://wallstreetplayboys.com/office-politics/>

<https://wallstreetplayboys.com/office-politics-it-only-gets-worse/>

Brian DeChesare:

<https://www.mergersandinquisitions.com/how-to-win-friends-and-influence-people-in-investment-banking-by-slacking-off-and-pretending-to-work-hard/>

<https://www.mergersandinquisitions.com/investment-banking-communication-skills/>

18) Reflections from Black Label Logic:

What follows are some reflections from Black Label Logic's twitter.

"Most people in senior management roles falls into 1 of 2 categories

A) People who are the strongest in their field within the company.

B) People who are great at office politics.

The former is a pleasure to work with, the latter should be avoided.

...I got some questions regarding how to tell a politician in management from someone who is really strong in their chosen field and have received their position based on expertise.

The former is A, the latter is B (**'A' is a politician, 'B' is really strong in their chosen field**).

You usually like A right away, they feel like someone who is one of your buddies, even a brother at times. You respect them at first too, because they seem like great leaders. However, over time you see that they leave a trail of broken bodies behind them.

B is usually hard to like at first, often direct, often seems overly curt, and even dismissive. Over time you start to see that most people who worked with them went on to do bigger and better things, and rarely if ever does anyone who has worked with them for ages hate them.

A will talk a lot in meetings, presentations and so on, they are always the center of attention at corporate events, often they own the room. However, if you carefully parse their words, you start to realize that they are saying what sounds good and makes them appear good.

B is often quiet for most of the time in public settings, but when they speak people listen. However, what sets them apart is that there always seems to be a queue of people at their door wanting to speak with them.

A will never give you honest feedback or constructive criticism, they will more or less leave you to your own devices unless they need something, at which point they will come find you.

Criticism from B is often direct, jarring and can make you feel like stabbing them in the moment, but you tend to always grow from it, and in fact agree with it once you calm the hell down.

However, the easiest way to tell, is look at their history. Both often have great results in their past, however, A leaves a trail of useful idiots behind them, B sends an army of competent, confident professionals out in from of them.