

### 3. The 17 Political Pitfalls to Avoid (& How to Fix Them)

This lesson is about some of the most common political mistakes people commit in the workplace.

## 1. Getting Chummy With Falling Stars

Who are falling stars?

**Falling stars are former high flyers who are nose-diving in the organizational power hierarchy.**

Often they know fully well they are on their way down, and guess what happens?

Their former, inaccessible and haughty selves suddenly become friendly and gregarious.

And lower-level employees, star-struck by their big names, are all too happy to get closer to them.

Often that's not a good idea.

The issue is that falling stars are falling because they royally screwed up or pissed off someone near the very top.

If you get too close to them, they won't help you up, but they will likely take you down.

Their newly minted bad reputation will infect you like a disease: upper management will see you as the friend of their enemy.

And that makes you an enemy, too.

Falling stars are sometimes in the last weeks in the organization and they can get bitter and negative. Once they're out, you'll be out of a (useless) friend and will still be reeling from the bad infection.

## 2. Stepping Too Early Into The Political Fray

What do the politically clueless do during a power struggle?

They quickly take up arms for one side or the other.

Which, of course, is as smart as betting on red or black -that is, not smart at all-.

**The political strategist instead keeps cordial relations with both warring factions.** He waits out the political struggle -or at least until it's safe to place his chips-.

And in the meanwhile, **he looks like he is too busy focusing on work and work only to worry about warfare.**

That way, whoever wins, they will consider him a friend of the organization.

He delivers results, seems only concerned about the overall health of the organization and looks supra-partes, garnering respect from both factions.

Whoever wins, he'll be fine.

Then, when the war ends, strong of his reputation, he begins his own political campaigning.

## 3. Showing Off Knowledge

Knowledge gives you power, but it's only knowledge that people *seek* and *come to you for* that is most valuable.

Knowledge that is thrown around to look smart and bright is try-hard bragging.

It's akin to saying "look at me, I'm smart (and you're not)", and it rubs people off the wrong way.

It's more annoying to your colleagues than to your boss because your boss might (might!) be flattered you're trying to show off to him, but your colleagues never will.

## 4. Refusing Your Boss' Power Over You (The Rebels)

Your boss has a strong influence on your life.  
And almost unlimited influence over your work life.

Put it that way, it can be a tough pill to swallow for many.

This reality of life aggravates and annoys people who then try to "free themselves" and regain back control over their lives by undermining or pushing against their bosses.

I call them "rebels without a cause" because they aren't rebelling against any boss' real shortcomings, but **they are rebelling against the feeling of having a boss at all**. They feel it is unfair to their persona and constriction to their freedom.

Of course, they will make up reasons in their mind to hate their boss, but they are only trumped up mental charges.

Needless to say, that attitude is political suicide.

People are most likely run into power issues when:

1. Boss is young
2. Boss has less experience
3. Boss is not as knowledgeable in their field

4. They have a rebellious streak (we will have a quiz on this)
5. They have big egos

It should be the opposite instead.

Being older, more experienced or more knowledgeable than your boss is a great advantage to make your boss dependent on you and win your colleagues' respect.

Here are some ways people ruin their chances of trying to “free” themselves of their boss' authority:

1. Fail to provide him with information
2. “Forgetting” to CC him on communication he wants to be CCed in
3. Undermine him publicly
4. Badmouth him behind his back
5. Complain to his superior
6. Tell the boss where he needs to change or improve
7. Openly reject his authority

There are times when it's hard not to resent your boss.

For example, you might feel at times that your boss is the main roadblock to your next career move. But even then your best strategy is to not show your resentment until you have enough power and leverage to resolutely win a possible confrontation.

Picking a fight or making enemies when you have less power is plain dumb.

Remember this:

*If you choose to fight people with more power, be prepared for the highly predictable results.*

Until you have more power, your best strategy is to always make your boss feel like you like them.

## 5. Offending Underlings

Licking up and kicking down.

How many times have you heard that as the “Machiavellian” way of winning at office politics?

Except it’s only true in the most fucked up organizations.

Just think of it: who’s more likely to succeed in the long run, the person who is hated by his subordinates and loved by his superiors, or the person who is loved and respected by everyone?

Exactly...

Having support from below is like leading a grassroots movement. When it becomes large enough it can carry you upward.

And of course, you never know who will become the next heavy hitter, and people who seem useless today might become useful in the future.

## 6. Don’t Mistake Gossip With “Being In The Know”

There is power in being “in the know” in the company.

And yes, sharing juicy information does show power for being part of a restricted circle of informational flow.

Says Geoffrey Miller:

*If the gossip usually knows some news that the listener does not know, the gossip may have privileged access to secrets, or a wider*

*social network, or or friends who themselves have privileged access to social information. That is, **the gossipers must have high social status***

But there is one issue with gossip: soon as you spill the juice all is left is an empty carton.

**When you gossip you give away information and you get back the reputation of a gossipers.**

That's a losing trade.

Ultimately, from a power point of view, gossiping is harmful ego-massaging.

Of course, people will like you for sharing the gossip. But they also lose respect for you. **Everyone uses and enjoys a gossipers, but nobody respects him.**

Keep the good information for the people at your level or higher, and *only use it strategically*.

Don't gossip just for gossiping's sake: all you get back is a bad reputation.

### **PRO Tip: Smartin gossiping**

Yes, there are better ways for showing you are in the know. For example, when others share juicy information with you, you can nod and mutter "yeah, I know".

"How does he know?", people will think. And conclude that you are just in the know as they are, probably more. And will respect you for keeping your mouth shut.

Or you can share positive information only.

For example, saying that it makes sense the managing director stays in shape because he runs 5km every morning. When you know those types of details about people, it means you must be close to them. But it doesn't look like you are gossiping, just like you are complimenting people.

## 7. Leading The Charge & Becoming The Battering Ram

Who is the battering ram?

**The battering ram is the person in a group of complainers and conspirators who leads the assault.**

It's the person who stands up at the meeting and tells the boss everyone is tired of his attitude.

It's the guy who walks into the CEO's office to complain, and it's the woman who takes the first step in filing a sexual assault complaint against the boss who jokes a little bit too much.

It takes courage to make the first step and, from a power perspective, it *might* be the first step that makes you the leader of a big change.

But these situations carry big risks, too.

The risk when everyone complains but nobody wants to take action is that they might be hiding behind you.

And after you have made your move public, you might turn around only to realize too late that there is nobody willing to walk the talk and back you up. That happens relatively often if your first move is not highly successful.

And if that's the case, you're (politically) screwed.

There is some overlap between "leader" and "battering ram".

**But while the leader has actual power, the battering ram takes far more risks to become one, with far more uncertain rewards.**

It might be the case that a battering ram leads a charge, wins... And he doesn't even get any spoils.

## Battering Ram Set-Up

The battering ram might also be a political set-up.

People pretend to be angry and to be ready to stand behind you. But then, as soon as you make the first step, they will even *deny* they ever agreed with you.

And then you're out.

If you're not sure, it's best that you organize a small group of people to take action *together* with you.

## 8. Enlarging Your Group Of Enemies

This is an issue for aggressive individuals and individuals with black and white thinking.

They say things like “either with me or against me”, “straight mafioso shit” and “my way or the highway”.

That's often a self-defeating approach because:

1. Your goal is to keep your group of enemies as small as possible
2. Labeling someone as an enemy often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy

I repeat it again: make your enemies as small a group as possible. Don't fall for the myth of the “many enemies, much honor”. Even the effective bosses in criminal organizations make friends far more often than they make enemies.

Here are a few ways to decrease your enemies:



## Add More Buckets

Don't move from "friends" to "neutral" to "enemy".

But add in there "bothersome colleague", "opposition", "temporary opposition", "difficult personality", "colleague with opposing goals", "short temper colleague" etc.

For example, not everyone who's bothersome is an enemy and not everyone who's opposing you *right now* deserves of becoming an enemy.

## Turn Enemies Into Friends

Think of ways to transform enemies into friends and allies.  
An enemy who's become an ally is often more helpful and reliable than someone who's always been a friend.

## 9. Objecting Organizational Changes

Standing against change is one of the most politically stupid action anyone could take.

Think of it this way: why does change happen?

Changes to organizational structure, priorities or projects don't happen randomly. And they don't happen because John the security guard wanted to.

Change happens because heavy hitters want to change.  
And **opposing change is like opposing the movers and shaker of your company.**

When you refuse the change, reject it and complain about it, you are basically giving a big middle finger to some of the most powerful individuals in your organization.

At best, you get a reputation of a complainer. At worst, the heavy hitters see your resistance and you will become the internal enemy.

Here are the approaches you can take in regard to change:

1. Embrace the new way, make a show of it for upper management, and thrive in it
2. Leave for greener pastures
3. Become a complainer

Guess which one suits you best?

As Jack Welch says in his book "[Winning](#)", **the executives who promoted the change love to see people embracing it and championing.**

For them, it's like receiving a compliment with your actions -much more powerful than your words- and they will see an ally in you.

## **10. Staying Stuck With Old Boss**

Similar to not embracing change, some people don't embrace the new boss.

They cling to the old, compare unfavorably the new with the previous and, in the worst cases, stay in contact with the old boss to reminisce or complain about the new one.

Remember, **when a new boss enters the scene, it's a clean slate for you.**

And **keeping your loyalty with the old boss never fails to annoy the new one.**

Any departing old boss who wanted to give you a good suggestion couldn't tell you anything more than this: I'm out.  
Embrace the new one.

<https://youtu.be/QPfiEvIh57c>

You can rest assured the behavior of both men must have annoyed the new boss, Michael Corleone.

## 11. Failing To Decode Corporate-Speak

You heard these:

- Employees are our biggest asset
- We put customers first
- Our aim is to change the world for the better

Many, especially the younger and more naive, believe in the message that corporate communication, trainers and speakers love to spout.

But not you.  
Don't fall for that.

Nod at the company's values and mission statements, but don't believe any of that shit when it comes to employees or internal politicking.

Don't get me wrong, there is a *backdrop* of truth in those slogans. But there are far higher priorities in the reality of things. And even for the few who *do* believe and act according to company's values, remember this: 99% of **people will always put themselves,**

**their needs and their little turfs, above any company's value.**

The informal system of power, the personal alliances and the self-serving nature of people always trump the “official” values and etiquette.

Employees matter... Until they don't matter anymore at the drop of a hat. **It's your output that matters, not you as a human being.**

Businesses and CEOs love to talk about their organizations as families.

CEOs autobiographies gush over their love for the people and employees. And they sob and weep at the heartbreak of having to fire their own family members when hardships strike ([Onward](#), [The Hard Thing About Hard Things](#), [Shoe Dog](#) etc.).

And then, guess what?

They fire people anyway. Multiple times if needed.

The only entity to gain when employees think of work as a family is the business itself -and the owner-.

If you're interested in the psychology of corporate manipulation [check out this article](#). But the short of it is this: pretend you believe the corporate speak, but know that, often, it's a lie.

## **Believe companies will obey the law**

Similarly, some individuals -often obsessive-compulsive and paranoids- take the law at face value.

And they believe their companies will abide by the law.

They believe that because something is forbidden it won't happen.

But many (most?) companies *will* try to break the law to give you the short end of the stick when they feel they can safely do so.

And a court will only protect you when you can prove with *hard facts* that your company broke the law.

That's why I warmly invite you to **take care of leaving no traces of your own law-breaking behavior and start recording all infractions from your employer.**

You don't need to use those records.  
And you might not even want to use it.  
As a matter of fact, I recommend you always go for win-win relationships.

But simply knowing that you have the power to win a lawsuit, immensely increases your power and leverage.

## **12. Becoming The Disgruntled Employee**

Some of the most moralist, idealist or naive individuals feel betrayed when they discover they realize all the hypocrisy.

They turn bitter, and start calling out all inconsistencies they see. They take pride in "calling a spade a spade", and with that behavior, they soon become the problem.

Some of them, obsessive-compulsive individuals often falling in this category, have difficulty in accepting the natural grey area that exists between professed values, the law and the actual reality of things.

**Make peace with the fact that the values are just a front, that the law matters only when you can prove it and that what people say and do is a very different thing.**

Once you accept the grey areas and contradiction of human nature, then you can also welcome back love and idealism within you -and you probably should-.

<https://youtu.be/QctC5b9qz1c>

## **13. Flirting (Or Complaining) With Assistants**

Yes, you're a cool guy and yes you'd tap some of them PAs.

But bosses often develop a protective attitude towards their assistants.

They can become their mentors, protectors, or sexual partners.

Even when they're not sexual partners bosses can still get jealous and protective (just like any other stupid man).

And if you're the guy flirting with their assistants, you also become the potential threat.

If that's not enough to kick you out, it's certainly enough not to give you more power as that would make you even more threatening.

It's allowed to fuck assistants in private while keeping a neutral demeanor in public of course.

Let the big ego show-offs do the public flirting.

The same applies to any female employees the bosses appear to be fond of.

### **Don't Complain to PAs**

Many secretaries have their allegiances with their bosses, not with the company or teams.

Complaining to them is likely to go straight to their powerful bosses' ears.

Of course, some PAs do hate their bosses.  
But still, don't talk smack with them about their bosses. They might still turn your private complaints to the big boss just to win some political brownie points.

## 14. Becoming The Problem

Politically clueless individuals end up fired and they don't even realize how that happened.

They don't realize it because it's rarely a huge blunder or a big flare-up.

But it's a host of small issues that, strung together, creates a big problem.

It's like a tipping point that you cross and from management's perspective, it's not anymore about how to help you but how to contain you, demote you or get rid of you.

Here are typical ways people become the problem:

1. Bring problems to upper management without solutions
2. Complain to upper management about their boss
3. Refuse change
4. Deliver work that the boss has to correct and waste time on
5. Piss off managers by challenging their authorities
6. Annoying people with clueless social behavior
7. Constantly bring the mood down
8. Resisting or delaying action on bosses' requests
9. Disenchanted, "whatever" attitude towards the company and mission
10. Filing internal complaints

Finally, you also want to avoid associating with anyone else who becomes the problem. It's an infectious disease.

## 15. Forming Out-Groups With Management

If you want to be management material, you must feel to them like you're an ingroup.

The most politically clueless individuals instead stay stuck in lower-level roles because they form outgroups.

Here is one example:

I remember years ago, sitting in a big room as a consultant for one of those company-wide lean projects.

A first-level manager bumped into an airplane model on the way to the meeting table and a heavy hitter joked on what it could cost to fix that airplane.

A brief discussion of the actual costs of the model ensued, and this was the dialogue:

**Random guy:** *actually they're very expensive, I remember it was around 3.000 each*

**Heavy Hitter:** *wow, that's almost more than my weekly salary*

**First Level Manager:** *I definitely need to be careful then, I'm not one of you big paycheck guys.*

The manager smirked as he *thought* he had done a cool joke.

But the "joke" was politically idiotic in countless ways.

First, it sounded slightly derogatory towards upper management, as if they were making *too much* money.



Equally important, these type of jokes stress the *differences* between you and the powerful people.

These remarks communicate the following: there is you guys there, and there is me here. And we are worlds apart. That's like saying that you will never be upper management yourself!

## **Look Like Management Instead**

Remember, you will only get promoted into upper management if you look and sound like one.

**The best way to become upper management is for upper management to feel like you are already one of them.**

Then they will want to officialize your position with the title.

Downplay the differences and show the similarities. Show the ways you are *like* them, how you understand them and you will soon become a heavy hitter yourself.

## **16. Sharing Visions & Ideas Before Having Power**

If you're the owner or CEO, think big and you'll be praised for it. Think strange and you're a visionary.

But if you're still working your way up you're better off being a cheerleader of management's vision rather than trying to promote your own.

At best, your visions running against management's vision will be read as the proof that you don't really understand what business is all about.

At worst, they will brand you like a problematic employee who doesn't like the company's vision and doesn't fit the culture.

Don't get me wrong: do not throw away your vision and ideas. As a matter of fact, cultivate them and improve on them with a healthy dose of realism.

Then let them blossom... *Once you're up there.*

But while you get there, focus on bringing business, cutting costs and looking and talking like upper management (and let the differences manifest later).

## **17. Putting All Eggs In The Boss' Basket**

We said you need to coddle your boss and build a great relationship, right?

Right.

However, you don't want that to be your *only* source of power.

If you don't also deliver, bosses might eventually realize that you are piggybacking on them and abusing the relationship.

And as we said in a previous lesson, you want to avoid making your good relationship with the boss too obvious.

As Robert Greene says in [The Laws of Human Nature](#), the "favorite" position can be dangerous. It's likely to stir envy among your colleagues and isolate you.

And it's all too easy-going from "too close" to "disliked".

As with romantic relationships, smaller gestures carry more weight when we are close. And with a boss there is no sex, cuddling, and intimacy to make up for those hurt feelings.

Especially with touchy and finicky bosses, build great relationships *while* you also deliver good work *and* expand your other sources of power.