

Why Do Toxic People Get Promoted? For the Same Reason Humble People Do: Political Skill

by Klaus J. Templer

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Summary. Good workplace politics skills can help employees with toxic personalities rise to the top of an organization's structure. There's danger in that: Capable and valuable employees leave organizations because of bosses, or corporate fraud and accountancy scandals result in bankruptcies. But sometimes promoting someone with a toxic personality is the right thing to do. They might be able to better handle a round of layoffs, for example, or possess technical skills that you can't hire for. [close](#)

Sometimes the wrong people get promoted. They might be deceitful and unscrupulously manipulative (what psychologists call “Machiavellian”); or impulsive and thrill-seeking without any sense of guilt (psychopathic); or egotistically preoccupied with themselves, having a sense of grandiosity, entitlement, and superiority (narcissistic). Employees with one or more of these three personality traits, known as the “dark triad,” are more likely to cheat, engage in fraudulent or exploitive workplace behavior, and make unethical decisions. It can be frustrating for honest and humble people to watch these employees get ahead. Why, given their toxicity, do they rise through the ranks? How do such people manage to succeed?

In a recent research study published in *Personality and Individual Differences*, I looked at the influence of political skill among employees. Political skill is defined as a positive social competence that helps people network, influence others, demonstrate social astuteness, and appear sincere in their dealings with others.

I surveyed 110 employees in Singapore in a variety of industries and positions, asking them how they viewed their political skill in the workplace. I also determined their scores on the H-factor of personality. High scores on the H-factor indicate honesty-humility. Low scores are practically identical with the common core of the dark triad. Finally, I also surveyed these employees’ bosses.

I noticed that toxic employees whose political skills were highly rated by their supervisors were more likely to have a high performance rating. In other words, while not *all* toxic people possess political skill, those toxic people who use political skill effectively in the eyes of their bosses are seen as better performers. And as we all know, those who are seen as top performers are more likely to be promoted.

Is there a way to prevent toxic people from moving up? Organizational psychologists who are knowledgeable in personality and behavioral assessments may help identify toxic

personalities early, but if the employee possesses political skill, this task is difficult. Bosses could also check with an employee's colleagues and subordinates before making a promotion, as toxic people may behave differently toward colleagues and subordinates than toward bosses who have decision power.

But it's also worth remembering that sometimes these difficult personality types can be useful for the organization. Imagine you need that James Bond-like figure for a difficult task to be executed fearlessly, logically, and emotionlessly. For example, a failing firm may need to downsize if it has any hope of surviving. While the need to fire employees can create a heavy emotional burden for most managers, for a manager low in empathy it is much less traumatic. Or maybe you absolutely need a technical specialist, even though they are a bit of a narcissist. Good managers figure out how to deploy these kinds of people while limiting the damage they do to other employees.

How about the honest and humble people — will they always lose out to these dark personalities? Not necessarily. It's just that some toxic people are able to use political skill for their own purposes and are successful in it. In my research I found that once political skill was controlled for, there was no difference in the average task performance ratings between toxic and honest-humble employees. And when it came to a task such as team facilitation, honest-humble employees received higher ratings than their toxic peers (again, when I controlled for political skill). This data helps explain why there are plenty of nontoxic people who rise through the ranks.

If you are one of these honest and humble people who feel left out, this research suggests you can make a run for the same promotion by acquiring political skill. Build your network with diverse groups of key people inside and outside the organization. Show genuine interest in other people (in a way that is apparent to them; it doesn't help if others do not notice). Actively listen to others, and ask them about their professional and personal interests. If you are able to establish good rapport with others, they will also listen more to your suggestions.

While demonstrating political skill is easier for some, it can be learned. When you use it for healthy personal and organizational goals, it can increase both your performance and your company's.

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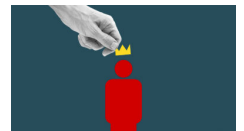
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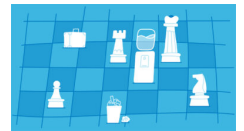
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