



POWER PLAYS

You had high hopes when you hired Ruth to head up your marketing department. She had just the right business skills and got along great with people in her previous position. What more could you ask? Plenty, as it turned out. Although Ruth brought lots of enthusiasm and talent to your organization, she never seemed to get the support of the staff. Her directives were ignored. Her plans to improve business performance never got off the ground. Finally, after many months of struggling, Ruth resigned. By that time, your revenues had gone south and you were saddled with yet another costly talent search.

HOW TO REDUCE COSTLY OFFICE POLITICS AT YOUR BUSINESS BY PHILLIP M. PERRY



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What happened? Office politics, that ugly and costly drain on business profit, had struck again. During Ruth's second week on the job, one of her staff members had turned to Allan, a veteran supervisor and informal group leader, and asked a single question: "So what do you think of Ruth?"

Allan pursed his lips and shook his head slightly, saying nothing else. But that was enough: Everyone understood that Ruth was not to be supported by anybody who wanted to stay in Allan's good graces.

Power plays hurt profits

Office politics is the practice of accumulating and utilizing power. Our opening story is a prime example of how destructive behavior can wreck a business. Moreover, the anecdote illustrates a costly lesson that some businesses never learn: Successful managers and supervisors do more than master technical skills and get along well with people. They also become "master politicians." Not only can they identify and overcome destructive power plays like Allan's, but they are also skilled at employing office politics for good purposes (see sidebar: "Good Office Politics.")

In the opening story above, Allan played the role of a master politician. With a shake of his head, he marshaled the power of his loyal co-workers against a new manager who he regarded as a threat to his own hold on power. The result was a dysfunctional work place and a broken profit machine.

"Office politics is absolutely a bottom line issue," says Ian Jacobsen, a Sunnyvale, CA-based consultant who has dealt with destructive office politics at many businesses. "One supervisor recently told me she was spending 40 percent of her time dealing with office politics, so her company was really only getting less than two-thirds of that person for actual work while paying her a full salary."

Wasted time is not the only damaging aspect of such

power struggles, says Jacobsen. "Office politics also diverts the organization from accomplishing its mission because people are pursuing their personal agendas rather than the business mission." In our opening story, Allan pursued his own goal of maintaining his power over his peers instead of helping Ruth institute her ideas.

Damaging as it is, office politics is here to stay because it is part of human nature. "No one ever checks their humanity at the door when they come to work," says Michael S. Dobson, a management consultant based in Bethesda, MD. "We all bring ourselves to the work place."

In fact, destructive office politics is more prevalent today, say organizational consultants. "Some people thought politics was on the way out with the movement toward promoting cooperation among people at many businesses," says Andrew DuBrin, professor of management at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, and author of the best-selling *Winning Office Politics*. "But there is actually more back-stabbing in recent times as companies continue to shrink and people compete for the best positions."

During difficult financial times, people feel less secure about their jobs and will do whatever they see in their interest to secure their paychecks, says DuBrin. People act in their own economic best interests and as long as those interests are misaligned with the corporate interests, you will experience destructive power plays.

There is another reason for the growth of office politics, says DuBrin. "Many more people have learned the value of networking as a tool for becoming liked. People recognize intuitively that the last people to go are the people most liked."

How to reduce office politics

Office politics turns destructive when people are rewarded for who they are and who they know—not for how well they perform. Staff members realize that no matter how good they are at their jobs, they are in danger of losing their paychecks to someone who is in better favor with the boss. Rather than concentrating on serving the customer and improving their work skills, people focus on playing up to their supervisors and forming powerful cliques that can overcome common threats.

We saw both results in this story's opening anecdote. First, Allan's clique responded to his desire for control, understanding he would protect them in turn. Second, the group was able to destroy an individual who seemed to threaten their common power. All of this came about because the interests of staff members were misaligned with that of the business.

"People play office politics for only one reason—they believe it is in their best interest," says Lawrence Serven, principal of a consulting firm called The Buttonwood Group, in Stamford, CT. "Often that belief is well founded. It's really the

system that is to blame, not the person." To reduce the power of office politics, says Serven, change the system to one that rewards performance. "Office politics needs to be addressed just like any other performance issue."

Here are five positive steps you can take to establish a productive reward system that will bring each individual's goals in line with those of your business:

1. Set a good example.

Start by taking a fresh look at your own behavior. "Make sure you do not play destructive office politics yourself," says Jacobsen. "Ask yourself, 'What games am I playing?' and 'How would things look if I were a fly on the wall?' Once you have an unbiased perspective, make an effort to institute more productive ways of interacting." Make a conscious effort to reduce the impact that personal relationships have on decision making.

2. Outline and communicate the goals of your organization.

Your staff needs to understand your organization's goals before they can share them. "One role of management is to define the business," says Dobson. "Answer the question, 'What do we do for a living around here?' The more clear you are about the company mission, the better."

3. Describe each person's contribution to the goal.

How do you define quality performance? This question needs to be answered in specific terms for each individual. "Office politics turns bad to the extent that quality performance cannot be specifically defined," says Dobson. "If

I think I am doing a good job and you say I'm not, then I start to believe you are persecuting me, so things get nasty." Without objective performance criteria that everyone accepts, staff members will compete in any way they know how for the limited organizational resources.

4. Maintain objective performance evaluations.

Regularly scheduled, objective performance evaluations are your best tools for reducing the impact of office politics. When it comes to feeling secure about their jobs, people look upon favorable reviews as valuable support. Even unfavorable reviews, when carefully prepared and presented, are seen as guides for getting back on a secure track. In both cases, people who know where they stand will be less fearful about losing their jobs and will devote less time to creating power centers and more to improving work performance.

Finally, evaluations work well when individuals know they have the power and resources to improve their positions. Encourage autonomy among individuals by making sure they possess the means to achieve the specific goals outlined in the performance evaluations.

5. Call people on games they play.

Suppose Andy approaches you with the following statement: "I have some negative things to tell you about Nick. He appears to be slacking off quite a bit in his work."

It seems like destructive office politics at work or could it be that Andy has really spotted something serious? DuBrin suggests a response such as this: "Fine, let's bring Nick in here and have a three-way conference."

GOOD OFFICE POLITICS

While this article offers suggestions on how to reduce the destructive nature of politics in the work place, not all office politics is bad. Smart managers use their political skills to get things done that are good for the business and the staff.

"Politics is the art of the possible," says Ian Jacobsen, a Sunnyvale, CA-based consultant who has dealt with destructive office politics at many businesses. "Being able to develop a group consensus for action is a healthy form of politics.

The implementation of any program will go better if you can get everyone on board."

When you need to put a new program in place, Jacobsen suggests the following three-step outline for political action:

First, sell the problem. "People are not willing to consider solutions before they see a pressing problem. So make people aware there is a problem and define its impact."

Second, engage people in the process of deciding how to solve the problem. "When people feel empowered because they have

invested their own ideas in a solution, they will take ownership of the problem."

Finally, set up checkpoints and measurable standards. These will help the staff assess progress toward solving the problem.

This three-step procedure marshals the force of the entire staff behind any new initiative. Getting people committed to a new program is an excellent example of manipulating power in a positive sense. It's "good office politics" at work.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFICE POLITICS

At businesses riddled with destructive office politics, people do the following:

Build empires rather than improve business performance.

Push for agendas that enhance their personal power, not company profit.

Focus on protecting their jobs because they do not feel safe.

Take credit for others' work.

Sabotage others and engage in character assassination.

Hurt others' feelings.

Discount others' achievements.

Engage in favoritism.

This is a very effective technique because “exposure is the best disinfectant,” says DuBrin. “Everyone will understand that if you make negative statements about people, there will be a three-way conference or more. This will quickly freeze up a lot of people; they will not make accusations unless well-founded.”

Change for the better

Above all, be aware that you can reduce the incidence of destructive power plays. “In many organizations, there is a sense that we can’t do anything about office politics, so we should ignore the issue,” says Serven.

“That’s about as much of a solution as you find in a lot of companies. But you will never have zero errors or 100 percent employee retention or complete absence of sexual harassment. Does that mean that you don’t make progress? Of course not.”

The secret is to work toward a single end result: a company that rewards people on merit. When you reduce destructive office politics to a minimum you will have a more productive work force and a healthier bottom line. ■

Phillip M. Perry is a free-lance business writer based in New York City.

GET MORE INFORMATION:

Winning Office Politics, by Andrew J. DuBrin (1990). One of the most comprehensive descriptions of political strategies. Prentice Hall, 240 Frisch Court, Paramus, NJ 07652; \$14.95.

Enlightened Office Politics, by Michael and Deborah Singer Dobson (2001). How to play office politics in the good sense. Amacom, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; 800/714-6395; \$17.95.

The End of Office Politics as Usual, by Lawrence B. Serven (2002). Emphasis on fixing the organizational system that encourages office politics in a business. Amacom, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; 800/714-6395; \$24.95.

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