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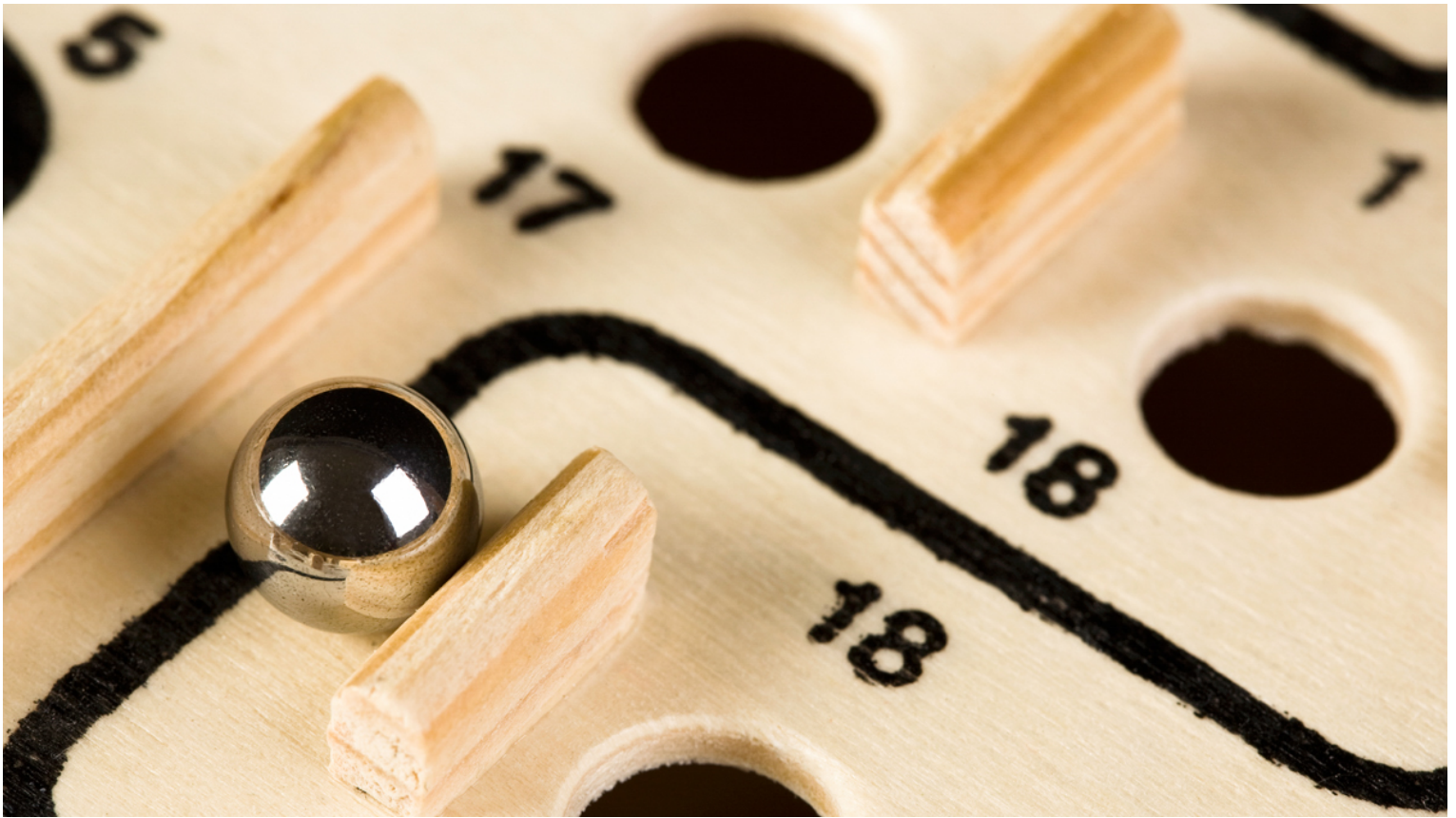
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COMMUNICATION

4 Strategies for Women Navigating Office Politics

by Kathryn Heath

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The politics of office life seldom fail to flummox and frustrate the top female executives my partners and I coach and train. In 2013, we conducted a number of interviews and surveyed 270 female managers in *Fortune* 500 organizations to determine what they liked and disliked about business meetings. Politics was one of the things that repeatedly fell into the dislike

column. In fact, both men and women said that women are more likely to become nervous and uncomfortable in meetings when interpersonal conflicts and other political challenges arise. We’ve observed time and again in 360-degree feedback surveys that women executives believe politics present a particular dilemma for them. On one hand, they feel uncomfortable engaging in quid-pro-quo behavior and political maneuvering. On the other, they acknowledge that it’s all but impossible to operate above the political fray.

With that in mind, I’ve combed our recent consulting files to identify four of the most effective practices that help the women we coach become more politically savvy.

Get yourself an agent. Gail was in her fifth year at a large finance firm when she recognized a disconcerting pattern. She was repeatedly passed over for choice assignments. According to Gail’s manager, she had a solid reputation, and her work was considered to be impeccable. The problem? She wasn’t lobbying as loudly for assignments as her colleagues. Gail was uncomfortable singing her own praises. Unwilling to waste her time on personal propaganda, Gail did something that worked even better for her. She recruited an “agent” to lobby on her behalf.

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Gail was liked and admired by her peers—in part because she did her job well without waiting for public recognition. So it wasn’t difficult to find a number of highly regarded colleagues who were willing to mention her name when the next great assignment was up for grabs. “It’s like having a sports agent looking out for my career,” she said.

This type of peer advocacy is a win-win proposition. The individual being referred gains the direct benefit without resorting to self-promotion; the “agent” enhances his or her own reputation by appearing selfless and making an excellent referral. While it’s a given that

female executives need to be comfortable stepping up to ask for what they want, Gail's strategy is a smart workaround that anyone can use.

Let planning trump politics. One of the reasons politics makes so many of us uneasy is that complex situations are difficult to read and impossible to control. When personalities and motivations intertwine, anything can happen. An intrepid energy industry executive we know takes a novel, planning-based approach to managing politics, and we've taught the same method to many female executives over the years. To inject some predictability into the most crucial of organizational interactions, he uses scenario planning to map out strategies.

His company has its share of challenges when it comes to politics—it's a multinational organization with dozens of managers vying for resources and lobbying for outcomes specific to their own regions. To keep up with the players and be in a position to advocate for his own agenda, this executive maps out potential scenarios according to three separate quadrants—personalities, motivations, and variables.

For example, he attends an annual planning meeting that is fraught with politics. So he does his homework. He maps out the *personalities* involved to help him anticipate how each individual might react to his agenda. He adds in their *motivations* to analyze and compare what he believes each person expects to accomplish. Finally, he takes the time to identify other relevant *variables* so he can anticipate factors that might sway individuals in real time as the meeting plays out. Thinking along these lines can help women create options, feel prepared, and remain agile in fluid political situations.

Turn your mentor into a sponsor. While mentors are important allies for navigating through political minefields, sponsors are absolutely crucial. Having an influential ally who publicly backs your agenda, your career, and gives you air cover, can fuel success. And yet, research indicates that sponsors are hard to come by—especially for women. One way we coach women to secure sponsorship is by “promoting” their mentors to sponsorship status.

A woman we coach, Sheryl, told us how she used this strategy to good effect. When her longtime sponsor left the company, she elevated her mentor to become a sponsor. To encourage genuine sponsorship, mentors need both to be invested in your success and to see that you are working on their behalf as much as they are working on yours. This entails clearly demonstrating how they can benefit from your advancement by aligning your agenda with theirs and highlighting the important overlap. In general, it is what you *do* rather than what you *say* that encourages mentors to advocate for you in a more active way. In Sheryl's case, she asked to be put on a number of projects with her influential mentor and essentially made herself indispensable. They got to know each other better, and her efforts earned her a powerful sponsor.

Make politics less personal. Without people there would be no politics. And while it's impossible to remove humans from organizational interactions, it *is* possible to take political situations less personally. The female executives we know who can look upon politics like a game—win some, lose some—tend to be more resilient and have smarter responses when a political interaction takes them by surprise.

One executive we coach uses this simple strategy to depersonalize politics: when a political situation starts to feel too personal, don't look your opponent in the eye. In many business situations eye contact is crucial, but in this case averting her gaze, she says, helps her remain calm and avoid the fight-or-flight impulse that comes when she feels under attack. Remaining on an even keel, in general, enables her to keep talking and regain control of the situation. Regardless, taking politics less personally removes the sting when the political tide turns against you.

Politics are an inevitable part of the back-and-forth mechanics of decision-making, and the right strategies can make dealing with political situations much easier.

Kathryn Heath is a principal of Flynn Heath Holt Leadership (FHHL). She is co-author of *Break Your Own Rules: How to Change the Patterns of Thinking that Block Women’s Paths to Power* (Jossey-Bass, 2011) and co-author of the HBR article *Women, Find Your Voice: Why Your Performance in Meetings Matters More Than You Think*. Join the conversation at FlynnHeathHolt.com and on Twitter [@FlynnHeathHolt.com](https://twitter.com/FlynnHeathHolt)

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