

Office Politics: A Skill Women Should Lean Into

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Who says women don't like office politics? Just about everyone: My clients. My colleagues. My mother. The sommelier at the French restaurant I ate lunch at last weekend. They've all complained about office politics. Some women claim they are not good at it, while others simply avoid certain hot-button business situations because they think playing politics is "sleazy."

Need more evidence? In 2013, my partners and I conducted a combination of surveys and interviews with over 270 female managers in *Fortune* 500 organizations to determine what they liked and disliked about business meetings, and one of the things that repeatedly fell into the dislike column was politics. In the process of coaching and training women leaders over the course of a decade, we've maintained a running list of common threads—and a disdain of office politics is in the top three. In reviewing several thousand 360-degree feedback surveys we found that both women and their managers cite political savvy as an ongoing development need for women.

But, as Winston Churchill once said, when you mix people and power, you get politics. Politics is a big, messy issue encompassing everything managers deal with all the livelong day. And it's not just a sprawling topic; it's also a pivotal one for women, because backing off in political situations makes it impossible for them to succeed in the highest levels of leadership.

With that in mind, we put together a prescriptive model suggesting several ways women can improve their political performance, which we've used with success in recent coaching seminars. Here's what it looks like:

Plug In: Today's nonstop pace causes some of us to go it alone—working through the week's agenda simply to stay afloat. Politically speaking, operating in "survival mode" can leave us isolated. Consider this entry from a 360-degree performance report we reviewed: "Her direct reports like her and she's the best at serving clients. However, she's always out in the field. I'm not even sure she knows the names of all the senior leaders in her office. This is a major liability in terms of her upward mobility." When we say "plug in," we mean forge internal alliances and tap into the grapevine (both the formal and informal networks) in the workplace. Even if you are a high performer at your job, if you are perpetually absent from the office you are missing opportunities to connect with the culture and stay attuned to the political context of your work environment.

Look Out: Imagine your career two to three moves ahead of where you are now and keep that image in your mind. Many women we work with are tightly focused on being perfect performers in the moment and don't think enough about positioning themselves to reach the next level in their careers. Projecting out into the future helps keep you alert and allows you to be nimble when opportunities arise.

Line Up: In order to make office politics more palatable, we coach women to build their careers as if they were running for office. That means actively lining up a coalition of supporters – allies, advocates, mentors, and sponsors. You need to recruit people who are willing to expend political capital on your behalf. Research indicates that men are more willing to trade favors than women are, and that may put them in a better position to line up sponsorship. Yet, even without cultivating a greater appreciation for the quid pro quo mind-set, one thing that women can do right now is to reach out and align themselves with other women who are higher up in their organization. It is not that men don't help women, because they certainly do. But there is something to be said for connecting with the other like-minded women around you.

Act Powerfully: Executive presence is important in politics, and women need to manage theirs deliberately rather than let other people draw their own conclusions. As a thought exercise, we ask women to consider how they “land on” people — that is, what impression they make. It is a distinctive phrase that helps them remember to work proactively at making a strong positive impact. We also coach them to use “muscular” language – and what we mean here is to use non-generic language, which will have a bigger impact on your audience. Don't just say: “That's interesting data,” for instance. Anyone can say that. Instead, say “That's robust data that supports my argument that ...” This may sound like semantics, but saying something specific and distinctive allows you to own your ideas and control the conversation.

Get Out: Speak up and actually *ask* for assignments, opportunities, perks, and promotions. In the process, don't handicap yourself. For example, saying “I'm not good at politics” is a type of self-handicapping. As soon as you say it, you diminish your power and put yourself in a position of having to overcome an obstacle you've put in your own way.

Take Credit: Don't be afraid to be noticed. Politics requires you to sell yourself; yet women work harder at modesty than men. Why? Self-preservation. According to Alice Eagly and Linda Carli in *Through the Labyrinth*, research shows that people accept boastfulness in men but often dislike boastful women. So every woman has a choice to make: Do you want to be universally liked or do you want to get promoted? We suggest the latter. Take credit for your work. One sure way to get passed over for a promotion is to remain silent about your accomplishments and allow others to take credit.

It's not possible to opt out of office politics. If you want to have a voice, if you want to make an impact, if you want to have a career, politics is simply part of the job.

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