Playing the ‘Office Politics’ Game

Strategies for not stepping on people’s toes in the workplace.

By Louellen Essex and Mitchell Kusy

Janelle recently accepted a new position running the training and development division for a company specializing in artificial joints used by orthopedic surgeons. She has worked in the industry for many years and at her current company for the last five.

Although Janelle is unknown to the majority of the 35 staff members in her department, she enjoys a positive reputation throughout the company and within the orthopedic industry. Janelle is worried, however, about a potential threat to her effectiveness in her new role.

Bob, one of three other candidates who applied for Janelle's new position, will be reporting to her. He sees Janelle as a “lightweight,” and is not convinced she can align the training and development function with the strategic objectives of the global enterprise.

Bob has made it known to his colleagues, who also report to Janelle, that he thinks she's unfit for the job. More important, Bob appears to be actively sabotaging her. Janelle needs to develop a strategy to deal with this adversary.

Winning strategies

Janelle is caught in a political quandary. Like many managers, she wonders how to handle the situation appropriately.

Unfortunately, being political is essential in the workplace. If you refuse to
play the office politics game, you may lose out on important opportunities.

There are some techniques to compete successfully without derailing your career or compromising the training and development function at your organization.

**Identify the power holders.** Who in the company do your co-workers admire? Why are these people admired? Know who the power brokers are in your organization. This will provide you with insight for navigating the complex web of relationships.

Keep in mind that those in control don’t necessarily hold the power. Instead, power is linked to influence. In other words, who in your organization, regardless of title, positively influences others?

Study the formal organizational chart first, and then learn who the informal power holders are through careful observation. Develop a strategy to build relationships with those who hold the reins of influence.

**Tailor your work style.** How is success measured in your company? What types of approaches and behaviors are rewarded? The better your working style fits the organization, the more influential you will be with your co-workers. Learn to modify your style to align with what seems most effective within the culture.

**Be an expert.** Develop an indispensable set of knowledge and skills—things that are not available elsewhere—and you gain “expert power.” This clout and credibility will serve you well, especially in times of political upheaval.

As a training and development professional, you possess a wealth of knowledge others most likely lack. Make it known to others how you can add value to their efforts.

**Recognize others.** Be generous with recognition and rewards, as well as opportunities for involvement. If you’re not in a formal position of power, find other meaningful ways to assist or support people.

People tend to do things for others who show appreciation; they tend to avoid those who don’t. Be known as someone who is gracious, and resources likely will become readily available to you.

**Use your influence wisely.** You do have influence—and power—even if you don’t realize it. Whether that influence is formal or informal, use your power to give to rather than take from the people around you.

You’ve heard the adage “choose your battles wisely.” Don’t throw your weight around until it is absolutely necessary to address an issue that may threaten you or your team’s success.

Also, be careful about the ideas you support or initiate, saving your political capital for major efforts.

**Network, but don’t align.** Building a strong network is critical. Develop key relationships so you can secure access to vital inside information.

Be cautious about aligning with a single faction. By alienating yourself from other groups, you could hinder or hurt your own position, especially in times of transition.

**Be respected and respectful.** Show respect, and you will be respected. This type of referent power comes from being genuinely liked and from having a reputation as someone who everyone wants to work with on projects.

**Work with your enemies.** Listen to your foes as much as you listen to your friends. It’s easy to stick close to your allies—particularly in difficult, politically charged times. However, ignoring your enemies is a political mistake that can lead to closed doors and missed opportunities.

Look for ways to minimize the conflict by bringing adversaries into collaborative efforts. Work with resisters, not against them. While some of your effort should be focused on helping others understand your view, an equal amount of time should be exerted on understanding theirs. This approach will make you more knowledgeable about the issues and provide a context for making smart decisions.

In addition, you might change your point of view as a result of this new information. Finally, if you can win over an opponent, he may become one of your most enthusiastic supporters.

As a leader who is successful at working with people you don’t always agree with, you will be viewed as someone who builds supportive relationships—whatever the circumstance.

**Expert advice**

There are certainly strategies that can be executed to deal with this awkward situation.

There are ways to deal with co-workers like Bob, bullies who have learned to muscle their way into the positions they want.

Proceed with confidence to offset the effects of Bob’s antics. Remind yourself that your track record is just as strong as his, and that management awarded you the new position because they were confident you could do the job.

Remember that Bob’s years of experience do not mean that his experience is relevant to your organization’s situation. You may be seen as more current with trends, or viewed as having a better leadership style.
How Good Are You at Office Politics?

Take this informal quiz to rate your skill at the office politics game. For each of the following questions, circle the answer that best describes you.

1. Are you aware of how success is measured in your organization?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

2. Do you know how much time is typically given for results to be obtained in your organization?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

3. Can you identify the decision-making system for driving the implementation of new initiatives?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

4. Do you know how much risk is tolerated?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

5. Are you aware of the consequences for failing to perform?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

6. Do you know who the most influential people are in your organization?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

7. Have you built effective relationships with the influential people who are key to your success?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

8. Do you have a wide network of relationships spanning several areas in your organization?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

9. Have you established your credibility as a results-oriented performer?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

10. Are you able to communicate persuasively by adjusting your message for a given audience?
    - Yes
    - Somewhat
    - No

**SCORING:** Add total number of times you circled “Yes,” “Somewhat,” or “No.” Then, multiply “Yes” total by 3, “Somewhat” total by 2, and “No” total by 1. Add the three numbers to get your total score.

**Score Implications**

- **26–30** Your political acumen is stellar. Continue to use your awareness to build a strong base of influence.

- **21–25** You have a good start at understanding office politics. Develop a keener sense of observation and study your organization more carefully.

- **16–20** You have a flicker of political savvy. Conduct a careful analysis of your organizational culture and begin to build a base of influence. Work quickly or your success may be at risk.

- **Below 16** You are apparently unaware of office politics! Move quickly to fill the gap or you may derail your career. Working with a mentor or coach may be your best course of action.

Start your tenure by interviewing each of your direct reports and asking them three questions:
- What is going well in the work unit that you would like to maintain?
- What can be improved in the way the work unit operates?
- What changes would you like to see made?

Additionally, review all documents relevant to internal operations, then set up a meeting with the managers.

Review your assessment of the work unit and key initiatives. Talk about your background and approach to leadership. Identify some quick results you can obtain to establish a track record and gain even more credibility.

Inspire co-workers to move forward on the path you have outlined and promise to engage them in the process.

If Bob continues to actively sabotage your work, let him know you are well aware of his actions and that you expect him to work with you even though he wanted your job.

Assure Bob that you will use his talents wisely in return for his cooperation. Make it clear, however, that you are in charge.

**Politically savvy**

Conflict often occurs in organizations in which individuals vie for scarce resources, such as key positions.

You do need to be politically savvy, but not with Bob. To that end, my advice is that you largely ignore his attempts to get you off kilter.

The right place to focus your energies is with your team. Answering the following questions will help you discover several areas that may provide you with political mileage:

- How is success measured in your organization?
- How much time is given for results to be obtained?
- What is the decision-making system for choosing and driving implementation of major change initiatives?
- What changes would you like to see made?

Conflict often occurs in organizations in which individuals vie for scarce resources, such as key positions. You do need to be politically savvy, but not with Bob. To that end, my advice is that you largely ignore his attempts to get you off kilter.

The right place to focus your energies is with your team. Answering the following questions will help you discover several areas that may provide you with political mileage:

- How is success measured in your organization?
- How much time is given for results to be obtained?
- What is the decision-making system for choosing and driving implementation of major change initiatives?
- What changes would you like to see made?
• What are your organization’s core values? How do you integrate them into your daily work?

Ask your direct reports to help address these issues. Get a feel for how the unit operates. With this approach, you’ll accomplish two things: You’ll uncover the pulse of the unit, and you’ll likely be perceived as a leader who values the input of others.

If these strategies don’t temper or reduce Bob’s antagonistic approach, you’ll need to forget the political arena and launch into a performance management mode in which you state your expectations, monitor performance, and provide feedback accordingly. At this stage of the game, kick into your directive role, let him know what you will and will not tolerate, and then stick to the program of reinforcing appropriate behaviors and disciplining nonproductive ones.

All in all, being a politically savvy workplace learning and performance professional is about engaging both the subtle and not-so-subtle variables of influence. These variables will help you build your base of influence across the organization. More important, by extending your political reach, you will be respected as a valuable expert.

Louellen Essex is an organization development consultant, adjunct faculty with the University of St. Thomas Center for Business Excellence, and an Executive Fellow at the University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Management; www.louellenessex.com.

Mitchell Kusy is an international consultant, professor in the Leadership and Change Program at Antioch University, an Executive Fellow with the University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Management; mkusy@phd.antioch.edu.

What’s Your Quest?

 Attend the 20th Annual Quest for Excellence® Conference

Featuring the recipients of the 2007 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award—the highest Presidential honor given to US organizations:

• PRO-TEC Coating Company
• Mercy Health System
• Sharp HealthCare
• City of Coral Springs
• U.S. Army Armament Research, Development and Engineering Center (ARDEC)

And many former recipients from all sectors, including Manufacturing and Service

April 22-25, 2008 • Hilton Washington • Washington DC

Register
866-229-2386
www.baldrige.nist.gov/QEXX/td.htm

Baldrige National Quality Program
Performance Excellence and Innovation
I want to subscribe for only $99, ($165 Outside the U.S.) to T+D magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

Order Information

Name: ____________________________________________
Title: ____________________________ Company: ____________________________
Address: ____________________________ City: ____________________________
State/Province: ____________________________ Zip/Postal Code: ____________________________
Country: ____________________________ Email: ____________________________
Phone: ____________________________ Fax: ____________________________

Check One:  $99 (USA)  $165 (Outside the US)
VISA  MasterCard  Amex  Discover

Accept Check (USD) (Payable to T+D)

Card Number: ____________________________ Expiration Date: ____________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Fax this form to 1.703.683.9591 OR Mail to: T+D, P.O. Box 1567; Merrifield, Virginia, 22116-9812, USA

Order online at store.astd.org
Phone: 1.800.628.2783 (1.703.683.8100 outside the US)

Orders processed within three business days.
If you have questions, please contact subscriberservice@astd.org

Prices valid through 12/31/2008. If you should wish to cancel your subscription for any reason, you will receive a refund on all unmailed issues.
Your subscription to T+D may be a tax deductible business expense.
Please allow 6 to 8 weeks to receive your first issue.

T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)