

Understanding Office Politics: What It Is and Why It Matters

Building a successful career is a journey filled with exciting opportunities and inevitable challenges. And one of those challenges that can make or break your career is office politics.

In this session, I will share how to navigate most situations effectively using a framework I call “the Three Rings of Influence”.

It is a proven strategy that I picked up as I advanced my career in the corporate setting. And while times have changed, the principles I will share remain relevant for understanding office dynamics, managing conflict with grace, and building a positive workplace culture.

Three Rings of Influence

“Leadership is not about position it is about influence” – John Maxwell

In your corporate career, whether you are in a position of authority or not (yet), one thing is for sure, you have influence. The question is, how do you use it in a way that allows you to navigate office politics, maintain your composure and get ahead without creating enemies.

There are many political personalities that you will encounter in your career, however, before we focus on dealing with others, it is important to focus first on ourselves. This is where the 3 rings of influence comes in.

Treat the rings of influence as three competencies you need to acquire as you progress in your career. Some have all 3 rings, while others may have just 1 or 2. It doesn't matter where you are now, what matters more is where you go from here. Just keep in mind that the more rings you have and/or develop, the farther you will go in your corporate career.

Ring 1 – Technical Influence

Regardless of the level of your position or your tenure, ‘Technical’ means having the skills and competencies needed to do the work that you were hired to do. For example, you were hired to do HR work, specifically in handling attendance tracking for a hundred employees. Or maybe you are in a more senior, supervisory or managerial role that looks after products or people. Your first task is to be technically adept at what you are expected to do.

Ask yourself these questions: Are your skills and competencies aligned to how your performance is measured? i.e. Are you hitting your KPI's and KRA's? Have you shown reliability and dependability in producing quality work? In other words, are you technically excellent in the transactions of your job role?

If the answer is ‘Sometimes’, ‘Not sure’, or ‘No’, then you have to work on your technical capabilities so that you can confidently say ‘yes’ to these.

Think of it this way, if you want to be a car mechanic, you need to know how to fix cars. If you don't know how, then you have to learn.

Too many times, I've seen people try to cut corners and pretend that they know what they are doing. Don't be a pretender. At level 1 your goal is to develop your ‘substance’ and to be a ‘performer’

Ring 2 – Inter-Personal Influence

Technical Influence is important, but it is not enough. You simply cannot accomplish great things with technical skills alone; You need the

help of people within the organization. Regardless of whether you want to lead a team (or not), you will need Inter-Personal Influence.

It is actually in Ring 2 where you will learn how to navigate office politics. It is here where you will need to develop your communication and 'likeability' skills. The goal is to develop your personal power of influence.

There are many ways to do this, the most devious ways this shows up in the workplace is through intimidation or manipulation. However, the better, and the more sustainable way is to build 'Gratitude' amongst your team and other departments.

Think of "Intimidation", "Manipulation", and "Gratitude" as powerful energies that can get things done. Each energy will create a mirror image of itself. Intimidation and manipulation will create people who will in turn Intimidate and Manipulate you, Gratitude however, will create people who will in turn be grateful to you.

Not all will be grateful, you will still probably create enemies, but it will be significantly less than the first two.

Ring 3 – Political Influence

Let me simplify how we strategically get Political Influence in the workplace. The goal is to find and cultivate a relationship with an established Politically powerful person within the organization.

This means that you have a powerful ally within the organization who is willing to back you when you get into trouble. It would be nice to wish that you could have a 'guardian angel' watching over you and help you grow your career.

Unfortunately, we live in reality and the reality is, there is always a trade-off to gain Political Influence. It is a favor for a favor. It is about gaining Political Capital.

However, Political capital is a finite resource especially if you have nothing to give in return. If you do not have Ring 1 or 2, any political backing will become unsustainable.

So, use your political capital strategically, pick your battles properly.

Spotting Political Behaviors.

References:

- **The Bully, The Saboteur:** Workplace Bullying Institute: <https://workplacebullying.org/> This resource provides information on identifying and addressing workplace bullying, including legal resources and support for victims.
- **The Credit Thief:** Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2017/07/how-to-deal-with-a-credit-stealing-boss> This article offers strategies for dealing with credit theft in the workplace, particularly when it involves a supervisor.
- **The Gossip Monger:** Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mysteries-of-love/201704/the-psychology-of-gossip> This article explores the psychology of gossip and its impact on individuals and relationships.
- **The Flatterer:** Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2017/01/10/how-to-spot-a-fake-flatterer/> This article provides tips on identifying and dealing with insincere flattery in the workplace.
- **The Gatekeeper, The Information Hoarder:** Inc.com: <https://www.inc.com/ilya-pozin/how-to-deal-with-the-office-gatekeeper.html> This article offers strategies for dealing with gatekeepers and accessing information in a politically charged environment.
- **The Divide and Conquer:** MindTools: <https://www.mindtools.com/commskills/conflict-resolution.htm> This resource provides guidance on conflict resolution and managing workplace disagreements.
- **The Promise Breaker:** The Muse: <https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-deal-with-a-coworker-who-never-keeps-promises> This article offers advice on dealing with colleagues who don't follow through on their commitments.
- **The Victim:** VeryWellMind: <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-deal-with-a-victim-mentality-5204415> This article explores the victim mentality and provides strategies for interacting with individuals who exhibit this behavior.

| Political Behavior | How to Deal with It Professionally |
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| The Bully: This person uses intimidation, aggression, and threats to get their way. They may belittle others, spread rumors, or make unreasonable demands. | Competencies: Assertiveness, Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Resolution How to Deal: Set clear boundaries, document their behavior, and if necessary, escalate the issue to HR or a higher authority. Don't engage in their game, but stand your ground and advocate for yourself and others. |
| The Credit Thief: This person takes credit for others' work or ideas, often subtly or by strategically positioning themselves in projects. | Competencies: Communication, Self-Awareness, Collaboration How to Deal: Clearly document your contributions, communicate your accomplishments to your supervisor, and advocate for fair recognition. If necessary, address the issue directly with the individual in a calm and assertive manner. |
| The Gossip Monger: This person thrives on spreading rumors and creating drama. They may use gossip to gain influence, undermine others, or simply for entertainment. | Competencies: Discretion, Integrity, Emotional Intelligence How to Deal: Refuse to participate in gossip. If someone tries to engage you, politely redirect the conversation or excuse yourself. Focus on building positive relationships and promoting a culture of trust and respect. |
| The Flatterer: This person uses excessive praise and compliments to manipulate others and gain favor. They may have ulterior motives and use flattery to advance their own agenda. | Competencies: Discernment, Critical Thinking, Assertiveness How to Deal: Acknowledge compliments graciously, but maintain a healthy skepticism. Focus on actions and results rather than empty praise. Be assertive in setting boundaries and protecting your interests. |
| The Gatekeeper: This person controls access to information or resources, using this power to influence decisions and manipulate others. They may withhold information, create unnecessary obstacles, or play favorites. | Competencies: Networking, Resourcefulness, Collaboration How to Deal: Build relationships with others in the organization to access information and resources through different channels. Be resourceful in finding alternative solutions and advocate for transparency and open communication. |

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| The Saboteur: This person actively undermines others' work or reputation through gossip, sabotage, or by creating obstacles. They may be motivated by jealousy, insecurity, or a desire to eliminate competition. | * Competencies: Resilience, Emotional Intelligence, Problem-Solving * How to Deal: Document their actions, stay focused on your goals, and build a strong support network. If necessary, address the issue directly with the individual or escalate it to a higher authority. |
| The Divide and Conqueror: This person creates conflict and division within a team to gain power or influence. They may pit colleagues against each other, spread rumors, or manipulate situations to their advantage. | * Competencies: Teamwork, Communication, Conflict Resolution * How to Deal: Promote open communication and collaboration within the team. Address conflicts directly and constructively, focusing on shared goals and mutual respect. |
| The Information Hoarder: This person withholds information or knowledge to gain an advantage or control others. They may be reluctant to share resources, expertise, or insights that could benefit the team. | * Competencies: Resourcefulness, Knowledge Sharing, Collaboration * How to Deal: Develop alternative ways to access information, build relationships with others who are willing to share knowledge, and advocate for a culture of transparency and open communication. |
| The Promise Breaker: This person makes commitments or promises they don't intend to keep. They may use this tactic to manipulate others, gain trust, or avoid responsibility. | * Competencies: Integrity, Assertiveness, Boundary Setting * How to Deal: Get agreements in writing, set clear expectations, and hold them accountable for their commitments. If necessary, address the issue directly and express your concerns about their lack of follow-through. |
| The Victim: This person constantly portrays themselves as a victim to gain sympathy or avoid responsibility. They may blame others for their mistakes, complain frequently, or exaggerate challenges to garner attention. | * Competencies: Empathy, Objectivity, Accountability * How to Deal: Listen empathetically, but encourage them to take ownership of their actions and focus on solutions rather than dwelling on problems. |