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The Political Element at Work

Let's start with you and your experiences of politics in your workplace. We will go on to define political behavior at work shortly but, at the commencement of this first chapter, let's focus for a few minutes on:

- Your attitude to workplace political activity.
- The consequences you observe in your workplace of behavior which you consider to be politically motivated.

POLITICS: A FACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

Political behavior at work is a fact of life. You will encounter it everywhere, in your team, your department or group, in your managers, your peers, in those who work for you and in yourself. Depending on how prevalent political conduct is in your workplace you may find that some, or maybe most, of the decisions made by your leaders and managers, and many of the decisions that you make yourself, are influenced by political considerations. Whatever your view of workplace political activity, it is something you need to get to grips with.

Many of you reading this book may be doing so because you want to learn how to handle the politics in your workplace more effectively. You want to learn how to identify and engage with the political agendas around you without either shooting yourself in the foot or making a challenging situation worse. You want to acquire additional insight, tools, knowledge and wisdom to help you navigate political territory effectively, and to enable you to have a positive impact on potentially tricky circumstances. You want to learn how to refocus politically motivated agendas on to the true business issues that need to be addressed and learn how to manage workplace relationships with your more politically minded colleagues more effectively.

Others of you may be reading this book because you are fed up of workplace politics. You see it as a pointless waste of time. You may

make observations about how prevalent politics is in your organization, and how it gets in the way of you and many of your colleagues doing your jobs properly. You may comment on how annoying and energy sapping it can be. You may see political activity as something that takes up precious time, but doesn't achieve anything beyond the self-advancement of certain key players. Part of you wants to shout with frustration and tell them all to get on with their real jobs. In reading this book, you are looking for pointers about why people behave in ways which you find worthless; you'd like to understand what it is that motivates some of your colleagues to invest so much time and effort in pursuit of goals that seem inconsequential to you.

So, just what is your attitude to workplace politics? You might like to take a few minutes to jot down what you think of it in the space below:

NOT ENGAGING WITH WORKPLACE POLITICS

Whatever you have written, and however skeptically or pragmatically you view workplace politicking, you may have difficulty engaging with it. Those of you who choose not to get involved in many of the situations at work that you consider to be politically motivated may have some good reasons for not doing so. What are they? You might like to jot down some of them in the space below:

You might now like to compare your list with the points below which reflect some of the most common reasons why people prefer not to engage with workplace politics. It may be that you:

- Don't know how to have a positive impact.
- Feel powerless to do anything effective.
- Lack the seniority to feel safe enough to get involved.
- Are intimidated by your more robust and ambitious colleagues.
- Worry that, if you do get involved, you'll mess up and you'd have been better off not getting involved in the first place.

There are very real risks inherent in wading into a sensitive political arena and upsetting people with more organizational clout, influence and authority than you; people whose subsequent opinion of you can change for the worse and whose view of you could adversely affect your career going forward. But, there are also many benefits to having the skills, sensitivity, interpersonal acumen and political know-how that mean you can make a contribution, however small or large, when you want to.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICS AT YOUR WORKPLACE

Every organization has its own distinct political character, and the political dynamics in your workplace will be unique to it. I'd like you to consider the character of the political activity you encounter in your place of work. You might like to take a few minutes to jot down a list of what you consider to be the consequences of the politics you observe around you at work. You can use the space below to write down your thoughts:

You might now like to compare your list with the points below which outline some of the commonly cited consequences of workplace politics:

- Ill-thought out decisions.
- Decisions made on the basis of only one consideration, such as finance.
- Petty competition between colleagues, teams or departments.
- People feeling they have little or no control over decisions that affect them.
- Missed opportunities to collaborate.
- Escalated conflicts, unnecessary aggression and arguments.
- Missed deadlines.
- Wasted resources, errors and rework.
- Dissatisfied customers, reduced profits.
- Disheartened and, sometimes, demoralized employees.

All of these consequences are negative. Rarely does anyone comment that one of the outcomes of political behavior at work is that it enhances their workplace, causes more effective decisions to be made and raises profits. It is seen, usually, as a counterproductive aspect of organizational life, but, nonetheless, it is also seen as a universal fact of organizational life. So if you want to be able to influence key issues in your workplace – or simply those that relate directly to your work – you will need to develop the capacity to engage with the often challenging political context around you.

THE STARTING POINT FOR HANDLING POLITICS

Understanding the political agendas, motivations and behaviors of key players at work – and responding effectively to them – is the starting point if you want to have genuine influence in your workplace. You

need to be able to read the political agendas that matter, understand the issues from the point of view of the key protagonists and be prepared to adopt effective, sensitive political approaches as and when you need them. You need to know how to identify, handle, respond to and, at times, initiate effective political strategies at work.

So whether you are stepping into political waters for the first time, or you are used to the political context and already skilled at some aspects of political management, the rest of this book will provide you with insight into what constitutes political behavior at work, will help you examine the nature of political activity in your workplace in more depth, and will outline for you an effective set of skills, tactics and tools that you can adopt, use and develop to give you more options when you encounter other people's political tactics and want to have influence in the situation.

SUMMARY AND NEXT CHAPTER

So far we have considered your attitude to workplace politics and the impact on you of the workplace political activity you encounter. Let's now turn our attention to defining what constitutes political behavior at work and identify some of the key traits associated with it.

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