

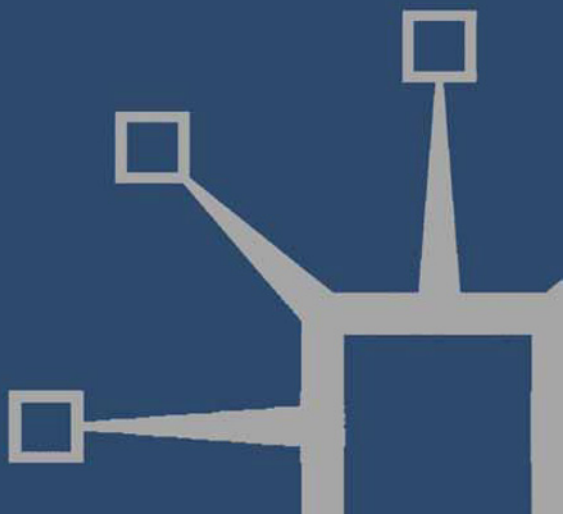
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# Managing Politics at Work

The Essential Toolkit for Identifying and  
Handling Political Behavior in the Workplace

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Aryanne Oade



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# MANAGING POLITICS AT WORK

THE ESSENTIAL TOOLKIT FOR  
IDENTIFYING AND HANDLING  
POLITICAL BEHAVIOR IN THE  
WORKPLACE

Aryanne Oade

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# Note from the Author

This book focuses on how you identify and manage other people's political behavior at work and, to some extent, how you manage your own political behavior as well. In writing the book, I am not seeking to advise you, the reader, on how to handle your workplace relationships, but rather to offer you my experiences and know-how as someone who has coached and worked with hundreds of clients on these issues. In addition to reading this book, you might want to seek the services and professional advice of a coach, business psychologist or consultant, each of whom should be able to offer you tailored, detailed and impartial counsel on the more challenging interpersonal and intrapersonal issues you might face at work.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge a number of people who have played a part in my work and the writing of this book.

Firstly, my thanks and gratitude go to all the clients who have spoken with me about their political experiences at work, sharing with me their successes, frustrations, reactions and strategies for managing – and using – political behavior in the workplace. These are perhaps the most stimulating and complex of issues to deal with and I have enjoyed every coaching meeting and workshop which focused on them.

Next, I like to thank the many clients and contacts who allowed me to pick their brains at the start of the writing process for this book. These conversations, about clients' and contacts' political experiences at work, were valuable in helping me make decisions about how to structure and focus the book. I am indebted to each of you and send my thanks to you gratefully and anonymously.

Also, my appreciation goes to my actor colleague Gina Rowland for her skills in re-creating believable business characters in coaching meetings, and for her helpful critique of seven chapters at the draft stage of the book; and to Eileen and Michael Scott for their timely and helpful review of Chapter 8.

Finally, I'm grateful to Stephen Rutt at Palgrave Macmillan for his speedy decision to publish this book and to the entire publishing team for being such effective and enjoyable co-workers.

# Overview

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Politics at work is a fact of life. If you want to have influence in your workplace it is vital that you accurately identify, interpret and react to the political context around you. This is a book about how you handle politics in your workplace. The book focuses on how you manage the political situations and the political behavior you encounter at work. It is about your political behavior, and the political behavior used by the people you work with and for. It is also about the impact – productive, destructive and unexceptional – of political behaviors used by your colleagues and by you on other people, on yourself and on the department or team you work in. It is written for anyone who is struggling to understand, make sense of and respond effectively to the political context around them at work.

## WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I wrote this book out of a firm conviction that how you behave at work – how you conduct yourself and handle other people – is what ultimately matters most. At the end of the day, it's the relationships that you build at work that count. It's not simply a matter of whether or not you possess the technical know-how your role requires. How you handle the people you work with is what will differentiate the adequate from the effective employee, and no more so than when other people's behavior – or your own – is partly or wholly motivated by political considerations. No matter how talented, intelligent, qualified or technically competent you are, without a comprehensive range of political skills – and more general people-handling skills – you won't perform as effectively as you could do in your role, you won't get the influence, promotion or projects you'd like and might well deserve, and you might not be seen as the effective, capable pair of hands your knowledge and technical skills suggest that you are.

## MY BACKGROUND AND WORKPLACE POLITICAL EXPERIENCES

I am a Chartered Psychologist. I began working as a business psychologist in the late 1980s. During the following five years I worked



for three consultancy firms. My experience of working for these firms was that I needed to expend much energy managing the relationships and political agendas of the people I worked alongside. I found myself as much a part of the political landscape as anyone else, and became caught up using political behavior as much as everybody else. I didn't like some of the behavior I saw around me, and I didn't like the fact that I ended up using some of it too. The working culture in each of these organizations was prevalingly political, and I found myself joining the party, much as I would have preferred to focus wholly on working productively with clients. Eventually, I wanted my energy and commitment to go solely toward delivering effective coaching programs and professional skills workshops. To that end I decided to work as an independent business psychologist.

Some of my initial projects were carried out as an associate to smaller consultancy firms. Then, in January 2000, I set up Oade Associates to design and deliver bespoke executive coaching programs, tailored professional skills workshops and custom-made conference scenarios. In this work I combine business psychology with the skills of professional actors to create real-life scenarios that reflect the leadership, management and political issues that my clients deal with in their work.

Since starting Oade Associates, I have run hundreds of executive coaching programs and professional skills workshops for managers and leaders working in the UK, Europe and North America. Many of these projects have involved working with clients on the reality of handling politics at work. In my coaching programs and workshops I ask clients to step back from their day-to-day work and political experiences. I ask them to reflect on the quality of the behavior they use when things are going well for them, and to compare that to what they do when they are under pressure. Then, with the help of my professional actor colleagues, I re-create the very meetings clients find most challenging – meetings which they mishandle or in which they lose influence or credibility – and help clients to revisit these meetings using different and more productive behavior, skills and interpersonal tactics. I coach them to understand the links between their intrapersonal world – their values, character and personality – and their interpersonal behavior: the tactics, skills and strategies they use with other people. Clients practise their new approaches until they are satisfied that they can go back to work and use them straightaway. As a result of working in this way clients perform better in their roles, have greater influence in their key workplace relationships and demonstrate sustained behavior change.

In addition to working one-to-one and with small groups I also work with conference audiences. In this case I develop a series of custom-made sketches which my actor colleagues subsequently enact live on stage. Audience members discuss and debate the action at round tables, so that they can learn from one another's experiences of handling similar instances and decide which interpersonal skills and tactics work well in particular situations and which don't. The scenarios can concentrate on any workplace issue, and recent sketches have focused on topics such as the politics surrounding working relationships and the politics of managing bullying and harassing behavior at work.

This book comes out of my work in helping clients to develop the political and people-handling skills they need to remain effective in highly political workplace environments – and it is informed by my own personal experiences of life as a consultancy employee.

# How To Use This Book

## WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

A proportion of people go to work and look for opportunities to use political behavior. They regularly handle things in this way, prefer to do so and become adept at taking advantage of the dynamics they create when they work in this way. Many more of you, though, go to work focused primarily on using behavior which will enable you to get your job done, and which will result in you performing effectively in your role. You don't set out to be political: you set out to do a good job in a political environment.

You can find yourselves unhelpfully caught up in other people's political agendas. You consequently recognize that you will need, on occasion, to call upon political strategies of your own if you are to defend yourself, stand up for your rights, get the credit you deserve and have influence in key situations, even if you:

- Don't really want to act this way.
- Don't consider yourself skilled at doing so.
- Would really rather not do so.

When you do join the political sphere, you can find that the behaviors you choose in responding to the political ambitions of your colleagues don't always have the impact you'd expect them to have. Sometimes they are not effective at all. Sometimes they're only partially effective, reflecting the fact that you simply don't understand enough about the motivations of the protagonists or the dynamics of the situations they create. A lot of your time and effort goes into what are ultimately ineffective responses to the political strategies of others. I wrote this book for those of you who identify with this group of people.

I also wrote the book for those of you who don't feel equipped to engage with the politics you see going on around you at all, even when it directly, and unhelpfully, affects your work. You fear that, if you enter the mix, your more politically motivated and competent colleagues will not welcome your input and it will go badly for you. You lack the skills, confidence and know-how to enter the political arena safely, so you wait for your more politically accomplished colleagues to work it out between them, even though this means that

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you miss out on opportunities to influence the issues. If you had the mind-set and the capabilities of a more political operator you'd be able to speak up and have at least some influence in some situations. But lacking the capacity to enter the fray with any certainty – and afraid that if you do it'll backfire on you – you keep your head down and let others resolve the situations which evolve around you instead. I wrote this book for those of you who identify with this group of people too.

## WHAT THIS BOOK WILL DO FOR YOU

This book will take you through a process of considering the political behavior you encounter and initiate in your workplace. It will help you reevaluate how well you respond to workplace politics and how productively you handle it. The book will introduce you to a series of six effective tools for managing workplace politics. Each tool stands alone or can be used in tandem with the other tools. Together they form a menu of options for you to draw on as you get to grips with the politics around you at work. Once you have been introduced to a tool, and worked through the exercises in the book related to it, you should be able to apply it to your working life straightaway.

The book will also introduce you to a series of case studies – and smaller examples – each of which mirrors realistic workplace political dynamics. A few of these scenarios are based on real-life incidents. In each of these instances the details of the characters, the setting of the events and the specific details of the scenarios have been fictionalized to protect the identities of the people involved. Each of the six main case studies is constructed to illustrate the themes of the chapter and tool preceding it. As you read a case study you will be asked to analyze it from the point of view of one or more of its key characters, applying the political tool from the preceding chapter to the action and finding solutions to the key political dynamics in the scenario.

Overall, the book will equip you with the insight, knowledge and tactics to enable you to:

- Gain and retain influence in political situations.
- Promote your interests, resolve conflicts, manage yourself and lead your team effectively when you are involved in – or feel the need to respond to – politically motivated agendas.
- Handle the political element you encounter at work with increased confidence and know-how.

Specifically the book will provide you with:

- Increased understanding about what motivates people in your workplace to adopt political strategies.
- Input to enable you to better analyze and identify political behavior at work.
- The knowledge, tools and tactics you need to help you manage your own and other people's political behavior more effectively.
- Insight into the impact of your own political behavior on your workplace contacts – and on your own reputation.
- Increased choices about how to conduct yourself and respond to other people at work, in situations where the political factor is a consideration.

## **STEPPING BACK FROM YOUR DAY-TO-DAY WORK**

As you read the book you will be encouraged to step back from your day-to-day work and:

- Review how you currently manage workplace politics.
- Identify your areas of strength and your areas for development.
- Make decisions about what to do to improve the way in which you manage and handle the political element in your key business relationships.

## **YOUR RESPONSE TO POLITICAL BEHAVIOR**

Even the most skilled people-handlers can founder when confronted with behavior that is political; behavior which is, by its very nature, not transparent, open and honest, and which, when tackled, doesn't respond to influence and dialog, doesn't follow the collaborative route even if it is presented as such, and is sometimes thought-provoking, possibly devious, often frustrating to deal with and, at times, simply divisive. Periodically, the book contains a series of questions for you to consider and answer in relation to your workplace political experiences and behavior. Each question is followed by a space in the text so that you can jot down your answers to it if you want to. These questions will provide you with an opportunity to apply the key points from the previous sections of the book to your working life, helping you get the most out of the process of reading the material.

This book will help you make the most of the political skills you've got. What a book like this can't do is make up for any lack of political

intelligence you may have, or any lack of competency on your part in handling people. But it will show you how to handle the political element at your workplace more effectively, and should help you develop further political skills.

I am not advocating that every time you see an unhelpful political behavior, you should get involved and give a view. In every situation that you are tempted to engage with you will need to assess whether, given your seniority and the issues involved, it makes sense for you to do so. In some cases it may be unwise or foolhardy to act. But depending on the degree of political behavior in your organization, the issues involved and your influence in a given situation, it may be exactly the right thing to do.

## **YOUR POLITICAL BEHAVIOR AT WORK**

The book is written to you, the reader, with the following note of caution. In my experience, when things go wrong for someone at work, it is unlikely to be because they are in the wrong job, although this is sometimes the case. It is much more likely that the person has neglected, or simply not managed, the human, political element of their work. They have not read the political landscape effectively enough. They have not considered deeply enough the political factors that matter to those with influence in a given situation. They haven't attended to the hidden agendas, personal dislikes, unresolved conflicts, power struggles and interpersonal dynamics that govern which decisions are made, by who, and when. My wish is that, with the help of this book, you will become more skilled, more effective and more productive at doing all these things, and that, in time, more and more of your energy and enthusiasm will go toward engaging with the aspects of your role that you find most rewarding, and less and less of your energy and enthusiasm will be dissipated responding ineffectively to other people's political activity.

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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.