

Seidman Business Review

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 11

1-1-2001

Office Politics in Grand Rapids Workplaces

Suzanne Crampton
Grand Valley State University

John Hodge
Grand Valley State University

Stan Lindquist
Grand Valley State University

Jitendra Mishra
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/sbr>

Recommended Citation

Crampton, Suzanne; Hodge, John; Lindquist, Stan; and Mishra, Jitendra (2001) "Office Politics in Grand Rapids Workplaces," *Seidman Business Review*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/sbr/vol7/iss1/11>

Office Politics in Grand Rapids Workplaces

Suzanne Crampton, Ph.D., John Hodge, Ed.D., Stan Lindquist, Ph.D., and Jitendra Mishra, Ph.D.¹
Seidman School of Business

The words *office politics* or *corporate politics* tend to carry a negative connotation. However, corporate politics refers to the acquisition and use of power, and power is simply referred to as the ability to influence others in order to get things done (Dessler, 1998; Robbins, 1994). How we develop and use our power and the various political tools at our disposal, of course, can be viewed in positive or negative ways, depending on the degree to which we are attempting to accomplish goals that are compatible with the organization's and the effect the political tools used have on others. The use of power and politics is necessary in order to achieve goals.

All people encounter some form of politics throughout their career, whether it be in positive or negative forms. Some positive aspects of politics include authentic attitudes, honest and open communication, networking, coping with difficult bosses, getting support from co-workers, and finding effective mentors. The characteristics of negative politicking are often seen as being selfish, uncooperative, or unreliable (McKenna & McHenry, 1994). It is interesting to note, however, that politics is most successful when its full potential is realized and put into action to accomplish desired goals. Simply put, it is more beneficial to participate in office politics when dealing with diverse individuals and groups whose interests and motives may not coincide with the formal goals of the organization.

Given how fundamental the need for power appears to be among people, and how differences in power between employees are basic to organizations, it is safe to say that organizational politics is inevitable. The more organizational politics is recognized as going on, the less trust and more alienation people are likely to feel. To be successful in today's work environment, employees must learn to minimize the effects of organizational politics.

The primary objective of this research was to survey the attitudes and perceptions of West Michigan managers toward the political environments of their organizations. Responses were received from 116 organizations (30.7% response rate). The survey examined: 1) DEFINITION of office politics; 2) CAUSES of office politics; 3) SCANNING for office politics; 4) FAVORABLE IMPRESSIONS toward office politics; 5) STRATEGIES of office politics; 6) BOOSTING ONE'S CAREER with office politics; 7) MANAGEMENT of office politics; 8) MINORITIES in office politics; and 9) GROUPS MOST LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE HIGH-LEVELS of office politics.

RESULTS

The first section of the survey was to determine how respondents defined office politics. Each respondent in our population was asked to rank six definitions of office politics (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly agree"). Each definition had a better than 64% acceptance rate, ordered as follows: techniques and maneuvers advancing one's career—83.6%; rising to the top based on connections—71.6%; exploiting resources to gain more control—67.2%; techniques to eliminate a rival—50%; hunger for acceptance—43.1%; and striving to acquire power—74.2%.

The second section of the survey examined CAUSES of office politics and asked respondents to rank their perception of nine factors that lead to office politics in their organizations. Factors were ranked in order of agreement as follows: increase job security (81%), better working relations with the boss (77.6%), control resources (62.9%), imitate power holders (62%), need for a radical change in the company (53.5%), and the lack of confidence in one's skills and talents (50.9%).

In the third section of our survey, SCANNING THE ENVIRONMENT, each employee was asked to identify some of the common ways to notice the presence of office politics. Top and middle managers indicated that talking to experienced employees is a tactful way to scan the environment for office politics (84%). Another way in which to gain knowledge is to find out who the powerful and influential people are. These managers also believed that another beneficial method for scanning the environment was the use of the grapevine. Of the middle managers surveyed, 86% agreed that paying attention to the grapevine significantly contributed to noticing the presence of office politics, while 75% of the senior corporate managers agreed.

Employees were asked to rank a list of six methods to gaining a favorable impression in the fourth section of our survey, GAINING A FAVORABLE IMPRESSION. Regardless of the type of industry (e.g., service, manufacturing, construction, public), all respondents agreed that helping the boss to succeed was a key method to gain a favorable impression (92.2% agreed). Loyalty to the boss and organization (88.8%) was the second highest method, followed by minimizing the boss's problems (82.8%), having a key office location (70.7%), and one's dress/appearance (70.4%).

In the fifth section of our survey, STRATEGIES OF OFFICE POLITICS, our intent was to determine the most frequent techniques used to gain a power advantage. Of all the techniques

¹Professors Crampton, Hodge, and Mishra are in the Management Department; Professor Lindquist is in the Accounting Department.

listed, the three with which respondents most agreed were: creating a favorable impression, with an agreement rate of 93.1%; developing a base of support, with an agreement rate of 88.8%; and, with 83.6% agreement, aligning oneself with more powerful others.

BOOSTING ONE'S CAREER WITH POLITICS, our sixth section, asked respondents to identify their perceptions from a list of statements concerning common methods to get ahead in their careers. The first statement, listening and getting others to talk, had an agreement rate of 89.5%. Creating one's own job through the use of political avenues was the second statement, with an agreement rate of 81%. The third statement of doing favors for others with the expectation of receiving favors in return had an 80.2% agreement rate. Our fourth statement encompassed using logic and facts to further one's career and had a 78.5% agreement rating.

In our seventh section, **MANAGEMENT OF OFFICE POLITICS**, respondents examined a list of ways to cope with and manage office politics. The intent of this section was to determine what techniques are used most successfully by managers in the workplace. We found that there are many techniques that are successfully used to manage office politics, all with an agreement rate over 80%. These include providing equal rewards, establishing open communication, encouraging ethical behavior, clarifying job requirements, creating teams, and implementing participative management.

The eighth section of our survey, **MINORITIES IN OFFICE POLITICS**, asked managers to respond to a list of statements relating to what they perceive minorities must strive to do if they are to participate in office politics. Our results showed that, overall, minorities must engage in a wide variety of activities in order to stay ahead in their offices' political environments. The overall acceptance rate among all eight statements was 85.4%, as follows: create a vision of career objectives (92.1%), establish confidence in themselves (90.4%), be enthusiastic about one's job (90.2%), set challenging and realistic goals (87.5%), select a good role model/mentor (85.7%), have ambition (84.8%), develop a power base/networking (79.3%), and respect the power they have already achieved (73.2%).

In the final section of our survey, **GROUPS MOST LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE HIGH-LEVELS OF OFFICE POLITICS**, managers were asked to respond to a list of employment levels that they perceived were involved in office politics. Overall, 88.8% of surveyed employees agreed that middle management was the group most likely to experience high levels of office politics. Top management had an agreement rate of 83.6%. According to the surveyed employees, line management only had an agreement rate of 68.5%. The final two groups that are most likely to experience high levels of office politics are staff employees (63%) and blue collar employees (34.5%).

Discussion

People in all organizations will continuously participate in office politics whether they realize that they are doing it or not. Those who do not participate or attempt not to participate in office politics are not getting ahead in any way. In fact, by not participating in office politics or ignoring the fact that it exists, they may be making themselves more vulnerable for a political attack.

Even though the term office politics can have negative connotations, our survey found that this is not necessarily true. Our research indicated that 83.6% of the respondents said that the best definition of office politics is techniques and maneuvers used to advance one's career. This definition is fairly positive and was chosen over others with more negative connotations.

There are various reasons why office politics is undertaken. These include power-seeking personalities, emotional insecurity, self-interest, and a person's hunger for acceptance. To effectively implement office politics one must have a wide variety of strategies. In researching this project, we discovered many different strategies and methods which are used in the workplace. Some of these strategies seem to be innocent in nature but are also very effective. Taking your boss out to lunch or joining small informal group conversations are two such examples. Other strategies, which tend to be viewed as negative, include discrediting a rival and withholding the truth.

It is very important to use the right technique for the right situation when planning to boost a career with politicking. Because someone is being political does not necessarily mean that person is being smooth and getting ahead of everyone else. The person could just as easily be offending someone. This is why it is important to utilize some of the more positive forms of politicking. Positive techniques may include going out to lunch with coworkers or supervisors. Observing adversaries and imitating what they do well is another method of politicking that may be classified as positive. Also, becoming an expert about the organization can be an effective way to climb the ladder of success. The bottom line is understanding the organization, having sufficient political knowledge, and knowing how to apply this information at the proper time. These strategies will help achieve the maximum results.

References

- Dessler, G. (1998). *Management: Leading People and Organizations in the 21st Century*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- McKenna & McHenry, *Managing Office Politics*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1994.
- Robbins, S. P. (1994). *Essentials of Organizational Behavior*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.