



## **Playing Politics**

### **by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

Do you play politics? Is that a good thing to do? Is it morally right? Is it smart? How we deal with political situations has a huge impact on the quality of our lives.

We are surrounded by politics at all times, and we can all identify with the negative aspects of political activities. Webster defines politics in an organizational setting as : “scheming and maneuvering within a group,” immediately giving the word a negative connotation. If we are practicing politics, something bad is happening. We have encountered Machiavellian individuals who would take credit for the work of others or somehow undermine their efforts in order to enhance themselves. You can undoubtedly visualize a highly political individual in your mind as you read this article. What gives rise to political thought?

All of us have a set of wants, needs, and desires. For example, most of us would like to get our hands on more money, thinking it would allow fewer problems in our lives. Most of us wish the world would slow down so we could relax once in a while and enjoy the ride. None of us like to feel we have been taken advantage of in any kind of interchange, whether it be a co-worker goofing off while we toil away, or our boss forgetting the raise we were promised. In short, most of us want more of the “good stuff” in life, and we want to be assured we are not disadvantaged by someone else hogging more than their share.

We all have a vested interest in getting our share in life: what we have worked for and are entitled to receive. There is a constant agenda going on in everyone’s head relative to ensuring this equity; it makes no difference if a person is on death row or the CEO of a multinational organization. It is impossible for the needs of all people to be optimized at once, so this creates tension between individuals and groups. How we deal with this tension is called politics. We all engage in it most of the time. There is nothing wrong with doing this. It is human nature. We live in a sea of politics.

I read a great definition of political dynamics by Tom Rieger in "The Conference Board Review." Tom wrote, "If your self-interests are in conflict with those of the greater good, it is simply human nature to adjust your view of the greater good to match the context of what is best for you."

The ethical dilemmas about politics surface when people get greedy. They want more than their fair share of the “good stuff” and work to figure out ways to enhance their portion at the expense

of others. We need to be alert for these people and protect our own interests at all times. Sometimes they are easy to spot, like the one-eyed pirate trying to cut off your head with a broad sword. Other times, they are so crafty their damage seems almost painless as if you are being sliced up by a razor-sharp foil.

Conducting yourself in an ethical manner, yet still being politically astute, can do wonders for your sanity and your pocketbook. Let's look at 14 rules for political survival:

1. **Know who butters your bread and act that way.** Some people seem to forget their boss' power to influence the quality of their life. This does not mean you need to be a "yes man" or a "suck up." Just don't go around intentionally undermining the boss, even if you think she is wrong.
2. **Act in ways consistent with your values and sense of spiritual rightness.** You know what is right. Often people rationalize and do wrong things in order to get ahead. These actions tend to backfire by reducing trust.
3. **Make 20 positive remarks for every negative one.** It is amazing how many people have that ratio exactly backward. They gripe and complain all day long. Then they wonder why nobody likes to be near them. Test this out on yourself. Make a mental note (maybe keep a 3X5" card and make hash marks) of each positive and negative statement that comes out of your mouth. You may be surprised. If you don't like your ratio, change it.
4. **Do not grandstand.** Practice humility and avoid taking cheap shots. Putting people down often feels satisfying at the moment (like they got what was coming to them), but in the long run, saying hurtful things will bring pain back to you in the future.
5. **Try to understand the intentions and motivations of others.** It isn't enough to observe their behaviors. You need to dig deeper to reach the true meaning in their actions. Only then can you understand what is happening.
6. **Follow up on everything.** Try to achieve a reputation for being 100% reliable at doing what you promise. Show initiative and be alert for opportunities to demonstrate your reliability.
7. **Do the dirty work cheerfully.** Every job has unpleasant or boring aspects. Do these quickly and efficiently without complaint. You are not too good for the menial jobs.
8. **Agree to disagree.** Arguments at work can persist for months while people dig in further to buttress their position and undermine the other side. Life is too short for this pettiness. After three legitimate attempts to convince one another, it is best to say, "It looks like we are not going to agree on this matter. Rather than arguing about it, let's agree to disagree. We still respect each other and can work well together. We just have this one area where we see things differently." It is amazing how much time and acrimony can be eliminated with these few words.
9. **Don't beat dead horses.** Forget the discussions that go on and on. Make your point once. If you think it was misunderstood, make it again. After that, move on. Repetition is

a rat hole. Sometimes you can observe a group in heated discussion for a full hour. It sounds like an argument, but they are really in violent agreement.

10. **Be aggressive, but don't be a pest.** There is a fine line between high initiative and being intrusive. Learn to read the body language all around you and back off before you go too far.
11. **Administrative people and other support people have real power.** They hold the keys for access to power people. They understand the sidebar conversations about you and the unpublished agendas that define the real ball game. They will be supportive if they like you.
12. **Keep an active social life with work associates.** This is not mandatory, but the better the relationship outside work, the more information will naturally flow in the conversation. Information is power. The basis for political power is that people do things for people they like.
13. **Always be considerate and gracious.** Try to avoid snapping at people. It is not always helpful to wear your emotions on your sleeve. The best rule here is the "golden" rule. Put yourself in the other person's place and ask how you would like to be treated.
14. **Try to foster peers as political allies.** Never make an enemy if you can avoid it - and you almost always can avoid it.

That is a pretty long list of "dos" and "don'ts," but most of them are common sense. The point is that your reputation (which is your most precious asset) is on the line in every interaction. Make sure you do everything possible to enhance it. I suggest you print out these tips and review them frequently. Following them can mean the difference between floundering and thriving.



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