

HOW TO NAVIGATE OFFICE POLITICS

YOUR GUIDE TO GETTING AHEAD



Robert Half®

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INTRODUCTION

Whether you work for a major multinational corporation, midsize firm or small startup, there's likely some degree of politics at play within your organization. While most people don't relish office politics, making the effort to understand your company's political landscape can be an important step in your career.

In fact, a majority (62 percent) of North American workers interviewed by Robert Half said involvement in office politics is at least somewhat necessary to get ahead today. The key to avoiding political fallout is to remain attuned to workplace

dynamics without getting drawn into power struggles or playing petty games. This tip sheet explores how to tactfully traverse the treacherous waters of office politics without damaging your reputation, professional relationships or career.



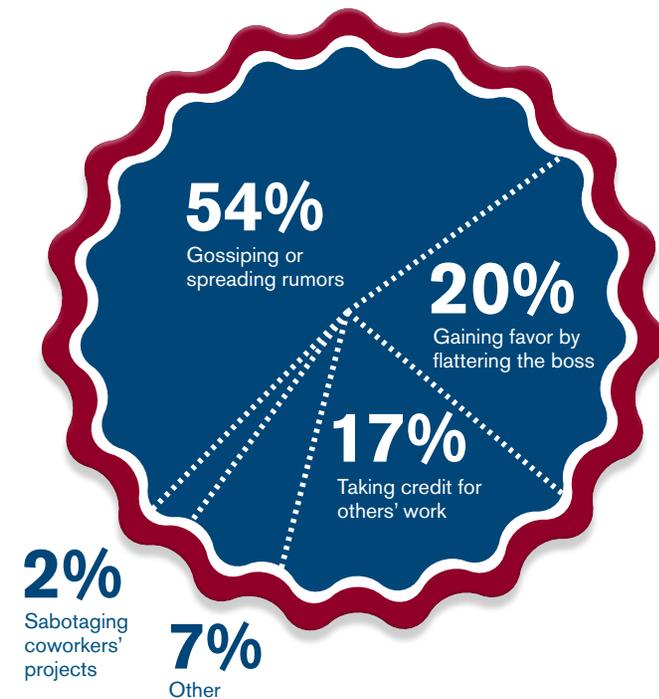
MASTERING WORKPLACE DIPLOMACY

Successfully navigating office politics requires finesse and flexibility. While it's an unfortunate truth that there are people who will do anything to advance their careers, it's possible to rise above the fray and climb through the ranks. Following are seven strategies:

- 1 ★ Avoid smear campaigns.** Play it safe and don't say anything about colleagues that you wouldn't say directly to them. As the noted humorist Will Rogers once advised: "Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip." Criticizing or whispering behind backs is only guaranteed to hurt one person's credibility: yours.
- 2 ★ Keep tabs on political undercurrents.** Separate tabloid-style gossip (e.g., "juicy" hearsay about the new hire's weekend exploits) from news that could affect your career. For instance, if you hear rumblings of job cuts or get word that an appealing new role is opening up, you can get a jump on updating your resume. It's fine to tune into the grapevine as long as you don't feed it.
- 3 ★ Build a broad coalition of support.** In an effort to impress the company bigwigs, many ambitious but shortsighted professionals end up tarnishing their relationships with peers by stealing credit for successful projects or pointing fingers at others when initiatives go awry. Aim to build solid connections with colleagues at all levels and in all corners of your organization – not just those at the top. Pay it forward by sharing credit for positive outcomes, delivering on promises, and pitching in when an extra hand is needed. You never know whose help or support you'll need in the future.

RUMOR HAS IT ...

Psst ... have you heard the latest news about office politics? Don't tell anyone, but according to workers polled, gossip is the most common form of office politics:



Source: Robert Half survey of more than 700 North American workers 18 years of age or older and employed in an office environment. Responses represent nearly 400 employees who cited office politics in their workplace.



MASTERING WORKPLACE DIPLOMACY

- 4 ★ **Pay attention to grassroots movements.** Not every guideline, policy and procedure is outlined in the company handbook. Avoid sticky situations by remaining aware of and sensitive to the tacit rules that often influence employee behavior at your firm. (For instance, does everyone go out of their way to stay on the good side of a particularly influential executive assistant?) Careful observation can keep you from inadvertently stepping on toes or breaking an unspoken chain of command.
- 5 ★ **Connect with your constituencies.** Interacting smoothly with a mix of personalities is challenging. Gain an edge by taking note of how people in your office prefer to communicate. While some coworkers value frank, cut-to-the-chase feedback, others might respond best to a “first-the-good-news” style of delivery. Work approaches vary, too. One manager might appreciate frequent status updates, while another supervisor may only be interested in the end results. You can’t be all things to all people, but being astute and adaptable will only enhance your effectiveness.
- 6 ★ **Eliminate wedge issues.** Small squabbles can quickly turn into rancorous rivalries, but don’t let conflict fester. When you’re upset or frustrated with a coworker, take some time to cool off, but then express your concerns directly. Be straightforward but tactful, focusing on facts, not feelings. Likewise, when you make a mistake, immediately acknowledge it and make amends. You don’t need to be buddies with everyone in the office, but you do need to be able to work together.
- 7 ★ **Remember, all politics is local.** Here’s a simple solution: Be friendly. Small talk is more important than many people think. Sure, talent and a strong work ethic are pivotal to advancing, but interpersonal skills matter, too. Occasionally taking breaks

to express an interest in your coworkers’ lives or to simply shoot the breeze about pop culture can help you connect on a basic level, diffuse tension or firm up collegial friendships.

POLITICAL IMPERATIVE?

Whether you’re running for office or just working in one, it pays to be a good politician. Sixty-two percent of workers said office politics is somewhat or very necessary to advance one’s career:

VERY NECESSARY TO GET AHEAD



SOMEWHAT NECESSARY TO GET AHEAD



NOT AT ALL NECESSARY TO GET AHEAD



DON'T KNOW/NO ANSWER



Source: Robert Half survey of more than 700 North American workers 18 years of age or older and employed in an office environment.

OFFICE POLITICIANS: A FIELD GUIDE

Although it's wise to be aware of office politics, some people take this involvement to an extreme. Here's a field guide to identifying some of the most prevalent political players in your office, along with tips for working with them:

THE GOSSIP HOUND

To this rabid rumormonger, the water cooler isn't just a place to hydrate, it's a second home. Frequently found speaking in hushed tones, the Gossip Hound loves speculating about everything and everyone. While this person may provide accurate or relevant information on occasion, don't allow yourself to get pulled into corrosive conversations.

THE CREDIT THIEF

There's an "I" in team, according to this self-serving spotlight stealer. This person consistently claims full credit for collaborative efforts, but takes none of the responsibility when things go wrong. Protect yourself from the Credit Thief by keeping a written record of your contributions and accomplishments. When necessary, don't hesitate to correct misperceptions about who did what.

THE SYCOPHANT

This self-seeking flatterer shamelessly tries to stroke the ego of anyone perceived to be in a position of power, but couldn't care less about peers. Be wary when the Sycophant displays a sudden shift in attitude toward you. He or she could be buttering you up for a favor, which likely won't be returned.

THE SABOTEUR

Rather than relying on hard work to make a positive impression, this person tries to look good by making everyone else look bad. The Saboteur, who operates like a contestant on "Survivor," delights in pitting people against each other. Keep your distance – and your guard up – when dealing with this master manipulator.



OFFICE POLITICIANS: A FIELD GUIDE

THE LOBBYIST

The Lobbyist is passionate about his or her projects and ways of doing things. This individual advocates strongly for support, but is often unreceptive to outside points of view. When collaborating with the Lobbyist on projects, be aware of the agenda being pushed, and be willing to stand up for your ideas.

THE ADVISER

The office's most influential people aren't always the most high-ranking or high-profile employees. The Adviser, for instance, is closely aligned with a company's leadership and serves as their "eyes and ears." Because the well-connected Adviser wields significant power behind the scenes, develop a good rapport with him or her.

SAVVY SELF-PROMOTION ★

Do you wince whenever you hear the term 'self-promotion'? Don't worry, you don't need to be a blustering braggart to raise your visibility and get the credit and kudos you deserve. Tactfully toot your own horn by periodically apprising your manager of your successes. Add context and muscle to your status updates by quantifying your contributions, linking your efforts to the positive impact they've had on the bottom line.

'OCCASSIONAL VOTER' OR 'ACTIVE CAMPAIGNER'?

Workers share their degree of involvement in office politics:

ACTIVE CAMPAIGNER: I HAVE TO PLAY THE GAME TO GET AHEAD



OCCASIONAL VOTER: I GET INVOLVED WHEN ISSUES ARE IMPORTANT TO ME



A NEUTRAL PARTY: I STAY COMPLETELY OUT OF THE FRAY



DON'T KNOW/NO ANSWER



Source: Robert Half survey of more than 700 North American workers 18 years of age or older and employed in an office environment.

MANAGERS: TIPS ON AVOIDING POLITICAL FALLOUTS

Most organizations aren't immune to office politics, and it can pose challenges for managers. If left unchecked, a politically charged work environment can hinder productivity, erode trust and lead to morale and retention issues. Here are tips to mitigate political problems:

Conduct straw polls. Maintain an open-door policy and encourage employees to reach out to you when concerns arise. But don't always wait for staff to make the first move. Be proactive and check in with team members from time to time. Informal chats allow you to monitor morale and identify the current climate.

Don't embargo information. Frequently providing clear and candid communication is a good way to keep the gossip grapevine from growing. Speculation tends to spike when changes are clearly afoot but management hasn't provided adequate information.

Don't play favorites. Acknowledging group successes reinforces the importance of collaboration. Instead of lavishing praise on any one person, make a point to recognize the contributions of the whole team. And before you reward or publicly single out someone for standout work, make sure you aren't slighting any unsung heroes.



Set a clear agenda. Turf wars are more likely to break out when priorities and roles aren't clearly defined. Prevent territorial tiffs and increase efficiency by assigning duties at the start of big projects. Tell people what they are responsible for and how they fit into the big picture.

Build a unified coalition. Take action swiftly and assertively if you notice that infighting (or one bad apple) is getting the best of your team. Your willingness to address disharmony early on and head-on will go a long way toward maintaining a healthy environment.

Walk the talk. Your employees will take their attitudinal cues from you, so practice what you preach. Don't engage in gossip, play favorites or openly criticize the decisions of those above you. In short, emphasize integrity.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES ★

Robert Half asked workers and executives the same question: "On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being 'very political' and one being 'not at all political,' how political would you rate your work environment?"

	Workers	Executives
More political: 6 or higher	39%	27%
Less political: 5 or lower	61%	73%

Source: Robert Half surveys of more than 700 North American workers 18 years of age or older and employed in an office environment, and more than 5,000 North American executives.



CONCLUSION

How you handle sensitive workplace dynamics can make or break your professional prospects. But it isn't really all that complex. Navigating office politics involves common sense, courtesy and compromise. Showcase your savvy by carefully observing your office environment without getting mired in the political pitfalls highlighted in this guide.

For a humorous look at office politics, check out Robert Half's ongoing career bloopers video series, *Don't Let This Happen to You*, at roberthalf.com/bloopers.

"THE PROMOTION"



ABOUT ROBERT HALF

Founded in 1948, Robert Half International, the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm, is a recognized leader in professional staffing services. The company's specialized staffing divisions include Accountemps®, Robert Half® Finance & Accounting and Robert Half® Management Resources, for temporary, full-time and senior-level project professionals, respectively, in the fields of accounting and finance; OfficeTeam®, for highly skilled office and administrative support professionals; Robert Half® Technology, for project and full-time technology professionals; Robert Half® Legal, for project and full-time staffing of lawyers, paralegals and legal support personnel; and The Creative Group®, for interactive, design and marketing professionals. Robert Half International has staffing operations in more than 350 locations worldwide. For more information about the specialized staffing and recruitment divisions of Robert Half, visit roberthalf.com.