

Office politics

Surviving and thriving in the corporate jungle

Patrick Forsyth



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Contents

	The Author	5
1	Introduction: a response to a competitive workplace	6
2	Welcome to the jungle	7
3	Adopting the right approach	15
4	How personal image influences	17
5	The role of communications	24
6	Management matters	33
7	Active responses and initiatives	40
8	Consolidating your position	45



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The Author

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!*, about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published recently.

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1 Introduction: a response to a competitive workplace

If there is one thing that has predominantly negative connotations it's office politics. The phrase itself summons up images of back stabbing, of Machiavellian plotting and watching your back. If the office with no office politics exists it has not been discovered yet, so the only option for those working in an organisation is to recognise this and act accordingly. No one can ignore any of the realities of life and survive for long, much less prosper.

Managers and executives are judged by results. To be successful, to achieve the results you intend or hit the targets you are set, may well be a constant challenge. Certainly in increasingly competitive markets and unpredictable economic conditions this seems likely for many, if not most, people. The phrase “the only place where success comes ahead of work is in the dictionary” is usually attributed to Vidal Sassoon; whoever said it first it is likely to be true. Yet whatever work – hard work – is necessary, and whatever skills must be cultivated to back up pure application, the challenge remains – and if circumstances and people conspire to make the task more difficult, this cannot be ignored.

Now, let us be clear. There is nothing wrong with healthy competition between people. Many would claim this is good, and certainly it is a simple fact of human nature and of modern corporate life. Nor is friction necessarily all bad. It can act as a catalyst to stimulate thought, creativity and ideas and make things happen that might otherwise not. While the worst aspects of office politics are certainly unconstructive, in some ways it *can* work for you. But in either case these are not effects that should be regarded as “just happening”. An active approach is necessary to minimise the negative effects that office politics may have on you, and to maximise any constructive ways in which it may help you.

Here we examine how such constructive individual action should be approached not as a “backstabbers’ charter”, rather to offer guidance to those wanting to increase their effectiveness and maximise any opportunities or methods able to foster success, and ultimately to further their careers.

2 Welcome to the jungle

Let's start with a healthy dose of realism about the realities of office life. Any organisation is a complex environment. And anyone working in one is subject to many different factors that either assist their success or make things more difficult. The range of influences is considerable. Success may be made more likely within an organisation that has, say, a constructive training policy, open communications or in which someone finds themselves working for an especially supportive boss.

Alternatively, such things as a lack of clear objectives, pointless time wasting bureaucracy, or persistently unclear instructions may hinder success. And more, and more, including factors that are seemingly small or unimportant. For example, just not being invited to a particular meeting might be significant – either allowing you time to get on with something more important, or cutting you off from an opportunity to influence a decision.

But there is one factor that is perhaps more likely to exert an influence than any other, and that is people. Unless you are a freelance or sole trader, working in an organisation automatically means you are interacting with others. Much of this interaction may be constructive. Other individuals may help and support what you do, team working may add a resource over and above individual skills, and ideas being discussed may lead to new thoughts, different action and greater success. But...there is always a but:

People mean politics

People, however constructively they approach their jobs, are not motivated solely by the desire to meet objectives and succeed in achieving the results they are charged with producing. They have their own agendas. Some of these intentions will help the general good, but others may not. Such personal ambitions include a wide range of factors.

- Getting the job done
- Increasing personal job satisfaction
- Organising greater visibility
- Impressing others
- Securing greater rewards
- Gaining greater authority
- Taking on greater responsibilities
- Beating others in a race for promotion
- Obtaining additional perks.

The list above immediately shows the possibilities. A number of the points listed clearly involve the possibility of competition. One person gets more responsibility, takes on the authority to handle something or is selected to attend an important conference in Singapore; and another does not. Of course, all such matters are highly personal. One person might regard travel to a certain location as a perk, while another might see it only as a chore. Both might see personal advantage in being present at the meeting that takes place there.

As such outcomes are sought, people work hard to achieve what *they* want and it is a short step from simply pushing for it to pushing harder – not just in a way that achieves what they want, but in a way that prevents or handicaps someone else in their intentions. Assertiveness becomes aggression, and brute force becomes the order of the day. What is done may be secretively devised, subtly and maybe even invisibly deployed, but brute force still describes it well – it has no purpose other than to achieve parochial personal advantage.

In addition, and still being realistic, other factors may be at work also. Some people are inherently less concerned about others than they might be, some are made so by their own feelings of inadequacy or incompetence (real or imagined), and some may have what is frankly best described as destructive streaks. They may:

- Want others to fail
- Delight in others' misfortunes
- See winning as necessitating someone else losing
- Use others
- Like the process of "doing someone down" (regardless of any positive benefit to them)
- Be bullies
- Want the credit for everything
- Let their prejudices overrule practicality

Again the nature and scale of all this may vary. Someone may simply be a bit ruthless in the way they set out to achieve some small step. Or, at worst, they may see an out and out back stabbing approach as their best route onto the Board, say, and be prepared to go to any lengths to succeed.

Appearances can be deceptive

Because of the way people approach their jobs, and because of many peoples' willingness to indulge, at least to some extent, in a political approach to what they do, it pays to remember that many of the signs around you in the organisation may be deceptive. Things are just not always what they appear, and what is said may contain hidden messages and hidden agendas.

We all know the stock warnings. Always be wary of the person who starts by saying “Trust me”, “Let me be honest” or “I’m on your side”; or at least react with a clear intention to read carefully between the lines as the communication continues. Aim to understand peoples’ motives, and do not necessarily think the best of them, or automatically give them the benefit of the doubt. Prudence is a good watchword in the political jungle of the typical organisation.

So, one element of your judgement about everything needs to be to keep an eye on the political implications or possibilities. This might be best stated as watching for dangers and opportunities, because what you observe may provide an indication of either. People need to be regarded as potential friends, or as enemies; and sometimes they may be both at different times. Watch for the signs and observe:

- What is said
- How it is said
- Announcements and decisions
- Alliances and changes of alliance
- Peoples’ intentions and motivations
- The behavior of others
- Communications (from memos to meetings)

What you must do is link your own clear intention, purpose and objectives to a way of working that reflects the environment – that is the political environment. You cannot work in isolation, pursuing your intentions as if others cannot affect your progress towards them. They will. Assume they will. The only question is whether others can assist your progress or, alternatively, whether you need to prevent it being made less likely by others. Then, in either case, you need to consider what action might be necessary on your part to accentuate the positive.

In all sorts of ways this view needs to colour your judgement. For example, who – exactly – do you take into your confidence, and how much and how soon? When should you ask advice? How much should you publicise your success (or hide anything that is less than successful)? Who should you know and who should know you? And what do you want other people to think of you? All these sorts of question, and more, are important. All demand you make considered judgements. And that, in turn, demands you have your ear to the ground and know what is going on – or, better still, know what is about to go on.

Adopting an appropriate approach

The out and out obvious politician may be adopting an approach that does them more harm than good. Most organisations contain some individuals who are well known for their ruthless opportunism and politicking. Others may sensibly avoid them, or at least avoid crossing swords with them or running foul of them. Their ploys are anticipated and ultimately may do them no good.

You have to decide just how to play things. Adopt the brash approach illustrated above and you may gain nothing. Avoid or ignore all the intrigue and you may be left on the sidelines and others will get the better of you. Just what is the best way forward? First consider some of the approaches people may adopt.

These include:

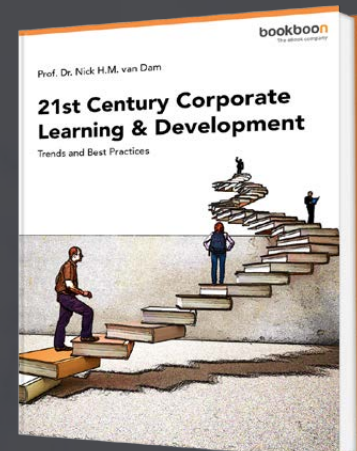
- *The publicist*: who approaches everything with an eye on how people will see them. They want the credit, they want to be the centre of attention and they may take this to extraordinary limits, spending long hours and considerable effort ensuring no tiny opportunity is overlooked
- *The mole*: who, hiding out of sight, dodging the system and operating secretly behind closed doors, is nevertheless working hard to get just what they want out of everything that goes on
- *The empire builder*: whose whole approach aims to expand their field of influence and who seek for themselves a presence in, if not responsibility for, everything.

There are doubtless more types that could be characterised in this way – including some that are simply more aggressive than those listed. Remember, such approaches are not mutually exclusive; elements of all of these may be included by some in their overall approach. Seniority also has a bearing. It is easier to empire build if you have the power to do so, for example.

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The specific approach you adopt will depend in part on the style of those around you, and the culture of the organisation you work in. Openness, for example, could be an advantage in a normally secretive environment, but might upset someone who was unable to envisage anything other than a secretive approach.

Certainly your approach needs to consider others. This does not include only prime players. It includes some others who, while themselves more neutral in the overall gameplan, are potentially a source of help in specific ways.

People power

While many people are actual or potential adversaries, or at least competitors, many are also allies. The later may help actively or simply in the background. Never underestimate how many such people are needed. Some will be an inherent part of your life, but others need to be found and cultivated and you should never underestimate how much systematic and sustained effort that takes.

Assistance comes for people who:

- Are sources of information
- Arrange or allow introductions to others
- Assist your cause, for whatever reason, directly
- Boost your morale or enthusiasm.

Such people may include those within and outside your immediate organisation, and outside contacts can include past colleagues, suppliers, social contacts, and more – everybody from those you meet at a conference to those you sit on a committee with can be potential allies.

This is an area that cannot be left to chance. You may feel that you are essentially well connected, but contacts may need expanding, those who move out of your network need replacing and changed circumstances demand new allies. The networking process is fundamental to holding your own in the political arena and you need to actively consider *who* should be “on your list” as it were, and how you *manage the process* to keep contacts fresh and useful.

Who should you select?

There are a variety of categories; indeed the first step of thinking this through may usefully be to systematically note the categories first, before you consider individual people. In other words the starting point is asking who you *should* know, rather than just who you do know.

Categories of contact

- *Sources of information*: those who know things, know how to find out things, are prepared to share things with you and, in some cases, delight in being known as information givers
- *Gatekeepers*: those who are less important in their own right than for their ability to allow or organise (or deny) access to others
- *Opportunity spotters*: including those who are in a position to provide opportunities that help your job performance
- *Influencers*: those who are able and willing to make things happen for you, and have the clout or seniority to do so
- *Mentors*: those who elect to provide you with on-going advice, support and encouragement
- *Developers*: those from whom you actively learn (it is good if your immediate boss in one such, and others may be needed to)
- *Stimulators*: those whose company or comment acts as a catalyst and spur on your creativity
- *Role models*: those you can learn from by their example (either with or without contact and advice from them)
- *Soul mates*: those you mix with socially or semi-socially and whose friendship helps keep you sane and on track
- *Swappers*: those with complementary skills to your own (who, for example, help you edit a report in return for your helping them rehearse a presentation)
- *Rising stars*: those, less senior than yourself, who nevertheless can help, in part with their fresh ideas and thinking (and who may well want you to regard them as a protégé and help them too)
- *Your staff*: while you may not want to embroil all of them in the detail of your schemes, they should essentially be a positive resource
- *Devil's advocates*: those prepared to critique your plans, thinking or ideas in a constructive way that stimulates a final conclusion

You may need to tie in with people in all these categories. The list is not definitive, nor are the categories mutually exclusive – one person may fulfill a number of roles for you. Hierarchies are usually unimportant to this kind of contact, and those you liaise with may include people from all levels and parts of the organisation. Trust is important however, and no contact will thrive if either party feels unsure of the relationship. Furthermore, as has been said, being well connected does not just happen – any list of contacts needs work.

Managing your contacts

The first task is to assemble a useful network. This must be done progressively and in all sorts of ways. Some contacts are known to you and just need developing. Others need establishing or seeking out, a process that can occur by spotting opportunities (e.g. talking to someone you sit next to at a conference), or which must be more prescribed (e.g. resolving to get to know someone in Finance and doing so).

Beyond that the process will only work if you:

- *Spend time maintaining contact* (it is all too easy to find you have not spoken to someone for six months and rapport is starting to decline)
- *See the process as two-way* (people are more inclined to help those who help them)
- *Keep promises* (be a reliable contact)
- *Return favours* (for example by swapping tasks)
- *Make the process acceptable* (it can be interesting, fun and the pleasantries and courtesies are important)
- *Keep good records* (not just of names and addresses, but a record of contacts to maintain continuity).

Take the people out of an organisation and nothing of significance would be left. A network of people is the foundation resource of your political strategy. Having the right network cannot be left to chance. You need to have clear intentions, make and maintain the necessary contacts, use them systematically and keep some records to help foster the whole process. If this makes it seem somewhat scheming, then so be it. It is necessary. But it is also an important part of organisational life. People, and your contacts and interactions with particular ones, are what makes working in an organisation possible, interesting and fun. So there is a wide range of rewards stemming from taking an active approach.



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A basis for action

There is an old saying that it is not what you know that is important, but who you know. In fact both are important in the office arena. Information is power, as they say, and you need to know what is going on. Who you know is also important to keeping up to date. But the who is important in a broader sense. You need allies. And you need to recognise and avoid enemies. Do not assume that everyone who is apparently neutral is on your side, and remember that some apparently clearly and intentionally putting out “Friend” signals are not really friends; and vice versa. Certain types probably need active avoidance, and certainly constant wariness.

For instance those who are:

- Untrustworthy or unpredictable
- A hassle, more likely to raise your stress levels than hopes
- Cynical, dismissing things as impossible, only because they would find it so
- Obvious competitors, with whom, while no participation may be desirable, need watching
- In strong alliances with those who, for whatever reason, you want to avoid
- Unable to keep secrets.

Tread carefully; think about how you are perceived by others within the organisation. Adopt an approach that is likely to help you get the job done (results always matter), and that is also likely to position you to advantage in the longer term.

Now on to how to adopt strategies to assist you to survive and prosper in the corporate jungle. You have already taken the first step if you accept that such strategies are necessary, and plan and act accordingly.

3 Adopting the right approach

Every business needs goals. Every business guru has their particular version of the maxim that: if you do not know where you are going any road will do. As it is with a business, so too with a career. You need to look ahead; and maybe to look far ahead. The best selling novel *Shogun* (a story about the early interactions between Japan and Europe written by James Clavell) is an exciting adventure. It is also as good a treatise on strategic thinking as you are likely to read. Only two thirds of the way through its substantial length does it become clear that the hero is not the European adventurer, but the Japanese warlord. He, seeing the shipwreck on the beach, plotted out how he could use the situation to his advantage over the next thirty years and then controlled events thereafter. Make no attempt to control your destiny and events will likely manipulate you – as will other people. You may not need to plan as intricately, or as far ahead, as the warlord in *Shogun*, but plan you must.

You are a major influence on your own career success. Office politics can be described as an environmental influence either inherently acting to help or hinder your progress, or being made to assist it, rather in the way that market dynamics and competition influence an organisation's commercial success. What happens is what happens, but what ends up as the final influence includes your reactions to those circumstances. However quick you might feel you are on your feet, you can only manage the politics that surround you to your advantage if you are clear what you are trying to achieve. Instant, and maybe defensive, action may do more harm than good without clear aims in mind.

The personal planning process which is necessary to progress your career is essentially similar to business planning, and revolves around four key questions:

1. Where are you now? (situation analysis)
2. Where do you want to get to? (objective setting)
3. How will you get there? (strategy formulation)
4. How will I know when you get there? (control).

Each needs systematically thinking through. Space precludes spelling out the details here, though this is done in my Bookboon publication *From successful graduation to successful career*. These principles are valid – necessary – at every stage of a career.

Such a process provides a firm foundation for how you proceed. But the ebb and flow of office politics may create impacts that:

- Assist you
- Hinder you
- Are neutral
- Provide opportunities for advancement
- Forewarn you of pitfalls.

In other words some external things inevitably affect your situation – but so do you. Probably the most significant effects are where you actively influence matters, spotting a likely hazard and stepping aside, or taking advantage of things as they progress. Rarely can we spot, as the warlord Taranaga did in *Shogun*, an uninterrupted chain of opportunity, but sometimes this is the case and the long term must certainly always be born in mind alongside the short term. Indeed it is possible to jump at seemingly dramatic short-term advantage and only later find that long term factors negate that advantage. This is the essence of the old saying about being nice to people on the way up, or, if you are not, you may rue it as you cross paths with them again later.

What is required is an active approach, well directed and focused, and tuned to take advantage of opportunities or sidestep setbacks, political or otherwise as time goes by.



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4 How personal image influences

Whatever the complexities of the politics of organisations, one thing is certain – appearances count. Never mind “never judge a book by its cover”, people do just that. How people perceive you inevitably colours their image of you. It also signals something not just about what sort of person you are, but where you sit in the office hierarchy (official and unofficial). Also whether you are to be regarded as friend or foe, and what power you are perceived as having to promote or protect yourself. How people treat you has a direct bearing on all of this, and it that you are seeking to influence – whether in terms of putting people off trying to get one over on you, or encouraging their assistance for your cause.

So, better to heed Oscar Wilde’s comment: “it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances”, and take note of the potential effect of how people see you. After all, we all have a stereotyped image of extremes such as the absent-minded boffin, the computer geek, or the office Romeo. Almost the same sometimes applies to images such as the grey accountant or the flamboyant advertising executive, so you should consider just exactly how others see you.

The moral is to use the fact that judgements are made (snap decisions too) and act accordingly.

Your personal approach to appearance.

You should:

- Accept the importance of appearance
- Be conscious of both the positive and negative sides
- Actively respond to the ways people see others.

The starting point to action here involves some self-analysis. If you know how you want people to see you, then it may be easier to actively seek to achieve the effect you want. This may seem easy. You may want to look powerful, persuasive or professional. But many such fine sounding words are in fact just umbrella terms – you must ask what does being professional, say, really involve?

The qualities involved in being professional include being:

- Expert
- Well-organised
- Well prepared
- Confident
- Knowledgeable
- Experienced

- Trustworthy
- Honest
- Approachable
- A good listener
- Powerful
- Diplomatic
- Good communications skills
- Loyal.

The above list could be extended, though some of the qualities listed are certainly important for most people. You can probably add more, including some factors that are more specific to your own particular job. Maybe you need to come over as financially aware, as a good negotiator or a whiz with information technology. Maybe it is important that you are professional in a more parochial sense: seen to be powerful because you have the ear of someone specific on the Board, say.

Overall, several points are clear. First, however you look at it, such a list contains a number of factors: perhaps a considerable number. Secondly, for the most part the factors represent options: that is you can *choose* to project a feeling of, say, being approachable even if this is not your natural inclination. Most people actively boost the way they are seen in some respects. You may reckon you are well organised, for instance, but still want to give an impression of even greater heights of organisation on occasion, or perhaps aim to have a particular person see you in this light.

These two factors go together. You should have clear objectives as to how you want to come over, and work at doing just that. The number of factors that you may want to actively include indicates some complexity, and you need to see the process as one of orchestrating everything together to create what you want. This may well include recognising weaknesses. If you are naturally a disaster of self-organisation, then you may need to actually get organised, and develop this as a revised part of the way you operate, rather than just seek to *appear* well organised. At the same time it is not suggested that the overall impression become too contrived, especially not obviously contrived, which would quickly become self-defeating. For the most part all that is necessary is some slight exaggeration of characteristics to ensure they are visible where this is what you want.

Perhaps the obvious starting point with regard to personal image is literally appearance: your dress and the other elements of personal “show”.

Looking the part

It should be said immediately that the objective here is not to stereotype you or to remove anything of real character and replace it by a universally bland image. The days of the organisation where every businessman, for example, was expected to wear the same (plain white shirt, grey suit, black shoes and conservative tie) are largely gone, and dress now involves a much wider range of acceptable options. Women too, appearing on the corporate scene in larger numbers and more senior positions than in the past, have wide choice. It is, however, a matter of “horses for courses” and you need to consider what is suitable. Indeed you need to consider what “suitable” means.

Some things are universally only sensible. I will take the example of a man (being one myself) just to allow some example: clean shoes, a well-pressed suit and a smart tie may always be acceptable. But there are exceptions. If a jacket and slacks is what is worn in your office (or something less formal), so be it, then wearing that in a well-turned out way may be fine.

However, there is no option but to make individual judgements. If you work in an advertising agency or some other creative company, then a suit, particularly a conventional business suit, might be regarded as wildly overdressed. Conversely there may be a good deal to be gained by being the only one in a more conservative group who dares to wear a corduroy suit or a really jazzy tie, so that may be the right action too – for some. The most important thing is to think about it. If you simply emerge bleary-eyed from bed and reach for whatever looks reasonably clean you may miss some tricks.

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Two further approaches deserve some consideration:

a) *“Power dressing”*

Power dressing as a phrase and a concept comes from the States. The thinking is that everything about you needs to shout confidence and that money should be no object in achieving what you want. So, you buy the best suits (tailor-made), you wear the best watch, carry the finest leather briefcase and adorn your desk with silver photograph frames or whatever other trinkets you believe will enhance your image. The dangers, especially outside of the United States, are obvious. There is a scale involved in the way such things should be regarded. At one end the approach is so low key or inappropriate that you are either invisible or marked down. And at the other, you are seriously over the top or regarded as being terminally pretentious.

So, somewhere between having your briefcase tied together with string and using something that persuades people you are a lottery winner who should not be working at all, is what is right for you. Think about it.

b) *Professional advice*

Alternatively, get someone else to think about it for you, because the second more formal approach is to use one of a number of image consultants to advise you on how you should dress and look. This is a substantial step towards spin doctoring, and you may be forgiven if you can think of politicians whose image is professionally “managed” yet who you do not regard as any sort of advertisement for the success of such a method. However, some people do use such help and are well pleased by it. If appearance is very important to you, therefore, and if you can afford it, this could be worth a try.

There are things beyond clothes that need similar consideration.

“Paraphernalia”

What you have around you also speaks volumes about you. There are many things that you have about you that contribute to your overall image. Certainly your office, or workstation, is one major one. It acts as a kind of billboard to those seeking to form judgements about you. Office signposts include its:

- Location (e.g. penthouse or basement)
- Size
- Purpose (e.g. accommodating just you, or with a meeting table/chairs)
- Organisation (e.g. tidy or bomb site)
- Busyness (e.g. does it appear to be a place for work or relaxation?)
- Contents (e.g. computer and other equipment)
- Embellishments (e.g. pictures on the wall).

The situation is similar with regard to yourself and your more personal ecrulements. Here again there is no one right approach or single solution to how to deal with any particular area. A balance has to be struck, and you can usefully think about how your present way of working comes over in this respect. The following topics are designed to get you thinking about the implications here and perhaps prompt you to think of those factors that you can yourself adjust or arrange to help create the positive image you want.

A question of impact

Ask – does the best computer on your desk look good, but can you work it? Are six e-mail addresses making you look more important or pretentious? Is a fat Filofax best or a slim one? Should certificates (linked to such as membership of a professional body) be on show? And is a row of cheap pens in your outside jacket pocket a good idea?

Image on the move

Stand 100 metres from the Accountant's office (or whoever else may be concerned) and whisper "Company car", and you may hear grownups whimper like children. Few things cause such aggravation or divisiveness. No one, but no one, seems satisfied with their company car: it is too small, too big, too ordinary, too old or produces too great a tax bill. Cars are not just a means of getting from A to B, they are part of their owner's persona.

This means cars too, represent an area worth some thought. A Porsche for all is not advocated, but influencing the policy to try to get something you are happy with is. You have to balance different factors. A smart coupe may look impressive parked outside the office, but if you regularly have to get the bulk luggage associated with, say, two small children in, it may not be the right choice. In any case, in some organisations you may be better regarded by showing restraint than by going conspicuously over the top. Remember too the external image: a customer may interpret too good a car as a sign of excessive prices.

Other travel factors too can influence your image, for example:

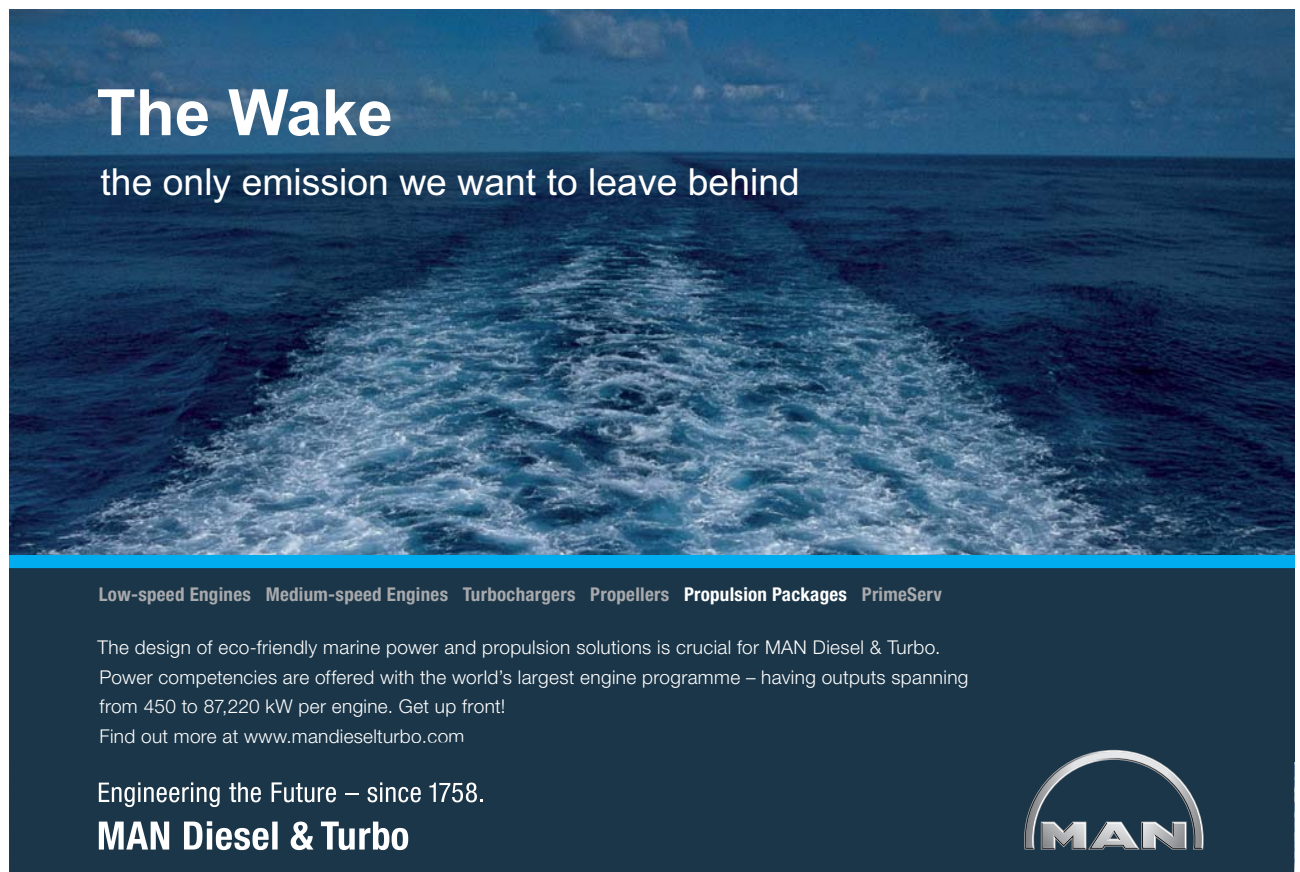
- Travelling first or second class on trains
- Flying economy or business class
- The kind of hire car you use.

And more. Whenever you travel, or arrange to travel, someone will be taking note of how you do it. Like so much else, a sense of political awareness is necessary as you make decisions in this area.

On top of things

A final area of consideration links to everything already said in this section. Most, if not all, jobs demand that you perform well. Results must be achieved and targets hit, and you are more likely to be regarded with respect, and as a power to be reckoned with, if you are seen as an effective performer. Of course, there are those who keep their heads down and who are not actually all that effective, yet who seem to succeed in a certain amount of manipulation. This is difficult to sustain long term, however, and in most likely future scenarios increasing pressure to achieve results in uncertain and difficult market and economic conditions make the success of this strategy even less certain in future.

Whatever your job, achieving the results you want will demand a range of knowledge and skills. Remaining well equipped and competent in a changing world is clearly only sensible. Other prerequisites of success are specifically visible and thus worth a mention here. It is surely true, for example, that you are more likely to deliver appropriate results if you are well organised. Furthermore, you are more likely to be taken seriously if you are *seen to be* well organised. Consider some examples of practice that gives a positive impression:




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- *Punctuality*: turning up for things on time and hitting deadlines takes some effort, but is worthwhile in terms of the impression of efficiency it creates.
- *Time management*: managing your time, your projects and diary and creating strong productivity is also well worthwhile. Good time management can increase productivity significantly. So, although there is no magic formula and the secret lies in the details and creating the right disciplines, becoming good in this way is really a necessity.
- *Tidiness*: literally *looking* well organised. Your office, your desk, your paperwork all can assist you in putting over the image that you have decided upon. Preparation clearly helps.

Rather like a mediaeval army lining up on the hill overlooking the likely battlefield, you must decide the position from which you operate. A position of being regarded as effective, well organised, confident and on top of things makes sense. Whether you want to work quietly and unobtrusively in the background, or lead from the front, how you appear is important, needs consideration and is not a matter to be left to chance.

Summary

Appearance – in its fullest sense – should not be dismissed as cosmetic irrelevance. It is an area well worth some thought. There are few rules as to how to proceed, other than that you need to work at it and take and implement a series of considered judgements to get the balance right. If people are going to see you as influential, as a power to be reckoned with in whatever way and to whatever degree you want, then the sum total of the many ways in which others perceive you must be designed to work actively for you. The objective is to directly influence how people relate to you.

Simplistically, this means that if you look like a doormat, you tend to get trodden on, and if you appear to have clout, the respect you command increases.

To create the right impression you must remember that:

- You only get one chance to make a good first impression
- The details matter and contribute to the total effect (for good or ill)
- Perception is reality, people really will judge you on appearances
- Consistency of overall approach helps to build an image cumulatively so, “it pays to advertise”.

In an organisational environment another factor goes with “looking the part”. Communication in all its forms is ubiquitous in the office, and there is more to it than just transferring information – every time you communicate, *how* you do it says something about you and influences what you can achieve.

5 The role of communications

If office politics is concerned with human interactions, then communications – without which there would be no such interactions – is vital. What you communicate and how you do so is the lifeblood of your political standing; and this applies to both formal and informal communications. You may rue or bless the day you submitted a particular report, or the few words you exchanged with someone in passing in the corridor.

Consider the nature of communications for a moment. Communication goes on amongst people all the time. Much of it demands little thought, and understanding is successfully achieved. Some communication struggles slightly – *what do you mean exactly?* – but succeeds despite its imperfections. But, in fact, communication is in fact inherently difficult and most people can all too easily conjure up memories of past communication breakdowns that confirm this. The cause may be simple: “No price too high” does not mean the same as “No. Price too high”, and the message in which the full stop is omitted may not just cause confusion; it may lead to bankruptcy. On the other hand the officespeak and gobbledegook, which passes for communication in some organisations, may bury every message in an impenetrable fog.

So, accurate communication is a sound basis for success, whether this just means getting your message across or creating a specific profile for yourself that matches your personal aims and intentions. This means it is worthwhile to:

- Recognise that communication can be difficult
- Think before communicating
- Deliver, consciously, *exactly* the message you want
- Add the emphasis and feeling you want

It also means that you should be very careful in interpreting the communications that are directed at you.

Reading between the lines

As everyone has their own point of view and their own agenda, communications often have more than one layer. You need to watch out for phrases with a subtext, such as: “This is a great opportunity for you” (*and one I can well do without*), or “It’s no trouble at all” (*I will be calling in the debt soon*). Some such are ubiquitous – *no one* means, “Have you got a couple of minutes?” literally and practically everyone seems to use the computer as an excuse, “Sorry, the computer’s down” (*I haven’t input the data yet*). What is more, many communications are unclear because part of the message is hidden to some extent. For example, imagine someone says, “If you think it’s a good idea, I suggest you go ahead”. If it works out they will say they supported the idea (and perhaps want some of the credit), if it is a disaster then they never said *they* thought it was right. Some element of double meaning is perhaps necessary, but it is worth forming a view of just how many such overtones you need to look for amongst the communications received from your colleagues and contacts and interpreting them accordingly. Types of communicator include:

- *The devious*: who always seem to inject a hidden meaning
- *The very devious*: whose communications have more layers than an onion
- *The downright Machiavellian*: whose subtext is actively disruptive

The advertisement features a circular logo on the left with three stylized human figures in the center, surrounded by gears and four arrows pointing clockwise. To the right, the text 'UNLEASHING CHANGE MANAGEMENT' is written in large, bold, blue capital letters. Below this, the dates 'OCTOBER 18 & 19, 2018' and the location 'DE RODE HOED AMSTERDAM' are listed in smaller blue text. At the bottom, there is a silhouette of an Amsterdam skyline including a windmill and several buildings. In the bottom left corner, the text 'Global Executive Events' is visible. A hand cursor icon is positioned over a green oval button at the bottom right of the ad.

While the messages from some can be taken at face value, it may help to grade those you deal with to some extent, as above, and take their messages on board with an appropriate degree of circumspection. Bear in mind that it is often those messages that appear most innocuous which should be interpreted with the most care, perhaps particularly those that make strident attempts to appear without guile. Warning phrases include such introductory remarks as: *Trust me – Let me be honest* – and added sincerity that does not ring true (*I only say this to help...*).

All this works both ways of course; people will try to read between the lines of messages you give them and you need to be clear about just what you aim to convey.

A variety of elements need watching for (or using). These include:

- *Exaggeration*: too much removes all credibility, too little and your message may lack power (and note that while we all need to be economical with the truth to some extent, out and out dishonesty tends to catch up with – and catch out – its perpetrator)
- *Flattery*: a little, appropriately used, really does go a long way; you might spot it at a hundred paces but that does not mean others do not respond positively (and if you found yourself agreeing with this thought, you have just been flattered – so it can work!)
- *Generalities or vagueness*: this may just be a sign of imprecise communication or an attempt to mislead (for example, when exactly will something be done if it is said of it – *leave it with me I will see to it at once?*)
- *Introspection*: too much that starts – *I think* – may be off-putting and, with thinking that is, say, party to considerable research, it may sell its idea short
- *Big words*: and similarly phrases, are a classic hiding place for precise meaning (saying something can only go ahead after *initiating project recording status* might be off-putting, but only mean a copy of the instruction needs to be put on file in Central Administration)
- *Jargon*: can act as a smokescreen unless pitched right between people with similar levels of understanding.

Similarly, *precision and description* add to the likelihood of communication achieving its purpose. So think what you mean to say, or write or whatever, say what you mean and double check that the right message has got across. And never act on messages coming to you if you are not exactly clear what they mean. It may only take a moment to check, and without that you may find you have allowed yourself to be manipulated.

Without words

A major amount of the information transferred is non-verbal. Some of this is obvious: the sanctimonious smile that says, “I told you so”, or the raised hand that says “No interruptions” may be unmistakable. Some study, and thus knowledge, of body language (an inexact science, but useful to a degree) may help on occasion. There are certainly physical areas where there are signs to be sent or received, and care is necessary with regard to:

- *Space*: in the sense of proximity is very important. People want appropriate personal space, and someone getting in their “intimate zone” may make them very uneasy. Suitable distancing prevents distraction, whereas too little space creates pressure and distraction
- *Touch*: physical contact is also something to be handled (sic) with care. A hand on an arm may be interpreted as a friendly gesture – or as grounds for sexual harassment. A “wet” handshake is a universal sign of lack of clout, but crushing someone to the pain threshold will hardly impress either
- *Eye contact*: like so much else this needs a balance. Those who never meet anyone’s eye always appear devious, those who never let go of eye contact can appear to be putting the other person under undue pressure
- *Position and posture*: (the heartland of body language). Folded arms can signal a negative response. Leaning forward can express interest or enthusiasm. A fist banged on the table certainly gives a point made greater force, but might be taken as a sign of loss of control
- *Expression*: a smile may lighten a difficult moment, or be taken as inappropriate flippancy.

The moral here is to adopt a heightened consciousness about such things, to deploy them with care and read between the lines not only in terms of words, but of physical signs too.

Physical difficulties are created sometimes so as to intentionally put someone off balance. If you are asked to attend a meeting at 7:30am, make a presentation in a tiny room that will not allow you to easily show your slides, or given an impossible deadline – then there is always a chance that someone is trying to make you fail. Forewarned is forearmed however. Get over such a hurdle, taking it in your stride, and not letting it dilute the effectiveness of something and the fact may well show – and score you points with other members of a group.

Again the moral here is vigilance and care.

People difficulties

The problems of communication touched on so far can normally be surmounted with a bit of thought. Or they would be if people were not so contrary. Misjudge them and you compound any problem. Now people come in all shapes and sizes, but certain people take exaggerated positions and adopt styles designed, sometimes ill-advisedly, to augment their own powerbase.

You must expect to cross paths with, at a minimum, the following:

- *The “row at all costs” type:* who feel there is always a corner to fight and that taking a heavy line is always best. Any incident is exaggerated, grudges are easily felt and an end is never heard of anything contentious. Joining battle may simply compound the difficulty and prolong the problem, as the stance is not based on rationale argument. Concentrate on future matters and bypass the problem
- *The “rude by nature” type:* is not prompted by incidents, they are just plain rude. There is even less to be gained by joining battle here, keep your cool, keep smiling and refuse to rise to the bait (something that will only encourage further attacks). Keep conversations factual and take some satisfaction from knowing that they know you are refusing to let them get to you

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- *The “just a minute” type*: timewasters with apparently nothing much to do who seem intent on knocking your productivity for six by turning every simple exchange into a full-scale performance. Insist on getting down to business or you will never achieve anything with them; if you can do this while still persuading them that you are a good listener, you will have an ally for life
- *The “know it all” type*: forever airing their superiority and who hate having their views challenged is also a potential ally dealt with appropriately. Only challenge when you are sure of your facts and recognise that doing this while acknowledging their expertise can be diplomatically worthwhile
- *The “tongue-tied” type*: from whom you cannot get anything by way of information. If they are in possession of information that can help you, then cultivating good questioning techniques is useful (do not ask – *do you know anything about this?* – rather say – *tell me what you know about this*; the first, which is a closed question, too easily prompts a negative answer or simple “No”)
- *The “double-checker” type*: who is suspicious of everything and wants proof of everything. Argument – *surely you don’t need to know that* – may create an enemy; do not rush things and trust can be built up.

And doubtless more. Note also that each category comes in various forms. For example, a senior person needs different handling from someone at a more junior or less influential level. And, as ever, not everything is always as it seems. Someone may be unwilling to give information because they are nervous or tongue-tied; or because they want to keep something from you and want you to perceive them as nervous or tongue-tied to achieve that.

Whoever you engage in communication, it is a process that demands care. Subtlety is a two way street. And there is considerable satisfaction in judging things just right. For example, if a display of real firmness seems to be called for, works and makes all future exchanges easier and clearer then you see the advantage of an approach that involves thinking it through. Conversely, an ill-considered outburst can mark you down as irrational, difficult and to be kept at arms’ length just when you need somebody’s active and willing support.

Coping with conflict

There are, let us be honest, occasions when communication becomes outright conflict. You then have to decide what line to take in response. There are a number of possible options including the following approaches:

- *All out attack*: here you decide to fight and that one party must lose – them. This makes necessary categorising them as wrong and yourself as right. Even if you win, it may sacrifice any sort of working relationship with the person for the future
- *Withdrawal*: this avoids the immediate problem, but leaves the real issue unchanged and no greater understanding between parties
- *Capitulation*: you can give in. This may seem an option sometimes (either for a quiet life or to preserve good relations), but can lead to dissatisfaction and create problems for the future if you become seen as a doormat
- *Compromise*: meeting people half way (or somewhere in between made acceptable to both) is another way forward, though it is not always easy to find if one or both parties feels strongly about something
- *Creating change*: here conflict is viewed as normal but constructive – we look for debate and aim to find a way forward that is satisfactory to both parties.

The development of good people handling skills is usually a prerequisite for the successful office politician. Without them instinctive “get off my back”, or other defensive or aggressive postures, may damage your standing.

The right methodology

An important aspect of communication is method. Telephone someone and get bogged down because your argument is ill thought out and you may achieve nothing – or only succeed in alienating them. Write a well-judged email to meet the same objective and you may have instant agreement.

Methods differ. Email is voice only, no body language can augment the message and description may be difficult. Confident presentations can bolster a weak case and make a strong one irresistible. People can find written communication, useful to get down a full case without interruption, most difficult to create effectively. It's seen as chore, dashed off in a formalised “officespeak” style, yet provides permanent reference and any ill-judged phrases – there in black and white – may return to haunt you. Equally, an email may be contrived, for example it may: be a display of power, hide its true aim in a rambling approach or hide key figures in a fog of numbers and statistics, be just insurance (for a rainy day) or just be designed to say “back off”.

So always:

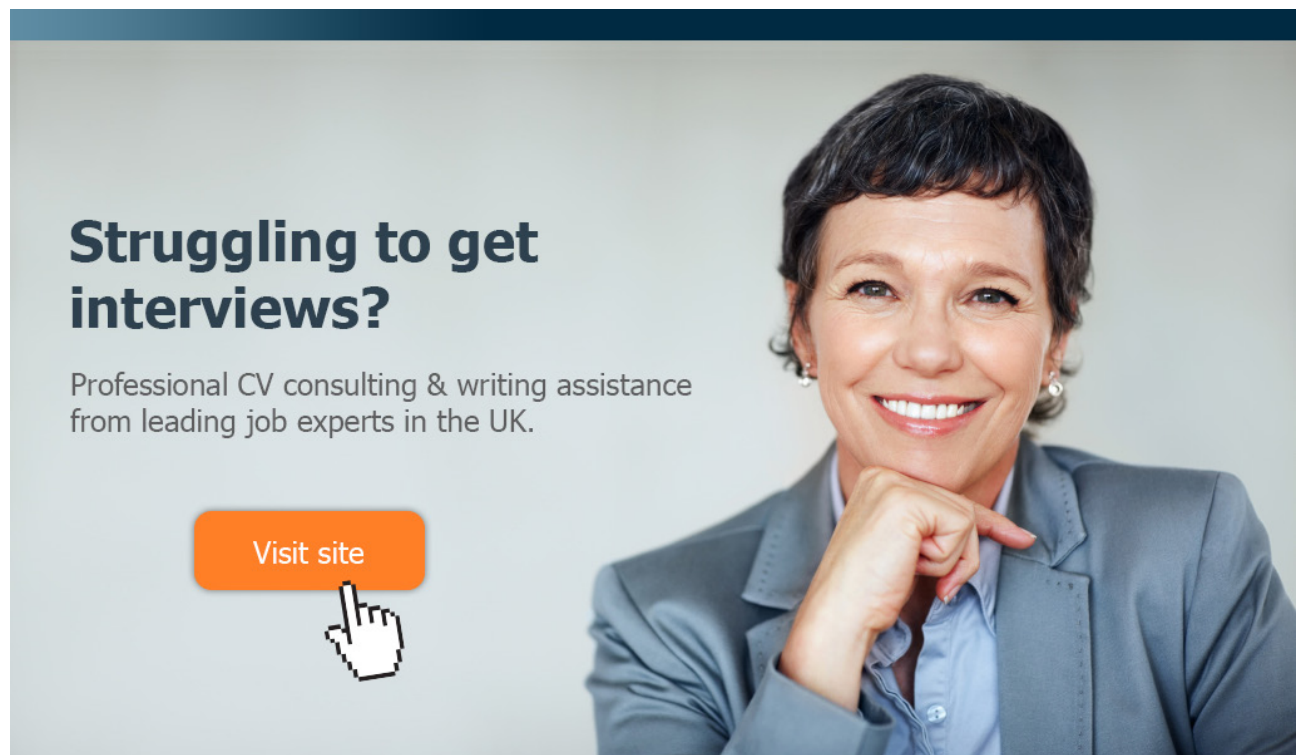
- Review the different potential communications methods
- Assess their potential advantages and disadvantages
- Focus on the likely results
- Choose whatever seems most likely to achieve your purpose

Sometimes the right decision involves multiple methods (something is put over at a meeting, and then confirmed and recorded in writing). Sometimes an unexpected method adds weight (praise of someone at a meeting is much more powerful than a private word). Always it is more important to consider the effect of things than the ease of things. It may seem easy to make a quick telephone call, however consideration may well show that a written record of something is important, even if acting to produce one will take longer.

Get it right

The complexities here demand skill. You need to have real competence in communications, especially in the more complex methodologies such as written communications or formal presentations to have any chance of using communications to give you a political edge.


If you need to check this out and augment your skill, do so (for instance I have another title in this series about the possible hazards of using PowerPoint). It's well worth getting this right.



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On the grapevine

Do note that not all communication around an organisation is formal. Every organisation has a grapevine. This network of communication which passes, and sometimes embellishes, news, tittle-tattle and rumour does not relate to the classic hierarchy. Rather it has links based as much on who gets on with who, and even on who is easily accessible to who (for, despite e-mail, people still like to chat face to face). So:

- Do not reject the grapevine as a rumour machine
- Get connected
- Listen, and do so carefully
- Contribute information as well as listen
- Give what you put in feeling as well as fact.

Of course, care is necessary. Not everything you hear will be true. Things need some interpretation, in part by comparing how a message varies between different people. Being “plugged in” to the grapevine as it were may take some organising. You have to have the right contacts if you are to pick up useful information and to do so early in the game. You also need to recognise that its advantages are two way. If you want to circulate information, the first – and sometimes the quickest – thing to do is to whisper it in the right ear. Doing so may simply disseminate the information, or it may bestow particular feeling to it. If you want to hype something up ahead of a meeting that will discuss it, then a few well placed comments can get people expressing interest, even approval, and looking forward to the discussion of it. In contrast, seeding suggestions that something is the wrong course of action may be the first step in a campaign to see it stillborn.

Summary

Communication has major impact on your level of political success. Every aspect of it needs to be considered judiciously. Particularly:

- Learn the skills of good communication
- Choose methods to match circumstances and objectives
- Remember out and out dishonesty rarely helps
- Stay close: ensure you have the contacts you need
- Be visible: ensure people know who you are and what you do
- Do not overdo broadcasting your success (this is resented)
- Never be so insistent or verbose that you become a bore
- Always keep other peoples’ situation in mind and direct your communication appropriately and, if necessary, individually.

6 Management matters

Managers must perform. Objectives must be met and targets hit. Achieving success is key in allowing you to pursue your more personal intentions from a position of strength. If you are responsible for a team of people or department say, then the potential scale of success is greater than what you might achieve alone. Management can be defined as the art of getting things done through other people. Being successful politically goes hand goes hand in hand with being a good manager. The better the team performs, and thus the better the overall results, the stronger the position you are in.

Having people responsible to you certainly demands management skills, and it also contains inherent risks – you stand or fall to some extent by the success of your team rather than only what you do personally. It is certainly possible to succeed, wield considerable influence and receive considerable reward within an organisation as an individual operator, however, having a team of people within your remit does increase the opportunities. Effectively it means you have greater resources and a larger stage on which to play out your intentions and ambitions.

Management does not just happen, and the process entails a good deal more than simply allocating work and letting others get on with it. The key management tasks are:

- Recruitment and selection
- Planning
- Organisation
- Development
- Motivation
- Control.

All are important as tasks and all contain both political opportunities and pitfalls. The aspiring office politician:

- Recognises that management takes time
- Studies what makes for effective management
- Uses their team to good effect, rather than keeping them in their place
- Continuously fine-tunes their own input and their team's performance to maximise achievement of all their objectives.

Recruitment and selection

Finding the right people is clearly important. And doing so successfully should not be underestimated. Few people, despite what they may like to think, are infallible judges of people and thinking you can “spot the good applicants as they come through the door” is likely to be a recipe for failure. Appointing the wrong people can do untold damage and, especially given what some would regard as labyrinthal employment legislation, can take a good deal of unraveling.

Effective recruitment starts with good analysis. Define the job to be done and ascertain the kind of person – in terms of qualifications, experience and expertise – who can best do it. Then go through the whole selection process systematically and thoroughly. You need to give every aspect of the process sufficient time, perhaps involve colleagues to give you another view, and remember that people are at their best (often an exaggerated best) at interviews. So the final advice is a firm: if in doubt do not appoint – especially on the basis only of someone who is no more than the “best of the (poor?) bunch”.

Here the big question is whether you recruit allies or rivals. Appointing “yes-men” may seem a safe bet (though it is easy to underestimate people in this respect), but the best route is normally only to appoint people who can do a first class job. Supervising the weak or ineffective is hard work, and hardly likely to get you judged as go-getter.



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Planning

Plan the work and work the plan is a good maxim. Set things up well for other people and the success you help them create makes them more likely to be loyal to you. Important things here include:

- Defining jobs clearly
- Setting standards, objectives and targets agreed after consultation
- Making clear control and appraisal procedures (and making them fair)
- Planning with people to make their goals attainable (both in terms of what must be done and of methodology)

The ground rules are important. People like to know what is expected of them. They like a challenge, but they also like to feel what they have to do is possible and they like to work for someone who recognises any problems that may stand in the way and who helps them in overcoming them. Sound planning is the foundation to creating a good rapport with your team. Get this wrong, for example setting ill-judged targets not realistically possible to achieve, and you forfeit peoples' goodwill and turn potential allies into people who will spend every possible moment making your life difficult.

Organisation

This is important in two senses. First, if it is down to you to arrange who does what, then the arrangement of people is something that will directly affect productivity, effectiveness and motivation. Struggling to cope amidst the difficulties of apparent poor organisation is frustrating for anyone. Secondly, you need to keep yourself and your team organised in a time management sense. If no one can ever achieve anything because they are in endless, unproductive meetings or struggling with labyrinthal systems and paperwork, then your instigation of either will win you no friends.

It is, in fact, easier to run a tight ship, insisting on disciplines that get things done, than to be a laissez faire manager. Your own ambitions are best served by winning respect and that comes most easily through successful management.

Development

High amongst a manager's responsibilities is that of developing their people. Ask people what they most want in a manager, and they often rate their being "someone I learn from" top of the list. Development means more, much more, than sending people on the occasional course. It encompasses the whole way manager and staff work together, from initial briefing to on-the-job explanation, mentoring and constructive consultation; from departmental meetings to formal training sessions.

It also reflects the dynamic job environment in which we all work today. Things change. Markets, methods, technology – all create the need for constant reconsideration of how things should be done and the need to acquire new skills or upgrade old ones. Recruiting good people, and then managing them in a way that prompts constant improvement, is appreciated by all and will show in the results.

Again this is a way to impress others on a wide front, *and* ensure that your team become real allies. Development may make people more self sufficient and more innovative and creative. If you succeed or fail by your ability to generate new ideas, do not try to keep the team out of this. Use them. If they have good ideas you all benefit; and you can take the credit for creating a team that is innovative.

Motivation

Never let anyone tell you that the time motivation takes (and it can take a fair amount) is wasted. It is crucial. There is no magic formula. Motivation consists of consideration and action to minimise anything that will lower morale and maximise well being and job satisfaction. Some factors are major. People like to achieve something, they like to know they are achieving something and they like to have the fact acknowledged. Other functions are minor, but they all add up. For example, recognition of achievement is the most powerful element of motivation. Many things are involved in it, including reward and incentive schemes, yet some of it is so simple – just for the manager to say, “Well done”. Simple it may be, but how many of us have done it often enough during, say, the last month?

Motivation is best undertaken with some real knowledge of the people involved. If you get to know your people, what worries them, what satisfies them and how you can work with them to make them feel greater job satisfaction, then not only may better results follow but there is a personal quid per quo. People will walk through fire for the manager who shows they understand and care – and demonstrates it. When you need an ally, you will have people whose instinct is to support you.

Control

Managers must manage. You may have to lay down the law on occasions. You may have to see that rules are obeyed and that systems and procedures are complied with – and you may have to come on hard sometimes and punch your weight. If you have a team who regard you well, who like working with you, and who understand that some matters must be complied with without debate (perhaps precisely so that time is kept available to act consultively on more important matters), then necessary control is possible. And exercising it should not destroy the acceptability of the management style you adopt.

So, it is possible to be both a popular manager and a successful manager.

There is an important overlap here between management, indeed general people skills, and communication. It occurs when people get together.

Making meetings work

It has been said that the ideal meeting is two – with one absent. Video Arts immortalized the phrase “Meetings, Bloody Meetings” in the title of a training film, and we all know the feeling of frustration stemming from time spent in interminable and unproductive ones.

Yet, as with presentations, much may hang on meetings and, more specifically, much may hang on individual performances at meetings. Not all meetings are useful to you, and sometimes the best action is to avoid them. The temptation to be there in case you miss something can be great. When you do attend a meeting you must be sure of making a positive impression.

Making meetings work

- Know why the meeting is being held (ask, if necessary, what the objectives are)
- Study the agenda and read all papers circulated beforehand
- Decide what information you may need with you and check your facts
- Discuss as appropriate with others before the meeting to prepare the ground
- Prepare any case you may want to put over
- Be clear regarding the terms of reference for any input you are asked in advance to make (e.g. how much time will you be allowed to make a report)
- Arrive on time

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- Obey the rules (e.g. direct comments through the Chair)
- Punch your weight and do not allow yourself to be shouted down
- Listen (and makes notes as necessary)
- Communicate clearly and persuasively (or whatever the circumstances demand)
- Be courteous to others (without groveling)

Remember meetings are complex interactions. There is often plenty of (political) subtext and some present may have their own agendas, either to sabotage the stated intention or some part of it, or to hijack the meeting, digressing to their own purpose. You need to keep your wits about you, relate to allies and watch for attacks from others. The battle ground analogy here may be all too apt.

There can be a “last chance” element to meetings. A decision will be made, for good or ill. You may be in a position to prompt the agreement you want, and often this may need a degree of assertiveness (backed by research, facts and hard evidence if necessary). It has been said that if the Creator had a purpose in giving us a neck, then it was surely in the hope that we would sometimes stick it out. And this may well be necessary.

So too may other ploys. The astute politician may attend the meeting with three proposals, two which do not quite meet the brief and are designed to be shot down and one, their favorite, which aims to then become the acceptable compromise. Or you may persuade someone else to put up an idea, aiming to inject a variant of it into the argument if it looks like being vetoed. The possibilities are endless, and many people start by forging alliances and coordinating action with others *before* the meeting starts. Having a cunning plan may not be enough. You must have a cunning way of getting it introduced and accepted.

Of course, a meeting may be yours. If so then you must chair it effectively. Otherwise you may achieve your purpose, but alienate everyone in sight. Whoever is in the chair may be required to be impartial, more often in an organisational setting they have a specified role, and everyone knows what it is. Efficient chairmanship is respected and, of itself, may help you enhance your profile (check out how to do it well).

Always in meetings the nuances of communication are important. There is likely to be a need to be diplomatic, assertive, persuasive, empathic, even downright stubborn – and more – in turn. Sometimes manipulation is an appropriate word. For example, the senior individual who introduces something from the Chair with a phrase like, “Now I think this is a great idea, what do you think?” creates wholly different discussion from one who asks for views without pushing their own up front. This may be ill-considered, loose phraseology or used with cynical purpose.

Whatever kind of meeting you attend or run, they are events presenting both opportunities and pitfalls. Committees and regular meetings (such as a monthly departmental meeting) present special problems as they can so often drift away from any clear objectives, and become the office equivalent of a sort of ritual rain dance. Certainly you should think very carefully before agreeing to become a member of some committees: you may be seen as concerned with something unimportant, when you are trying to appear helpful. And time is a valuable resource, which needs to be concentrated on key tasks.

Always be on your guard and remember just because it says, “Review progress on office relocation”, say, does not mean everyone will be focusing on a constructive and practical approach to the problem.

You will do best at meetings if you watch for evidence of:

- Hidden agendas
- Personal motivations
- Playing for time, or delaying tactics
- Organised alliances
- Smokescreens
- Blackmail
- Spoiling tactics
- Flattery
- Exaggeration and unwarranted assumption.

In addition to the kind of approaches listed above, you may have to recognise subtle signals and deal with plain old-fashioned bloody-mindedness. When push comes to shove you must organise to play your part well, and at the same time progress your own objectives and enhance your chosen image.

This may mean surviving major attack (someone organises that your key presentation is interrupted by the delivery of tea, three messages being handed in and a persistently ringing mobile telephone). It certainly means keeping your eyes and ears open, and producing a sure touch on the tiller as and when necessary to ensure you end up where you intend.

Management is a prime example of how something that is an inherent part of your role and work can be inherently bound up with projecting and influencing your political standing. Through the way you work with your team and through specific team aspects of operations, like meetings, you can influence both your image and the outcomes that stem from the activity. Management – like most political activity – needs authority. For most this is not something that is given, it is something we create. The confidence with which you exercise it can play a major part in your success.

7 Active responses and initiatives

If the analogy of the office environment being like a jungle is apt then, just like someone aiming to survive in the jungle, you have to use every means at your disposal to aid your survival. Just as everything you propose to do must be assessed in terms of the utilisation of time if you are to be truly productive, or the financial implications or cost-effectiveness of something reviewed ahead of agreement to proceed, so too must the political ramifications. This must be a habit – a *reflex*. Your progress in office life is something like snakes and ladders. Spot and take advantage of an opportunity and you can jump ahead of the game. Fail even once to anticipate a potential hazard and you are heading down a tail.

The game plan

The need to form long term intentions and to keep the long term in mind throughout was mentioned earlier. The thought is worth restating here. The Chinese have a saying that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. It is fair comment. You need, at the same time, to bear in mind where you are aiming to get to and to recognise that each step – provided it is the right direction – takes you just a little nearer. Small steps forward may be worthwhile. They may also be disproportionately significant, putting you in a position from which you can more easily move further on.



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Time spent on something that avoids you facing any kind of set back is useful too. Success comes, major coups apart, from the detail. You need to watch for:

- What can take you forward
- How you can prevent setbacks.

And recognise that many different factors – and people – may play a part.

It is also important to recognise that nothing can be put on one side as fixed or permanently favourable. The environment in any organisation is inherently dynamic. Changes abound – some predictable, others not. Friends become foes, foes become allies and changing circumstances and practices create new opportunities and change the stage upon which the office war is fought out. A new senior manager can change the culture, a move to a new office can change the way communications work and a change in the market can change everything from the amount of money available to the pace of expansion.

Successful office politicians:

- Have clear, long term intentions
- Anticipate change
- Review what might help them constantly
- Look, creatively, for opportunities to make circumstances work for them
- Seek actively to avoid things that might damage their progress
- Leave no stone unturned in seeking advantage.

Though individual jobs vary there are a number of common factors useful to secure and strengthen your position and take you on towards your long-term goals. From each may stem opportunities to move forward or retrench and prevent backsliding. For example:

Deadlines

All of us have to get things done on time. You can either aim to do so or not:

Hitting deadlines

Probably it is normally in your interests to deliver on time; more than that, to get a reputation for delivering on time. When you meet deadlines you affect other people. They like that, and that may affect your attitude.

Always challenge a deadline imposed on you if you think it is unreasonable. It may be better to negotiate a different date than agree one reluctantly, struggle and perhaps fail (when, needless to say, your reluctance will never be remembered). And when you hit the time on the nose it may sometimes be worth making sure people notice.

In setting deadlines for others, consult, obtain agreement and then expect delivery to be fulfilled. Never be vague – *let me have it as soon as possible* – and give credit where it is due when things are well done.

Playing for time

The moment can pass; sometimes all too easily. So there are occasions when what is best for you (and even for the organisation also) is to wait. If others are pressing you need reasons for delay, and these must at least seem constructive. For example, you might delay by:

- Invoking some other event and its timing – *let's look at it again after Christmas*
- Involve more people – *we shouldn't go ahead without knowing John's opinion*
- Demand more detail – *let's look at the detailed costing first*
- Refer to a higher authority – *we must let the Board see this*
- Putting something else ahead – *we can only do this after...*
- Stressing its importance – *it's so important, let's not rush into anything*
- Commission some research – *we need objective facts here.*

Failing all else convene a committee to take it forward (this could block it forever), though do not expect this to be seen as constructive.

A way to delay can always be found, a way to meet an agreed deadline must be found; the trick is to decide which it is best to do.

Disasters

The Chinese write the word crisis with two separate characters: the first means chaos, and, interestingly, the second means opportunity; not a bad way to think about it.

Not everything in business goes well. Sometimes new products fail, research costs a fortune and casts no useful light on anything, budgets are exceeded, or newly appointed staff prove useless. When such things occur you have various options:

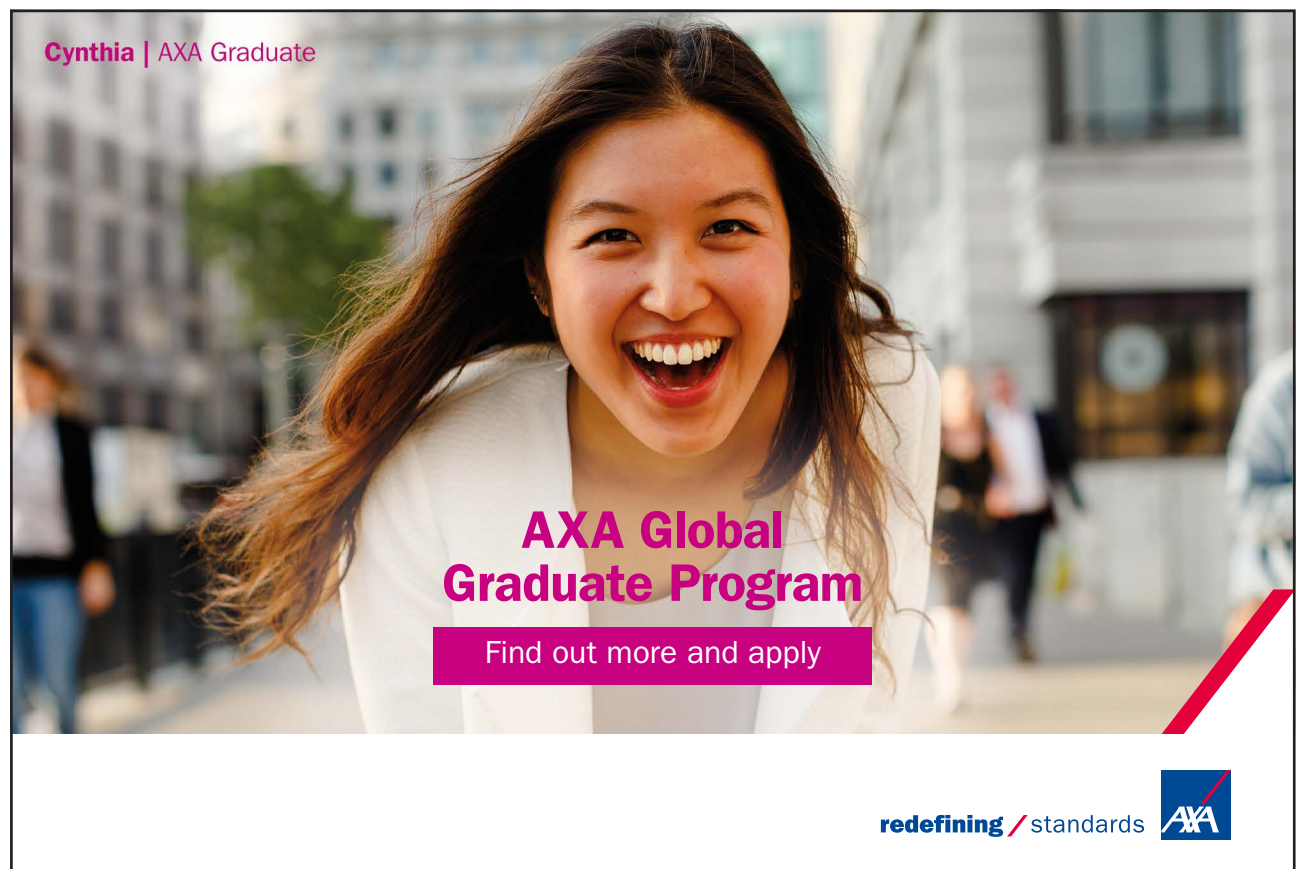
- Distance yourself from the whole thing – *I know nothing about it*
- Join the “inquest” – *we need to find out why this happened*
- Look for lessons – *we must stop this happening again*

- Lay blame – *of course, it's marketing's responsibility*
- Avoid blame – *nothing to do with me*
- Seek credit – *I always said it wouldn't work*
- Excuse – *well, it was an impossible job in the circumstances.*

Or more besides. But whatever line you take bear in mind the realities of human nature: for example no one ever scored many gold stars for saying “I told you so”, and you may not be popular if you rub peoples’ noses in something (or insist it is put on the record).

If it's your disaster, then things are different. You cannot afford too many disasters, though few people are *always* right. What is necessary if you are to build up a power base is to have a good strike rate. An individual disaster, at least one that it is possible to recover from, will be viewed in the context of your overall record. If not you may want to suggest it is.

Be very careful about laying blame with others for something that is manifestly your fault. It may get you off the hook in the short term, but make you enemies for life. Reasons are different from excuses. In a dynamic world, circumstances can change, often unforeseeably, meaning things may not work out. There may even be some good that comes from the situation (perhaps being late on something allows new information to be taken into account that changes things for the future); if so this is worth noting.



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Whatever the scale of the disaster, there is a position to be taken up and choices to be made. You may only survive by the skin of your teeth, but just being known as a survivor may be useful in itself.

A range of influences

The truth is that a long list of factors can link to office politics for good or ill. The following is just a few more examples of areas to use or be careful about:

- *Numeracy*: is important in any business. Being more numerate than your colleagues can give you an edge. Figures, especially financial figures, provide a classic form of smokescreen (lies, damn lies and statistics). You can focus on something, avoid the issue, prolong the investigation, or cut through the uncertainties given the right number. Make certain you are sure of your facts, then the choice is yours and the range of possible outcomes is considerable
- *Events*: some events, e.g. training, may be necessary, a personal help and better not delayed. But attendance on a course, as with conferences, sitting on a committee and more says a good deal about you and how you behave needs consideration
- *Records*: clear, well selected, information is important. Your ability to act, and where necessary act quickly, is strongly linked to your store of information. Information is power, yet a compromise is always involved here. You don't want to spend your life filing, but you want the right information to hand; again care is necessary
- *Contracts*: before agreeing to anything contractual think before you act, aim high, negotiate hard, trade variables rather than conceding points, aim for both parties to feel it is a good deal (the win-win scenario of negotiation) – negotiation is another career skill for the office politician
- *Work and success*: projects can certainly influence your profile. Some things (e.g. being the one to make 300 people redundant) may leave a negative influence, others be seen as good (though crowing too much about your successes can be viewed negatively)
- *Extra-curricula activity*: another area where the pros and cons have to be weighed up carefully, and where not just the usefulness of something but how it makes you seem is important, concerns activities that overflow outside the organisation
- *Political correctness*: this is important and ignoring the norm, for instance a man being disparaging about a woman colleague (or vice versa) can be damaging; a host of things here should be approached wisely.

Such examples make a clear point. Some things – providing they are well done – form a useful part of your profile. Everything must be considered in terms of how it may affect your standing, everything must be examined to see if it presents an opportunity, or if it's a sign of hidden danger to come. Careful reaction, in the light of your short and long term intentions, can enhance your situation.

8 Consolidating your position

If you are aware of the need to take office politics into account, indeed to do something about it, then consolidation is very much the first step to being able to survive; and thrive. In addition there are skills involved and there is a need for constant vigilance and fine tuning as you move ahead – ideally with a clear plan of what you want to achieve.

Success does not mean you can relax. There is always the possibility of setback or reversal, and you need to act to consolidate and maintain your position. Clearly success comes not from some magic formula, but from the details. However, to keep things manageable we will concentrate here on four additional factors before summarising the overall picture.

Constant monitoring

The need for constant awareness cannot be overstated. You need to keep an eye on everything and everybody, recognising that things can change very quickly if you take your eye off the ball. All sorts of things distract, for example:

- Pressure of work
- Tackling new things
- Feeling all is well
- Being reassured by others that all is well
- Focusing on one issue, to the exclusion of others.

Despite the distraction and the pressure you need to monitor your political standing and progress constantly. In passing it should perhaps be noted that those who are most successful in an organisation are rarely those that are most stressed out. Stress is, after all, a reaction to pressure. By managing the pressure, and by remaining essentially laid back about things, you are more likely to remain in control and on top of things.

You should constantly monitor

- Your plan and intentions
- Your progress and career development
- The opportunities and pitfalls in your work environment
- The people around you and how they might help or hinder

The intention should always be to have a view of how to handle matters next. Is there a difficulty you foresee that will need overcoming? Is there an opportunity that lends itself to some ploy? Or do you simply need to heighten your profile or build it up positively in some specific way?

Confidence

A quotation encapsulates an important thought: “If you think you can, you can. And if you think you can’t, you’re right” (Mary Kay Ash). You need to have the courage of your convictions and confidence in your ability to succeed. If you want to take on a particular project, say, not least because of the opportunity doing so would provide, then it surely helps if you truly believe that you can complete it successfully – maybe more: that you can do it better than anyone else. If you can think like this it helps. If not, ask what would make such feelings possible. If you can only take something on after some advice, training or rehearsal, so be it. Get down to organising the preliminaries and then go for it with confidence.

Put yourself in a position where you are able to be confident and you make success more likely. This is a separate but important area (see *Outstanding confidence in a week*, Patrick Forsyth, Hodder).

Working the system

Being politically successful does not necessarily need constant contrivance. Most of the opportunities you need are all around you, they are an inherent part of the ongoing life and processes of the organisation for which you work. All that is necessary is to recognise the possibilities that are there, and take advantage of them.

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Inherent opportunities may come from:

- Meetings
- Projects
- Processes
- Systems
- Changes
- Information
- People

So, almost whatever the circumstances – you have an appraisal scheduled, you are recruiting a new member of staff, you are giving a presentation to the Board, or writing a report that will be widely circulated – you not only need to have the possibilities stemming from it in mind, you need to make them work.

It is the way you orchestrate the possibilities that is perhaps most important.

A degree of ruthlessness

Whilst we might prefer that honest dealing was all that corporate success required, realistically this is sometimes not the case. Like so much else there is a balance needed. Out and out ruthlessness and dishonesty may be self-defeating, especially when brute force is applied unthinkingly; we all tend to applaud when the bully gets their comeuppance (though some succeed longer term than we might like).

On the other hand, it would be wrong to suggest that there are never occasions for some element of ruthlessness. You must judge carefully how far you take matters. Certainly success is based to some degree on all the following. Sometimes, and to some extent, you need to be:

- Assertive
- Strong willed
- Stubborn
- Firm
- Resolute in the long term
- Persuasive
- Forceful.

Skills are involved here and there may be abilities you need to cultivate to strengthen your overall chances of operating successfully. Certainly you need to be prepared to stick to your guns and fight your corner where necessary. Much can be achieved through diplomacy (another useful skill); some things need a more head-on approach. And sometimes action that others at least will see as devious is the only route forward. After all, given oranges the job is to make marmalade as they say. The tougher you resolve to be, the more perhaps you need to think through the consequences.

You need the ability to be diplomatic or forceful – and to select which is best in individual circumstances.

Summary

Here we have covered a variety of aspects of office life and, whatever else, it will be clear that there is no magic formula for winning out politically. You must work at it, and you must do so consciously and with due consideration of all the changing people and circumstances surrounding you. No stone must be left unturned and if you take your eye off the ball you may look back to see you have missed something significant.

The positive and negative sides of the process are equally important. It can be as useful to spot and take advantage of an opportunity as to side step a problem, or identify an adversary sufficiently clearly and far ahead of their making a move that you can take preventative action to neutralise their impact on your progress.

Let's touch on three things here in conclusion:

- Planning pays dividends: *be clear in your intentions and work to achieve them*
- Flexibility enhances your success: *aim to be “quick on your feet”, keeping your wits about you and adapting your action in the light of the actual circumstances*
- Ultimately it is down to you. *Remember what Lily Tomlin said, “We’re all in this together. By ourselves”. In fact no one is without help, we all forge alliances and, although they may change over time they are always part of how we operate. But it is your talents for the process that will help you most.*

Overall if you are to survive and perhaps turn organisational politicking to your own good you must have (and this is a list you might extend):

- *Knowledge of what is going on* – which means good sources and lines of information
- *Sufficient of the right people on your side* – whether influencers, sources of information or close allies and whether voluntarily, unknowingly, or because they have their arm twisted
- *A high order of communications skill* – verbally (e.g. presentations), in writing – whatever (and whether formally or informally)
- *The “right” image* – an accurate idea of what is suitable and the right degree of visibility
- *The patience of a saint* – and certainly the ability to see the broad picture, implement a long term strategy and, if necessary, bide your time
- *Sufficient assertiveness* – this balances the patience; it is important to be prepared to fight your corner and to be seen to have sufficient clout to do so (though being *aggressive* may not help)
- *Organisational and management abilities* – there will be no time to consider political matters, much less do anything about them, if time, people, projects and yourself are not well managed
- *Fleetness of foot* – you need to spot potential pitfalls and opportunities, have an eye for the main chance and the wit to take advantage of it
- *A degree of ruthlessness* – not least with yourself, and the sensitivity to know when not to overdo it with others so that it becomes self-defeating.

So, if you cultivate and deploy such characteristics all will go well, and you will stay on top of things. If so, then there will be some moments when the pressure will ease, and you can relax a little, confident that you are safely on course.

But, realistically, there is never a moment when you can be completely off your guard.

Perhaps I can end by saying that I am on your side in all this and wish you well. Honestly, trust me (and trust your instincts next time someone in your office says something like this to you – and read between the lines)!