

# Mastering executive politics

**“I don’t do office politics” is not a valid strategy.**

**By Jackie Sloane**

**A**fter serving in a variety of departments over a number of years, Gina had worked her way up as a leader in her organization. She maintained good relationships with past colleagues. So when she was asked to develop a major company-wide cost-cutting initiative, she reached out to them, sharing her goals and her thoughts on why the initiative was important. She asked for their partnership, ideas and support in setting up conversations with others she didn’t know as well. Given her experience and relationships, Gina knew many of the issues her colleagues faced and what they cared about. She asked good questions and listened. As a result of her approach, she was successful in saving many millions of dollars for her firm without alienating others in the process of what could have been a political minefield. In fact, she strengthened her reputation. She was subsequently wooed by other departments to take on leadership roles.

*Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines politics as “factional scheming for power and status within a group.” To accomplish business and career goals, we must influence others. To

be effective at it, we must plan. Is that Machiavellian “scheming” or about being strategic, a systems thinker?

The more we stop to consider how action and inaction impacts others, the more proactive we can be. Activities that appear blatantly self-promoting or exclusive cause mistrust.

Gina basically lobbied people to work with her, a political technique. But she was also an astute negotiator, focusing on the needs of her various constituents. We’ve all heard people say “I don’t get involved in office politics.” Yet the more we advance and the bigger the project, the more we must rely on the participation of others to get things done. We’re more effective influencing those we understand.

Another successful executive believes that politics is about people wanting to work with those they like. We recommend others for plum projects because we know and trust them.

To master executive politics, assume that everyone has interests and concerns, and it’s up to you to cultivate relationships and support before you need them.

**Examine something you want to accomplish that may not be working so well.** Be specific in clarifying the result you seek. For

example: “My department is viewed as an important business partner; our involvement is sought throughout strategic decision-making and long-term planning processes.”


**Whose goodwill is essential to what you want to accomplish?**

In the example above, who makes the decisions about those long-term processes? What really matters to each person or group? Focus on that when you communicate with them. How can you help them with their concerns? How does what you want impact them? Develop and maintain personal relationships with these individuals.

**How do you want to be seen in the organization?** What actions do you need to take to build and maintain that reputation?

**Clarify what really matters to your immediate supervisor.**

Address it in your conversations with your boss, then act on it consistently. We are often surprisingly unclear in communicating this to our reports or learning it from our managers. Understand the dynamics your boss is dealing with, then plan ahead for those. Make it as easy as possible for everyone to do what you’d like them to do.

**Care about other people and what matters to them,** and you will cultivate a powerful reservoir of goodwill. 

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