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A Positive Approach to Office Politics

By Julie Jansen, Coach and Author of *"I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This"* and *"You Want Me to Work With Who?"*

- Office politics can be used positively to boost productivity.
- Developing management programmes, encouraging healthy networking, amongst others, are steps to achieve this.



Office politics is a fact of life. It refers to an employee's ability to use his/her power in a company to fulfill his/her personal agenda. HR professionals, in particular, are mired in it on a daily basis. Office politics is not indigenous to specific industries or sizes of companies.

Instead of striving to erase it, HR professionals can make good use of it to increase productivity in a company. Roffey Park Institute, a leadership organisation in the United Kingdom, set out in a "Management Agenda 2007" survey that managers experienced positive results from using office politics. Indeed, in today's politicised work environment, HR professionals have to win their employees' hearts and minds. This requires political acumen, the ability to forge alliances and emotional intelligence to negotiate, influence and motivate. In the same line, the updated "Management Agenda 2012" survey indicated that "organisational politics itself is not necessarily detrimental to organisational life and some may use 'politicking' to further the organisation's interests". Indeed, about 56% of the 700 employees interviewed in the United States pointed out that involvement in office politics is "at least somewhat necessary" to get ahead, a Robert Half survey found out in August 2012.

Despite prevailing negative perceptions, HR professionals should understand that there is such a thing as good office politics. It refers to employees' positive behaviours and actions to further a business cause, ensure the success of a project or facilitate a promotion or salary rise.

Take, for instance, the method used by a manager called Lawrence. Lawrence is aware that no one on the executive team really knows any of

his direct reports. He realises that it would help his team's careers if they were exposed to the executive team so he has asked several members of the executive team to briefly introduce their specific functional area at his bi-weekly team meetings. This gives both the executive and his staff the opportunity to interact in a more informal manner.

Most people would think that Lawrence's move is simply good practice. In fact, this illustrates good office politics. It is thus important for HR professionals to manoeuvre through office politics but also help employees understand and navigate it. Even more challenging, they are often put into the role of a "police officer", particularly when people's behaviours are unsavoury.

Understanding negative office politics

When the topic of office politics comes up, it generally refers to detrimental behaviour or actions in the workplace such as blaming others, vying for recognition, game playing, manipulation, stealing credit, leveraging power or status, and managing up with contrived motives.

For instance, Kar Fai works in a finance role in the Research and Development (R&D) division of an international company. His manager, the Senior Vice President (SVP) of R&D has requested that Kar Fai shares the financial details of projects regularly with Annie, the portfolio manager in R&D. Yet, Kar Fai does not invite Annie to meetings, fails to copy her in emails to schedule meetings with senior executives and does not give Annie credit for her contribution. When asked by the SVP why he continues to behave this way, he answers: "Annie

does not contribute to my work at all, so why should I involve her?"

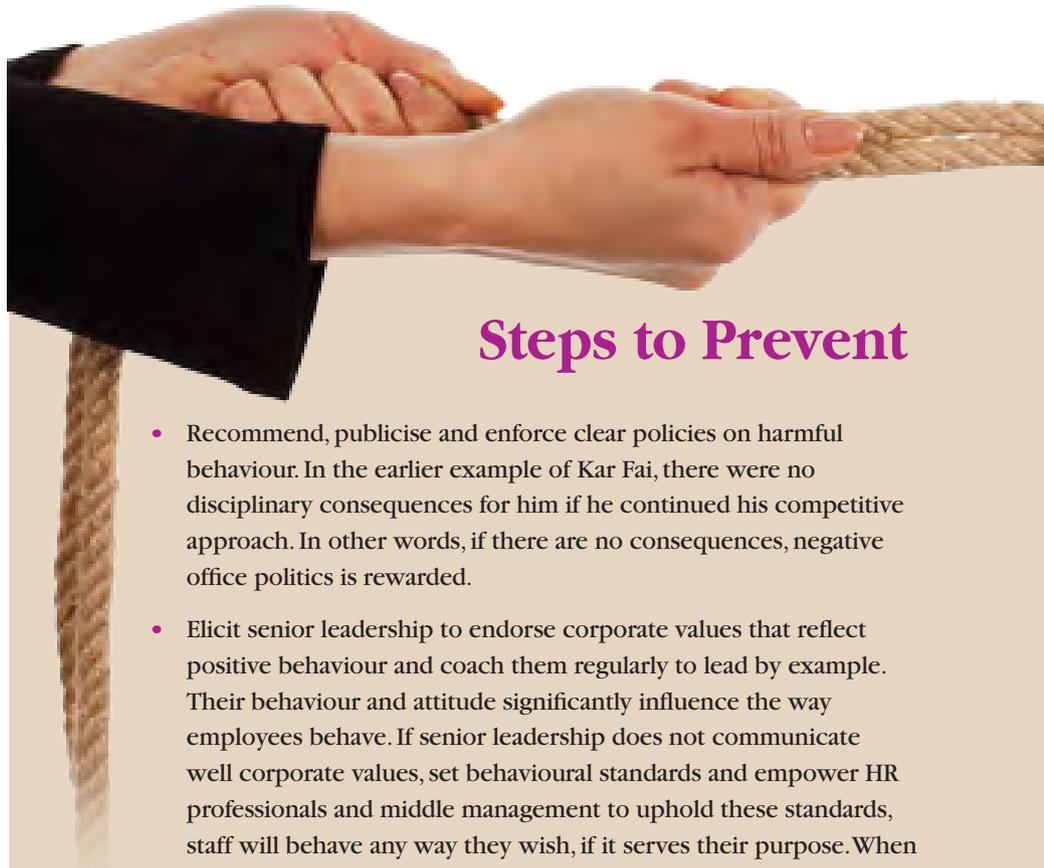
Not only is this insubordination on Kar Fai's part, he is also clearly focused on furthering his career at the expense of others. Unfortunately for Annie and the whole team, the SVP dislikes disciplining employees. Yet, by avoiding it, he is condoning Kar Fai's behaviour and sending the message to other staff that undermining colleagues is tolerable. Instead, he should, along with the HR manager, tell Kar Fai that he is documenting the instances that he excludes Annie and, if he continues to do this, his job will be in jeopardy.

What causes office politics?

Although HR professionals are responsible for hiring employees who collaborate to achieve common business goals, an organisation is comprised of individuals with different values, personalities, beliefs, attitudes, expectations, motives, experiences, goals and work ethics. Asking them to work together can naturally create confusion, misunderstanding and stress.

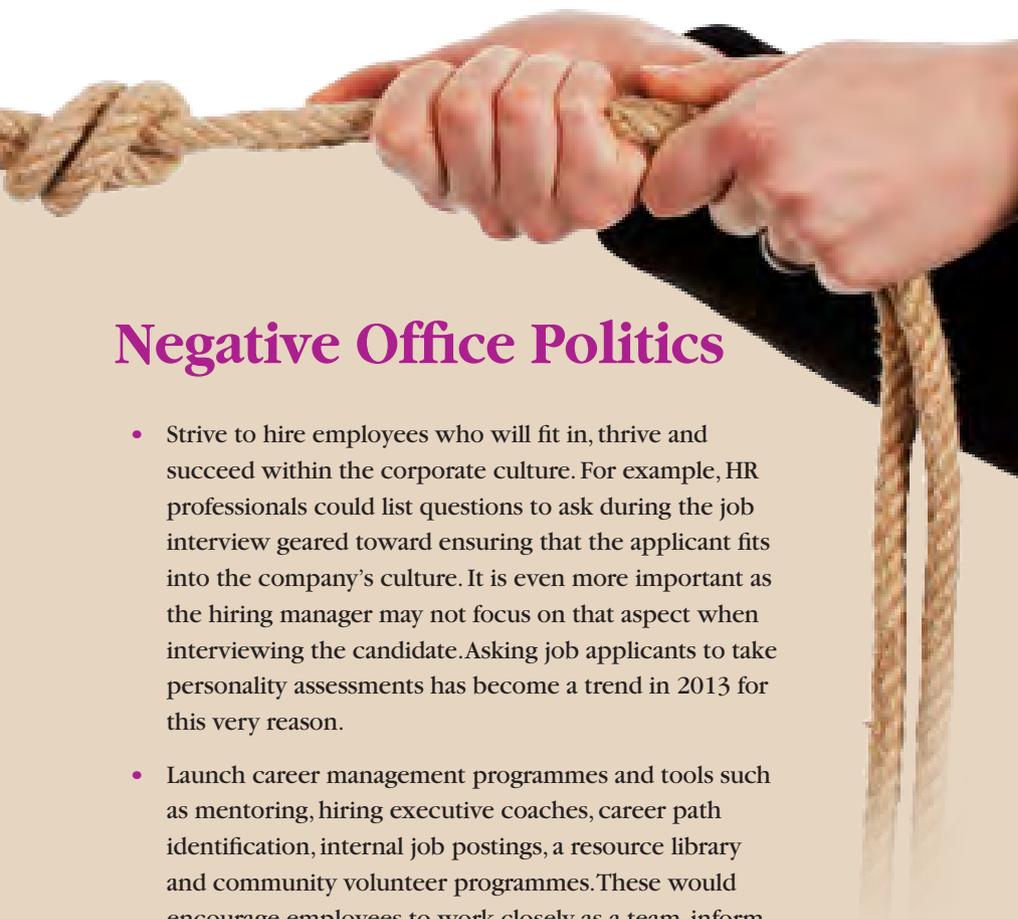
Office politics is inherent to the workplace because:

- some employees have more power and authority than others and they leverage on this;
- getting promoted or gaining visibility with senior management is important to many employees, which can create a misalignment with a team or department's goals; and
- staff often have to compete for limited resources.



Steps to Prevent

- Recommend, publicise and enforce clear policies on harmful behaviour. In the earlier example of Kar Fai, there were no disciplinary consequences for him if he continued his competitive approach. In other words, if there are no consequences, negative office politics is rewarded.
- Elicit senior leadership to endorse corporate values that reflect positive behaviour and coach them regularly to lead by example. Their behaviour and attitude significantly influence the way employees behave. If senior leadership does not communicate well corporate values, set behavioural standards and empower HR professionals and middle management to uphold these standards, staff will behave any way they wish, if it serves their purpose. When there is a lack of communication and clarity about business goals, when no one knows who is accountable for what, and when goals need to be achieved, employees create their own agenda to survive rather than help the company succeed. Hence, if a senior manager is not transparent about the way he/she manages his/her team, HR professionals could meet with him/her and identify ways that he/she can increase transparency, such as holding a town hall meeting or sending out a regular email updates to mitigate gossiping.
- Work closely with managers to help them be more effective at giving difficult feedback and managing poor performance. For example, role-playing actual situations that a manager faces with his/her employees could help him/her handle a challenging conversation. The HR professional could play the role of an objective third party.
- Offer training to all staff on negotiation, conflict management and emotional intelligence. This would help employees build confidence and interact in a more positive way with their co-workers, especially in stressful times. HR professionals could encourage staff to network within the company and positively market themselves, their teams and projects. By the same token, they should openly educate staff about office politics and its potential good use. Although mastering office politics is crucial to career advancement - especially the more senior one becomes - many employees, regardless of their level, tend to avoid it, thinking that only hard work matters.



Negative Office Politics

- Strive to hire employees who will fit in, thrive and succeed within the corporate culture. For example, HR professionals could list questions to ask during the job interview geared toward ensuring that the applicant fits into the company's culture. It is even more important as the hiring manager may not focus on that aspect when interviewing the candidate. Asking job applicants to take personality assessments has become a trend in 2013 for this very reason.
- Launch career management programmes and tools such as mentoring, hiring executive coaches, career path identification, internal job postings, a resource library and community volunteer programmes. These would encourage employees to work closely as a team, inform them on what other career opportunities are available in the organisation and focus on constant learning and growth. When employees are more knowledgeable and gratified, they are less apt to engage in office politics.
- Work with managers on developing a stakeholder analysis to assess the key people in their work life and determine whether they are champions, neutral or possibly enemies, and help them create a simple strategy for developing and nurturing relationships with everyone. This can be as simple as listing all the key employees who touch someone's job in some fashion and identify action steps to nurture these people, such as inviting them to coffee or asking their feedback.
- Finally, HR professionals ought to govern their own behaviour. It is easy to get pulled into conflict and gossip because they usually know more than anyone else about what is going on in the company. They should be positive, rise above interpersonal conflict, avoid gossiping and relying on confidentiality, and above all be a model of integrity.

It is important for HR professionals to tackle negative office politics because it has an adverse impact on a business, namely low morale, diminished productivity, decreased customer satisfaction, high turnover, absenteeism, errors and missed business results.

How can HR professionals identify it?

HR professionals are in a position to note if bad behaviour is a pattern and how it affects other employees. If they consistently receive negative feedback from staff about one team member's behaviour, this clearly indicates a pattern. When Laura White, the VP of HR for an air cargo company, was asked about office politics, she responded: "All day, people come into my office to complain about someone else's behaviour. After six months, I was easily able to assess which employees were truly demonstrating bad behaviour on a regular basis to further their own agenda, and which ones were doing so based upon a specific situation. I make decisions about which battles I should help employees fight, when to involve a manager or bring an issue to the attention of a senior leader." Laura added, "At the end of the day, our Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer set the example for how people can and should behave, whether they believe this or not."

Conclusion

Office politics is an intrinsic part of the workplace. Yet, when HR professionals promote positive office politics, employees can be more productive.