Office Politics
How to Navigate the Undercurrents of Office Politics and Stay Afloat
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INTRODUCTION

So you finally got that new job you had applied for. Congratulations! You’ve studied and trained in your field, and now you’re ready to show the world what you can do.

But wait! You’re not alone. You have 5 employees under your responsibility, there are 4 others on your level and a director who is under another director, who is under The Big Boss. And it doesn’t take you long to discover that the idyllic image of cooperation and harmony that the personnel director who hired you so eloquently described is, well, not exactly accurate.

You come into a room where your subordinates are talking, and suddenly the room goes silent; one becomes very busy, another looks uncomfortable and embarrassed, and another quickly masks a fleeting look of outright hostility with an insincere smile.

Your peers in the corporate hierarchy are outwardly friendly, but you sense a certain distrust. The one who was supposed to fill you in on things you need to know about company procedures always has something more urgent to do, another makes sarcastic remarks aimed at making you feel like a bumbling idiot, another is permanently angry at all superiors and expects you to loyally agree with him at all times and considers you a traitor if you don’t.

As for your director, he makes snide remarks about his superiors in their absence, but is all fawning smiles whenever any of them shows up in person. And he expects you to behave the same way with him. He gives you more work than you can reasonably handle, and enjoys pointing out your mistakes.
You feel lost and worried. You were given all the right training to be a competent accountant, secretary, or computer programmer, but no one gave you the manual that explained how to deal with all of these kinds of people.

Well, we are about to repair that omission. In the following pages, you will discover what you so desperately need to know about the seemingly mysterious behavior of many of the people you will come into contact with in the course of your career. You will find out what drives them, what their favorite tactics are, and how you can stay above the fray and counter those tactics without resorting to them yourself.
Chapter One
WHAT IS OFFICE POLITICS?

The first definition in the dictionary for the word « politics » is « the art or science of government or governing, » but if we read on a bit further, we find: « intrigue or maneuvering within a political unit or group in order to gain control or power, » and then « the often internally conflicting interrelationships among people in a society. »

So when we say that politics and offices go together, we are recognizing the difficulties that people have getting along together in a group, and the great possibility of at least some of them using underhanded methods to gain ascendancy over the others.

Now this does not mean that all offices will necessarily be hotbeds of political maneuvering and below-the-belt tactics, but at the same time, we must be aware that this tendency exists and be prepared for it if we should find it. Burying our heads in the sand and pretending it doesn't exist will not make it go away.

Who is concerned by office politics?

Short answer: everyone. This is not a cynical insinuation that everyone uses them, but rather a reminder that even those who don't use them may come across them at any time, either as a victim or an observer.

Also keep in mind that, even though this book is mainly concerned with the office environment, no group is entirely immune to them. Associations, those with noble objectives or simple clubs devoted to leisure activities, scientific institutions,
cultural organizations, schools, churches: they all have one thing in common – they bring people together in groups, and no matter how noble or innocent their objectives are, they can all become the scene where the drama of power struggles are likely to play out.

Within the office, there is usually a hierarchy: first, a director, superior, team leader, CEO, etc. This person has people under his direction and responsibility. And then there are the members of the team, who are in the position of equals in regard to one another, but in a subordinate position in relation to the director. We must keep this in mind, because the political strategies used will be different depending on the heirarchical relationships of the people involved.

What are the objectives of people who resort to office politics?

People who resort to office politics can have quite valid goals; very often they do it in order to get a promotion or a raise. Or a person who is in a position of responsibility doesn't want to see someone else come along and take over their position. Or they might want others to have a favorable opinion of them. Well, who doesn't? That's perfectly normal and natural. Or they might want to influence others. That too is just a part of living, from parents who want their children to eat their vegetables (« a spoonful for Mommy, now a spoonful for Aunt Bertha... ») to a high school girl who wants to get the football captain to ask her out, to a director who wants her employee to finish a project by a certain date.

While there's no harm in any of the above desires, there is harm caused when people choose to use means that hurt others. When a promotion is obtained
by destroying the reputation of one’s rival, or a director uses unwarranted pressure to get the project done, or when parents use humiliation to influence their children, there’s something wrong, and while the person who is perpetrating the harm may believe that the end justifies the means, the person on the other end of the stick has a different view of the situation. Our goal in this book is to keep you from finding yourself on the wrong end of the stick, but without harming others.

Another reason some people use these methods is to cover up their own incompetence, whether real or imagined. Some people have so little self-confidence that they can't imagine that they could get the promotion or even keep their present job if they are judged on their competence alone, so they try to load the dice by making others look bad.

And some people really are incompetent, and they either know it and are desperate to cover up, or they deny it even to themselves and refuse any implication that they could be wrong about anything. This is all the more uncomfortable when that person is the boss, and according to the Peter Principle, it not only happens, but is almost inevitable. According to the Peter Principle, people who are competent in their jobs are promoted, and this will continue until they reach their level of incompetence. Once they have reached their level of incompetence, they will not be promoted any more, but will remain in their position. As this process continues throughout a company, the end result can be a lot of incompetent people in positions of responsibility.

Dilbert, on the other hand, affirms that Peter was an optimist. (Dilbert, the well-known comics character created by Scott Adams, is an expert on office
politics.)

And there are still other, darker reasons for using these kinds of tactics. One person might be jealous of a co-worker who got a promotion instead of him, another may feel that she has been treated unjustly, and feel justified in taking revenge. Some people have an ingrained victim mentality, and lash out at whoever happens to be near them. Some people will be conscious of these attitudes; in others they will be working on a largely subconscious level.
Chapter Two
UNDERHANDED TACTICS OF OFFICE POLITICS EXPOSED

A person who wants to gain an unfair advantage over his co-workers cannot, of course, just come out and say so. The success of his enterprise depends on his methods remaining in the dark. This is why you will have gone a long way towards countering these people just by recognizing the tactics they are using.

Another reason you need to be aware of these tactics is to avoid the temptation to use them yourself. In fact, you may wonder whether publicly showing a list might not be too helpful to certain unscrupulous people who might want to use them instead of avoiding them. In fact, that is not a great danger. Enough people have found them without the help of this book, and often use them in a more or less unconscious manner. And you will be shown not only what they are, but why these tactics are dangerous, not only to their designated victims, but also to those who use them. They are indeed the kind of weapons that backfire, either sooner or later.

So here is a list of some of the more frequently-used tactics you may encounter (Of course this list is not exhaustive. Office workers everywhere are cogitating night and day, looking for newer and sneakier methods):

**Tactics to make themselves look good:**

- Taking the credit for other's work:
  - Offering to write a report on a group project, and then describing it in
such a way that the reader thinks they did the majority of the work

- A director might present work done by those under his orders as if it was his own work

- Explaining to others how hard they work:
  - Complaining about being terribly busy
  - Explaining in detail all the things they have to do
  - Repeat it often enough, and people will believe it

- Making it look like they have a lot of work:
  - Having a lot of papers on their desk
  - Running around looking busy
  - Staying after work hours
  - Keeping a harried look on their faces

An example of the harried-look method: rumor has it that the famous poet, T.S. Eliot, wore green-tinted makeup to make himself look like a tortured soul.

- Yes-men
  - Making the boss think they're very intelligent by agreeing with everything she says
  - As they say, « Flattery will get you everywhere. »

- Making themselves indispensable:
  - Arranging it so that people have to go through them to obtain materials or access to certain rooms
  - Withholding information from others – if they get fired, the
information goes with them

- Making use of symbols of power
  - Trying to have a larger or better-placed office
  - Keys
  - Titles
  - Company car

**Tactics to help them avoid looking bad:**

These tactics are especially important for the incompetent, but equally useful for the just plain lazy.

- Avoiding work:
  - Managing to be someplace else when someone needs them
  - Staring intently at the ceiling when the director asks for volunteers for a task
  - Taking as long as possible to do the work they do have
  - Finding ways to get the work assigned to someone else
  - Making it look as though they already are over-burdened with work (see above)

- Avoiding responsibility

  When there is work to do, trying to spread the responsibility as thin as possible, so that it will be impossible to know who to blame in the case of failure. This works best when there is a common accord among a group of co-workers, the more, the better.
Or, alternatively, managing to get someone else to take the responsibility. This could backfire if the project is a success.

- Avoiding taking initiative
  
  This would be even worse in the event of failure, for the person would be blamed not only for the failure, but for even having had the idea in the first place.

- Being non-committal
  
  Expressing an opinion is considered dangerous because the person might be proved to be wrong, or their opinion might be in contradiction to the director's, or still worse, they could end up being right and the director wrong.

**Tactics to make others look bad**

- Banana peels
  
  Mission impossible: Used by directors, who assign a task that can't be done because:
  
  - there isn't enough time
  - the objectives are unrealistic
  - it can't be done within the assigned budget

- Bad suggestions
  
  In a group setting, or to sabotage a director, preferably an incompetent one, they might make a proposal that they know to be
stupid or ineffective, but that sounds good to the unsuspecting target. For example, suggesting the use of cheaper materials that ones knows to be shoddy.

- **Withholding information**

  Already seen above, this tactic is quite versatile. In this setting, the target person will draw erroneous conclusions or do unnecessary work, possible fail miserably in his project for lack of crucial information that the office politician knowingly withholds.

- **Obstructionism**

  To keep a rival from succeeding, especially a competent one, they slow down his progress by refusing to cooperate (actually pretending to cooperate but not doing anything), or inventing preliminary tasks that « must » be done before actually getting down to real work, or nit-picking over details, for example engaging in lengthy discussions over whether the final report should be single-spaced or double-spaced. This tactic can be advantageously combined with work-avoiding tactics.

- **Divide and conquer**

  Fomenting trouble within a group so that the targets will use up all their energy and attention fighting among themselves. A director will use this tactic to keep those underneath him from uniting against him.

- **Discouraging words**

  *Fault-finding*

  Most effective when used by a director. The target is only informed of
their shortcomings and mistakes, never of their qualities or anything they might have done right.

Sarcastic remarks

More versatile than direct criticism, this can be used to make inferences without coming out and saying what they think directly.

General negativity

Here, they will predict that the target person will never be able to succeed in his task, possibly because of unfavorable conditions, but adding a subtle insinuation of the target's lack of intelligence or competence will be even more effective in discouraging him.

- Criticizing others behind their backs

  The more subtly this is done, the more effective it can be: a lift of the eyebrows, a shrug of the shoulders, a knowing smile, or saying « I don’t personally believe what they told me about Betty, but well... ») (voice trailing off). The cynical saying: « throw enough dirt, and some of it will eventually stick » is unfortunately often true. If you find yourself having a negative feeling when you meet someone you know who has never done anything to you, try to remember whether you have heard criticism of that person. If you have, you will begin to understand the insidious but devastating effect that criticism can have.

- Blaming others

  Not to be confused with avoiding responsibility, which is before the fact, while blaming others takes place after the fact. Those who have
been careful to avoid responsibility from the outset will have an easier time finding someone else to blame when things go wrong.

**Knowing who to blame**

Skilled office politicians, while knowing the necessity of putting the blame on someone else, are also aware that there are some people it’s better to avoid blaming, the boss, for example, except behind his back, or someone who has the favors of the boss. People low on the pecking order are safer choices, although blaming a direct rival can have greater benefits.

- **Betrayal**

Pretending to be someone’s friend and promising them support, only to back down when that support is needed is one of the ugliest of these tactics. Since people don’t like turncoats and traitors, this tactic must be covered up with denial that any promise of support was ever given, or else it will backfire and the perpetrator’s reputation will suffer more damage than the benefits he derives from the betrayal.
Chapter Three
THE DEEPER ROOTS – WHAT REALLY MAKES OFFICE
POLITICIANS TICK

Whether we want to admit it or not, we are all products of the society we live in and are deeply conditioned by the prevalent attitudes of that society. And yet we see people who use underhanded tactics to get ahead and we are horrified by their behavior, even though they were brought up in the same social environment we were. Moreover, we may at times even be tempted to use such tactics ourselves, or we may resort to them without realizing that we are doing it.

In fact, Western society today is in a position of inner conflict between two worldviews, and because of the domination of the Occident in the world as well as instantaneous global communications, other countries throughout the world are affected also.

On the one hand, there is the profound influence of social Darwinism, a concept that became more and more accepted after the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1859. Darwin's theories, in particular the concept of the survival of the fittest, were based on observations of animals, but they were quickly applied to human behavior.

If you spend some time hanging around the water cooler and listening to your co-workers, you may hear some of them saying things like this: « In this life, it's dog-eat-dog, » or « If you want to get ahead in life, you have to be willing to step on some toes, » or « I have to watch out for number one, and if I don't no one else will, » or « Do unto others before they do unto you, » or « Nice guys finish
What these people are expressing is a worldview which considers that we are basically alone, separated from others, and in competition with them. The « fittest » are those who are the most ruthless, those who have the strongest weapons and use them to win the battle. We would be surprised if people who hold these views didn't resort to office politics!

Now this way of thinking obviously didn't originate with Darwin, but it became more acceptable to think in this way and justify it after Darwin's work gave it a seemingly scientific basis.

There is another competing worldview in Western society, and that is the Judeo-Christian tradition, which maintains that men are connected as brothers under a benevolent God, and not separated as rivals. And in other parts of the world, we also find religions or philosophies that promote a worldview of connectedness and cooperation: Taoism, Buddhism, Islam.

Now described in this way, it sound very clear and concise, but in real life it is in fact quite confused and messy. We have all received messages and lessons deriving from both of these worldviews, often even from the same people who express a mixture of both. Whether or not we were brought up in a particular religious tradition, whether or not we heard about Darwin's theories, these two basically conflicting ways of seeing the world have seeped into our minds, transmitted by parents, teachers, television, song lyrics, and the people we listen to while hanging around the water cooler.

As a result of this mish-mash, we don't have just two types of people, the
good guys who want to help us and the bad guys who want to bash our heads in. That would be too simple, wouldn’t it? What we actually have is a rainbow of colors, where each person is a unique combination of shades and hues. This is crucial to remember in your dealings with others, at the office as well as elsewhere, because if you really believe that the person in front of you is nothing more than the pigeonhole that you have decided to put them in, then you are at risk of making some serious mistakes in your relationships with them.

That being said, a few pigeonholes can help us to make some sense out of the mish-mash, as long as we don’t take them as absolutes, so here are a few types of people to look out for as you make your way through the underbrush of your company’s jungle:

- **The Pure Darwinist**

  This person believes that the world is a hostile place and the only way to get ahead is to dominate others before they dominate you. He (or she) is the type who is most likely to use underhanded methods deliberately and to justify their use by affirming that everyone else is doing it too. But don’t expect them to admit it openly. They can be very skilled at manipulating others, know how to spout idealistic high-sounding phrases, and are likely to hold others to standards of honesty they have no intention of respecting themselves. Beware of them; they are the most dangerous kind.

- **The Wishy-washy Darwinist**

  This person would rather use honest methods, but when he finds
himself in a bind, for example, he sees that a co-worker might get the promotion he covets, he swings into action, and finds just the appropriate underhanded tactic for the occasion; but he is not really comfortable in that role, so he tends to forget that he ever did anything dubious and will hotly deny it if directly accused. As soon as he's finished playing a dirty trick on someone, he will revert back to « normal » and will even be genuinely friendly to that person. This kind of person is hard to define, but if you see them playing dirty once, well, don't be too trusting next time, OK?

- **The Indignant Victim, or The Hidden Darwinist**

  It may seem strange to put these people in the same general category as the Darwinists, but they also believe that the world is a terribly hostile place and that only a few can succeed, and that those who do succeed necessarily use underhanded methods. The difference is that they do not justify this situation. In fact, they are very angry about it. They attribute all of their failures to a conspiracy of bad people who are out to get them, or to the boss, who « hates their guts. » Incompetent people who adopt this attitude have the advantage of a convenient, ready-made excuse for their failure. The irony is that however much they hate those who practice office politics, they constantly use one of its most popular tactics: blaming the problem on others.

  The problem is that when they see these different types of behavior, many people who have been brought up to be honest and trusting individuals just don't
know how to react. They don't want to be like that themselves, and they wonder if they can really succeed without using those tactics, or if their only other choice is to be « poor but honest. » Without a distinct understanding of what is happening, or a clear vision of who they are and what their real choices are, these people are in the very risky position of wandering near the slippery slope of office politics and finding themselves sliding down it into the fetid swamp of the Wishy-washy.

But before we come to the rescue and show you what attitudes you need to have to avoid the fate of joining their ranks and also defend yourself against their attacks while still increasing your chances for advancement in your job, there is one more task at hand, and that is to dissipate the illusion that the use of office politics can actually be to anyone's true advantage.
Chapter Four
THE RAVAGES OF OFFICE POLITICS

Most people have a certain idea of fair play and honesty, and find office politics distasteful, but how many realize the great ravages that the use of these tactics actually cause? When office politics is allowed to gain entry into a company, it's not just a few who suffer, but everyone is affected. There are damaging effects on every level:

The first person who loses out is obviously the one who is the target of the tactic. They may:

- lose out on a promotion they deserve
- end up with a lower salary
- possibly even lose their job
- lose their good reputation because of lies that were spread about them
- lose their self-confidence
- live in daily stress in a hostile environment
- become cynical or even paranoid (but can it be called paranoia if someone is really persecuted?)
- become depressed

Less obvious are the damages done to the company, but they are real:

- More competent employees may be passed over for promotion in favor of less competent ones – the Peter Principle on steroids.
• An unpleasant atmosphere will be created, where suspicion takes the place of cooperation and the employees experience less job satisfaction in general.

• Stressed and dissatisfied workers will be less productive.

• Honest employees will have little hope of being recognized and promoted based on their competence and work. After all, why bother?

• There will be more turnover, which will demand extra work and cost to train new employees.

• When directors are surrounded by yes-men, the real problems that need firm decision-making and quick action are pushed under the rug, and may not surface until it is too late.

In other words, this is not just a peripheral problem, a question of morale that the personnel director can remedy by sticking little motivational signs around the office. The degree to which these tactics are used within a company can influence the very survival of the company itself, and therefore the jobs of all those who are employed there.

But we’re not finished yet. You would think that at least the people who use office politics in the hope of gaining certain advantages would come out on top. After all, that's the whole point of using these tactics, isn't it? Well, ironically, underhanded office political tactics are bound, in one way or another, to turn into office boomerangs...
The many ravages that office politics wreak on their perpetrators:

Lack of friendship and support

They themselves do not expect help or support from others, because they see others as competitors and enemies. Others, whether co-workers, superiors, or those under their direction will eventually get on to them and will learn not to trust them and they will end up being disliked and isolated.

Increasing incompetence

If they are promoted to a higher level by using office politics, but do not really have the qualifications for the job, they are going to have a hard time just keeping their heads above water.

As they continue to hide their incompetence instead of taking measures to improve, they will be digging themselves into a hole of deeper and deeper incompetence.

Lack of confidence

Their seeming confidence is a smoke screen too; since their accomplishments are false, this means that on some level, if only on the subconscious level, they cannot help having feelings of inadequacy. As much as they try to convince themselves that they deserved the promotion, and only used political methods as an additional security measure, they will never really know.

Lack of self-esteem

Actually, it may be an initial lack of self-esteem that leads them to use these methods, because those who do not have a high opinion of themselves to begin with are more likely to compromise their integrity. In addition, the more they use
them, the more they are caught in a vicious circle of low self-esteem.

*They are constantly under great stress*

- The stress of feeling that they are in a hostile environment.
- The fear of others using the same kinds of tactics against them.
- The fear of failure – once again, this is circular, and may also be the motivation that got them started in the first place.
- Any kind of lying causes great stress. You can perform a muscle test on anyone, and if you ask them to lie, even in a non-threatening test situation, any muscle you test will go weak.

*Loss of energy*

In addition to the above stresses, it takes a huge amount of energy to justify dubious actions to oneself, and to keep from tripping up in one's lies (remembering which different version of a story they told to which people). It wouldn't be surprising if they had trouble sleeping at night either, which will sap their energy even more.

*Loss of contact with reality*

People who lie or present themselves under false pretenses may end up confusing reality with their new story or image. One reason for this is that in order to lie convincingly, you have to repeat the story to yourself several times to make it sound natural. But the more you do that, the more you may tend to come to believe the false version, even though you invented it yourself at the outset. The self-help technique of repeating positive affirmations about oneself is based on the same principle, except in that case, the person is consciously working to change
their beliefs.

How ironic it is that people who use these tactics to confuse and destabilize others end up destabilizing themselves and don't even realize it.
Chapter Five
YOUR ACTION PLAN FOR SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN THE OFFICE

Office politics is a reality, and it's not going to go away. Sooner or later, you are going to come into contact with people who behave in one or more of the ways described above, and you're going to have to deal with them. But just as a tennis player spends time working on his serve before going out and challenging his competitors, you also are going to have to build your own strengths. And you'll have a much better chance of success if you concentrate on changing yourself rather than striving to make others change.

Your attitude toward yourself

*Self-esteem*

You hear a lot about self-esteem these days, but what is it exactly? Simply put, it's a deep sense of your own value and dignity, a feeling that you're an OK person. It's based on your being, not on your possessions or your accomplishments. It's the ultimate security, because no one can take it away from you unless you let them. If you have genuine self-esteem, you will emanate a calm strength that will make others think twice before attacking you, and you will be much less likely to be destabilized if they do.

*Confidence*

Confidence is not the same as self-esteem but builds on it. It is the feeling that you are able to handle the various situations and circumstances that you meet
in your life. If you have genuine confidence, you won't need to put up a front to impress people, and you won't feel diminished by others who have skills or knowledge that you don't have.

If you take a hard look at yourself and realize that you are lacking in self-esteem and/or confidence, deal with it honestly and don't try to deny it to yourself or think that you've taken care of the problem if you manage to put up a front before others. This doesn't mean you have to shout it from the rooftops either, but it is really in your best interest to find a way to overcome this serious problem. Although it's beyond the scope of this book to go into this subject more deeply, there are many self-development programs out there that could help you.

Clear goals

Do you really want to go all the way to the top of the corporate ladder, or would you rather have a middle position that puts less pressure on you and leaves you more time with your family? What are your long-term, mid-term and short-term goals? If you are clear about these, you will be in the driver's seat of your life and will be less subject to others' influence and manipulation.

Keeping stress to a minimum

In today's world, it is difficult to avoid stress altogether, so it's helpful to have a few methods to reduce it. Remember, when you are under stress, you cannot function at your maximum potential, and your mental clarity goes out the window. Techniques such as meditation, relaxation, and self-hypnosis are all beneficial, but here are a few quickies you can use on the spot to keep your cool in the midst of a stressful situation:
Deep breathing

Take a deep breath. Take several. Take as many as you need. This goes against our automatic reaction when we are under stress, which is to hold our breath. Why is that? Perhaps our ancestors in the jungle increased their chances of survival when they remained completely immobile to avoid being noticed by a sabre-tooth tiger who was looking for a meal. Ask yourself: will it increase your chance of survival to stop breathing when your boss bawls you out or your co-worker makes a snide remark? On the contrary, your brain needs all the oxygen it can get, so give it a lot and maybe you'll find the answer you need to get yourself off the hook or find just the right witty response to that obnoxious person.

Rub the K-27 acupuncture point

It's located in a small depression just at the inside of your collarbone on either side. Try it. No one will notice.

Hold your forehead

We often do that spontaneously when we are thinking about a problem. There are two neuro-vascular points on your forehead, and holding them lightly will stimulate circulation and frontal brain activity. That's where your problem-solving neurons are, and that's where you want to be. This one can be done unobtrusively too.

Cook's Posture

You'd better find a private place to do this one, or you'll look pretty strange. If you don't have your own office, the bathroom will do fine, or do it at home before you leave for work. Sitting or standing, cross one leg in front of the other, then
cross your arms, with the same one on top as your legs, either both right or both left. With your arms crossed, join your hands and pull them inward to an upright position. (This is a bit awkward, but should not be painful). Breathe quietly but deeply, touching your upper front teeth with the tip of your tongue as you inhale, and releasing it as you exhale. The arm and leg crossing stimulates right-left brain integration, and the tongue position is related to acupuncture points.

* Bach flower remedy #39 *

If you are under intense pressure, before you reach for the tranquilizers, try this one first. Bach remedy #39 is a combination of several Bach flower essences that help you to stay calm under difficult circumstances.

**Keeping your energy high**

This is just as important for your personal well-being as for your success in your job. High energy is positive energy. Although some negative emotions, such as anger, seem to carry a lot of energy, they will eventually deplete you and those around you. And if the people around you are carrying negative energy, you’ll have to protect yourself to avoid being drawn into negativity yourself. The first thing you need to do is:

* Dwell on the positive *

Of course there are plenty of negative things going on in your life, in your job and in the world, but there are also lots of positive things, if you take the trouble to look for them. This does not mean that you deny the things that are going wrong or that you sweep them under the rug, but rather that you keep a balanced
perspective. We'll see in a later section how to deal with negative people, but first you have to deal with negativity in yourself. Are you down on yourself? For every shortcoming you find, write down one of your qualities. Don't be modest – you're not going to show it to anyone.

Are you dealing with an unpleasant situation? There is surely a lesson for you to learn through it or a new strength or skill that it will help you to develop. Do this balancing act whenever negative thoughts come to you.

*Cultivate a sense of humor*

Instead of getting angry about daily irritations, find something ludicrous about them and laugh at them. Subscribe to a Joke of the day on your email. Watch a funny movie. Read Dilbert comics. Laughter has been proved to help heal even physical diseases. And remember: « He who learns to laugh at himself will never run out of things to laugh at. »

*Whistle a happy tune*

Remember the song by that name? Music has a powerful influence on our mood. Humming a cheerful tune with upbeat lyrics may be just what you need to lift your spirits.

*Energy techniques*

In addition to the anti-stress techniques mentioned above, here are two more:

*The zip-up*

Draw you hand up from in front of your pubis to your chin. A couple of inches in front of your body is fine. Do it three times. It stimulates the
Central acupuncture meridian. It is said to protect us from other people’s negative energies as well.

*The thymus thump*

The thymus is located at the top of your sternum just a couple of inches under your collarbone. Tap lightly around this area in a clockwise motion for about 15 seconds. This will give you an energy boost.

**Your attitude on the job**

*Be clear in your dealings*

Tell others what to expect from you, when you expect to get the job done, and any other details they need to know. Ask questions when something is not clear to you. If you can’t get a clear answer and find that someone is avoiding being clear and above-board with you, take it as a warning signal.

*Take responsibility*

This goes along with clarity. When you make a mistake, admit it – this is uncomfortable in the short term, but beneficial in the long term. It will build others’ confidence in you, and show that you are a reasonable and modest person. But not so modest that you refuse to take responsibility for your successes! When you succeed, don’t hide it, for heaven’s sake, just be discreet about the way you let it be known.

*Be proactive*

Anticipate problems instead of letting them sneak up on you, and take initiative, but be careful to do it in areas where you have clear responsibility. If you
step on other people’s territory, they probably won’t be terribly appreciative.

*Strike a proper balance about your own competence*

You need to show your capacities to the right people, your director or your clients, for example, but don’t show off unnecessarily. You might provoke jealousy or rivalry.

**Your attitude towards others in general**

*Be lucid but not cynical*

Now you are aware of the tactics that unscrupulous people have been known to use on the job as well as in many other areas of life. Forewarned is forearmed, and this is important. On the other hand, you may or may not run into them today, so while you remain alert, you shouldn’t expect to find them everywhere, because if you do, you will, even if they’re not really there. You might even provoke them into being, because people often act the way we expect them to act, and if we treat someone as a basically honest and loyal person, they’re more likely to act that way with us, and if we treat them with suspicion, they may react with suspicion and defensiveness and be tempted to dip into their arsenal of dubious methods.

*Look for the good in everyone*

This is related to the above point and to keeping a positive attitude in general. Everyone has qualities and shortcomings. If you ignore the qualities in someone and concentrate only on their shortcomings, do you think that this can really help you to obtain what you want from them, or that it could be helpful to them? Would you like to be treated that way? While most people would probably
answer no to both of the above questions, a lot of people automatically behave that way with others, just because they are so steeped in negativity.

*Be respectful of others*

This is related to self-esteem, which we mentioned in a previous section. If you have self-esteem, you will naturally have esteem for others. Those who lack self-esteem will often try to compensate for it by tearing others down. This may even be a largely subconscious reaction in them, which doesn't keep their actions from hurting those who they try to tear down. But even if you become the target of this kind of attack, you must be careful not to let them pull you into their negative energies. Maintaining a respectful attitude towards the person is the only way to do it. It is possible to take measures to counter their attack without losing your own dignity, and this way you will feel better about yourself, and any reasonable onlooker will be more inclined to take your side.

*Understand what projection is*

This is a psychological concept which explains that we interpret external events and people according to our internal emotions and denials. For example, if we find ourselves dealing with angry people a lot, we may be projecting our own hidden anger onto them. That is, instead of expressing our anger directly, which we can’t do because we think it would mean that we are bad, we let others get angry at us. In that way, we are the innocent victims and they are the bad guys. In any kind of relational problems, at work or elsewhere, it can be very revealing to examine what you might be projecting on others as well as what they might be projecting on you.
By the way, this is not a whole lot of fun, because you are digging up things that a part of you is ashamed of and wants to hide. Some people may even do well to get professional help if they feel a lot of anxiety about it. But the benefits and new freedom that result from discovering your own projections are incalculable. In addition to that, being aware of others’ projections gives you a much better perspective, and helps you to stay calm and keep your emotional balance in the midst of conflict. Just don't say to them: « There you go projecting again! » because they won't take it well.

**How do you know when someone is using underhanded methods?**

First of all, don’t jump to conclusions. Some people agree with the boss because they don’t have much confidence in themselves or because they were taught to respect authority figures, not because they want to curry favor. Others might criticize their co-workers without being involved in a campaign to discredit them and get a promotion in their place, but simply because they are critical of most everyone. Still others might not get around to giving you important information because they can’t be bothered, not because they’re out to get you.

This is why it would be prudent to observe people for a while, and not draw conclusions until you see a definite pattern over time. You’ll eventually figure out the pure Darwinist most of the time, but never forget that labels are over-simplifications, and even the most ambition-driven opportunists have their mellow moments. Conversely, sometimes those you would least suspect reveal
themselves as members of the Wishy-washy category. No hasty conclusions are warranted here either; these people are unpredictable by definition.

So it’s best to take things on a case-by-case basis. Nor is it advisable to accuse people of unworthy motives; on the one hand, you could be wrong, and secondly, if you are right, why let them know that you are on to them?

A very useful skill is being able to tell if someone is lying to you, since various forms of lying are often used in office political strategies. Here are a few indications that a person may be lying, or in any case, is not being totally sincere (remember, indications, not proof either way!)

- The fake smile- a fake smile is done with the mouth only. Observe the person’s eyes. If their eyes are not smiling (Irish or not) they may be trying to look happier or friendlier than they really feel.
- Observe their pupils (discreetly!) Pupils that become smaller without a change in the lighting indicate a negative reaction; larger ones a positive reaction. Do their words correspond to what their pupils are saying?
- Look for discrepancies between their words and their body language. If their gestures are very tense while they say « I don’t care, » well, maybe they really do care.
- Look for time lags between their words and their body language. This could mean that they are fabricating gestures to go along with their words, but these are not spontaneous. They might say, for example, « I feel great, » and then smile, instead of the gesture being simultaneous with the words.
- Do they make eye contact? If not, perhaps they are lying (or just shy).
• Evasive answers to your questions (unless you’re being too nosy) could also be a red flag.

• If they repeat your question or pause before they answer it, it could be because they need a few seconds to make up a false answer to give you.

• Anything in their words or behavior that doesn't seem natural, or just a general feeling that something is fishy should at least put you on your guard.

• Do you tend to lie frequently yourself? (Ahem! sorry for the indiscrete question). People who lie frequently tend to be more distrustful of others and should be aware that they may be overly suspicious of others.

**How to handle attacks**

We have seen that one of the tactics to make others look bad is to criticize them behind their backs. Another is a direct attack on the victim – making critical or sarcastic remarks with the purpose of destabilizing and discouraging them. We need to look at each of these separately, even though the attacker can, and often does, use both in combination.

• Behind the back:

  The first problem, of course, is that you might not even be aware of it. So you need to be on the lookout for telltale signs. Are people who were friendly to you suddenly backing off and taking their distance? Are you sure there isn’t something you did to rub them the wrong way? In either case, the best way to handle the situation is to talk about it. If you feel ostracized by a group, pick out the one who seems to be the nicest or the most reasonable
and open-minded, and find a way to casually approach the subject with them. If you're upset, try not to show it – just express a puzzled concern. You could say something like: « Maybe it's just me, but I've been getting the impression that people in this office are acting rather distant towards me. It's funny - I didn't have that impression at first – just in the last week or so. .. »

This is enough of an opening – you don't have to say « Please tell me what's going on behind my back », in fact, that's the last thing you want to say. Now observe the other person carefully. If they act embarrassed and change the subject, or deny it flat out, there may be a smear campaign going on, and this person seems to believe it, or may even be the source of it. If they react with surprise and ask you a few questions, either they don't know about it or it really is your imagination. Or they might tell you about something negative they heard about you. This gives you an opportunity to set the record straight, and wonder out loud (don't ask directly) « Who on earth would want to spread such vicious rumors? » Once you're on to what is going on, you have to counter the attack. You want to do it from a position of strength, so you must never show it if you are upset. With your co-workers, treat it as a joke. Without revealing who informed you, just mention that it seems that a rumor is going around that you (insert the smear content here), and this is the most ludicrous thing you ever heard. If it's an attack on your competence or your personal morality or behavior, leave the boss out of it, (in most circumstances) but if it's an attack on your honesty or integrity, it would be a good precaution to go to your director and calmly tell them about
it, saying that you just want to set the record straight, but don't ask them to take any action or punish the perpetrator, who you may never identify or at least have proof about anyway. You definitely don't want to make a big deal out of it; on the contrary, you want people to stop talking about it as quickly as possible.

- **Direct attacks - sarcasm**

  If a co-worker makes a snide or sarcastic remark, call them on it immediately and firmly, but not aggressively: «Gosh, Frank, it sounds like you're implying that I'm some kind of blithering idiot! If you have a problem with me, I'd much prefer that you tell me about it directly.» Sarcastic remarks are demeaning, and you want to make it clear that in your dealings with others you expect to be treated with respect, just as you treat others with respect. You also want them to understand that you are not someone who can be destabilized easily.

  If it's your director who makes these kinds of remarks, it might be more prudent to get your message across in a more subtle way. A surprised or even shocked look will give the unspoken message that you are not used to being spoken to in that way. Depending on the nature of the remark, you may want to ignore it altogether, or say «Is there something wrong?» not «Did I do something wrong?», which could signal that you feel destabilized.

- **Direct attacks – criticism**

  Criticism is not necessarily bad. We all make mistakes and need
feedback. You need to accept constructive criticism and deflect and discourage destructive criticism. Constructive criticism has two characteristics – it is respectful and specific. If someone says « You always mess thing up! » this is both disrespectful and too general to be of any real use for you to correct your errors. If they say, « Sandy, the bills you prepare for our clients are not clear enough – you need to include the exact time spent and the hourly rate so they know exactly what they’re paying for, » then Sandy has no reason to feel humiliated, and she knows exactly what to do to correct the problem.

If you are on the receiving end of destructive criticism, once again, be firm with co-workers and subtle with your director, but make it clear that vague and demeaning remarks are not the best thing to motivate you or show you how to improve. Of course, you suspect them of trying to discourage you and make you feel bad, but you don't want to tell them that; on the contrary, you want to show them that you assume that their motives are clean and above-board, and that their only desire is to help you improve. Then ask for specifics: « I'm sorry you think I'm not doing an adequate job, but I need something more specific to go on – just what do you think I need to do to improve my performance? »

**How to handle incompetence**

This is a very delicate question, and it's not easy to deal with incompetent people you might meet on the job, but according to the Peter Principle, it's more
than likely that you’ll meet up with many of them in the course of your career. Also, a person can be quite competent in one domain but without a clue in another. A good technician, for example, might not be a good manager, but his job might require both types of capacities.

Depending on whether the incompetent person is your equal, beneath you, or your superior, your situation will not be the same and your reactions will vary. So let’s look at each case separately.

- **The incompetent person is your equal**

  If you’re in competition with them for a promotion, this could be good news. But if you have to work with them on a common project, they may hamper the work and make you look bad. In addition, your own competence may make them feel threatened, and they may be tempted to resort to underhanded tactics to save face. This puts you in a tight spot, but here are a few things you can do:

  - Show them respect as a person. If they detect any feelings of superiority on your part, they will resent you and make you pay for it sooner or later.
  - Refrain from showing off your own competence. Be modest, and don’t try to teach them things they don’t know, unless they ask you, or use jargon they don’t understand.
  - Find something they can do right and steer them towards that part of the project if you can. Build their confidence by complimenting them on anything they do right. Now this may seem to be against your own
interests if you are in competition with them for a promotion, but if you are really sure of yourself, you can afford to do it, and if that person becomes a member of your team once you do get the promotion, they'll be a lot easier to work with.

- Be clear with your superiors on who is doing what, so you don't get blamed for the other person's mistakes.
- If they're really messing up, go to your superior and ask an innocent question about the project that will let them know there is a problem, but without accusing the other person. That way your superior will feel that he has uncovered the problem on his own, rather than feeling caught in the middle of a dispute and being forced to take sides.

➢ **The incompetent person is under your orders**

While some directors might feel more reassured to have people who are not too bright under their orders, for fear that they might eventually take their place, this is short-sighted thinking. If a person under you is not doing their job right, you could be held accountable.

If you have power in the matter, it might be better for all around to shift this person to another department or task where they will be more qualified and you won't have to worry about them.

If you don't have this possibility:

- Always treat them with respect. I know, I already said that. It bears repeating, because it isn't always easy, but it's very important.
They may just need more training. Depending on the circumstances, you could try to help them to get it, or give it to them yourself.

They may lack self-confidence or have other limiting beliefs. Do not underestimate the effects this can have on them. People who believe they are incapable or stupid usually convince those around them of it too, creating a vicious circle. Try to encourage them and build them up. Your influence may not be enough, but who knows? Some people will blossom and grow in astounding ways when they find someone who is willing to believe in them.

**The incompetent person is your director**

This is not an easy situation to find yourself in at all. The above methods for handling equals or subordinates do not apply, and you could find yourself being blamed when things go wrong. You may also have to deal with your own anger when you think that this person is getting a bigger salary than you and not (in your opinion) earning it.

If this person is not the top boss, you could try to find a way to get access to their superior, depending on the structure of your company’s organization. This could be very risky if you don’t usually have any contact with that person, because you may be seen as disloyal, or a meddler, or a political maneuverer yourself. If you can arrange a chance meeting or find a different, neutral pretext for seeing that person, then you would proceed with innocent questions aimed at subtly revealing the problem or situation, as was suggested
before.

- If your director is a top decision-maker or the big boss, it may be not just you but the company itself that is in danger. In this case, you would be wise to ask yourself whether it would be a good time to start consulting the job offers section of your newspaper.

- You may have more influence with your director than you think, and your suggestions, made in such a way that he will be able to think he thought of it himself, will be followed, for the benefit, or just plain survival, of the company and its employees, including you. Of course, you won’t get credit for it.

We have been considering throughout this section cases where you are competent and the people you are dealing with are not. When you find yourself in such a situation, do spend a bit of time considering the possibility that, regardless of their general level of competence, there could be times when they are right and you are wrong.
Chapter Six
HEADING THEM OFF AT THE PASS: THE JOB INTERVIEW

The best cures are always preventive, and the best way to deal with office politics is to avoid it altogether. For the company, this means weeding out prospective employees who are likely to resort to office politics before they are hired. For the job candidate, it means avoiding companies where these methods are rampant.

If you are looking for a job, in addition to a good salary and other advantages, it is crucial for you to find a positive atmosphere where you will be respected and you will not have to constantly be on the lookout for banana peels and other unpleasant surprises. Here are a few tips:

- Before you go out to your interview, even before you start checking the job offers in your local newspaper, picture in your mind the kind of atmosphere you want, and ask the Universe, God, and/or your subconscious mind to guide you. Even if you don't believe in help from the Universe or God, you might know that scientists have found that the Reticular Activating System in the brain has an amazing capacity for directing our attention to things that we decide are important, so if you state your intention clearly and ask your brain/subconscious to be on the lookout for indications about this subject, it can pick up on things that your conscious mind might not have noticed. Either you will get a general feeling, a hunch, or you may notice some detail that you wouldn't have ordinarily noticed.
• Notice how the interviewer treats you. Is this the person who will be your
director? If not can you meet with your prospective director before the final
decision is made? Are they haughty or respectful? If you see them
interacting with other employees, how do they treat them?
• In this respect, be conscious of your own dignity. Go as an equal, not as a
beggar. You have something to offer them as well as something to gain
from them. Of course you’re not going to be arrogant or cocky. An employer
who is looking for someone he can browbeat will likely sense your attitude
and hire someone else, and you can thank your lucky star he does.
• Refer back to the section on detecting lies. If the interviewer insists a bit too
much on how they are all one big happy family, for example, maybe they’re
not.
• Can you meet any present employees to ask them how they feel about
working there? Maybe just someone you meet in the hall (hopefully not the
CEO!) or maybe at a restaurant close by where they go for lunch.

If you are doing the hiring:
• The sections on detecting liars and asking for guidance will be useful for you
too.
• Although many job applicants will want to be pleasant and agreeable,
beware if they are too obsequious, unless you want a yes-man, but as you
know, yes-men are only yes-men to your face, not behind your back.
• As an employer who wants to banish office politics from your company, you
should be favorably impressed with a prospective employee who comes with an attitude of equality. You can be sure that if you respect them, they will respect you too.

- You want to get an idea of how they see life in general; are they cynical, rugged individualists, or do they have a victim mentality? Small talk on a subject unrelated to the job, like sports or current events might ferret out some of these attitudes and serve as advance warning that they may be more inclined than average to resort to office politics.

- Be clear about your own expectations concerning the job, and also concerning the positive attitude you want to find in your employees. Observe how they react – body language as well as words – as you are explaining this. A lifting of the eyebrows or shrinking pupils could mean they don't take you very seriously, and have no intention of limiting themselves to the rules of fair play.

- Oh yes, and do remember that these precautions won't be of much use if you don't pay them a fair salary.
Chapter Seven
WHEN IT'S BETTER TO WALK AWAY

If you follow the advice in this book, you will be well-armed in your defense against office politicians and their ilk.

However, your opponents, by definition, are not playing by the rules, and you may be overwhelmed. If this happens, you must weight the costs, and at some point you may decide that the wisest course of action is to move on:

- If the deck is so stacked against you that you simply can't win, or just come out even, it's probably better to cut your losses and look for a better environment. This can happen when there are so many people who are using these tactics that it has become ingrained in the whole company, or if several of them gang up against you and there is no one willing to take your defense, or if your director sees you as a rival or believes lies others have told about you.

- If you are in a constant state of siege or conflict, the unremitting stress will eventually take its toll on your mental and/or physical health. It would certainly be better for you to leave before you go into a state of depression or develop an ulcer or worse.

- If you find yourself in a moral dilemma: you may see a lot of unsavory things going on, and there's nothing you can do about it. Even though you are not participating in these actions, you may feel that just by remaining in that company you are compromising your integrity. Please don't. Your integrity is a precious gift to be cherished. Don't let anyone take it away from you.
• If things are going so badly that you feel you are at a risk of getting fired: you have to consider the alternatives and decide which course of action is in your best interests, to stay to the bitter end or to bail out right away. In some countries, people who are fired without being accused of serious wrongdoing are eligible for severance pay. But you also have to think of how it will look on your resume and what kind of references you can get; In any case, be lucid and don't just wait for it to happen. Be proactive.
CONCLUSION

After seeing the list of ravages that the use of office politics can cause, you would wonder why anyone would care to use such tactics. In fact, they are illusions. The people who use them think that they are masters of illusions by fooling others, but in reality they are succumbing to illusions: the illusion of obtaining a shortcut to success, the illusion of reaping the rewards without doing the hard work, the illusion of confusing appearances with reality.

It’s not just a question of which course of action is morally superior, although that is important; what we must also keep in mind is the fact that these methods are short-sighted and cannot stand in the long run. Even the seeming rewards they give are not real. Why do we want to succeed in our jobs after all? Beyond the comfort that can be obtained with money, we want the approval of others; but why do we so desperately need the approval of others? To convince ourselves that we are important – in other words, to gain our own approval. And if we have reached success by false means, we know it, and we also know that the approval of others that we were ready to do anything to obtain is meaningless. It’s very ironic, and very sad.

We don’t feel jealous of people who have fallen into a trap, and there’s no reason to feel jealous of people who fall for this kind of illusion, even if we meet them at a time when their ploys seem to be working for them. To the extent that we develop genuine self-esteem and a solid confidence in ourselves, we have already succeeded far more in our own lives, whatever the appearances seem to indicate.
The appearances will catch up with our inner reality if we persevere and continue to pursue our goals with faith and calm tenacity.

And don't forget to laugh!