

# Harvard Business Review

LEADERSHIP

# Great Leaders Embrace Office Politics

by Michael Chang Wenderoth

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A rising young executive found herself strategically ousted in an internal power play. Jill had all the chops to rise to the corner office: consistent top 10% performer, hardworking, intelligent, personable, driven, multilingual, an MBA from a top-tier school. Handwritten

thank-you notes from the CEO proudly adorned her wall.

## What happened?

When I met Jill (not her real name), she was struggling to make sense of her career setback.

“I was universally liked across the company, a team player who put in more hours than anyone else,” she said. “I was heads down on delivering results, shared my inner self and built trust...everything I was trained and even coached to do.”

With those words, I recognized what had happened immediately. Jill was one more victim of what I call the “Kumbaya” school of leadership, which says that being open, trusting, authentic, and positive – and working really hard – is the key to getting ahead. The Kumbaya school is doing the Jills of the world a great disservice, leading them to often act in ways that are detrimental to their careers.

What should Jill have done differently? Jill should have spent much more time managing up. She should have better managed decision makers, her boss, her image, and her own career.

Rather than being chained to her desk delivering great work, Jill should have been networking with the most influential executives, ensuring her contributions were noticed by those above her, and confirming that she was being perceived as executive-suite material. Managing a career in these ways is critical, but surprisingly few people do it.

The harsh reality is that organizations are hierarchies, and the social science bears out uncomfortable truths about politics and interpersonal relationships: We make initial snap judgments of people, often based on appearance, that can carry on over time; we favor those who are similar to us; we get promoted or gain valuable information by making our

boss feel good and building relationships with influential people; we form perceptions based on a speaker's appearance, body language, and voice more than the content of the argument; and we are more likely to be perceived as competent if we are judiciously critical or show anger (at least, men are). There is strong evidence that our work ratings, bonuses, and promotions are weakly correlated to actual performance – in fact, performance may even matter *less* to our success than our political skills and how we are perceived by those who make the decisions.

So why wasn't Jill spending more time managing up, especially if it was in her own self-interest?

First, we *want* to believe the world is a fair place. As parents, we want to shield our kids from the stark reality of racism, sexism, popularity contests, and the schoolyard bully. And today, with the transparency of social media and the internet, it's perhaps even more tempting to believe that the "truth" will set us free. "Everyone can see how hard I'm working," we tell ourselves, or "Everyone knows how good my work is. All you have to do is look at the results." Believing in a just world feels good. Jill said it herself: "I didn't want to play office politics or be perceived as a brown-noser, self-promoter, or someone who rose because she was buddies with so-and-so. I was always told that the cream would naturally rise to the top."

CEO biographies and leadership literature perpetuate this "just world" myth. Wanting to leave a positive legacy, CEOs rewrite their histories through rose-tinted lenses rather than telling how they politically outmaneuvered their peers to rise to the top. Using emotion, spin, or relationships to influence others feels unfair, even if there is convincing research that shows they can be effectively applied strategically and ethically.

We therefore self-handicap, shying away from using techniques that would otherwise expand the ways we can get ahead. We likewise dismiss "political people" as repulsive rather than stepping back and studying how they communicate, network, and

strategically manage their careers. And we cherry-pick the research that supports feel-good leadership tactics. Positive psychology, for example, doesn't argue that you should always be happy or praise indiscriminately, but that's the message people take away – and misapply.

Young leaders need advice that's more realistic, granular, and nuanced. I arrived at this conclusion long ago – regrettably later than I should have – during my corporate career. I could see that the smartest, most hard-working guys were not always the ones who got ahead. And over the last few years, building my executive coaching practice and teaching MBAs, I have been shocked by the lack of evidence backing up most career and leadership advice and the ease with which many coaches simply stick to unproven “feel good” aphorisms. Likewise, I've been surprised to see leadership coaches shy away from sound research with uncomfortable associations. For example, one student told me his professor did not want to teach a research-based persuasion technique after finding out that the CIA also used it. But the information itself was valid and worth studying.

I know I'm not alone in saying we need to pay more attention to interpersonal relationships and politics. Robert Cialdini's book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* shows the tremendous benefits to understanding social psychology. The behavioral economists convincingly demonstrate how emotion, framing, and carrot-and-stick incentives can lead to “predictably irrational” behavior, as described in Dan Ariely's book. Jeff Pfeffer has also written books on these uncomfortable truths: *Power* and *Leadership BS* (disclosure: I facilitate and coach in his Stanford “Paths to Power” course for executives, and I thank him for opening my mind on this topic). And Todd Kashdan, author of *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, provides hard evidence that brilliantly challenges prevailing advice in modern psychology.

But too often I see leaders and their coaches treating effective influence-building tactics as if they're Machiavellian. I'm not arguing that we should be Machiavellian. We each choose if we want to rise in organizations, the path we take, and whether the ends justify

the means. I am arguing, however, that if we want to avoid what happened to Jill, we need to spend much more time managing up and around – and employ techniques that may not feel intuitive. Herminia Ibarra, in her book *Act Like Leader, Think Like a Leader*, stresses how we need to try out different leadership styles and behaviors if we wish to grow – and that latching on to authenticity can be an excuse for sticking with what is comfortable. In fact, leadership may often feel uncomfortable.

As for Jill, three years later she is thriving at her current company. It took time to get up to speed in a new industry, but she's doing great work and rising quickly now that she understands how to play the game. She also advises younger people starting their careers that doing good work is only part of the success equation. Jill says she has expanded her worldview and is much better off for it. And to that, she and I both sing Kumbaya.

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