

Navigating Muddy Waters: Strategically Managing Office Politics

By Lisa B. Horowitz, JD, MSOD, Founder and Principal Advisor of the Attorney Talent Strategy Group

All organizations, including (or dare I say, especially) law firms are political. To be successful as a lawyer—in a law firm, legal department, government agency, or nonprofit—you need to understand and effectively navigate your workplace’s political environment. Opting out is not an option. You must be politically savvy.

Women can be at a disadvantage in highly politicized legal environments. In her excellent article: [*How Political Dynamics Undermine Gender Balance in Law Firm Leadership and What Your Firm Must Do About It*](#), Ida Abbott writes that “lawyers who are ‘in the know’ and privy to inside information through their connections to influential leaders—and who tend to be men—have an unfair advantage over those who may be equally talented and productive but less well-connected” (emphasis added).

Much can and needs to be done at the organizational level to delimit the disproportionate impact of office politics on the careers of women lawyers. In the meantime, however, here are steps that you can take immediately to be politically informed, astute and strategic.

Forge strong relationships—up, down, and across. When I was growing up, my mother used to say to me: “*It’s not what you know but whom you know.*” It made me furious. There I was with my nose to the proverbial grindstone and it wasn’t enough. Despite my objections, the school of hard knocks taught me that my mother was right. Developing supportive, strategic, and influential relationships is as critical, if not more critical, to career success as working hard and doing a good job. To effectively navigate office politics, it is essential to build a strong network of internal and external relationships and alliances with people “up, down,

and across” who support you and help you get what you need to succeed: information, opportunities, guidance, mentoring, and sponsorship.

Understand written and unwritten rules. Information is power. In addition to “*whom you know*,” there is an often-overlooked “*what*.” The “*what*” you need to know to successfully navigate office politics must include the written and unwritten rules that govern critical processes and decisions that impact your career.

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Unwritten rules often define what is *really* expected of you and how you add value: the *real* evaluation criteria, *real* criteria for advancement and promotion (including those who need to support you), how many billable hours you *really* need to work, what is *really* billable and what unbillable work is *really* valued. They may also govern how to *really* get important assignments, *really* be assigned to significant client teams, how to *really* be included on high profile client pitches, and how to really get credit for business development. While some firms are becoming more transparent (there is no excuse not to know the written rules), there still exist many unwritten rules. To succeed, you need to know them. Your mentor, sponsor, champion, and even peers can help.

Identify who has power and influence. Understanding who has power and influence in your organization is also essential to being politically savvy. It may be important, for example, to

identify who can (or must) help you make partner. Conversely, it is crucial to know who can really hurt your career. Your supporting relationships can again be invaluable in guiding you in this regard.

Know your organization’s strategy and goals. To navigate your organization’s political environment, it is very useful to understand its strategic plan and goals. This can sometimes be a challenge. Surprisingly, not all organizations (including law firms) have written strategic plans and if they do, they often do not share them beyond the partnership level. Having an understanding of your organization’s strategy and goals (written and unwritten) will help you better understand what is valued and where to focus your efforts.

Create your individual strategic career plan. Having a strategic career plan with a vision and annual SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) goals and action steps is central to your professional growth. Having such a roadmap also helps you navigate office politics. With a strong vision and specific goals in mind, you can be politically savvy in developing relationships, identifying written and unwritten rules, and in your choices.

Pick your battles. Being politically savvy requires that you pick your battles intelligently. Not all battles are created equal. Knowing your end-game as well as who has influence and power will enable you to determine which battles to fight, which landmines to avoid, and when to simply keep your head down. And because it is a very small world, being politically savvy means trying to



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resolve conflict in a way that preserves relationships whenever possible.

Practice empathy and listen actively to advance mutual interests. To effectively navigate office politics, it is important to be attuned to the needs, concerns, and interests of others. Practicing “empathy”—stepping into

the shoes of others—and listening actively are essential skills. They allow you to influence others by identifying common interests and creating buy-in for mutually beneficial actions that advance your goals and those of others.

Manage your emotions. Finally, be self-aware and self-manage. To

successfully navigate office politics, understand your “hot buttons” and how to carefully manage them.

So don’t hesitate. Jump into the muddy waters of office politics and succeed by navigating strategically.

Lisa B. Horowitz, JD, MSOD, is the Founder and Principal Advisor of the [Attorney Talent Strategy Group](#). She spent almost 30 years as a partner, associate, counsel, and senior talent development professional in AMLAW 100 law firms. She currently shares her experiences coaching attorneys on achieving their career goals and advising law firms and legal departments on the design and implementation of strategic talent development solutions.