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Stop Avoiding Office Politics

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"I won't do it," he said. "I don't care who they are; I won't buddy up to people I don't like and respect just because I want something from them."

This came from a senior manager at a Fortune 500 company. It was a theme we hear over and over from managers at all levels. They're reluctant to take part in what they call "political games." (http://blogs.hbr.org/video /2011/01/the-best-way-to-play-office-po.html) They consider organizational conflict and competition mostly ego-driven, adolescent games. They want disputes settled through data, analysis, and logic, by what's "right" — not by who knows whom, who owes whom, or who plays golf with whom. To build relationships simply because they want something from other people is, to them, blatant manipulation.

So they withdraw from much organizational give-and-take. Like our senior manager, they deal with others when there's an issue or problem, but they don't build productive ongoing relationships except with those few they happen to like personally. Otherwise, they hunker down and focus on their own groups and work.

Are you one of those managers? If so, you're probably making yourself and your group less effective than you could or should be.

Ask yourself this: Do I have the influence in my organization that I'd like to have, that I think I should have? Do others listen to my point of view? Do disagreements between my group and others get resolved in our favor? Do we get the resources, information, or the time and attention we need and deserve? Are we constantly distracted by outside pressures?

If any of these questions touches a nerve, you may need to rethink how you deal with the political environment that exists in your and every other organization.

Much as you might like to avoid them, the best way to deal with political environments is to engage them (http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2011/10/use-office-politics-to-your-ad.html) , to turn *toward* them. To turn away is to abdicate your responsibilities as a leader and manager. It is to let down yourself, your team, and even the organization as a whole.

Unless you reach out, engage others, and create active, *ongoing* relationships — relationships you sustain even when there's no immediate problem — you will lack the ability to exercise influence beyond your group. And even in your own world, your influence will be limited. If you've ever worked for a boss who lacked any organizational clout or credibility, you know how frustrating that is.

We're not saying organizations are benign worlds where everyone wants the best for everyone else. They're often maelstroms of conflicting goals, divergent interests, and fierce struggles for scarce resources. More often than not, however, the conflict is driven by legitimate business differences. Such conflict may turn personal, if those involved aren't mature enough to keep it above that plane, but their failure doesn't mean the fundamental problem isn't a real one that needs to be worked through actively by all involved.

Of course, there are organizational bullies who do play personal games, pick fights, and try to intimidate others. They define themselves by the interpersonal battles they win, not by the results they've accomplished for the organization. They do build ego empires. How do you deal with them? Again, not by withdrawing.

The right approach is not to avoid the politics but to take part in positive ways for good ends. The organizational maelstrom can be dysfunctional and personal, but it need not be. As you actively reach out and create allies and supporters around a common cause, as you jump into the fray, these guidelines can help you exercise influence

in political environments without "playing politics":

- Keep your efforts clearly and obviously focused on the ultimate good of the enterprise.

- Work with others for *mutual* advantage, not just your own.

- Don't make disagreements personal or let them become personal. Well-intentioned people can disagree and still respect each other.

- Conduct yourself according to a set of standards important to you — honesty, forthrightness, openness, dependability, integrity — no matter what others do.

- Build ongoing, productive relationships with *everyone* you need to do your work, as well as those who need you, not just those you like.

- Always remember, these are professional relationships, not personal friendships. You don't have to like them or they you; you just have to work productively with each other.

To be a force for good judgment and fairness when important decisions are made in your organization, you need to reach out and actively build ties with others. Staying above it all may feel like the moral high road, but it's just abdication.