

Success at work requires that you be not only smart, but savvy. Readers learn to become a master of office politics while remaining ethical and becoming more highly effective on the job.

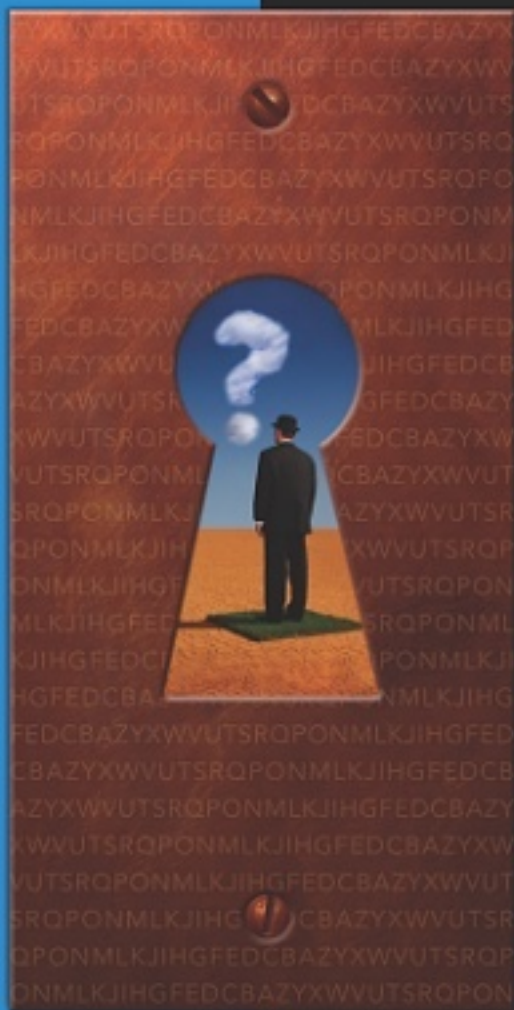
The Hidden Language of Business: Workplace Power, Politics & Influence

By Margaret Morford

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MARGARET MORFORD

THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS

WORKPLACE POLITICS, POWER & INFLUENCE

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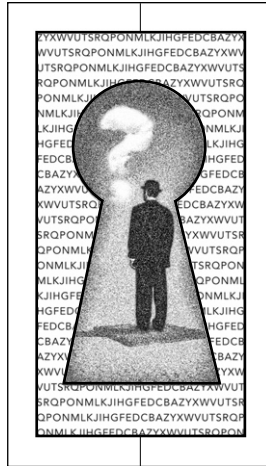
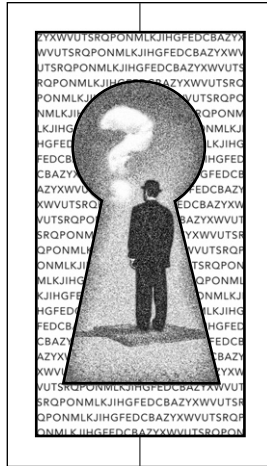


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INTRODUCTION

Being political has become synonymous with manipulating others or not telling the truth. Being “politically correct” suggests that we are doing or saying something a certain way because we have to. “Politics” has taken on a connotation of falseness and working in a political environment is seen as an experience to be avoided at all costs. But all these impressions are both naive and detrimental to anyone’s working career. Unless you are a hermit living on a mountaintop in some remote area of the world, you deal with politics every day, and most especially at work. People who say they “don’t play politics” are destined to fail. You cannot get two people together without politics taking place. Everybody has an agenda and everyone is trying to accomplish his or her agenda in the most efficient way possible.

Not a day goes by that we do not read in the news about an executive who has decided to resign “to pursue other interests” or “to spend more time with his family.” Translation: he got fired. As people move up in the management ranks, they are rarely fired because of a lack of knowledge or ability. They usually are let go because they have made an enemy of someone powerful; or they have failed to pay attention to a subtle but critical change in the direction of their organization; or—more benign, but no less deadly—they have failed to build a wide enough network of supporters to carry them through when they make a mistake. Their organization usually offers some sort of reasonable explanation for their dismissal, but the real reason almost always lies in one of the above glaring political blind spots.

Since politics are inevitable in the workplace, wouldn't it be smart to become adept at not only dealing with them, but also understanding how to use them to accomplish your own work agenda? This book is *not* about stepping on people to get what you want out of your career. It *will* help protect you from those who would step on you to get what *they* want. This book is about practicing “positive politics” and succeeding...with your ethics and your soul intact.

I have come to see workplace politics as “the hidden language of business.” Knowing this secret language allows you to operate with peak effectiveness in the workplace. And not knowing it—*not* possessing this crucial intelligence—easily can doom your career. By reading this book, you will gain exciting access to this hidden language—this inside intelligence—that is so critical to successfully navigating your career.

Ask yourself this: How many times at work have you been “right”—yet still made people mad? I know one person who was so “right” that her co-workers did not speak to her for a month! So it is “the hidden language of business”—the *positive office politics*—that will make or break your job satisfaction and advancement. Politics is the distinction between being merely right—and being *right and effective*. In any organization, being effective—in a positive, ethical way—is what really counts!

Politics isn't about winning at all costs. It's about maintaining relationships and getting results at the same time.

—John Elred

Some people who have unimpressive titles wield great power. I once worked for a CEO whose administrative assistant was very powerful. I watched her break several individuals' careers and they never knew what hit them. If she did not like you, she would say negative things about you to the CEO. Within 30 days, I would begin to hear the CEO say those same things about the individual she did not like. If you wanted to see the CEO and she liked you, you simply had to ask for an appointment with the CEO and she would get you in to see him that day. If she did not like you, she would tell you it would be three days before she could get you on his appointment calendar. She was a very bitter and mean human being.

As head of human resources for the company, I was asked by my group if I was going to address this with the CEO. They felt that, because I had a good relationship with him, he might listen to me. While I have never shied away from handling tough situations, I know that being politically astute means picking your battles and recognizing a no-win situation before you step into it. I reminded them that she drafted almost all the replies to his correspondence even before he saw it. She fended off people he did not want to talk to and knew who should be put through to him immediately. She made all his travel arrangements and made sure he was upgraded to first class. When I pointed these things out to the people in HR, I posed the question: "Do you think he would really want me to bring this up? He is not going to fire her and I will put him in the awkward position of appearing weak. No, what we are going to do is pursue a good relationship with

her and do what we have to do to make her like and respect our department. Also, we are going to help people who have come within her sights to dodge her wrath, if at all possible. That way, we will not get sideways with the CEO and maybe we will be able to blunt her negative effect on the workplace. It was one of the hardest things we ever had to do.

In the next few pages, I am going to give you 11 subtle ways to tell who has power and influence in an organization. Watch for these cues so you will be able to identify the real power brokers in any organization:



POWER SIGNAL #1:
***Complete “catch up” is done for them
 if they join a meeting late.***

Watch what happens when someone joins a meeting late. If the meeting stops for a few moments when the person walks in and someone says, “Where we are is...” and then gives a quick synopsis of what has been happened so far, you are probably looking at someone who is powerful. If you are not particularly powerful, the group accepts your apology for being late, you slide into your seat, and you have to catch yourself up as the penalty for being late. What the group is really reacting to is that if this powerful person is not on board, whatever they are meeting about probably has little chance of succeeding.



POWER SIGNAL #2:

They suffer no penalty for habitually showing up late to meetings.

No matter how rude and arrogant this may seem, it is a sure sign someone is powerful. While people may comment or joke about the fact that they always run late, no one is willing to come down on them hard enough to make them observe the social niceties we expect from others. It may not be right, but it is real, and complaining about it only erodes your credibility, not theirs.



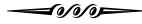
POWER SIGNAL #3:

When they speak, everyone stops talking.

Watch carefully for these people in meetings. No matter how many people are talking or how heated the discussion gets when they offer an opinion, everyone stops talking to listen to what this individual has to say. You can cultivate this reputation by rarely speaking in meetings and thereby giving great weight to the few opinions you express.

Addendum to the rule—On those few occasions when you do speak, make sure you sound strong and sure. Some people do not speak because they are timid. Or when they do weigh in, they speak so softly they sound meek. Be very careful not to trail off at the end of your point or allow your

tone to rise at the end of a sentence. These mannerisms give the impression you are unsure. Also, do not lead your points with questions such as “Don’t you think we should...?” Or, “Wouldn’t it be a good idea if we...?” If you do, you will be seen as asking permission or seeking approval. Rather, say, “I think we should...” If others disagree with you, that is okay. It is not okay if they think you are weak or timid!



POWER SIGNAL #4:

They are able to operate outside the normal organizational restraints.

This one will make most people rant and rave. And there are many examples of it: Perhaps there is a hiring freeze on and suddenly a manager gets to replace someone or—even more aggravating—the manager gets an increase in head count. Or another example: You have been told not to make any more capital expenditures this fiscal year, and suddenly someone gets new equipment or funding for a new sales or marketing campaign. If you have asked those above you why this is being permitted and you do not get a good, clear answer, *stop asking!* Do the people you are asking understand this goes against the rules everyone else has to follow? Yes. Are they any happier about it than you are? Probably not, but they do understand that these people are powerful enough to shake the corporate tree and get what they need. Railing about it only makes you unpopular with senior managers who have already signed off on this course of action.

One of the most astute mentors I have ever had, Nick Jordan (I still go to him for advice 20 years later), gave me a political lesson I will never forget. We had a peer, the vice president of marketing, who was incredibly creative but equally arrogant. He ignored requests from other departments, but constantly got additional resources and increases in head count when no one else got them. I often complained to my boss, the CEO, about this. The CEO always said he would deal with the situation, but nothing seemed to change. Nick was a fellow VP and asked me one day what I knew about the CEO and this VP of marketing's history. I told him I knew they had worked together once before at a different company. My mentor then informed me they had worked together two other times in the past. Every time the CEO changed companies, he recruited this VP of marketing to come work for him. So here was my profound lesson: My mentor looked me squarely in the eye and simply said, "Margaret, stop smacking the teacher's pet!"



POWER SIGNAL #5:

*People say, "How are we going to sell
[person's name] on this?"*

Listen to the name that gets filled in that blank and the tone with which it is said. If the tone conveys concern or fear, you are looking at someone who is powerful. People know this endeavor is destined to fail if that person does not support it or chooses to actively block it. Also listen for this: "Susie's

not going to like this.” If that is expressed with concern or a negative shake of the head, you know Susie is powerful. If the tone seems to have a smile to it and an attitude of “I cannot wait to see the fit she throws when she hears this,” you know Susie is not particularly powerful.



POWER SIGNAL #6:

People who work for them get higher raises than are normal in your organization.

While no one should ever discuss the amount of money they receive for a raise, the reality is everyone talks. Everyone knows who the managers are who seem to get more money for their people. It may come in the form of a larger annual increase than normal or in their ability to get their people promoted either legitimately or through a faux promotion (an elevation in title but no real change in job duties) in order to pay them more money.

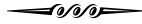


POWER SIGNAL #7:

They can disregard requests from other business units and not suffer any long-term, adverse consequences.

They never turn in their budgets, performance reviews, succession plans, etc., on time, but nothing ever happens to them. They can ignore e-mails from other departments, never

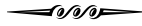
answer them, and yet they continue to prosper. This is someone who is a powerful contributor in some aspect; someone who is so important to the organization that no one is willing to really penalize them for this lack of responsiveness. Chances are they come through when the organization needs them in such a spectacular way that their unresponsive behavior pales in comparison to what they deliver.



POWER SIGNAL #8:

When a crisis arises, your CEO (or the highest level person in your organization) meets with them behind closed doors.

Pay attention to whom the highest-level person in your organization turns when they have to make a crucial decision. You will not be privy to those discussions, nor will they take place in a regular meeting, but pay attention to the identity of the individual who has that one-on-one meeting with the CEO. If you have watched any of *The Godfather* movies, this is the equivalent of the consigliore—the person whose advice and counsel carries great weight in the organization. You need to know who that person is.



POWER SIGNAL #9:
*Their areas routinely suffer fewer
budget cuts than other areas.*

Regardless of what organization you are a part of, the budgeting process is pretty much the same. Everyone gets instructions in a budget packet (memo, guidelines—whatever this is called in your organization) and they do their budgets. They then are sent to the finance department for someone to combine and roll up into the next year's budget. If they collectively come in too high, they are returned to everyone with instructions to cut them by X percent. If they still do not get reduced far enough, someone meets with each manager or department head and helps them individually cut their budget until they are in line with what the next year's revenues (or budget dollars) and expenses need to be. In these budget wars, powerful people lose fewer dollars as a percent of their overall budget than other departments do.

Early on in my career, I worked with a CFO who thought my department was a huge waste of money. As a matter of fact, he said openly in a meeting that he thought we could eliminate my department and never miss a beat. We were under terrible budget constraints one year and no one could get his or her budget down far enough without making drastic cuts. If my department took too great a hit, I was going to have to lay off one or two of the eight people working in my area.

We had reached the point where each vice president had

to meet with the CFO and CEO individually to pare down their budgets. It was a pretty big bloodbath, with people losing thousands of dollars in these meetings. My meeting with the CEO and CFO was scheduled after lunch one afternoon. The CFO came to my office that morning, rubbing his hands together and telling me I needed to decide who was getting laid off because my department was going to be half the size it was now, once he was done with my budget.

Now, my CEO was a great supporter of the things we were doing, but the money had to come from somewhere and the CFO was clearly gunning for my department. Since I felt there was no way I could win the CFO over, I figured I would need a strong ally in the CEO. I knew the CEO had a great sense of humor and I thought if I could make him laugh, I might come through the meeting with my department intact. I arrived for the meeting with all my backup detail and stacks of papers. I had hardly taken a seat before the CFO suggested that we start with my head count. At that point I told both men, "Before we get started, I have brought a visual aid to assist me in my budget presentation." I pulled what looked like a malformed apple out of a bag and put it in the middle of the conference table. My CEO fell out of his chair laughing, and the CFO got red in the face and asked, "What is that and why is this so funny?" My CEO looked at him and said, "Joe, it's a turnip. As in 'you can't get blood out of one!'" My meeting was the shortest of all the six VPs and I only lost \$10,000, which meant no reduction in head count. Being politically savvy means reading your audience well, understanding who can be converted to your cause, and how to convert them.

Here is the negative political lesson I learned from that situation: I came in the next morning to find the turnip sitting in the middle of my desk with my letter opener stuck completely through it. Ketchup was bleeding from it and all the way across the surface of my desk. When the CFO arrived that morning, he stood in my doorway and told me I was so lucky—but he would be ready for me the next year! I left the company before the next year's budget had to be finalized, making my own head the head-count reduction.



POWER SIGNAL #10:

As the organization changes, they are able to maintain their position or move up.

As organizations change, watch the people who lose responsibilities and those who gain them. If an individual is able to move up, especially when the organization is going through budget cuts or a significant change in senior management, you are looking at someone who understands how to thrive within any power structure. If they do it more than once or survive more than one regime change, they are exceptionally powerful.

Also, you should watch for what I call the “Three Card Monty Power Grab.” This is an individual who manages to trade a relatively low-level responsibility for an extremely important one, all the while saying they just changed responsibilities and their job is really no different from anyone else’s.



POWER SIGNAL #11:
They deliver results.

The fastest way I know to become a powerful person in your organization is to “over-deliver” results. When you deliver phenomenal results, no one questions why you need additional resources and no one questions your methods. They are happy to give them to you because they know the investment will come back to the organization two-, three- or four-fold. No one will look over your shoulder as long as you keep delivering.

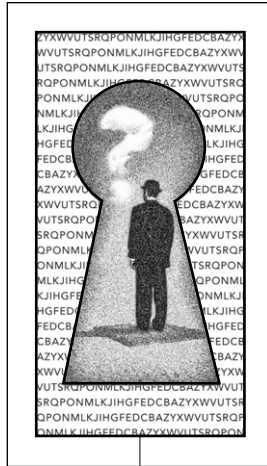
It is crucial politically that you understand what delivering results means to your organization. It is not always what you think. Often compliance functions—like human resources, the finance department, or the legal department—believe it means keeping your organization out of trouble. It does mean that, but not if your organization loses its flexibility to grow and respond to marketplace needs. If you are constantly saying “no” (See Rule #1—Learn To Say “Yes” If At All Possible), you are not delivering sufficient results.

Why is it important to know who has power and influence? Because not only do you want to make sure you do not get sideways with any of them (because they make career-ending enemies), you also want these people to be proponents and supporters of yours. You need them as a part of your network.



Political Assignments to Enhance Your Career

Take a few minutes to review the 11 ways to tell who has power and influence. Make a list of those people in your current organization who have *real* power and influence. Over the next year, plan how you will get to know each one better. Either serve on a committee of which each is a member or volunteer for a project that will get you exposure to them. You want them to know who you are, to appreciate the caliber of your work, and to say nice things about you throughout your organization.



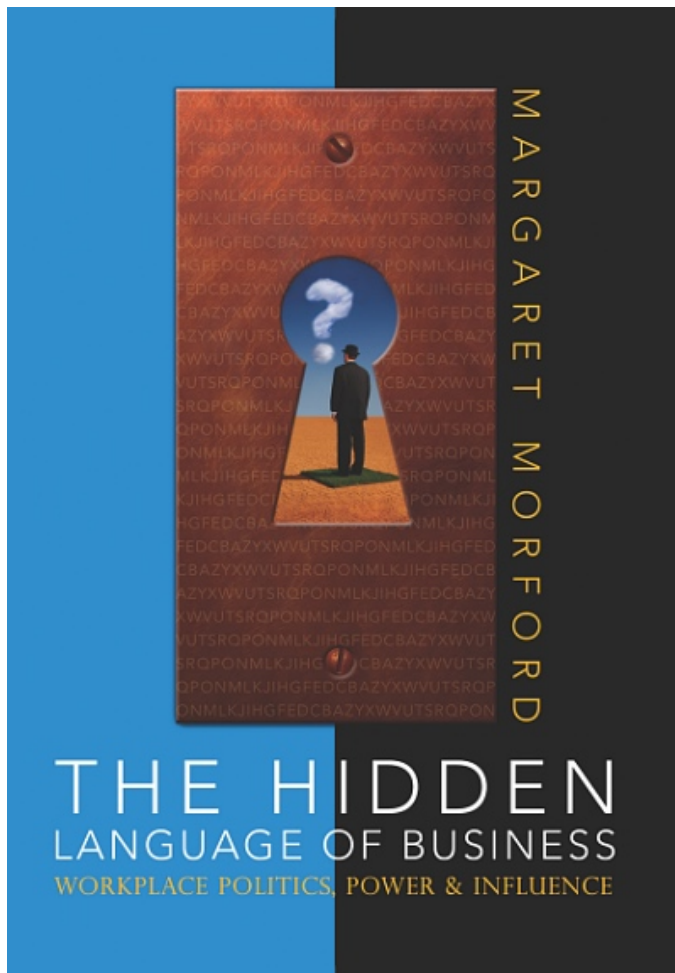
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Margaret is President for The HR Edge, Inc., an international management consulting and training company. Her clients have included Lockheed Martin, Chevron, Time Warner, U.S. Secret Service, Sara Lee Foods, Home and Garden Television, Nationwide Insurance, U.S. Department of the Treasury, NAPA Auto Parts, Homeland Security, New York Presbyterian Hospital (Cornell & Columbia Medical Centers), U.S. Marine Corps, Deloitte, Blue Cross Blue Shield, U.S. Coast Guard, Vanderbilt University, Comcast, Intercontinental Hotel Group, Small Business Administration, McKee Foods, Skanska, Fox Broadcasting, Schwarz BioSciences, Alcohol, Fire & Tobacco, Fifth Third Bank, Verizon, Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, SAS (computer software), The Nashville Predators national hockey

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