

# Book review

## HBR Guide to Office Politics

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This is an easy-to-read, succinct guide for existing and aspiring executives who want to create productive working relationships in their organisations. Written in a relaxed, journalistic style, it offers useful, practical tips from a wide range of leading experts on how to get on better in the modern work setting.

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This HBR Guide is set out in four sections. The first three sections deal with different political scenarios that occur in all enterprises. The last section deals with building generic skills that help in navigating such political scenarios. The first three sections deal respectively with political challenges with first your boss, second your colleagues and third with your organisation.

Scanning the content pages will reveal an all-too-familiar catalogue of political challenges. Most workers will have faced some, if not all of the 12 scenarios discussed in detail in these chapters. For instance: the control-freak boss; the disaffected boss; the bully; the credit-stealer; surviving layoffs; etc. Each chapter follows the same structure: the problem; why it happens; and what to do about it. The issues are illustrated

with vignettes on good and not so good approaches to the specific political challenge under discussion in that chapter.

Whilst each chapter on the 12 political challenges focuses on that one particular issue, recurring themes arise throughout the book. These are more directly dealt with in the fourth section, which covers skills. Readers who wish to grasp the essence of handling office politics in general may prefer to go straight to section four.

Section four highlights these generic skills and principles. First and foremost, Dillon points out that avoiding difficult situations is no long-term solution. In actuality, avoiding difficult situations will make the situation worse by undermining your own performance. Second, the author advises that you examine and adjust your own perspective. Before sorting out the apparent source of your frustrations, check yourself out initially. It could be that the root-cause of the problem is your own blind spot over your own weaknesses. Just consider the question: is there actually a problem to solve here? Third, get to know the person you have difficulty with: "people [. . .] tend to like people better when they've actually collaborated with them on something." When we dislike someone, we tend to avoid him or her. This simply worsens the problem. Hence, fourth, cultivate empathy: what are the underlying motives behind the person's behaviour? This will give you ideas on how you and your adversary

can both collaborate productively to meet your respective goals. Fifth, change the dynamic. If you have got to a situation where you cannot stand each other, the chances are you are locked in a vicious circle. You may be reciprocating the “bad” behaviour of the person you dislike. You need to break out of this pattern: “assume the best, focus on what they’re good at, and how they can help your team.”

Dillon gives guidance on how to have a productive conversation if you have to confront the person who is causing you problems. Firstly, as with much in good practice, prepare: “[. . .] 75 per cent of the battle is fought before you walk into the room.” The goal is to manage your own state of mind and to frame the conversation. Secondly, manage the timing of your meeting; choose a mutually convenient time and a neutral location to have this meaningful but difficult conversation. Thirdly, manage your own message. Be clear on your intention, create a mutually constructive frame such that both parties could gain from any likely outcome. Fourthly, focus on the facts covering the behaviour you wish to address and *not* on the person. Then, fifthly, pay attention to the other person, what they say and how. Sixthly, propose solutions that could benefit both of you.

Dillon is sufficiently realistic not to assume that even the best-crafted

plan will always lead to a mutually satisfactory outcome. She thus gives guidance on how to address the problems formally. Finally, she points out that we will rarely have the chance to work for our “dream team”. You may have to coexist with a fellow worker you do not respect. So, if all the advice does not lead to a more productive work environment, you may have to acknowledge this and learn to “Zen out”, as the author puts it. This is “the fine art of emotional detachment.” Every annoyance in the office cannot be addressed. Stay positive and accept that shifting alliances and relationships are the stuff of life.

This HBR book is a “how to” survival guide to office politics. It will help the novice and the experienced hand improve their working environments and relationships on a day-to-day basis. This volume is worth keeping close by in order to help the reader navigate the frequently choppy waters of the modern office.

## Reference

Dillon, K. (2015), *HBR Guide to Office Politics*, Harvard Business Review Press.

### **Stephen Flynn**

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