

Office Politics Don't Have to Be Toxic

Harvard Business Review | Madeleine Wyatt, Elena Doldor | May 30, 2022



Illustration: Peter Gehrman

There's no escaping office politics. It might get a bad rap, but the ability to network, build relationships, and influence others is critical in any workplace. Unfortunately, research has shown that all too often, office politics is a white man's game, as women and ethnic minorities often have less powerful networks and benefit less from engaging in politics than their white, male counterparts do.

To make matters worse, attempts to address this inequity often focus on "fixing" the people who are excluded, encouraging them to develop their political skills, get more comfortable with politics, or temper their reactions, rather than acknowledging organizations' roles in creating cultures of toxic, non-inclusive office politics. Of course, there's certainly a place for this well-intentioned advice for individuals — but to make meaningful change, leaders must take action to foster more-inclusive cultures on an organizational level.

To explore what organizations can do to promote healthy office politics, we conducted in-depth interviews with 40 mid-career ethnic minority employees working in a wide range of industries across the UK. We asked them to describe their experiences of politics at work, and how their workplace environments influenced their own willingness to engage in politics. We then used a statistical model to analyze their responses and identify common profiles of more- and less-inclusive cultures.

Toxic cultures lead to disengagement from office politics

Unsurprisingly, many of the people we talked to shared extremely negative experiences with office politics. They told us stories of feeling excluded from informal relationships, being overlooked or pushed aside by managers, and witnessing underhanded behavior from their peers. One participant explained how it was “an impossible task to break into those cliques and establish yourself.” Another vividly described the brutality of their workplace, saying, “They’ll slit your throat in front of you over there. They’ve got no issues about that.” Others recounted times when they were scapegoated or stepped over: “I’d been sidelined because [the managers] took the credit,” one participant recalled.

Our analysis also demonstrated that toxic office politics cultures can be created and perpetuated at any level of the organization. One participant described how their manager “started bringing his friends in, so I got moved to a lower position,” while others described how their peers “played the game” that was “all about trying to get the other person down.”

In response to these toxic cultures, many of the people we talked to disengaged from politics, keeping their heads down and redoubling their work efforts rather than joining the political melee. For example, one interviewee told us that participating in their workplace’s office politics meant “you’re willing to bend the rules and you’re willing to bully, you’re willing to step on people, and morally, to me, I don’t agree with that, so I would not be part of that social club, so I haven’t [progressed].” Another explained, “I didn’t get involved in the politics; just did a good job and that was it.” Some even sought to leave their jobs entirely: “I wasn’t confident I would succeed because of the cliquiness of the organization,” a participant shared, “so I looked for jobs elsewhere.” These reactions are understandable — but the problem with avoiding the political arena is that it can lead employees to miss out on the vital development opportunities and relationships they need to get things done and advance their careers.

Inclusive cultures foster participation in healthy office politics

The good news is, not everyone we interviewed experienced office politics negatively. Some people shared stories of supportive cultures in which managers proactively included minority employees in the types of political activity necessary to build relationships, be effective in their jobs, and advance in their organizations. For example, one participant explained how their boss “ensured that [career growth] was made easier, because she had done the engaging with all the right stakeholders beforehand.” Managers in these workplaces actively nurtured employees, leveraging politics to build connections rather than keep people down: “Well, I wouldn’t like to use the word politics,” another participant reflected. “It’s more like having a proper and professional relationship with the people in authority; [they] understand where I’m coming from [and] appreciate me for who I am.” Other employees shared experiences in which both peers and managers used their clout to stand up for them or provide them with developmental opportunities: “There’s something about having the right support...I’ve been put forward for things and people have thought of me.”

Rather than feeling slimy or underhanded, politics in these organizations were openly acknowledged and even taught to newcomers. “You need to make sure that you’ve got supporters within the organization and that you know how to network well,” an interviewee explained, “and that’s sort of drilled home from a very early point once you join.” Similarly,

others described workplaces in which an explicit “focus on involvement in relationships and connectivity [was] ingrained in the culture of the firm” in a way that was helpful and inclusive.

As a result of this approach, employees in these environments felt more comfortable engaging in politics. One worker shared that they used to hesitate to participate in office politics, but after experiencing a more supportive organizational climate, they became “a bit more political in the way I interact with people and recognizing that it’s not just about how well you do your work...it’s about how you go about doing it.” Another described a newfound appreciation for a bit of healthy self-promotion, recognizing that “you do need to get yourself known and recognized by people in a position to help you.”

Of course, building an inclusive culture is easier said than done — but it is possible. Through both our interviews and our broader research on politics, leadership, and inclusion, we’ve identified five strategies to help organizations foster healthier office politics cultures, in which all employees are nurtured and supported:

1. Be transparent.

Talking about politics can be uncomfortable — but failing to do so only benefits those who already have easy access to the political arena. To ensure that all employees are included, it’s critical to be transparent about both the existence and the importance of politics. Leaders, managers, and employees at every level should be encouraged to talk openly about the value of building connections, and to make the informal practices of office politics visible through explicit onboarding processes, mentoring (both by peers and senior staff), talent development programs, employee affinity groups, and other initiatives. In addition, as remote and hybrid work become the norm, it’s important to consider where and how informal connections occur in online spaces, and make sure that all employees are aware of and have access to these structures as well.

2. Ensure access to informal career development resources.

Many organizations aim to foster diversity and inclusion through formal talent development programs. However, this approach doesn’t help when it comes to the informal, unofficial interactions that drive office politics. Indeed, in our prior research, we found that successful career growth requires a mix of both formal and informal resources, and minority employees typically have less access to vital informal resources. To close this gap, organizations should provide mechanisms such as mentorship, sponsorship, and support networks to ensure women and ethnic minority employees have access not only to formal professional development tools, but also to the informal processes that are critical for growth.

3. Reframe politics positively.

In our interviews, we repeatedly heard from employees that they felt it would be distasteful, perhaps even morally repugnant, to engage in office politics. This assumption — that politics are, at best, a necessary evil — can be deeply ingrained, especially among people who are used to being left on the outside. But it is also an assumption that can be challenged: Our prior research found that people’s views on politics can change significantly as a result of their professional experience. As such, leaders should explicitly push back against the view that

politics can only be used for self-gain, and instead reframe it as a tool that can help everyone build connections, access opportunities, and get things done. This means finding ways to highlight the value of political behaviors such as negotiation, influencing, and relationship-building at every level of the organization, as well as including political skills alongside other core competencies that are prioritized in professional development programs.

4. Leverage politics to drive inclusion.

All too often, politics are seen as a system that's designed to keep power with those who have it, and exclude those who don't. But what if we instead used politics to disrupt entrenched inequalities? There's no denying that managers play a key role in gatekeeping the political arena, but that also means they're in the perfect position to encourage fairness rather than favoritism. Organizations should train managers and senior leaders to share their political know-how and leverage their political power across racial and gender lines. For instance, well-respected sponsors can be encouraged to get involved in leadership development programs specifically designed to support women and ethnic minority employees. This both improves employees' access to senior leaders' networks, and helps the sponsors better understand the barriers different employees face. They can then use these insights (alongside their political savvy) to advocate for their protégés and come up with more-effective strategies to address obstacles facing employees across the organization.

5. Share success stories.

It's easy to look past the details of the journey once someone has made it to the top. To normalize politics as a typical component of a professional success story, organizations should formally and informally encourage employees who have "made it" to share their stories — and emphasize examples of times when they benefited from a helping hand, or leveraged inside information and relationships to get ahead or be more effective in their roles. Publicly sharing these experiences helps employees at any level envision a path forward for themselves in which politics plays a positive role.

Office politics has long served as a mechanism for exclusion — but it doesn't have to. While the negative impact of toxic politics on ethnic minorities and women in the workplace is well known, our research shows that it is possible to build inclusive political cultures, in which politics are instead leveraged for common good. With a thoughtful, inclusive approach, organizations can help all their employees engage and reap the benefits of office politics.