

## CHAPTER 12

# What Campus Employers Teach Students About Office Politics

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### *Marilyn Moats Kennedy*

Office politics is to the '90s what sex was to the Victorians: interesting, sometimes fun, but no one with the least claim to a proper upbringing would dream of speaking about it in public.

Consider commencement exercises. Several times a year graduation speakers, with full administrative honors, mislead the young about what it takes to succeed outside the university. They wax eloquently about vision, hard work, commitment, etc., but never mention that office politics exists and no one succeeds who can't analyze and work the system. "Cream rises to the top," the august one says, never mentioning that so does grease. Wouldn't it be great to hear a graduation speaker say, "When I came to Worldwide Widgets I had a series of boring jobs, but I learned who to impress and who not to cross. I learned to negotiate and barter, to treat the front line troops with respect. I learned what causes to fight for and when to walk away. That's how I got to be CEO." In your dreams! Instead, universities perpetuate ignorance about practical politics by using office politics as a synonym for all evils. "That's just politics" is a common phrase sending the clear signal that politics should be avoided.

That's not realistic. Professors and staff know perfectly well that there is a great deal of politics on campus, but since most understand the pro-

cess imperfectly, they may not talk about it. It doesn't matter. Students are acute observers, and campus employment provides a wonderful laboratory for students to acquire political skills they'll use forever. Even without instruction and explanation—watching how things really get done is an antidote to the hard work myths. Here are some of the key things students learn.

*Office politics is everywhere.*

There is no politics-free environment. Students assume that universities are free of back stabbing and back biting. Professors get tenure on merit. They also imagine the lives of professors they admire resemble that of St. Francis of Assisi more than Darth Vader, but that's another story. Campus employment disabuses them of such notions and provides the first look at how far individuals will go to gain power and how hard they'll work to retain it.

*Politics is about the acquisition, use, and sometimes the misuse, of power.*

Power means getting and keeping control of situations and people, and nobody still breathing lacks an interest—or can afford to. Despite all protestations to the contrary, who has command of power matters. Students absorb this as they watch professors, administrators, and staff scrap

over issues that logic would dictate hardly matter except as control issues. Determining who has power and who doesn't is a student's first chance to learn something about practical politics.

*The grapevine is the most important source of accurate information.*

It's the collected wisdom of people who know how the system works and what it will and won't tolerate. My experience has been that about three years of post-college experience are necessary to validate and firmly implant this lesson. Students realize almost immediately that secretaries, mail room people, librarians, assistant everybodies, and building and grounds employees work to know what is going on, and they find it out first. Support people understand that information is vital to success on the job and a source of power. What confuses students—and some of the staff—is the constant derision of the grapevine as “gossip” even as they observe people acting on the information they received.

Career counselors have a duty never to demean the importance of staying plugged in to the grapevine. Why let someone jeopardize a first professional job because he/she didn't learn the importance of cultivating information sources on campus? Not that every student will get it when you explain, but offering the explanation is important.

*Rank is not as important as influence.*

There are two kinds of power: formal power which consists of the organization chart, meetings, rules, regulations, and policies, and informal power which consists of relationships and the grapevine. Students know something about the differences. For example, it's a rare, and remarkably dim, student who doesn't know that the dean's secretary, not the dean, is most important in getting into closed classes, obtaining a rule variation, even in advising on the best time and approach to get the dean to grant a special request. She may have no rank, but she has enormous influence. That's an important principle in the real world where secretaries often have as much, if not more, power than their

counterparts did on campus and must be worked with and through.

How many new corporate recruits have come to grief because they treated the secretary as an underling rather than an equal? Students who haven't worked with support staff often pay more attention to where individuals sit on the organization chart than to the power they wield—a dangerous, career-bashing practice.

*People skills are vital.*

Getting along with people is mandatory, not optional, regardless of brilliance. It's harder for science and technology students to learn this because in the classroom they see professors who are actively unpleasant receive lucrative grants and promotions. What they can't see—which working in a lab or office provides—is that merit and brilliance aren't the only considerations.

Students understand that less-than-competent professors exist and a certain number of bad classes are inescapable and must be endured. They blame it on the tenure system. In a campus job they learn to work with people who are poorly educated, below-average performers but must be treated with deference. It's hypocritical, but it is necessary. Some don't learn this lesson, and they're back at the campus employment office looking for a different job. Some even realize (or are told by a sympathetic adult) that they will meet clones of these sub-standard performers in the most admired corporations, not-for-profits and entrepreneurial businesses. They're unavoidable.

*Doing grunt work cheerfully is more important than displaying brilliance.*

People who believe that any kind of honest work is beneath them will stumble from one career cul de sac to another in the real world. We all agree that stapling, stuffing, collating, and gofering are as necessary to getting the result as leading, thinking, and strategizing. What we don't agree on is how much “attitude” one can have about such tasks. In a campus job the only acceptable answer is, “None.”

The supervisor who insists on quality work delivered with a smile is teaching an invaluable lesson. There are too many “twentysomethings” who have been fired from a first job because they didn’t understand that attitude can dictate outcome.

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*Only results count.*

How often do students hear that a classroom assignment was a “good try”? Without a campus job how would they know that in the workplace trying doesn’t count? In “The Return of the Jedi” which was the third part of the “Star Wars” trilogy, Luke Skywalker searches for Yoda who will tell him the meaning of life. What does Yoda say? “Try not! Do or do not! There is no try!” Students probably saw the movie and heard Yoda say those words, although Yoda whispered because he was gasping his last. They didn’t make the connection with the workplace. Credit for trying is strictly a classroom policy.

The first time a work assignment isn’t finished on time or properly done a student will get a blast of Yoda’s philosophy. The idea of no excuses and no extensions is the greatest gift a supervisor can give a neophyte—and many do.

Employment counselors help students learn about politics when they acknowledge the importance of power, the grapevine, and building good relationships—not just doing good work. This is not always a popular stance, but it is an vital part of the institution’s overall educational mission. No student is prepared for post-graduation employment who hasn’t learned these lessons, some of them the hard way.

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