A person wearing a Uncle Sam hat (red top with a white star on a blue background, and a red band) is holding a red clipboard. The clipboard has a white sheet of paper with text. The person is wearing a dark suit jacket. In the background, there is a large, faint white outline of the number 9 on a light gray background.

# POLITICAL SAVVY IS A LEADERSHIP SKILL

Bonnie Marcus

# Most people cringe when they hear the word “politics.”

The poor reputation of many politicians, the bantering back and forth between political parties and candidates, and the ongoing name calling especially during an election year (which seems like every year nowadays) have all tarnished the public’s opinion of politics. So it’s no surprise that the topic of office politics conjures up similar negative emotions.

Office politics is perceived as dirty, manipulative, and unfair. And those people who engage in politics often earn the unfavorable reputation of being “political animals.” In the research I conducted for my book, *The Politics of Promotion: How High Achieving Women Get Ahead and Stay Ahead*, I discovered that women especially found office politics distasteful and believed anyone who engages in it to be self-serving and cunning.

The result of this negative mindset about politics is that many people avoid it in their workplace, concluding that it’s counterproductive and a waste of their precious time. They presume that their best contribution to the organization is their hard work and performance. According to the Center for Work Life Policy (CWLP), 77% of women trust that their talent and hard work, not connections, contribute most to their advancement.

In fact, women believe that they are taking the high road when they focus on their work and refuse to get involved in the political games of the office. Unfortunately, their “political deficiency” often leads to a lack of internal connections that will help them perform better and receive recognition for their work, not to mention an increased susceptibility to being blindsided.

One consequence of people’s negative mindset about office politics and subsequent lack of engagement is that most organizations miss the advisement of its most talented employees. Decision makers and key stakeholders only hear from those people who are active participants in the political game, and certainly not all professionals with potentially valuable input.

Furthermore, when employees aren’t engaged in the politics, they feel like outsiders and victims. They see themselves as pawns in a larger political game of which they have no knowledge or control. Their opinions don’t matter. Their voices go unheard. They can become bitter and isolated. Sometimes this results in a loss of motivation and/or a decision to opt out and leave. What they fail to see is that being politically astute need not be contemptible. In fact, political finesse not only helps individuals navigate the workplace successfully, but political savvy individuals help organizations achieve a more harmonious and profitable environment. They assist organizations to achieve better business outcomes.

Imagine, for a minute, a workplace where everyone is aligned with business objectives; where everyone understands the value they contribute; an environment where people actively seek to build mutually beneficial relationships across the organization. In other words, a workplace of politically savvy individuals.

If we define leadership as “the process of social influence in which a person can enlist the support and aid of others in the accomplishment of a common task” as defined by the author in [this Forbes article](#), then political savvy is most definitely a leadership skill. A fresh mindset about political savvy then replaces the self-serving and manipulative attitude that prevents talented employees from collaborating. With this new perspective, an active engagement in relationship building and a focus on understanding the most effective way to get things done becomes a positive force in the workplace.

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Betsy Myers, director of the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach in the Clinton administration, COO of Obama's first presidential campaign, and now founding director of the Center for Women and Business at Bentley University says this about political savvy, "I think you have to be conscious of how you come across. You have to watch for what's going on around you—that you can't just operate; you can't just do your work. There's a bigger picture." Betsy sees two parts to being politically savvy: "Being conscious of the world around me—who is in my corner, who's not? What relationships do I need to build, to spend more time on? And then, being strategic about how to move the ball forward."

How do politically savvy people demonstrate leadership? It takes a keen understanding of the workplace dynamics and a network of strong relationships. Politically savvy people do 9 things:

**1 | Understand their value proposition and how their work contributes to positive business outcomes for effective self-promotion.** Politically savvy people recognize what they bring to the table. Their self-awareness is the foundation of authentic self-promotion. Equipped with an understanding of their value proposition, they see how to best support others in the organization and assist them in achieving their goals. In this manner, self-promotion is not self-serving, but a political and leadership skill.

By assisting others, politically savvy individuals gain visibility and credibility for themselves and their team, and collaborate with others for improved business results. Self-promotion is an integral part of political savvy. It expedites access to the networks and the information necessary to be successful.

**2 | Understand the business objectives of the organization and align themselves and their team with these goals.**

Individuals who align with the mission and business goals of the organization are more involved in moving the organization forward. They appreciate how they fit into the bigger picture which positively impacts morale, productivity, and performance. It requires political savvy to move beyond daily to-do lists and job responsibilities to see the larger picture and make the connection of purpose. It is this sense of purpose that motivates employees to do their best work.

**3 | Build diverse teams.** Politically savvy people know that they cannot accomplish everything themselves. They also have the self-awareness to recognize that others may be more skilled in certain areas. They consciously build diverse teams with an understanding of their own limitations and a keen awareness of what needs to be accomplished. Diverse teams are more productive and potentially more harmonious, especially when each individual's unique contribution is recognized. This encourages respect and increased productivity.

**4 | Delegate and empower their team.** Politically savvy leaders support the professional development of their team. They train and empower their team to learn new skills and assume more responsibility. As a result, the employees feel more valued and appreciated for their contributions. The organization benefits from increased employee loyalty and performance, which positively impacts the bottom line.

As a manager, politically savvy leaders earn a reputation as someone who empowers individuals, promotes top talent, and places the best interests of the team and the business in the forefront. With a powerful contingent behind them, they can, in turn, increase their own scope and influence in the organization. Their empowerment of others affords them more time to nurture relationships and increase their political and social capital.

**5 | Share their success.** Politically savvy people understand the importance of having visibility in the organization for increased influence and promotion. Sharing their successes leads to future opportunities for themselves and deserving team members. Politically savvy people not only communicate their accomplishments with key stakeholders, but also share with their colleagues how they achieve their results. A knowledge of these success metrics allows others in the organization to capitalize on the both the process and results and utilize this model for their own work. Why keep reinventing the wheel?

**6 | Build mutually beneficial relationships across the organization.** Warren Bennis said, “As leaders, we’re all angels with only one wing. We can fly—but only if we embrace each other.” Politically savvy people understand that they need other people to achieve their goals. They establish relationships of trust and influence by helping others and paying it forward. They consciously and actively invest in relationship building. They seek to understand what others want and need; what motivates and interests them, and they collaborate using their value proposition to achieve common goals.

Politically astute people also know when and how to leverage these relationships appropriately. They understand the quid pro quo and cash in their chips for exposure to networks and stakeholders, important information about the politics, or access to scarce resources. The strength of these relationships creates a sense of connection; a common bond and potential increase in loyalty to the organization. Mutually beneficial relationships help the organization run smoothly and efficiently, thereby increasing profitability.

*“Politically savvy people understand that they need other people to achieve their goals.”*



**7 | Understand the workplace dynamics paying special attention to the way decisions are made.** Politically savvy people get what it takes to get things done. They are tuned into the reality of their work environment. Their awareness of how decisions are made, the unwritten rules (that often rule), as well as who has power and influence allows them to go to the right source for what they want and need. This knowledge of the best approach to get things done streamlines processes and increases productivity. Savvy people use their own influence and political and social capital to open up doors. Their deftness in subtly working the system and organizing resources contributes to a decrease in expenses and positive business outcomes.

**8 | Create a network of allies and champions.** With social astuteness, politically savvy individuals build a strategic network across the organization to improve their performance and support their career goals. A strategic network is a comprised of the right people; people who are willing and able to speak for you. Building this type of support network takes focus and intention. An attention to the workplace dynamics helps savvy people know who the right people are. They are skilled in nurturing these relationships, articulating their value proposition, and gaining influence over time. A network of allies and champions who regularly advocate for you and your team helps the organization to sustain a positive work environment where people feel connected and valued, where performance is recognized and employees support each other to be successful.

**9 | Benefit from mentors and sponsors.** Savvy people understand the importance of learning from others and actively seek both advice and feedback to improve their performance and reach their career goals. Both mentors and sponsors are important for leadership development. What's the difference? A mentor gives advice. A sponsor gives advice *and* takes action on your behalf.

Typically a mentor can be a boss or former boss, a colleague, or someone whose leadership style you admire. These relationships may be casual or part of a formal company-wide initiative. Many organizations now offer mentorship programs, especially for women. Mentors can be invaluable in helping their mentees navigate the workplace, handle conflict, and deal with challenging situations. Mentors from outside the organization provide an additional perspective on the industry and offer advice based on their business expertise and experience.

Sponsorship is the most powerful relationship one can have in the workplace. It's a highly visible and political relationship that positively impacts a career expeditiously. Sponsors open up doors for new opportunities, create visibility, and actively promote their protégé. If there is no formal sponsorship program in place, identifying the right sponsor, a high level executive with the power and influence, and nurturing this relationship takes political and social astuteness. A protégé with savvy understands what they bring to this relationship and the optimal way to support their sponsor and capitalize on the partnership.

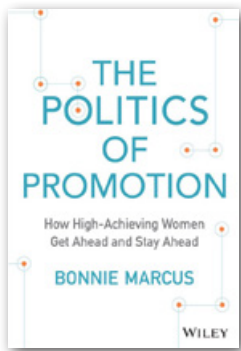
Every organization would benefit from having more politically savvy employees who understand the importance of relationships for their career and business success. A company where employees are actively engaged and understand the importance of political and social capital benefits not only from an increase in employee retention, but also increased profitability.

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People who keep their heads down and focus solely on their work may do outstanding work. But their concentration on their job and to-do list limits their visibility and therefore their effectiveness and influence. Their ideas and opinions go unnoticed. Their accomplishments unrecognized. The organization suffers from a lack of information about how they achieved their positive results.

Politically savvy people demonstrate leadership. They pay close attention to the ever-changing political landscape, understand how to build visibility and influence through mutually beneficial relationships, and empower others as well as themselves to be successful. 📌

# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of [The Politics of Promotion](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Bonnie Marcus is founder and president of Women's Success Coaching, a company that assists professional women in successfully navigating the workplace and advancing their careers. Forbes.com honored Women's Success Coaching three years in a row as one of the Top 100 websites for Professional Women. Bonnie started her own corporate career at an entry-level position and worked her way up to the top of a national company. As an award-winning entrepreneur, a contributing writer for Forbes and Business Insider, and a much sought-after professional speaker, Bonnie shares her message globally. For more information, please visit [www.politicsofpromotion.com](http://www.politicsofpromotion.com).

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