

## Career Compass No. 25: Winning Office Politics, the Right Way

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest coaches us through the game of office politics, with the goal on winning - for our community!

*I am a younger supervisor in the Building Department. Recently I presented a proposal to change the way we do business, better serve the development community, and generate revenue at the same time. Some colleagues who didn't want to see the change lobbied against my idea behind closed doors with the Chief Building Official. Some deal was made that resulted in a cosmetic change in procedures, but nothing substantive. My proposal was quickly shot down.*



*Organizational politics got in the way of a needed improvement (not to mention morale). I hate politics and game-playing--I don't play favorites or trade favors. How can I be more successful and avoid these tactics?*

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I can understand your frustration but organizational politics will never disappear. They are a part of organizational life. To think otherwise is magical thinking.

### **POLITICS ARE GOOD**

As suggested by Ron Ashkenas in an hbr.org blog piece “Use Office Politics to Your Advantage,” organizational politics are in fact good for the organization. First, the early indication of “politics” is a warning sign that different organizational groups or stakeholders may have concerns about your idea or proposal. You need to take heed. By sensing some internal or external opposition, you can take corrective action.

Second, politics promote dialogue and even debate which is good for an organization. Without debate, management may rubber-stamp ideas from influential or “well-connected” factions without adequately vetting the ideas.

## EMBRACING POLITICS

“Politics” are about exerting influence. Instead of trying to avoid politics, you must embrace them.

While some politics and power come from “back-room” deal-making, you can focus on the power and influence that come from connections, shared ideas and collaboration.

To achieve a more positive hearing of your ideas, you certainly want to enhance your relationship with the Chief Building Official (see [Career Compass No. 12: Communicating with Your Boss](#))

However, you need to go beyond relationship-building with the decision-maker.

Here are some strategies to become more astute in making organizational politics work for you and your ideas:

### **Strategy 1 - Commit yourself**

If you want others to commit their support, they need to see your passion and commitment to the idea. Why should others get invested in your proposal if you are not visibly enthused about the possibilities?

### **Strategy 2 - Draw a political map**

You need to understand the lines of social connections and informal influence between key players and stakeholders inside and outside the organization. Then you can engage those players based on addressing the following questions:

- Who will benefit from my idea and may support it?
- Who could be negatively affected by my idea or perceive it as a loss of resources, influence or status and may therefore resist the proposal?
- Who is the real decision-maker and to whom does that person relate?
- Who might influence the decision or outcome?

### **Strategy 3 - Engage in authentic ways those who may be affected**

Once you identify the potential players who may be affected or who may perceive a positive or negative outcome, you must reach out to them. As you engage them in several conversations, you need to focus on asking questions, listening, identifying their interests, and integrating at least some of their interests into your plan. By getting their “finger prints” on the proposal, the proposal may become their proposal. Or, at the very least, they may not actively oppose the proposal.

If after several conversations, you encounter opposition, you need to accept it and then move on to conversations with other people. It is better to identify substantial opposition from some groups early on in the engagement process.

In terms of engaging these other players in conversations, you want to create an authentic relationship. An **authentic** relationship is developed when you are genuine and transparent.

Describe your proposal with not just all the benefits, but also identify some of the potential negatives. In the process, you must also convey why the idea is important to you. This kind of authenticity deepens your connection, builds trust, and provides the foundation for some joint action.

As part of the authentic engagement effort, it is a good idea to offer someone who supports the proposal some real work to do, no matter how small. As Schlesinger, Kiefer, and Brown point out in their hbr.org blog piece “[How to Create Raving Fans](#),” you need to engage supporters in some tangible task (such as reaching out to other colleagues or sending their ideas in an email to you). Immediate action cements support.

#### **Strategy 4 - Frame your idea or proposal in different ways**

By conducting “listening sessions” with various people or group representatives, you can discern their values, perceptions, and interests. Then, depending on their values and interests, you can develop a different “frame” for different players.

For a painting, a blue frame brings out or accentuates the blue in the painting. Likewise, by emphasizing different aspects of a project proposal, you can refocus people and tie your proposal to their interests or priorities. In your situation, your proposal to better serve the development community can be framed as a customer service enhancement, an economic development benefit, a revenue generator, or a way to better address the Council’s agenda.

#### **Strategy 5 -Retool the proposal**

Based on engaging others, you can retool your basic proposal to incorporate other ideas or minimize opposition. This may require some compromise, but remember that “politics is the art of the possible.”

#### **Strategy 6 - Build alliances**

To become a better political player, you must help others and support their reasonable ideas and efforts whenever possible. Then you can ask for their support when you need it. In other words, if your proposal to better serve the development community is important to you, it is a good time to “cash in some chips.”

#### **Strategy 7 - Use a sponsor**

Now that you have attracted additional support and minimized opposition, you can further campaign for the proposal and build on your initial support base.

As part of your campaign, you may wish to identify and engage a sponsor for the proposal. The sponsor can be someone who is a “higher-up” or well-regarded by the decision-maker or the organization as the whole.

#### **DON’T WITHDRAW. ENGAGE.**

Don’t use politics as an excuse for losing or withdrawing. Embrace organizational politics and make good things happen.



*Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com).