



It's a jungle out there: a back-stabbing, buck-passing, bitching, ass-kissing jungle.

A whopping 98% of people have noticed an increase in skullduggery around the water cooler, according to a recent report, with office politicking reaching epidemic proportions since the downturn.

And it's not just queen bees and bastards being drawn into political machinations. We're all at it, apparently, with the vast majority of workers saying it's something they always have to keep in mind. Largely considered the informal (brown-nosing the boss), as opposed to the formal (calling a meeting), way of getting things done, office politics are rated by 80% of workers as destructive, and no wonder: when you're so busy fluffing your boss's ego to feather your own nest, who has time to do their job properly?

The uncertainty, engendered by rocketing redundancies, is making us all edgy, and with good reason. "When there's an increase in competition, people are more likely to stab colleagues in the back," says the business psychologist Jane Clarke, a director at Nicholson McBride, the consultancy responsible for the survey. "Now people are fearful for their jobs, and it's, 'How can I make sure the axe will fall on them and not on me?' People are admitting to behaviour they're not proud of, but they see others doing it. They believe that playing by the rules won't get them far in this climate."

The essayist Alain de Botton, author of *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, believes our ability to play "the game" decides who rises to the top of any organisation. "Because achievement in most fields is difficult to monitor reliably, in order to get ahead, workers must acquire a range of skills disconnected from their original job descriptions, skills for which ordinary life does not usually prepare them and that may indeed run counter to the codes of much of ordinary, moral behaviour," he says.

Politicking can range from the innocent – publicising your own successes, or sending lots of e-mails to cover your back, for example – through to the downright Machiavellian, such as passing off others' work as your own, blaming colleagues for your mistakes or lobbying for people to be sacked.

Sarah, a PR executive at a corporate consultancy, recalls how her boss, sensing trouble ahead, asked her to take on an extra project "as a favour", then, when the client pulled out at the last minute, as her boss fully expected, Sarah took the bullet.

She kept her job. Others haven't been so lucky. Clarke recently witnessed Lucas, a senior marketing director and former SAS officer, reduced to tears at the hands of his own scheming team, who, without his knowledge, had arranged for their CEO and HR manager to be at a meeting to discuss some particularly difficult team issues. Lucas was shocked to see his bosses there.



OFFICE

BACK-STABBING IS BACK WITH A VENGEANCE AS WE FIGHT TO KEEP THE POLITICAL MINEFIELD



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“Any negative feedback, of which there was plenty, could be used against him,” says Clarke. “At first, he was really angry, then he burst into tears.” Pre-recession, says Clarke, the team would probably have pulled together, no matter how unpopular the boss. “People can cope with difficult times when they’re getting the results. Now, people feel they’re working harder and harder with nothing to show for it, and there’s far more risk of being fired, so they feel they have to cover their backs. People are experiencing a definite loss of control and sense of helplessness. There’s very little upside, especially for the victims.”

Marie-Louise, a successful IT saleswoman, has found that times have been really tough this year. It has also been tough for her boss, Graham, and this may well be why he’s behaving in the way he is. As the leader of a sales team, there are immense pressures on him. He needs to be seen to be performing and has turned to Machiavellian methods. “He told me that he was appointing me as his deputy,” she recalls. “I was really delighted. I told everyone in the team and they seemed pleased for me. I also told people outside the team. Then, nothing happened. I found out that he didn’t ask me to deputise for him at a meeting he couldn’t attend: he asked another, more junior, colleague instead. When I confronted him, he said that he hadn’t really meant he’d have one deputy, but that the role should rotate around the team members. I felt completely stupid and undermined. He seemed to find this amusing, because he told one of my close colleagues that he was playing a ‘bit of a game’. The difficulty was that he was never found out – his game-playing remained undiscovered. And whenever his team’s figures were down, there was always someone else to point the finger at.”

As Clarke notes, office politicians approach their dark art with varying degrees of competence. She has even devised a questionnaire (take the test overleaf) designed to pinpoint where workers perform on the scale. Some are able to achieve an enormous amount and come away squeaky clean (the Star Players and Machiavellian types), while others succeed only in drawing attention to their own selfish objectives (the Losers). Finally, there are those who sit on the sidelines, refusing to dirty their hands with the whole sorry business (the Naive types) – a stance, says Clarke, which, though laudable, is likely to see you first out the door. In the current climate, everyone needs to be politically aware. So, roll up your sleeves and get involved.

Not that office politics are all bad. “Psychologists believe we’re all born with a desire to influence what’s going on around us. The workplace is no different,” says Clarke. “It can be a positive thing if it’s focused on steering events for the common good. And if politics are being abused in your workplace, then it is better to be in a position to counter, deal with, or, at the very least, be aware of what’s going on.” ▶

WARS

OUR JOBS. SHARON WALKER EXPLAINS HOW TO NEGOTIATE – AND, OVERLEAF, FIND OUT HOW MACHIAVELLIAN YOU REALLY ARE

What kind of *office politician* are you?

1 You find out that someone in another team has blatantly taken the credit for a piece of work your team produced, with only minor input from them. Do you:

- A** Ignore what they've done, hoping they will eventually get their comeuppance?
- B** Talk to the team leader, give them feedback and find a way of putting the situation right?
- C** Talk to your most powerful contacts behind the scenes to make sure they know that you were actually responsible for this success?
- D** Write an outraged e-mail to the boss of the individual who claimed the credit, blind-copying all the senior people you know?

2 There are threatened redundancies. Do you:

- A** Keep your head down and hope nobody will notice you?
- B** Ensure that you raise the profile of your team and the work you've been involved with — and make yourself as useful as possible?

C Find out who is responsible for the decision-making and ensure they know you're responsible for lots of great work, regardless of whether you are or not?

D Take every opportunity to say how great you are, rubbish others and claim the credit for any successful work in front of as many people as possible?

3 You can't stand someone in another department with whom you are supposed to be working closely. Do you:

- A** Try to ignore them and just get on with your own work?
- B** Talk openly to them, giving your view, and try to understand their perspective to build a better relationship?
- C** Subtly undermine them in private to get them taken off the project?
- D** Talk about them behind their back to anyone who will listen to undermine their position?

4 Your rather bullying boss has unfairly criticised your colleague in public. Do you:

- A** Think it is completely outrageous and feel affronted, but do nothing?
- B** Talk to your boss, defending your colleague and offering to rectify the situation in a way in which nobody loses face?
- C** Congratulate yourself that it's not you being criticised in public?
- D** Join in with the criticism?

5 You have to make a presentation about progress on a project, but there has been none. Do you:

- A** Present the plain facts?
- B** Be honest, but point out that the hurdles are inevitable and focus on how to overcome these and go forward?
- C** Line up someone else to do the presentation and distance yourself from the project?
- D** Lie and say that there has been more progress than there has?

ANSWERS: **A** Naive; **B** Star Player; **C** Machiavellian; **D** Loser

THE POLITICAL CLASSES

THE STAR PLAYER

These office politicians have a clear sense of what they are trying to achieve. Their manipulations are for the general good and their own goals square with those of the team and the company. Good, nice, effective people, they have a clear idea of where the power lies and how to influence it.

POSTER BOY Barack Obama.

THE MACHIAVELLIAN

Machiavellians are accomplished politicians who, for one reason or another — fear of losing their job might be one — have gone over to the dark side. These schemers have a habit of taking the lion's share of credit for a team effort. They rarely get caught and they're not averse to a bit of backstabbing. Beware.

POSTER BOY Dark prince Peter Mandelson.

THE NAIVE

The Lib Dems of office culture, the Naives believe that if they keep their heads down and work hard, it will all be fine. How wrong can you be? "These people are not influential," says Jane Clarke. Refusing to engage means you're more likely to get shafted.

POSTER BOY Anyone you've never heard of?

THE LOSER

If you're going to plot and scheme, don't get caught. This guy is so thick-skinned, he doesn't even know politics is supposed to be a subtle business. He is likely to start false rumours without covering his tracks and his gauche attempts at manipulation only serve to wind everyone up. His one saving grace? "He's unlikely to progress far up the corporate ladder," says Clarke.

POSTER BOYS Derek Draper, Damian McBride

