

# How To Do Office Politics

Toxic boss, oversharing colleague, office big mouth – how do you deal with them all and still hold onto your job in these post-recession times, asks Anna Moore

**M**Y FIRST – AND LAST – FULL-TIME job came with a steep learning curve that had nothing to do with the work. It started at recruitment. I was a happy freelancer, not looking for a job, but was wooed by a warm, irresistible deputy editor who wanted me to join her magazine as news editor – the position she'd just left. She told me my starting salary, adding it was what she had earned when she'd done the job. I started work, we became close, had lunches, met each other's partners. Several months later, I discovered she'd actually been on £10,000 more when she'd had my job. She had blatantly lied and cheated me out of a whack of cash.

Dubious? Deceitful? Double-crossing? Or just doing her job and getting the best deal for the company? I soon discovered that getting on in an office meant getting savvy, redefining 'friendship' and dealing with a host of tricky characters. There was



Tempting as it may be, using a stiletto to make your point is not recommended

**'She had blatantly lied and cheated me out of a whack of cash'**

the aforementioned deputy editor, who was indiscreet and irreverent. She won your trust, yet was so ambitious she couldn't help using it against you. Then there was the editor herself – brilliant, hypersensitive and paranoid, no doubt convinced we were talking about her behind her

back. (To be fair, though, we were.)

'Many of us spend more of our waking hours with colleagues than we do with our friends and family,' says Blaire Palmer, life coach and author of *What's Wrong With Work*. 'Yes, you can build friendships and

close relationships – in fact, it's important you do. However, we need to remember, 'work' has different rules to 'outside work', and we have to learn those rules.

'For example,' she continues, 'certain things are more acceptable at work, like some degree of lying or being economical with the truth (like matters of salary). There's also a hierarchy, an imbalance of power. Your 'friend' may also be your competitor or your boss.' At work, you have to tread with care, and never more so than now. Jane Clarke, director of business psychology consultancy Nicholson McBride is updating her book *Office Politics: A Survival Guide* after noticing a sharp increase in politicking. 'We work with a lot of companies, and people keep telling us that office politics has increased hugely in the last year,' she says. 'With the global financial crisis, people are fearful and vying for position.' *{continued}*

Sue Clarke, career coach at website [inthehotseat.co.uk](http://inthehotseat.co.uk), agrees. 'If a colleague is worried she might be selected for redundancy, the "team members" she saw yesterday can rapidly become "potential competitors",' she says. 'Colleagues may seem to change personality overnight and start exhibiting traits like withholding information they would have once shared, and being hypersensitive when before they were pretty good-humoured.'

Sophie, an arts administrator based in London, knows what that's like. 'We are a small company with a few clients - and with the funding cuts, we're going to lose some if not all of them,' she says. 'Jobs will have to go and there are constant rumours about whose it will be. Our worst characteristics - bitching, catastrophising, paranoia - are definitely running riot.'

So, how do you deal with people at their worst? First, start with your own behaviour. It's the one thing you can fully control. Sue Clarke suggests 'the dignity test'. Imagine a camera is following you around. Would you regret anything when watching it played back? 'If you act from a place of integrity, the likelihood of saying or doing anything that can be used against you reduces dramatically,' she says.

Having addressed your own behaviour, nurture work relationships and friendships, but think carefully about how much you tell. 'It's important to have friends, and you don't want to be so inscrutable that you build a wall around yourself,' says Jane Clarke. 'But, before revealing information - whether personal or work-related - think about the possible implications. What could happen if I tell this person X?'

If you are very senior, your team look to you for leadership and inspiration - they may not want to hear that your marriage is in trouble and you hate your job. Nor will they be able to take tricky feedback when the time comes. Similarly, if you count your boss as your best friend - and spend boozy evenings listing your woes, don't be surprised if you find prestigious assignments or promotions go over your head. ('She's a lovely person but she's in a difficult place right now,' may be your boss's verdict.)

If you need a close ally and confidante, Jane Clarke suggests choosing one person only - and choosing carefully. 'Tell

that person that he or she is the only one you trust so they are aware of the role and its responsibility,' she says. 'But it's a risk.'

When it comes to 'tricky' colleagues, first embrace the difference. 'Get savvy about the fact that not everyone is like you,' advises Sue Clarke. 'Don't seize on what you may see as negative behaviour. For example, one of my clients, a feisty, loud Australian brought up in a family and education system where boisterous debate was encouraged, was very quickly pigeonholed in the UK as aggressive, negative and ferociously competitive. In fact, she was none of these things - it was just the way others interpreted her behaviour.'

Likewise, maybe you're driven mad by the Ice Queen opposite who keeps her cards close to her chest. Is it really a problem? Could it simply be that you're a 'heart on your sleeve' person and she is more private? Turn it around. Perhaps she finds you needy and indiscreet.

If you're convinced that someone's behaviour is 'problematic', try to identify what's driving it. We all have reasons for the way we act. Someone who is prone to catastrophise or insist she has more work than anyone else could be terrified of failing. Someone who reacts aggressively to criticism could be suffering from a bad case of 'imposter syndrome', believing that she is not up to the job.

Is the behaviour worth addressing? More often, it's merely a matter of finding the best way to work with it. 'If someone won't take criticism, put the ball in their court,' suggests Sue Clarke. 'Get them to weigh up their own performance and self-evaluate. What did they do well and, with hindsight, what would they do differently?' If it's a catastrophiser,

remind them of past triumphs and help them feel confident. 'When they start saying they can't cope, remind them that they always do,' says Jane Clarke.

'You have a choice,' she continues. 'You can accept colleagues for who they are and make light of the behaviour or you can confront it. You may want to give some-

one advice simply by telling them that they are great at what they do, but their tendency to do X is getting them a bit of a reputation, which isn't doing them any favours.'

Act impeccably, be tolerant and understanding of the personalities around you - but, most importantly, keep a sense of perspective. 'It is only a job,' says Sue Clarke, 'and most of us aren't exactly negotiating world peace. Make sure you have a life outside work. Holidays, weekends, precious time with friends and family give the opportunity to step back and see things from a fresh perspective. They also stop you getting wound up in the first place. It really helps to develop a sense of humour.'

The 'sense of humour' part is what got me through my own office days. Office politics are quite funny after all (as proven by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant).

Years on, I'm freelance again, with only the phone for company. I no longer have to deal with colleagues who would trample over my dead body to get closer to the boss, or are all over me on Monday but freezing me out by Tuesday. But it can be very quiet round here. I miss the lot of them. ■

➤ *Want more ideas for keeping your cool at work? Go to [marieclaire.co.uk/de-stress-at-work-tips](http://marieclaire.co.uk/de-stress-at-work-tips)*

### YOUR SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Safia Minney, founder of Fair Trade fashion label People Tree, shares her tips

#### 1 Respect everyone from the mailman to the managing director.

Since starting my first business at 22, I've made a point of treating everyone the same and listening to their ideas.

#### 2 Observe office politics but never get involved.

Knowledge is power, so equip yourself by watching how people interact. Understanding what makes people tick has been the secret to my success.

#### 3 Don't take criticism personally.

It's easy for resentment to build up between colleagues when one is assessing the other, but learn to take it on the chin and your boss will respect you for it.

#### 4 Learn to be yourself at all times.

Being genuine highlights your value as a colleague. I squirm when I see people pretending to be someone they're not.