

Office politics can be a force for good, new research shows

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Office politics is often associated with toxic cultures and marginalized groups, but a new study in the Harvard Business Review today has identified five strategies for organizations to promote 'healthy office politics' that foster inclusive and supportive working environments.

Existing evidence shows office politics is all too often a white man's game, as women and ethnic minorities tend to have less powerful networks and benefit less from engaging in it. Attempts to address this often focus on "fixing" the people who are excluded—encouraging them to develop their political skills, get more comfortable with politics or temper their reactions—rather than acknowledging organizations' role in creating inclusive cultures.

The new research from experts at Queen Mary University of London and King's College London used in-depth interviews with 40 mid-career ethnic minority employees from a range of industries across the UK to look for trends in workplace cultures.

Unsurprisingly, many shared negative experiences with office politics—feeling excluded from informal relationships, being overlooked or pushed aside by managers, and witnessing underhanded behavior from their peers—which often led people to disengage, missing out on vital development opportunities and relationships needed to succeed at work.

However, some shared stories of supportive cultures where managers proactively included minority employees in the kinds of political activity necessary to be effective in their jobs and advance in their organizations. Rather than feeling slimy or underhanded, office politics were openly acknowledged and even taught to newcomers.

Dr. Elena Doldor from Queen Mary University of London, co-author of the new study and co-director of Queen Mary's Center for Research in Equality and Diversity, said, "There's no escaping office politics; it might get a bad rap, but the ability to network, build relationships, and influence others is critical in any workplace. However, minority employees are often pushed to the side-lines of this political arena. Organizations may not be able to suppress their office politics, but they

can and must strive to make it more inclusive."

Dr. Madeleine Wyatt from King's College London, co-author of the new study and Reader in Diversity and Inclusion, continued, "Of course, building an inclusive culture is easier said than done—but it is possible, as our new research has demonstrated, and organizations that foster this kind of political integrity result in more supportive workplaces. Office politics has long served as a mechanism for exclusion, but it doesn't have to."

The new research identified five strategies to help organizations foster healthier office politics cultures where all employees are nurtured and supported:

1. Be transparent. Talking about politics can be uncomfortable, but failing to do so only benefits those who already have easy access to the political arena. Employees at every level should be encouraged to talk openly about the value of building connections, and organizations should make the informal practices of office politics visible through explicit onboarding processes, mentoring (both by peers and senior staff), talent development programs, [employee](#) affinity groups and other initiatives. As remote and hybrid work become the norm, it's also important to consider where and how informal connections occur in online spaces, to ensure equal access here too.

2. Ensure access to informal career development resources. Dr. Wyatt's Previous research shows that successful career growth requires a mix of formal and informal development resources, and minority employees typically have less access to the latter. To close this gap, organizations should provide mechanisms such as mentorship, sponsorship, and support networks to ensure minority employees can access all the tools and processes needed for growth.

3. Reframe politics positively. The deeply ingrained view that politics are, at best, a necessary evil can and should be challenged. Leaders must explicitly push back on the view that politics can only be used for self-gain, and reframe it as a tool that can help everyone to build connections and make the most of every opportunity. This means finding ways to highlight the value of skills like negotiating, influencing and relationship-building at every level of the organization, as well as including political competencies in professional development programs.

4. Leverage politics to drive inclusion. Managers play a key role in gatekeeping the political arena, so organizations should train them to share their political know-how and leverage their power across racial and gender lines. For instance, well-respected sponsors can be encouraged to join leadership development programs specifically designed to support [minority employees](#)—not only improving marginalized groups' access to senior networks, but also helping leadership to understand the barriers different employees face, so they can better advocate for their proteges and develop more effective strategies to address inequalities.

5. Share success stories. It's easy to look past the journey details once someone's made it to the top. To make politics a normal part of a professional success story, organizations should encourage employees who have "made it" to talk openly about how they did so—and emphasize times when they benefited from a helping hand, inside information or key relationships. Sharing these stories helps employees at any level imagine a path forward in which [office](#) politics plays a positive role.

More information: [Office Politics Don't Have to Be Toxic | Harvard Business Review](#)

Provided by King's College London

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