

WANT TO GROW?



BY HOWARD M. GUTTMAN

Business growth in today's intensely competitive environment is a tough challenge. Management books are filled with advice about how organizations can rocket their way to growth and success: strategic change, mergers and acquisitions, new product pipeline management, CRM, lean manufacturing, technological fixes, you name it.

What often gets lost in the quest for growth is the need to create an environment in which people can honestly and openly confront one another over directional and operational differences and, then, commit to a common platform for moving ahead.

PROOF OF A PROBLEM

According to *Fast Company* magazine, 97 percent of employees are affected by office politics. Recent headlines in the press bring this statistic to life:

- ▶ “Trial of WorldCom’s Ebbers Will Focus on Uneasy Partnership”
(*Wall Street Journal*, 1/12/05)
- ▶ “Behind Morgan Stanley Turmoil: Competing Visions of Its Future”
(*The Wall Street Journal*, 4/15/05)
- ▶ “President of Red Cross Resigns; Board Woes, Not Katrina, Cited”
(*The New York Times*, 12/14/05)
- ▶ “New DaimlerChrysler CEO Targets ‘Infighting, Intrigues’”
(*The Wall Street Journal*, 11/28/05)

ILLUSTRATIONS: RON ZALIME FOR MWORLD/AMERICAN ARTISTS

Start by Taming Office Politics



An organization at war with itself is poorly equipped to do battle in the marketplace. Unless organizations are adept at managing office politics and the conflict that surrounds them, business growth is unlikely, no matter how shrewd the strategy may be. If your growth plans are faltering because of internal politics and strife, there are options available. You might try investing in Office Politics®, the new board game that has been flying off retailers' shelves, or you could log on to www.office-politics.com for tips on outfoxing that Machiavelli in the cubicle next door. Or you might just walk away, resigned to the fact that office politics are a necessary evil, right up there with performance reviews and outsourcing.

TAKING POSITIVE STEPS

But while office politics can't be eliminated, they can—and must—be tamed. Here are seven rules to help modify behavior and redirect negative political energy into positive, growth-oriented business results.

1. Don't Triangulate. Triangulation entails bringing an issue to a third-party "rescuer" for resolution. It's an attempt to avoid responsibility by using a surrogate to handle an issue that should be resolved head-on between two people.

My firm once worked with the senior team of a property-management firm. One team member had an outstanding technical knowledge of construction and had been with the company for many years. He had a close relationship with the president, and whenever he had an issue with another member of the team, he took his complaint straight to the president's office. The president continued to allow this dysfunctional behavior, giving the excuse that "He's a quirky guy, but he does great work, and he was there for me in the early days."

The triangulation continued until we brought the team together for a clear-the-air meeting. During the session, other members of the team expressed their displeasure with this individual's continuing attempts to co-opt the president. The president listened, and then agreed that he would no longer put this person's needs above the good of the group. He promised to stop fostering this person's triangulation efforts, and once he did, relationships within the team became much healthier and performance improved.

2. Don't recruit supporters to your point of view. Self-interest has long been an animating force of human behavior. That's fine, as long as it doesn't result in subterfuge and in-fighting. For many, self-interest converts to a zero-sum—a you're-either-with-me-or-against-me mentality. Such individuals recruit third-party supporters to their cause. And, keep in mind, the "copy" function on e-mail has become a convenient recruitment enabler. Such behavior is not conducive to open discussion and transparent relationships. Outlaw it!

The ability to depersonalize an issue, to treat it as a business case, is especially important when giving and receiving feedback.

3. Resolve it or let it go. The longer a conflict between co-workers remains unresolved, the greater the chance that it will metastasize, spreading its poison throughout the workplace. In order to cut off conflict before it spreads, we advise managers to impose a 24- or 48-hour deadline for warring employees to hammer out a truce. If, at the end of that time, they have not been able to do so, they are expected to drop it and let it go.

4. Don't accuse in absentia. Even an accused felon has a right to hear the charges against him and defend himself in open court. So should everyone in the work unit. If, during a meeting, someone brings up an issue that involves a person who is not in attendance, the discussion should stop right there. The group owes it to the absent person to postpone further debate until he or she can be heard from.

5. Don't personalize issues. In business settings, differences of opinion and viewpoints have a way of stimulating new ideas and strengthening outcomes, provided the discussion doesn't devolve into personal attacks. When it does, you're apt to trigger serious political intrigue.

The ability to depersonalize an issue, to treat it as a business case, is especially important when giving and receiving feedback. Let's face it, unless feedback is positive, it is an invitation to hurt feelings and defensiveness. It's important to learn, when giving and receiving feedback, how to keep things depersonalized. For the person providing the feedback, whether to a direct report in an annual performance review or to a peer in a team meeting, this means stating concerns in terms of observable behaviors, not feelings. Instead of using formulations such as, "I'm disappointed in your performance," or "You've got to improve your attitude," stay focused on specific behaviors that the person can improve. Stating that, "Your department's productivity dropped seven percent this quarter," or "I have called you three times to set up a meeting, and you haven't returned my calls," is likely to be met with less defensiveness and result in more positive action.

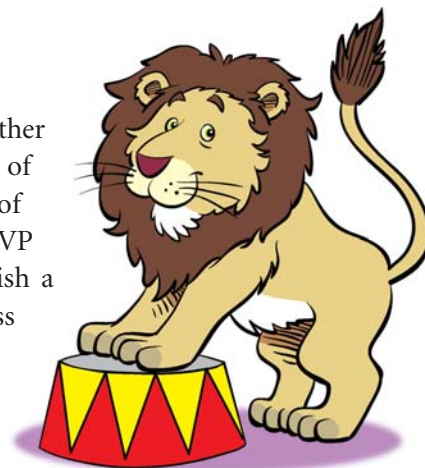
When receiving feedback from your boss, peers or direct reports, remember that it's about the way you are doing your job, not your worth as a human being. And remember that it works both ways: if you feel that colleagues are not stating their concerns in a depersonalized fashion, ask them to provide more objective measures and behavioral evidence related to those measures.

6. No hands from the grave. A decision is made in a departmental meeting and everyone nods in tacit agreement. But outside the meeting room the nodding turns to second-guessing and sabotage. Beware the refrain, "It was *their* decision, not mine." It's the open sesame for divisiveness.

One vice president of an international conglomerate with whom my company worked recalled that he would walk out of a meeting with the leaders of his subsidiaries believing that they had agreed upon the products that each one would offer in a given region or country, only to



receive a frantic phone call from one or another of them a few days later accusing a colleague of violating the agreement. Once he became aware of the delayed disagreements and second-guessing, the VP asked executive committee members to establish a firm rule: no one was to leave a meeting unless there was full agreement on the resolution of an issue, duly recorded in meeting minutes. This eliminated second-guessing and *ex post facto* politicking.



Manuel Jessup, vice president of human resources for Sara Lee Underwear, is a strong proponent of “no hands from the grave.” He simply won’t tolerate second-guessing after a decision has been made. “Some people may walk out of the room and continue to complain about what we did. They want us to go back and revisit our decision. To them I say, ‘The train has left the station and it’s not coming back.’”

7. Hold peers accountable. Executives must do more than just observe the rules themselves. They also must also hold their peers accountable for compliance.

That means that each employee must adopt a zero-tolerance policy. When a colleague begins talking to you about someone behind that person’s back, refuse to listen. When a co-worker tries to convince you that the two of you should try to prove a third party wrong, don’t sign up for the cause. When a team makes a decision, don’t participate in the delayed dissention.

Significant change begins at the basic molecular level of organizational life. When individuals—especially those at senior levels—demonstrate that office politics is not “the way business is done around here”—then others will follow.

SUMMING UP

For these seven rules to be embedded in organizational life, they cannot be legislated imperiously. In organizations that have successfully rechanneled office politics to healthy business relationships, such rules or protocols begin by having top managers discuss, identify, commit to and live by them. A similar process is then followed to cascade the protocols to every individual and team. Before long, you’ll spend less time playing office politics and more time focusing your human resources on the next round of competitive advantage in order to drive business growth. [MW](#)

Howard M. Guttman is author of When Goliaths Clash: Managing Executive Conflict to Build a More Dynamic Organization. He is the principal of Guttman Development Strategies (www.guttmandev.com), a Ledgewood, NJ-based management consulting firm specializing in building high-performance teams, executive coaching, strategic and operational alignment, and management training. He can be reached at hmguttman@guttmandev.com.

AMA offers several programs to help executives and managers cope with office politics. Check out AMA’s management and leadership programs at www.amanet.org.