

How High-Achieving Women  
Get Ahead and Stay Ahead

SAMPLE

The  
POLITICS  
of  
PROMOTION

NEW FOREWORD INCLUDED

*Bonnie Marcus*

## Praise for *The Politics of Promotion*

"If you're one of those nice girls who thinks politics is a four-letter word, think again. From promotions to perks to plum assignments, savvy women know the path to success is paved by politics. *The Politics of Promotion* will help you to make workplace politics an integral part of your skill set without feeling as if you've compromised your integrity."

—Lois P. Frankel, PhD,  
author of *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*

"Bonnie Marcus has finally come out and said what needs to be said: self-promotion is a leadership skill! *The Politics of Promotion* should earn a place on every woman's bookshelf. Marcus not only demonstrates why playing politics—zestfully, skillfully, and ethically—is essential for women seeking to shape satisfying careers, she offers invaluable advice on how to do it. This book offers a perfect wake-up call for women who want to believe that working hard should be enough. It's not. Bonnie Marcus shows you a better path."

—Sally Helgesen,  
coauthor of *How Women Rise* and  
author of *The Female Advantage*

"*The Politics of Promotion* is a savvy book, full of advice for ambitious women. Bonnie Marcus explains that success follows not only from competently fulfilling one's job description but even more from successfully negotiating company politics. To help women navigate these complexities, she offers a wealth of advice backed by examples gleaned from her long experience as a corporate executive and a career coach. Marcus provides the crucial insights that business schools leave out of the curriculum."

—Alice Eagly,  
coauthor of *Through the Labyrinth*

“Sheryl Sandberg taught women about the importance of ‘leaning in’ in order to get ahead in the workplace. In *The Politics of Promotion*, Bonnie Marcus gives women practical tips on how to be savvy about the way they lean in to avoid potential landmines; how to navigate the realities of their workplace, and position themselves for success without compromising their feminine traits or integrity.”

—John Gerzema,  
author of *The Athena Doctrine*

“*The Politics of Promotion* totally reframes the concept of office politics. Bonnie Marcus clearly and practically explains how the work environment must be understood for anyone hoping to advance their careers. Through research, case studies, and a variety of powerful vignettes, the book offers insights for all individuals—women and men—who seek to be more successful, eliminate roadblocks and deliver for themselves, their teams and their organizations.”

—Susan B. Chodakewitz,  
CEO, Nathan Associates, Inc.

“More than a ‘rah rah’ motivational treatise, *The Politics of Promotion* sends a strong message that we must work hard AND be smart as women in today’s organizations. I found woman’s leadership guru Bonnie Marcus’s blend of personal experience, relevant examples and applicable tools to be a goldmine. Her strategic networking templates alone are worth the price of the book. A meaty great read for all women and those who support them.”

—Jennifer B. Kahnweiler,  
PhD, CSP, author of *Quiet Influence* and *The Introverted Leader*

“*The Politics of Promotion* is packed with practical knowledge every woman needs in clear, engaging, and actionable language. Marcus outlines a proven method for women to navigate the complexities of the workplace and get the promotions they deserve.”

—Gloria Feldt,  
cofounder and President, Take The Lead; and author of *No Excuses*

“Women tend to perceive office politics as something distasteful. *The Politics of Promotion* is a very helpful book for individuals needing to better understand and embrace the importance of company politics, not only as a critical part of career advancement, but as a more effective way to successfully carry out your daily job responsibilities. Bonnie Marcus's research demonstrates how being political savvy allows you to build important relationships with critical stakeholders who may be able to support, mentor and promote you. Reading this book will help you to learn how to navigate across an organization to achieve your career and business goals by working with and through others.”

—Alexandra Glucksmann,  
President and CEO, Cedilla Therapeutics

“Women are graduating from college and entering the workforce ill prepared to navigate their new environment. Putting your head down and achieving great results works in school, but being successful in your career requires more. Bonnie Marcus has nailed the missing piece: political savvy. *The Politics of Promotion* should be required reading for all college graduates.”

—Tiffany Dufu,  
Chief Leadership Officer, The Levo League

“Women regularly think that doing a great job ensures promotion—I used to think so too. Instead, we know from data and personal experience that performance excellence means, at most, that you might be considered; actually securing the promotion requires a great deal more. Bonnie Marcus has seen how this plays across multiple disciplines and industries and is full of insight and advice that will put women in a far stronger position to understand how to create the opportunities their talent demands. Her tough love acknowledges injustice but her tough thinking is what promises success.”

—Margaret Heffernan,  
author of *Willful Blindness* and *A Bigger Prize*

“Until genuine meritocracy becomes the norm, women will continue to face subtle bias and double standards. They will be greatly helped in navigating the traps and blind alleys of organizational life by the career advice that Bonnie Marcus offers in this readable book. Bonnie reframes the ‘dirty words’ of politics, networking, and self-promotion as necessary leadership skills that can achieve all-round benefits when exercised thoughtfully. Ambitious readers will feel better equipped to go for the leadership prize.”

—Alison Maitland,  
coauthor of *Future Work* and *Why Women Mean Business*

“Bonnie Marcus shares from her experience on how to get the recognition and rewards you deserve for your work by managing the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace. Politics is inherent in all human relationships. *The Politics of Promotion* will teach you how to interact professionally and get promoted while staying true to yourself.”

—Marilyn Tam,  
author of *The Happiness Choice*

How High-Achieving Women  
**Get Ahead** and **Stay Ahead**

*The*  
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*of*  
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# INTRODUCTION

**Y**ou work really hard. You have what it takes to do a good job. All your skills and education have prepared you to have a successful career. You are passionate about what you do. You enjoy your colleagues and you invest a great deal of time and energy into every project to make sure it's perfect.

Perhaps you have been recognized for your top performance. You think you are well on your way to getting a promotion. There is a new opportunity to move up. It would mean more compensation and more responsibility and you are ready to take it on. You apply for the position. You know you are qualified, maybe even overqualified, and you are confident that the job will be yours. And then the bottom falls out. Someone else is chosen over you and they aren't nearly as qualified as you are! You are frustrated and angry. You feel betrayed. Wow! You didn't see it coming.

What happened? Politics!

Workplaces are highly political environments where decisions about who gets ahead, who gets more compensation, and who gets access to scarce resources are not based on performance alone. Our naïve assumption that our performance will guarantee a successful career is a dangerous one. This assumption results in thousands of women being blindsided. And it happens every day.

Where does this assumption come from? As young girls we are taught academic success is a must. Don't you remember what a great feeling it was to come home with a good report card and



have your mom and dad tell you how proud they were? I recall it well. Receiving good grades was important and I worked hard to excel in school. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to be when I grew up, but I got the message that doing well in school was necessary for me to be successful in whatever I chose to do in life.

Success in school is based on industriousness. You work diligently, study, and prepare, and you are rewarded with good grades. This belief and behavior, however, does not translate to the workplace.

Early in my career, I worked for a national health care organization. I joined this company as a regional manager and after eight years worked my way up to be an area vice president. I was a rock star! I won every top-performance award for my region and loved the work and the people I worked with. So I wasn't terribly concerned when we started to hear rumors about reorganization. I had survived a couple of mergers and acquisitions and had always landed on top.

The reorganization became a reality, and one day we had a conference call with the CEO to announce the changes. There were two ways this would impact me. First, there were some changes in the structure of my region and a new vice president role was created. Second, I had a new boss, a buddy of the CEO from outside the company and another industry.

I was excited about the possibility of a promotion to vice president. I asked for the promotion. I lobbied for the job. All of my eighteen direct reports called the new SVP and recommended he choose me. I was confident the job was mine.

And then I was blindsided. The vice president position went to someone else from outside my region. I was devastated, angry, and frustrated. After investing eight years of my time, energy, and talent, I had been overlooked. I felt betrayed.

What else did I need to do to move up? I had a history of great performance. And I had worked the politics to some degree. After

all, I asked my new boss for the promotion. I talked to my direct reports and let them know I was interested in the new position. Many of them recommended me for the job. I thought I had done everything right. But did I?

No!

I learned many lessons as a result of this experience. I learned that I was very naïve. I learned that focusing on my work alone was a mistake. I learned understanding the way decisions are made in your organization is critical. It is essential to know who has the power and influence over the decisions that impact your career. And it is paramount to build allies and champions across the organization.

I failed to build a relationship with my new boss because I didn't like him. I didn't understand how the decision about the vice president position would be made. I didn't get the politics.

In the workplace, the rules of the game are not as simple as you'd think. Although hard work and performance are important, they are not the sole basis for advancement. Yes, your track record is critical, but unlike school, the workplace has different criteria for success. Often promotions are based on personality, on the ability to engage in the organization's politics and promote oneself with intention; to network and build relationships.

Can you see what happens when we ignore these things? We are still working on an assumption that helped us reach academic success. We behave as if this assumption is valid. But it doesn't help us in the workplace. In fact, it works against us and sets us up to be blindsided.

Potential landmines for women are everywhere. We would like to believe that gender bias has dissipated, but many organizations now have a subtle form of bias that is much more challenging to anticipate and navigate. This unconscious bias adds to the complexity women face when navigating the political landscape. This is why this book is so important. While it's true that both genders

need to embrace the culture and politics of their organization, women face different challenges. Due to their exclusion from the inner networks of power and influence, unconscious bias can ambush them at any time.

I have written this book because I believe wholeheartedly that women must get savvy about workplace politics if they are serious about their careers. We need to get serious, not only because we deserve it, but because companies need the expertise and perspective of both genders. Sure, there has been a lot of research and discussion about the challenges we face as women in attaining leadership positions. But I know, and I'm certain you do as well, that we have the talent to lead and that our leadership helps organizations prosper.

We need to be at the table! We need to be there because we bring value and a unique viewpoint, but getting a seat is still complicated for women. There are people in your organization with different agendas and allegiances that you need to understand to be successful. Political savvy is about relationships and a focus on what others think and feel. It's about aligning yourself with key stakeholders and building relationships of trust and influence. You need these relationships in order to thrive. You need information about the politics of your workplace in order to survive! It's important to understand that attaining a leadership position not only helps your career, but also helps your company.

For those of you who have missed out on a promotion, this book is for you. For those of you who still believe that your talent and hard work are enough to assure you a successful career, this book is also for you, because you are on a dangerous path covered with political landmines!

Everything I learned about how to navigate the realities of the workplace and get promoted is included in my Political Toolkit, which I'll share with you in this book. These tools helped take me

from an entry-level position to running a national company, and they have helped hundreds of women get promoted in competitive male-dominated industries. So if you are serious about your ambition and ready to do the work, you will find in these pages a proven process to get ahead and stay ahead.

The tools provided here will show you a painless path to navigating the workplace effectively so you can achieve the career of your dreams. So let's begin!

# - 1 -

## POLITICS IN THE WORKPLACE

### *How It Works and How Women Fit into It*

**S**allie Krawcheck, once named the most powerful woman on Wall Street, said it felt like she was fired when a restructuring at Bank of America eliminated her role in 2011. She was asked to join the bank to turn around its Merrill Lynch and U.S. Trust wealth management businesses. What seemed like a perfect role for her turned out to be a blindside. Bank of America was a mixture of several cultures due to acquisitions and leadership changes. Though Sallie attempted to navigate and understand the ever-changing political landscape, she was considered an outsider with few ties to any of the powerful cliques within the bank.

Sallie, based in New York, found it challenging to build relationships and camaraderie with her team and the key stake-holders who were in the corporate headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina: "It's hard to be part of the inside jokes when you're not there or you aren't having a few minutes swapping stories while grabbing a coffee between meetings. I was never part of the meetings-before-the-meetings, or the meetings-after-the-meeting, or the 'real' meeting; I was just part of the official meeting (which in some companies can be the least important meeting of them all)."<sup>1</sup>

Sallie wasn't in the "in crowd." Not only was she not located at the corporate headquarters, but she was still viewed as an outsider to Bank of America culture. She was not invited to these informal

meetings where the real politics play out; where important decisions are made. Despite her attempts to gain access, she was unable to maneuver through the complex politics. Because Sallie was astute, she understood her vulnerability as an outsider. But like many of us, Sallie also believed that her business results would help to maintain her status and substantiate her value to the bank.

"I realized I wasn't part of the 'inner circle'. But I mistakenly believed that if my team delivered strong business results—and, as I repeatedly told the team, if we were the business no-one had to worry about—we would be successful. But on the day I left, the business was ahead of budget and gaining share."<sup>2</sup>

Sallie is a great example of a woman who is a top performer and incredibly savvy about workplace politics. Her résumé validates this. She had repeatedly overcome political and cultural barriers in her past to achieve top leadership roles. Yet despite her best efforts to understand and master the politics at Bank of America, she was blindsided. Her job was eliminated. And though she was offered another position at a lower level, Sallie decided to leave the bank. She was trumped by the politics.

## *DERAILED IN NEW YORK CITY*

Cathie Black, a former chair and president of Hearst Magazines, was appointed chancellor of New York City schools by Mayor Bloomberg in November 2010. Mayor Bloomberg believed Cathie was the right candidate based on her extensive management experience. But it was apparent rather quickly that public opinion was against her. After just a few months in the job, a NY1/Marist poll revealed that just 17 percent of New Yorkers approved of her job performance.<sup>3</sup>

Cathie had an incredible track record. She navigated to the top in the publishing world, where women executives were a rare commodity. Despite her obvious success and savvy, however, New

Yorkers viewed her from the outset as an outsider to public education, and therefore incapable of doing the job. They looked for every opportunity to emphasize her weaknesses and never gave her a chance to prove herself. What looked like a new challenge and opportunity for Cathie turned out to be a blindside. In April 2011, she was forced to step down. Cathie fell victim to the politics and the power of public opinion. The politics derailed her.

What lesson can we learn from Sallie Krawcheck and Cathie Black's experiences? Here are two extremely competent and prominent female executives who were able to reach leadership positions because of their talent, hard work, and political savvy. Yet in each of these situations, they were blindsided and unable to overcome the strong political barriers. This clearly demonstrates the necessity for all of us to understand the political landscape and identify potential landmines.

Every organization has unique political dynamics. In fact, each team within a business line or function often has a different language, different success metrics, and behavioral norms. You have to be willing and capable of adapting not only to get ahead, but also to stay ahead. Politics can make or break your career. This is especially important for women to understand. To our detriment, we continue to avoid workplace politics and set ourselves up to be blindsided and passed over for promotions.

You must ask yourself where you would be today if you had been more politically savvy and tuned in to the way decisions are made in your company. Most important, what is possible for you in the future if you are willing to learn how to effectively navigate the realities of the workplace? What is possible if you are given the tools to master the politics?

For decades, women's advancement in the workplace has been the focus of research and conversation. Unfortunately, we can only point to limited success in this area. Women are inching their way up to leadership positions, but their progress has been very slow.

Currently, women hold only 5.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEO positions and 5.4 percent of Fortune 1000 CEO positions.<sup>4</sup>

Are we frustrated yet? You bet!

We are certainly well prepared and well educated. Women now hold 57 percent of all bachelor's degrees and 51 percent of all doctorates. We now earn 47 percent of law degrees and 45 percent of all master's degrees in business. We enter the workforce with optimism and ambition, and then our goals for career advancement are not realized.

Many theories explain our lack of progress, but the bottom line is that the optimal way for women to circumvent obstacles is through political savvy and relationships. The culture and politics in our organizations still make women's ascent to top positions extremely difficult. Sometimes the politics is so powerful and overwhelming that even super stars like Sallie Krawcheck and Cathie Black cannot survive. For women, the politics is often complicated by gender bias. This was certainly true decades ago when we faced overt discrimination.

For instance, Elizabeth, an executive in the bio/pharma industry, told me her story about her first job out of college. She was one of the few women working in a company that made flavor and fragrance materials. Three weeks into the job, one of the salesmen came into the lab with a request. Elizabeth quickly volunteered that she could make that happen. The man replied, "No, you can't. You're a woman."

Elizabeth said she was shocked at the time and will never forget this incident. She said to herself, "Wow. I thought I could do anything and then I realized there are other people who aren't going to let me do everything because I'm a woman."

Timi Hallem, a partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, tells her story of gender discrimination early in her career as an attorney:

"I had a 3-year-old and a 10-month old. The managing partner of the firm came into my office and told me that the firm was go-



ing to reduce my salary because I was less valuable now that I had children. Because I had young children there were things that the people who worked with me would not ask me to do, and therefore, that made me less valuable to the firm. I asked whether I'd ever turned anything down or refused to do anything, and was told that that was not the issue—that, no, I had not. But that there were things they wouldn't ask me to do—and that in and of itself made me less valuable. So my pay was reduced, and I thought about leaving. I actually interviewed elsewhere, and then I decided that would, basically, give them too much satisfaction. I decided to first work on building up my practice to the point where they'd be really sorry when I left. Instead, within six months, they restored my pay and gave me back what they had taken away, and decided I didn't deserve to have my pay cut since the clients were clearly happy with me."

For those of you who have recently entered the workforce, I'm sure these stories are shocking. We rarely see examples of discrimination this overt any longer. Now we have the law on our side—it is no longer legal or politically correct to discriminate against women based on their gender—but this has forced gender bias to go underground. Second-generation bias, as it is commonly called, is more challenging because it is subtle, and women are blindsided by it every day.

The point is that you never want to be caught off guard by this. Political savvy helps you to understand which people in your organization support you and support the advancement of women. These are the people you need to build relationships with. Political savvy also helps you to uncover those who are less likely to help you because you are a woman. This is not always easy because these people may justify their behavior based on other reasons, but with keen observation skills and focus, you can learn who pays lip service to the promotion of women and who doesn't. Bottom line: You need to figure out who are your allies and who are your foes.

Lisa, one of my clients and a senior executive in the banking industry, tells me that the boys' club still exists in banking and these informal networks are difficult for women to access:

"Twenty years ago, men were pretty overt about the fact that they didn't really care to make an effort to include women in their inner circle. I think, at this point, it's less overt, but it still exists. And there are different reasons. I think there's definitely an element of men feeling like, if they say the wrong thing, or do the wrong thing, they're going to get sued for harassment. So, they need to keep their guard up.

"Sometimes I think there's a 'women versus men' type of thing, just in terms of the kind of things that men will do together—and they won't invite women. Not even for drinks."

Lisa tells the story of how a senior manager at the bank with whom she had a great relationship did not invite her on an all-day fishing trip, yet invited all her male counterparts. Lisa had lunch with him a couple of weeks later and asked him, "If you knew I liked to fish, would you have invited me?" And he said, "Probably not."

She says, "It was a man who I respected, who I knew liked me very much—and who was very much a straitlaced guy, and there was never any question that he treated men and women equally. But then, there's the off-campus event, and he didn't invite me. It's these types of events where people let their guard down. That's where people talk about things that you may not talk about in a formal meeting. And that's where you build relationships. To be excluded from that because you're a woman excludes you from those important conversations."

To Lisa's point, she may never get invited on fishing trips with her male colleagues. She may never be asked to go to Monday night football events because she's a woman. You may have had similar experiences. It is still important to find opportunities to connect and build relationships with these men so they can get to

know you beyond your work and your presence in formal meetings. Stay tuned, because access to these informal networks is achievable with political savvy. It is possible to create bonds with the men in these networks even if they don't include you in their activities after work. You have to be creative and make it happen!

Another thing I've learned listening to women is that they understand the importance of "leaning in" and asking for what they want and need, but when they assert themselves it can backfire because some men are threatened by their assertiveness.

Lori relates her current challenge with "leaning in" at her company: "The higher you get in an organization, the older the men are that you're dealing with, and the less receptive they are to assertive females. I surprise men when I am assertive. And it disturbs them at some very basic level. And those are the folks who are my audience. They're who I need to persuade, and who I need to have some confidence in my capabilities and my leadership. And if I strike them personally on a level that makes them uncomfortable, it puts me automatically behind the eight ball. Their basic understanding of female behavior is challenged. I'm looking for collaboration and some equal footing—something they would gladly give somebody my age who was a man with a family and demographic that they have."

Do you get a similar reaction from men when you speak up or offer a different opinion? Isn't it worth your while to know who would be most receptive to your ideas and the optimal way to communicate with them to avoid landmines? That requires political savvy!

Unconscious bias rears its ugly head in other ways as well. Bias shows up in the stereotypes men and women have relative to work and leadership. For example, I hear from women that they are no longer considered ambitious once they have children. They are frequently passed over for positions that require more travel. We

can experience this type of bias from both men and women who hold beliefs that women who are mothers should behave in a certain fashion. And of course, we still earn less money than our male counterparts.

Here's Elizabeth's story:

"When I was pregnant with my first son, the woman who had hired me had been appointed to a new job as an individual contributor and another woman came in to take over the group. This woman decided who got the really high-level corporate assignments. Well, I saw these assignments going to other folks. So, I made an appointment with her and when I walked into her office I said, 'Arden, can you help me understand why I'm not getting any of these opportunities?' And she did actually say to me, 'Well, I didn't know how willing you were to travel.' And I said, 'But you never asked me. You made that assumption for me.' You could see that she just never considered that I would want to travel, and it was a really good opportunity. She did end up being very open about giving everybody opportunity. I could see how it changed her approach. She stopped making assumptions about what people would say."

In this situation, Elizabeth confronted the woman and asked her directly why she wasn't getting the same high-profile assignments others were offered. If she had not asked the question, she never would have known the reason why she was repeatedly passed over.

There are people in your organization that make assumptions about you because you're a woman. It is not always obvious why we are not given the same opportunities as others. It's critical, therefore, to clearly communicate your goals to your boss and other decision makers who have influence over your career.

How you position yourself in the company with key stakeholders is critical to overcoming this bias. Learning how to effectively articulate your career aspirations and your achievements is an im-

portant aspect of political savvy. Identifying the people who would benefit from this information is another critical component.

Another challenge women face is a lack of confidence. Do you wake up at 3 AM in a sweat because you're wondering if you have what it takes to succeed, if others will discover you really aren't that smart? Our internal demons can hold us back. Many women tell me that they believe they aren't good enough to make it, and that it is pure luck that they have achieved any success. Their self-doubt prevents them from speaking up and giving their opinions, from asking for more compensation and responsibility. I hear from these women that because they have a need to be liked and please others, they take on too much work and don't delegate. As a consequence, they are not perceived as having leadership potential in an environment that rewards visibility and credibility.

Lack of confidence holds many women back from engaging in politics and leaning in. What I have come to realize through my coaching practice and discussions with women is that many of us don't understand our contribution to business outcomes. We don't recognize our value. Identifying your value proposition is the necessary first step to understanding and believing in your contribution to the company. It inspires your confidence to put forth your ideas and ask for what you deserve. It fuels your ability to build relationships of trust and influence by offering to help others based on your value proposition. These relationships assist you in navigating the workplace by giving you important information about its politics and by promoting you for new opportunities.

In this book, you will learn the significance of self-promotion as both a leadership skill and a political tool. You will learn savvy ways to communicate what you and your team have accomplished and how to sell your ideas across the organization to build political influence.

I'm sure you can relate to some or perhaps all of these examples of barriers to women's advancement. You live with this every day! And yes, we can look internally (our own limiting beliefs), externally (unconscious bias and gender inequality), and every which way to explain the lack of women's progress. Women are still viewed and judged differently than men in the workplace—and this is sometimes subtle and therefore challenging. But political savvy is understanding the culture whatever it is, and then learning how to best position yourself given the reality. You cannot ignore the politics any longer if you want to advance your career. Political savvy helps you successfully circumvent the landmines and position yourself for success. Gender bias is just one obstacle you must be aware of when navigating through the workplace.

You deserve to move up.

If you are working really hard and want to get ahead, you certainly don't want to be passed over or pushed aside, right? Well then, let this be a wake-up call for you. You need to get “real” when it comes to how you fit into the current culture of your organization. You need to take a good hard look at whether or not you have the political savvy to thrive in such an environment. Because the reality is that workplace politics can make or break your career!

The reality is that if you have any aspirations for advancement, you cannot afford to ignore the politics. Yes, hard work is important. Yes, performance is important. That being said, once you reach a certain level of technical competence, politics is what makes the difference for your career success.

Right about now, you're probably asking yourself, “Whatever happened to meritocracy? Why can't I get a promotion based on my track record?” Look around your workplace. Is this what's really happening, or are you wishing for a pipe dream? Who is getting promoted? Is their advancement based solely on their performance, or on other factors such as the relationships they have formed and their influence with key people?

For those of you who focus all your efforts on doing good work, you are not alone. Women spend all their time and energy doing their work and getting great results. We do not see the importance of spending time to network with others and build key relationships. As a result, we do not have access to the privileged information about “the rules of the game” that we need to navigate the workplace successfully. We do not have access to the influential networks where key decisions are made. We rely on the traditional methods of receiving information. Most of the time, we get this information too late to be able to use it to our benefit.

For instance, we wait patiently until new positions are posted. The reality is that many times these jobs have already been promised to others and the company is simply going through the motions of interviewing candidates. Has this happened to you?

It happened to Shereen. “I had two interview opportunities in my company for the same position and I was blindsided. I was highly qualified for the first position for which I posted. I had full support from my direct supervisor who reached out to others on my behalf. I executed the interview well. I definitely had the background to supersede the other candidate. But then I found out from behind the scenes that the VP went to the Hiring Director and told them to hire the other person because it was her third time interviewing for the job. And so, they went with that person because they were uncomfortable going against the grain, fearing some backlash and knowing that there was a reorganization on the horizon.

“Then I interviewed for the same position a year later, because the girl who got the position quit. There was now a new Hiring Director in place. I was unknown to the new Director. I reposted and again, they went with another candidate, a male, who was very well networked and considered a hot ticket. Everyone knew this person well.”

The more we are tapped into the information networks, the greater the likelihood of knowing about new openings before they

are formally posted. This knowledge then gives us the advantage of letting others know of our ambition and getting their feedback on how to move forward.

Another example is when we read a job description and believe that we are qualified and meet the requirements for the position. What we don't know is what is involved in the decision-making process: who owes who favors, who will influence these decisions—in other words, the politics. The only information we have is the formal job description. But what will it really take to secure this new position? We're in the dark. That was my blindside experience as well as Shereen's.

Here's the lesson. When you rely on the traditional means of getting information, you miss the boat time and time again. You don't want to appear too pushy or too ambitious and so you continue to wait, living by what you think are the rules of the game. But your refusal to be proactive and political results in you being the last one to know what's really going on.

Do you sometimes feel like an outsider at work? You most likely recognize that there's an "in crowd" that has the ear of senior management. Do you sometimes wonder how to gain access to this exclusive network? And is it worth the effort to do so? You may not want to bother with the politics, but your very survival in the workplace depends on learning who the players are and their unwritten rules.

I'm certain that most of you reading this know only too well that the strength of the old boys' club persists in most organizations. What you may not know is that the best way for you to advance is to gain access to these informal networks by building relationships and using political skill. Politics opens the door to valuable information and shows you the best road map for avoiding landmines and building bridges and allies across the organization. The more expansive your network is, the clearer your path.



You might also be turned off by the notion of “politics” in the workplace. You don’t want to get involved. You don’t have the time for this. You put in a long day and then rush home to your family. You barely have a life as it is. So how important is this?

It is the knowledge of the workplace systems and culture that gives the politically savvy the advantage. A lack of engagement in politics results in your exclusion from the power networks. You are not connected to the people in the organization who can provide you with information about the way decisions are made and who can influence those decisions.

This lack of engagement in workplace politics by women is often referred to as “political skills deficiency.”<sup>5</sup> One can make the argument that this is a viable reason for women’s lack of progress. Our lack of engagement in workplace politics not only puts us at a disadvantage or political deficiency, but it also puts us in the “loser’s bracket.”<sup>6</sup> None of us want to be in the loser’s bracket if we have any ambition at all!

Only YOU can answer how important this is for YOU. If you are truly ambitious and want to control your career destiny, then you need to pay attention to the politics. If you sincerely want to move your career forward, this book will be your guide to learning how to be painlessly political.

I understand that engaging in workplace politics is probably not your comfort zone. You would rather focus on your work and not deal with the politics. But what if you had a road map for how to become politically savvy and build the relationships necessary to help you get ahead and stay there?

In this book, you will learn all the tools you need to scope out the political landscape, be strategic, and identify the key relationships you need for your advancement. You will also learn how to build confidence, trust, and influence with these key stakeholders. In short, you will learn how to be politically savvy.

## *WHAT IS POLITICAL SAVVY?*

Have you ever wondered why some people seem to get a free pass? Their mistakes are minimized and their achievements maximized. Doors open for them and they enjoy the spotlight without a tremendous amount of fanfare. They may or may not be as competent and talented as you are, but everything they do seems to work in their favor.

These people are politically astute. They have learned how to work the system in a subtle way. They have gained favor with those in power, and this is not by accident. This is a skill. The fact that they have achieved this status without being viewed as manipulative and self-promoting only confirms their skill.

Politically savvy people develop a sense of intuition that helps them to circumvent potential landmines. They observe the environment and take note of what is rewarded and what is disregarded. They observe how people succeed and what is important to the people in power. This observation is critical to developing political skill.

How well are you tuned in to how decisions are made in your organization? These decisions are often not as straightforward as you might think, and the people with power and influence are not necessarily those you see in the upper rankings of the traditional organizational chart.

How strong are your relationships with key stakeholders and influencers? Politically savvy people have not only identified the power brokers, but also have developed relationships to increase their visibility and influence.

How do you become politically savvy? You need to observe, listen, and ask questions such as:

- Who is getting promoted and why?
- With whom do they have relationships?

- How are people rewarded in your organization?
- What did they do to get noticed?
- What types of behavior are not rewarded?
- Who can be your champion?
- Who seems to be in “favor” and why?
- Are there certain people who have access to the leadership team?

In her book, *It's All Politics*, author Kathleen Reardon addresses the importance of observing the environment and learning about potential danger. She mentions primatologist Frans de Waal's studies with chimpanzees. Chimpanzees don't make uncalculated moves. They are great at observing the social landscape. “They are always keeping track of each other, always thinking about the next social step. Three chimps form coalitions and work together to assess their surroundings and deal with potential enemies.”<sup>7</sup>

So it seems that even chimps are politically savvy to some degree! This awareness of their environment and willingness to work together contributes to their very survival.

We also need to develop a radar system to understand potential roadblocks and danger. This radar comes from a keen understanding of the people and culture of the organization. This radar system comes from the knowledge that can only be obtained from the inner circles within the workplace that both influence and make the rules of the game.

Betsy Myers, director of the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach in the Clinton administration, chief operating officer of Obama's first presidential campaign, and now founding director of the Center for Women and Business at Bentley University, spoke to this point when I interviewed her: “I think you have to be conscious of how you come across. You have to watch

for what's going on around you—that you can't just operate; you can't just do your work. There's a bigger picture, and you have to stay conscious of what's going on around you. I think that's the big thing—that there are more pieces to the puzzle. Where do you fit in to the puzzle?”

Betsy suggested that you ask yourself these questions:

1. Who are the stakeholders here that care about the work that I'm doing?
2. What are the relationships that I need to build?
3. What are the relationships that need to be improved or strengthened?

“Part of being politically savvy is saying, ‘What is it that I’m trying to do?’ And, when I approach someone whose help or involvement I need, I ask myself ‘how can I help them reach their goals?’

“So, part of being politically savvy is being able to sell your initiative and your idea or the reason why you need to be at the table, because you actually are—not just because they like you, or, you know, you’re fun, or you’re smart, or whatever it is—but that you actually help them further their goals.”

Betsy says there are two parts to being politically savvy: “Being conscious of the world around me—who is in my corner, who’s not? What relationships do I need to build, to spend more time on? And then, being strategic about how to move the ball forward.”

According to executive coach and best-selling author, Dr. Lois P. Frankel, political savvy means understanding the nature of the quid pro quo inherent to every relationship. She advises that to be effective at workplace politics, you must provide others with what they need and want in exchange for what you need and want.

Frankel comments on this: “Early in my career it was difficult to succeed with workplace politics because the ‘old boys club’ wasn’t

hospitable to women and I didn't understand how to crack it. I thought working hard would be the best strategy, but that wasn't true then; it isn't true now. I don't know that the 'old boys club' has changed that much, but I've gotten better at building the kinds of quid pro quo relationships that enable me to achieve my goals."

Timi Hallem speaks of the political savvy necessary for female attorneys: "I think it's crucial for female attorneys, because in addition to the usual office politics that everyone faces, in every organization, whether it's a law office, a corporate, academia, or in fact, real politics, there are minefields no matter where you are. For women attorneys, there are more minefields, because you're also going to be dealing with some people, even in this day and age, who are not supportive about either women attorneys, or women who have kids, or part-time work. And you need to know who they are, and how to deal with them."

## *THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL WILL*

Political skill is very important, but it is only one part of the equation. Organizations are political arenas, and to be effective in such arenas, one must have both the political will and political skill.<sup>8</sup>

What is political will? It is the willingness to embrace the politics; to understand how decisions are made, and how the culture affects those decisions.

The very first thing you need to do is to get real about what it takes to succeed. Time and time again I have seen talented and deserving women passed over for promotions because they are unwilling to pay attention to the way decisions are made and who has the power and influence over those decisions. Are you one of these women?

What will set you apart from others is having both the technical competence and the commitment to understand the political

landscape, and how best to use that information to build relationships that protect and position you going forward. Your deliberate avoidance of workplace politics or your unwillingness to engage them puts you in a vulnerable position. As with my own blindside experience, without essential information about how judgments are made and who makes and influences them, you can only react once decisions are made. You give up your power and influence to affect the decision-making process.

Our mind-set about workplace politics as negative, manipulative, and evil keeps us from “leaning in” and understanding the reality of what it takes to navigate the workplace. It’s important to “lean in,” but you need to look out before you lean in and familiarize yourself with the realities of the workplace.

I asked the members of my LinkedIn groups some questions to determine how they felt about politics in the workplace and the people they viewed as political. The first question I asked was, “*What comes to mind when you think about politics in the workplace?*”

Here are some of the responses:

“Within any group there is the unassigned ‘leader.’ This person may not always do the right thing, or is the best employee, but knows how to ‘play the game.’”—Elizabeth

“There is entirely too much political up-man ship occurring in most workplaces. The person(s) who engage(s) in these games may not always be right or be the best employee, but has learned to work the system to make him/her the center of attention and project the appearance that they are the most important employee in the workplace.”—Georgette

“Unnecessary waste of time. Losing revenue; limiting execution. There should be a course in politics in the workplace. Not everyone likes to work in a manipulative environment and is wired to

play games and present themselves as suck ups, pretending to do a job they cannot!”—Catherine

“The idea of politics in the workplace immediately conjures up a pejorative image of someone who is trying to get ahead based on ‘schmoozing’ versus merit. We have all worked with that person. . . the one who seems to have no substance yet continues to have more and more influence, making you wonder ‘who exactly do they have pictures of doing what?’”—Stefanie

From these responses, it is easy to see that workplace politics and women often don’t mix well! You can definitely sense the anger and frustration. They express a very strong sentiment of trickery and manipulation.

Marilyn Tam, who has been CEO of Aveda Corp., president of Reebok Apparel and Retail Group, and vice president of Nike Inc., agrees: “Political savvy has a negative connotation because people seem to think that being politically savvy means that you’re somewhat sly. Anytime the topic of workplace politics comes up, there seems to be this perspective that there is personal gain involved and it is trying to get something out of the other person instead of understanding it’s about human nature. There seems to be a feeling that if we’re politically savvy, we must not be leading with our skillset and knowledge and experience. It’s almost like cheating.”

Linda Descano, managing director and global head of Content & Social, North America Marketing, Citibank, North America, and president and CEO of Women & Co., affirms Marilyn’s point of view: “Office politics doesn’t need to be dirty or require that you check your integrity at the door. In fact, your integrity is a tremendous asset in building followership. And, workplace politics doesn’t have to be about win-lose competition, but collaborative competition through which you elevate yourself as well as others.”

Cheryl, one of my LinkedIn respondents, saw the advantage of politics on one level, but also how power and influence was misused on another: “I have seen politics at the micro and macro levels of the company. I have seen leaders use politics successfully to get what they want for the benefit of their team, organization, or the company. It can range from support from upper management to funding and resourcing for a new project or program. Or even acceptance of a new policy that has been rooted deep in the company culture for years. I have also witnessed and been the brunt of negative politics where leaders choose a side and stick to it no matter what the cost just for the sake of keeping their ego intact.”

What do you observe in your organization? Can you see positive as well as negative politics going on? You can learn a lot from this observation. Find positive role models who exhibit the qualities you would like to emulate. How do they behave and communicate? How do they build influence and use their power? Let negative politics be a lesson for you as well. What type of behavior do the outright manipulators exhibit that turns everyone off?

The second question I posed to the groups was, *“How do you feel about people who are politically savvy and work the system?”* Some of the responses clearly indicate the point of view that people who work the politics are self-serving:

“Some people just know how to play the game. It could be an inborn skill, learned skill, birth date, seniority, the cookies, friendship, coffee making, or they just self-manage very well. I just can’t stand this type of creature.”—Rosanna

“I feel discouraged many times because they often do the least work, or sabotage the harmony in the workplace with their constant need to ‘be the best’ when the bosses are around.”  
—Elizabeth



“It is very discouraging to try to work with the people who make their own rules. They are constantly putting themselves ahead of other employees to make the boss believe that they are number one and, on the side, will do anything necessary to sabotage the work of any coworker that they may take a dislike to.”—Georgette

Here are some positive responses. When women view using political savvy for the greater good of the team and the company, they acknowledge that it can be worthwhile and, in fact, beneficial.

“If you are politically savvy for the best interest of the company, and not stomping all over ethics and morals, then perhaps it is acceptable.”—Catherine

“Early in my career I was naïve enough to think that as long as you did a great job, politics should not matter. Hah hah! At this point I actually ‘admire’ people who are politically savvy and work the system if they also deliver results; realize that it is just a means to an end and support the people who deliver results as well. Being politically savvy and working the system does NOT mean you do not treat people well along the way and have a positive impact on your firm and those around you. The best ‘politicians’ I have seen in the workplace are also regarded as some of the best leaders (not managers, leaders) I worked with and remain some of the people I would be willing ‘to follow into the fire’ any day.”—Stefanie

“If their hearts and heads are in the right place, then I think being politically savvy can have its benefits not only for employee morale, but it can take a company forward. When people put others before self, being politically savvy, especially in male

dominated organizations, the benefit can be far and wide. Others who have malicious intent and are politically savvy can wreak havoc on an organization, individuals, and a company's bottom line because their intentions are selfish and not for the greater good. They commit unethical atrocities or treat really great people poorly and because they can work the system, they get away with it for decades."—Cheryl

The next question I asked was, "*What specifically bothers you about these people?*"

"It amazes me that some individuals can continue to blatantly use their power position to wreak havoc and upper management or peers do nothing about it. Individuals who get caught on the wrong side are too afraid to do anything and if they do, it can end up destroying a career. Individuals with such intent truly believe they are above the law and do not see their actions as bad which is also bothersome. It is interesting to me that politics are everywhere. I see it in small teams who refuse to accept new employees into their inner circle despite huge talent. At a company level where leaders are seen from those below them as a cancer in the organization but those above continue to raise them to higher levels. Our country is a great example of how bad the aftermath can be if the intentions are bad and they go unchecked."—Cheryl

"I seem to always fall for their tricks."

"Everything. They can be very vindictive and seem to have a 'God' complex."

"Not a good use of time."

"I get irate thinking about the number of people with whom I have worked that are more concerned about their own positioning than their impact on the firm or the people with whom they work. The people who are 'political' solely to advance their own cause and are willing to throw anyone around them under the proverbial bus at a moment's notice . . . while good, well-intentioned people are unmotivated, or even worse, lose their jobs just because they have not played the game."

My next question was, *"Do you admire the people who are politically savvy and know how to work the system?"*

"Not in the least. I see this personality as all about self."

"No. Karma is evil—what comes around goes around."

"Definitely not. I am who I am and have a great deal of hard work behind me getting to this point in my life without playing games. (Seems like that was my downfall)."

"NO—How can you admire anyone that works the system and is disrespectful? My father was a SWAT Team Commander. He put the first SWAT Team together in the early 70s, and was praised for his concise training, his efforts, and successful in what it truly means to be tactical. He also taught me to walk through life and behave with grace, dignity, and integrity. How is politically savvy and working the system dignified? Criminals work the system, there is no grace, dignity, or integrity in this."

Here, however, is one different response. This woman recognized what a leader can accomplish with political skill and admired her manager's ability to use this skill well to influence others for the greater good of her team and her organization.

"I once worked for a manager who was incredible at politics. She could walk into a room of 'good old boys' and completely turn them from against even listening to her to having them believe it was their idea. The great thing about this leader was that she put others before self. She didn't care who got credit for her ideas but that they got support, funded, and moved forward at the delight of her organization. This type of politically savvy leader you can't help but admire."

Do you know someone like this in your organization that has the savvy and skills to influence others? As I mentioned previously, make a note of how they achieve their influence; how they communicate; how they behave; who they have close relationships with. This person can be a great role model for you!

Now granted this quick survey represents a small sample of professional women, but I also get similar responses when I ask these questions in my live workshops. The overwhelming response about workplace politics is negative. Pay close attention to this! It is this very sentiment that prohibits you from seeing the benefit of working the politics in a positive and constructive manner.

Timi Hallem comments on this from the perspective of a female attorney:

"There are some women who are suck-ups. And there are some men who are suck-ups, and that's life, right? I think it was worse when I was starting out in the 80s because, my perception then was that the men had grudgingly come to accept women, but the women they liked the best were the most passive; who would do whatever they asked them to do and who never made any trouble, never made any waves. And I was not in that group. So ultimately, I made waves if I couldn't politick my way into what I needed. But people who don't understand office politics are completely short-changing themselves. Because it matters for men and it matters

even more in my view for the women. And the refusal to see that is a huge mistake.”

The majority of women I've asked about workplace politics view the people who work the system for their benefit as political animals. They are seen as manipulative, self-serving “suck-ups” who waste everyone's time. But the fact of the matter is that these manipulative suck-ups have no savvy at all! Their blatant misuse of relationships for their own benefit is proof that they are not socially astute. Politics can be utilized in a positive manner to help you achieve your goals.

Politically savvy individuals work the system in a subtle manner. They are often behind the scenes building relationships of trust and influence. They are not self-serving. They are using their relationships for the greater good of everyone. This sets them apart from the outright manipulators that give office politics a bad name.

“Politically skilled individuals not only know precisely what to do in different social situations at work: they also know exactly how to do it in a manner that diffuses any potentially manipulative motives.”<sup>9</sup>

I also asked my LinkedIn groups, *“Does your organization promote people solely based on performance?”* All of the respondents agreed that this was NOT the case.

This puzzles me. If you know this to be true, that the principles of meritocracy are not always upheld, why would you not seek out the people and information that will positively influence your career? Why would you continue to believe that your work alone will get you ahead? Why would you not embrace the politics to learn how best to navigate and realize your ambition?

Politics is everywhere.

Sure, we sometimes get disgusted by the manipulators in our workplace as well as national and local politicians. Around election time, we are turned off by the candidates' posturing, and we get tired of their commercials and the endless debates. But what we

don't see is that politics is ever present in our own lives as well and we use it every day to further our cause or personal goals on some level.

Let's take a look at some examples.

It's a girl's night out. You are meeting five of your good friends for dinner at a local restaurant. Do you notice how you and your friends jockey for position at the table? Who sits next to whom? Who shares information with whom? Maybe you choose to sit next to someone because you have some juicy information or gossip to share that you feel will strengthen your friendship with that person. Perhaps you feel on a subconscious level that your information positions you as someone with personal power by being "in the know." Yes—this is politics!

Now I ask you to observe your child at school or at play. Do you notice how certain children play together and avoid others? Aren't bullies seeking power over others? Do you see how children will try to influence the teacher? Maybe they bring in little gifts to get positive attention. Children are very savvy about getting the teacher's attention by exhibiting either exceptional behavior or outright bad behavior. All of this is politics! Even at a young age, children leverage their power and influence for their personal gain or some goal.

It's human nature and it's politics. We use our power and influence every day with our friends and family.

Why are we surprised that there are politics in the workplace?

Ask yourself the five questions I asked my LinkedIn groups:

1. What comes to mind when I think about politics in the workplace?
2. How do I feel about the people who are politically savvy and work the system?
3. What specifically bothers me about them?

4. Do I admire them? Why or why not?
5. Do I work in an organization that promotes solely on performance?

Do you have political will? Are you willing to see the benefits of positive politics? What is your mind-set? Are you willing to engage? Are you willing to learn how to use politics in a positive manner to help you achieve your career goals?

Be honest in your responses to determine if you have a bias against politics. Here's the reality: If you are ambitious, your avoidance of the politics sabotages your efforts to succeed. If you view politics as evil and therefore ignore it, you are setting yourself up as a victim—a victim of potential landmines and blindsides.

If you have a negative belief about workplace politics, work on shifting your mind-set. This is a critical first step! Politics is a fact of life. It's everywhere. When you accept the reality of politics in the workplace and take the time to identify and shift your attitude, then you are ready to navigate the system and position yourself for advancement.

Reframe it. Positive politics is an invaluable tool for you to survive and thrive in the workplace. The consequence of avoiding it is a not only a lack of advancement, but also the increased probability of being blindsided at some point in your career.

Marilyn Tam offers a great tip on how to shift your mind-set. "I say to women if I told you now that you need to learn this software program or this new device to be good at your work, will you do it? They all say, 'Yes, of course. That's part of my work.' And then I'll say this is also part of your work. So if you shift your thinking about some of these other things (the political skills such as networking, promotion, etc.) as being part of your work, everything shifts.

"Honestly, don't think of it as politics. Think of it as relationships. And when you think of it as relationships, you're not doing

something that is bragging or boastful or negative or manipulative. You are doing something that is benefiting everyone in the organization because you are sharing and understanding how we can collectively come together in a way that serves.”

Here’s the good news! Political savvy is a skill not a trait and, therefore, you can learn this. What I’ve observed in my own corporate experience as well as speaking with hundreds of women is that political savvy is often learned over time and sometimes as the result of a traumatic workplace experience. Many women, including myself, were forced to see the impact of politics when they were blindsided by it. Until this point in time, they were solely focused on their performance. They knew that office politics existed, but chose to ignore it. They considered it a waste of time until their very survival depended on it.

Marilyn Tam describes a situation early in her career that prompted her to learn the importance of politics. As a senior leader in the company, Marilyn negotiated a severance package with the COO and CFO for an employee who was leaving the company. He was not leaving under the best terms but he did resign of his own accord. Marilyn believed the package was fair and everyone involved was in agreement with the terms. However, she overheard a conversation between the COO and this employee where the employee asked for more compensation. To her dismay, the COO blamed Marilyn for the terms of the agreement. He told the employee that it would be okay with him to offer a more generous package, but his boss (Marilyn) would never agree to offer more. Marilyn was shocked and blindsided by this. The COO apparently had the need to look like the good guy.

“I was so shocked. I didn’t know what to say. Because it was so different from everything I had experienced to that point. And I’d known both of these people for three years. It wasn’t a new relationship. So what it brought to mind was, ‘I wonder what I really don’t know.’



“Until that point I still was naïve to think that everybody would just do what’s right and work together and have the common mission of the company in mind. Then I realized that well, maybe not. Maybe some people want only the highest good for themselves.

“It really made me much more aware of the power and the danger, if you will, of ignoring politics. And that it’s really part of human nature. It’s part of every human interaction. And it has to be addressed or else it can be very destructive to the whole organization as well as to the people involved. It really brought me into the awareness more and gave me the incentive to truly address that up front: private agendas, public agendas, company agendas, or global agendas.”

Political savvy can also be learned over time with the use of keen observation and listening skills. A mentor or coach can help you to develop sensitivity to the culture of the organization before you step on a landmine.

In her research on this topic, Lisa Mainiero interviewed 55 high-profile executive women in the 1980s to determine the role corporate politics played in their career histories. Her article, “On Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Political Seasoning of Powerful Women Executives,” is the result of her interviews about their involvement in workplace politics. Most of the women interviewed felt that “politics” was a dirty word and did not admit to engaging in the politics.

Mainiero stated, “A careful analysis of the career histories of these women, however, showed that they developed a sensitivity to corporate politics that belied their comments. As they recounted key developmental events in their careers, it became clear that not only were these women astute observers of their corporate cultures, but they had an ability to build alliances and partnerships that were unequaled among their peers.”<sup>10</sup> In essence, they became politically savvy over time.

My interview with Linda Tarr-Whelan confirmed this. Linda, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Commission on the

Status of Women during the Clinton Administration, and deputy assistant to President Jimmy Carter for Women's Concerns in the White House, said "I believe that relationships are primary and all else is secondary and thinking of this as 'politics' never really occurred to me."

What is involved in learning to be politically savvy? Using Mainiero's work as a guide, I have identified four stages of development. In each of these stages, I have indicated specific characteristics and milestones that will help you figure out where you are in this process and where you need to go to further your savvy skills.

## ***STAGE 1: NAÏVE NANCY***

Stage 1 I call Naïve Nancy. Observing Nancy in the workplace, you will immediately notice that she's completely focused on her work. In fact, if you want to find her, she is most likely in her cubicle or office.

She's not tuned into or even aware of the politics. Unaware of unwritten "Rules of the Game"

- 100 percent work-focused
- Learns through positive/negative experiences

I can recall my own experience in this stage of development. I was interviewing for the CEO position at ServiceMaster and had been out to the corporate office in Downers Grove, Illinois, many times for interviews and psychological testing. I flew out for what was to be my final interview dressed in my "power" red suit. As I was waiting in the Human Resource office for my appointment, a woman sheepishly approached me and whispered to me that we (meaning women) don't wear red here. I knew that ServiceMaster

was a very conservative company, but I certainly was unaware of the unwritten rules of etiquette and why red would be considered inappropriate for women to wear. (I actually never got an answer to the “why” on this). The fact is there was an unwritten rule that I had no knowledge of and I broke the rule because of that lack of information.

You can be in Stage 1 at the very beginning of your career or when you transition to a new role or company and need to learn the rules of the game all over again. Then something occurs that throws you off guard and opens your eyes to the culture and decision-making process. At this point, you begin to move toward Stage 2.

## ***STAGE 2: GREAT WORK GRETA***

- Building a reputation for great performance
- Aware of who has the power and influence in the organization
- Understands the importance of relationships
- Focused on career advancement but does not yet have a plan to move forward
- Limited networking

In this stage, Great Work Greta sees the importance of developing her personal brand and creating visibility and credibility across the organization. She still works very hard, but now sees that relationships are also important for her advancement. However, she is not actively building relationships for her career or prioritizing this. She is also aware of the politics but does not yet engage. Greta recognizes that if she wants to get ahead, she needs to focus on her career, not just her work. She has yet to figure out yet how to fit this into her work schedule.

One of my clients, Katie, who works at a financial services firm managing a digital marketing platform, had a very successful track record yet was trapped in a business unit that had no advancement potential. As she was in Stage 2 of her development, I coached her to better understand her value proposition, and to identify and build a network across the organization so others could easily see her competence and leadership potential. Building these alliances became the focus of her political seasoning and self-promotion efforts. Her efforts transitioned from a laser focus on her work to an outreach to others.

### ***STAGE 3: STRATEGIC SARAH***

The next stage, Stage 3, is about becoming strategic.

- Learning delegation/management skills
- Building strategic relationships
- Seeking mentors/sponsors/coach
- Learning to talk about accomplishments

Strategic Sarah is looking at where she wants to go and creating a strategic plan to get there. Her plan includes building relationships with key stakeholders and influencers. Sarah is aware that if she wants to succeed, she needs to delegate to and empower her team and develop her own personal influence and self-promotion skills. In this stage, Sarah first recognizes the importance of working with a coach or finding a mentor and sponsor.

Many of my clients are in this third stage. They have established themselves as talented and hardworking and now realize that they need to work with their team to reach the next level of success. The work involves how to motivate and inspire the team; how to sell

their ideas to their supervisors, peers, and direct reports to achieve business outcomes—in other words, how to create influence and be recognized as a talented manager.

One of my clients, Katherine, contacted me to help her create more visibility and credibility for herself in the global financial services firm in which she works. Katherine describes herself as the “go-to person”—the person who gets things done. My interviews with her peers, direct reports, and supervisors confirmed that this was Katherine’s reputation in the organization. Though her performance was exemplary, she was perceived as more of a doer than a manager. Coaching her to empower and delegate to her team has improved her executive presence and therefore leadership potential. Helping her to identify and build relationships with the power people resulted in her identifying a sponsor and getting promoted twice in 18 months.

## ***STAGE 4: POLITICAL PAM***

- Using personal influence
- Mentoring others
- Maintaining credibility/visibility
- Leading and inspiring others

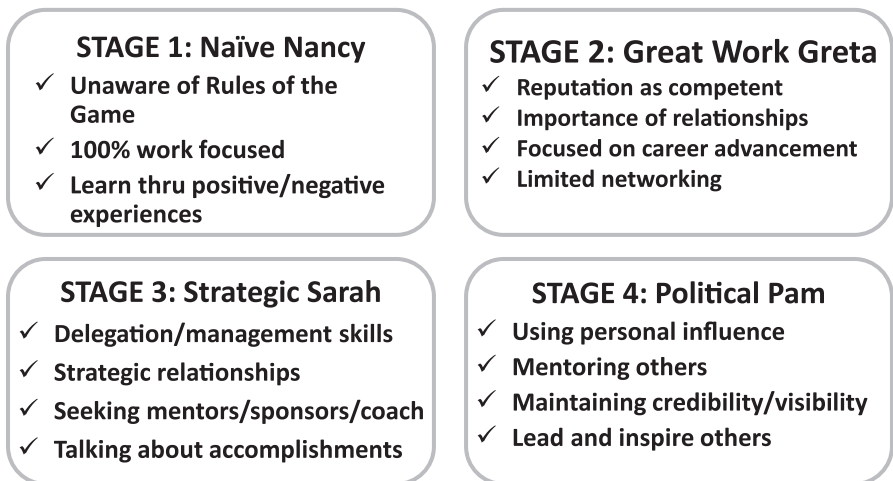
In Stage 4, Political Pam has reached a leadership position by leveraging her talent and hard work along with the relationships she has built across the organization. Now at the top of her organization, Pam sees politics as a way of maintaining her status, promoting her ideas, and helping others to move up the ladder. It’s more competitive on top and Pam spends much of her time and energy working the politics. She is a great role model for other

women in the company and mentors other men and women to achieve their goals.

My client, Diane, is at this stage. She is COO of a construction company. She worked her way up to senior leadership from an entry-level position. Her responsibilities keep her busy, but she recognizes that she needs to use her personal influence to maintain her status. She hired me as her coach to strengthen her relationship with the CEO and the other members of the leadership team. She offers to mentor others and she focuses much of her attention to her relationships, especially with the CEO. The coaching has helped her to develop a keen understanding of what he wants and needs, and she leverages this to position herself as an important member of the team and an asset to the company.

Where are you in terms of your political seasoning?

What stage best represents where you are right now (see Figure 1.1)? What do you need to do to move to the next stage of political savvy? Bear in mind, this is always in a state of flux. With a re-



**FIGURE 1.1** The Four Stages of Political Savvy

organization or new position, you might be thrown back to Stage 1 temporarily until you learn the new rules of the game.

## YOUR POLITICAL SKILL

The willingness to accept the importance of workplace politics for your career advancement opens the door for you to learn how best to navigate the political landscape. It prepares you to learn the political skill necessary to thrive in your organization.

There is a common misconception that politically astute people are born that way; that they have the innate talent to understand what motivates and interests others and can modify their behavior accordingly. I do believe that some people are more tuned into their environment and the needs and desires of others by nature, but this is a skill that can be practiced and learned.

Political skill is a matter of focus and intention. You can learn to pay attention to your environment. You can learn to be more sensitive to what it is that people are really saying; to become more aware of what their body language reveals about their thoughts and feelings.

Because it is a skill, not a trait, it can be learned. Can you learn this? YES!

“Political skill is an interpersonal style that combines social astuteness and the ability to execute appropriate behaviors in an engaging manner that inspires confidence, trust, and genuineness.”<sup>11</sup>

How would you rate your own political skill?

The *Political Skills Assessment* in Figure 1.2 will help you to measure your own political skill. There are 15 questions that represent three different categories: strategic networking, promotion, and political savvy.

	<i>Never or almost never true</i>	<i>Seldom true</i>	<i>Sometimes true</i>	<i>Often true</i>	<i>Almost always true</i>
1. I spend dedicated time at work each week networking with others.....	1	2	3	4	5
2. I know my value proposition and can comfortably talk about my accomplishments.....	1	2	3	4	5
3. I understand the way decisions are made in my organization. ....	1	2	3	4	5
4. I network to build allies and champions across the organization.....	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have a good rapport with most people. ....	1	2	3	4	5
6. I communicate effectively with people at all levels of the organization.....	1	2	3	4	5
7. I have strong relationships with decision makers and influencers in the organization.....	1	2	3	4	5
8. I have identified my power network; who I know and who I need to know to achieve my goals.....	1	2	3	4	5
9. I call on my network contacts to help me get things done and open doors for my advancement. ....	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am well known across the organization as a top performer.....	1	2	3	4	5
11. I have or have identified a potential mentor/sponsor.....	1	2	3	4	5
12. I readily promote the accomplishments of my team.....	1	2	3	4	5
13. I pay close attention to what type of behavior and communication is rewarded.....	1	2	3	4	5
14. I have communicated my career aspirations to my boss and my network. ....	1	2	3	4	5
15. I am tuned into the motivations and intentions of others....	1	2	3	4	5

FIGURE 1.2 Political Skills Assessment



Answer all the questions and use these guidelines to rate yourself based what best describes you:

- 1. Never or almost never true
- 2. Seldom true
- 3. Sometimes true
- 4. Often true
- 5. Almost always true

Once you complete all the questions, add up your score in Figure 1.3 for each of the three categories.

Scoring Guidelines

- A high level of competence in a category would be 20 to 25.
- A medium level of competence would be 15 to 19, and a low level would be below 15.

What have you discovered about yourself? Any surprises?

Assessment Scorecard

Category 1:  
**Strategic Networking**

Questions	Score
1.	_____
4.	_____
7.	_____
9.	_____
11.	_____
Total:	_____

Category 2:  
**Promotion/Personal Influence**

Questions	Score
2.	_____
5.	_____
10.	_____
12.	_____
14.	_____
Total:	_____

Category 3:  
**Political Savvy**

Questions	Score
3.	_____
6.	_____
8.	_____
13.	_____
15.	_____
Total:	_____

FIGURE 1.3 Political Skills Assessment Scorecard

## Strategic Networking

If you scored high in strategic networking, you are well on your way to moving your career forward. You have identified the key stakeholders and influencers and you are actively networking.

A moderate level of competency in this area might indicate a lack of understanding of who holds the power and influence over your career or a lack of commitment to reach out to these contacts.

A low score in networking most likely means you are still focused on doing the work and not paying attention to the relational skills you need to succeed.

## Self-Promotion/Personal Influence

If you scored high in this category, you understand your value proposition and are actively and intentionally promoting yourself and your team across the organization. You have a great reputation for solid performance. You are good at establishing rapport and building relationships of trust and using your personal influence.

A moderately high score might indicate the need for you to better understand how you contribute to the organization. It might also be reflective of your hesitancy to talk about your achievements.

A low score in this area means that you are most likely too focused on doing the work and believe that your work will speak for itself.

## Political Savvy

A high score in this category means you are tuned into the way decisions are made and who holds the power and influence. You are actively building relationships of allies and champions and possible mentors/sponsors.

A moderate score in this area means that you are probably aware of the politics but not actively engaged; not tuned into what motivates and interests other people. You are cognizant of how certain behaviors are rewarded.

A low score indicates a lack of awareness and engagement. There is a high probability of being blindsided by the politics.

## *IN THIS CHAPTER, WE HAVE LEARNED*

- ✓ The importance of understanding the politics of your organization to avoid any blindsides.
- ✓ The necessity of reframing your negative view of politics and embracing positive politics as a critical part of your career development.
- ✓ The four stages of political seasoning that help you identify where you are in the process and where you need to go to move your career forward.
- ✓ An assessment of your current political skill with special attention to self-promotion, strategic networking, and political savvy.

## *THE POLITICAL TOOLKIT: YOUR SECRET WEAPON TO COMPETE IN A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT*

To help women become more savvy, I've created the Political Toolkit. In the next chapters, you will learn each tool in the process. Mastering these tools will help you successfully navigate the politics in your organization and move your career forward.

The four stages of political seasoning demonstrate that political skills mature over time. We have also seen from the results of our Political Skills Assessment that some of our skills are stronger than others. The goal is to strengthen all your skills by using the tools in the Political Toolkit, and consistently use them to engage in positive office politics and avoid potential blindsides.

## *HERE ARE THE TOOLS YOU NEED IN YOUR POLITICAL TOOLKIT*

The first tool you need is a *Mirror*. A Mirror? How is that a political tool, you ask? You are going to learn how to use the Mirror for self-reflection in order to identify your value proposition. Chapter 2 describes how your value proposition is the unique way you do the work that contributes to successful business outcomes. Understanding your contribution is the foundation of savvy self-promotion. And authentic self-promotion is a necessary ingredient for political savvy. Articulating your value proposition to your network in subtle and effective ways is one of the most powerful ways to gain visibility and credibility.

The second tool in the Political Toolkit is a *Magnifying Glass*. In Chapter 3, we're going to use the Magnifying Glass to look carefully at your work environment and observe the dynamics. The Magnifying Glass assists you in developing the keen observation skills and focus necessary to understand the politics. It helps you to see beyond the organizational chart to determine who really has power and influence. This important tool helps you to figure out what people want and need in order to gain influence and build trusting relationships. The Magnifying Glass also gives you information about your company culture and any hidden rules that may affect your ability to succeed.

The third tool in the Political Toolkit is a *Pass Go and Collect \$200 Card*. Remember this from Monopoly? It was to your advantage to fall on this square and get that card because you advanced faster around the board and collected more money. Wouldn't you like the ability to move forward faster and receive more compensation for your career? The Pass Go Card is strategic networking for your career advancement. An expansive and strong network helps you avoid blindsides and positions you for success. No career is built in a vacuum. We need others to help us do our jobs better and to help us navigate successfully in the workplace. You will learn in Chapter 4 how to use this tool to identify the power grid in your organization; who has the power and influence; who are the key stakeholders and decision makers. You will map out your own power network and identify who you know and who you need to know to move up the ladder.

The fourth tool you need is a *Get Out of Jail Free Card*. This is the fastest and most efficient way to get to the top of your organization. The Get Out of Jail Free Card is sponsorship. A sponsor finds high-visibility projects for you and paves the way for your path to

leadership. They protect you and allow you to take risks. They promote you across the organization and provide introductions to other people with influence. You definitely want this card in your toolbox. How do you get it? In Chapter 5, you will learn how to position yourself to get a sponsor and identify who makes the best sponsor given where you are in your career and where you want to go.

You will learn how to ask for sponsorship and clarify expectations for the relationship.

A *GPS* is the last tool in the Political Toolkit. The GPS is executive coaching. An executive coach advises you how to use the other tools in your toolbox. They help you understand your unique value proposition. They assist you in communicating your value effectively and building strong relationships of trust. The coaching process helps you to identify your power network and look at your career strategically to forge relationships that will aid your professional growth. A coach will also help you identify and overcome any internal barriers and fears you might have that prevent you from reaching your goals. We will discuss in Chapter 6 how to find a coach and how to use them to reach your career goals.

Once you learn how to use these tools, you will have a road map for success. These tools have been used by hundreds of professional women to successfully navigate the realities of the workplace. Now it's your turn!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**B**onnie Marcus, MEd, is president of Women's Success Coaching, a company she founded in 2007 to assist professional women in successfully navigating the workplace and advancing their careers. She started her own corporate career at an entry-level position and worked her way up to the top of a national company. With 20-plus years of sales and management experience, Bonnie's extensive business background includes being president/CEO of a ServiceMaster company, and VP of Sales at Medical Staffing Network and at two other national companies in the health care and software industries. She has held executive positions in startup companies and Fortune 500 firms.

As an award-winning entrepreneur, a contributing writer for *Forbes* since 2010, and *MoneyInc*, and a much sought-after professional speaker, Bonnie shares her message globally through keynote speeches, live workshops, blogging, and her popular podcasts. Her passion is to help high-achieving women embrace their ambition and realize their leadership potential. In 2019, Bonnie was recognized as one of the Top 100 keynote speakers by Databird Business Journal.

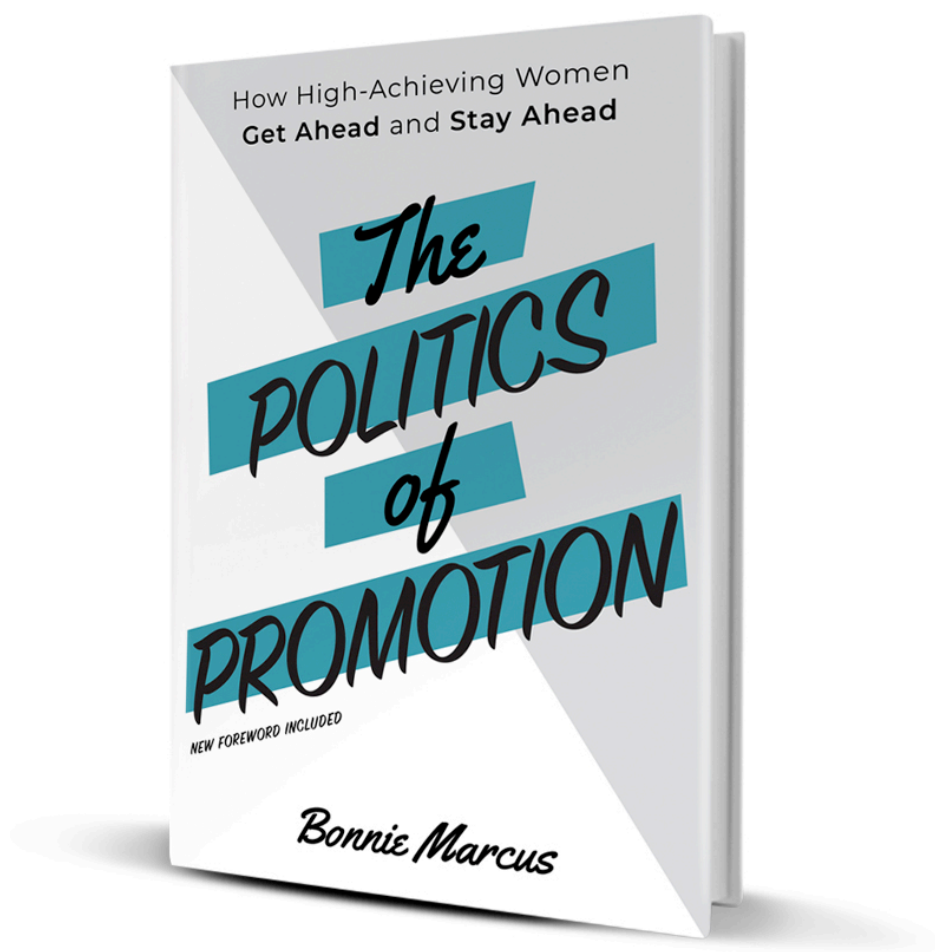
Forbes.com honored Women's Success Coaching three years in a row as one of the Top 100 Websites for Professional Women, stating, "Women's Success Coaching weighs in on the many building blocks of empowering women in business, from assertive communication to self-promotion to sensitivity training." A certified

executive coach, Bonnie has been honored as one of the Top 30 Coaches in the world from 2015–2019, by Global Gurus.

Bonnie received a BA in Sociology from Connecticut College and a M.Ed. from New York University. Her website is [www.BonnieMarcusLeadership.com](http://www.BonnieMarcusLeadership.com), and she can be reached by e-mail at [Bonnie@BonnieMarcusLeadership.com](mailto:Bonnie@BonnieMarcusLeadership.com) and on Twitter as [@selfpromote](https://twitter.com/selfpromote). Read her posts on Forbes.com at [www.forbes.com/sites/bonniemarcus](http://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniemarcus).



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