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INSIDE OUT

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HY DO PEOPLE OFTEN TALK ABOUT OFFICE POLITICS?

Martini: People talk about office politics because it is often impor-

tant in determining whether you succeed long-term in an organization. That being said, there is a black box associated with the topic; many people do not fully understand how office politics works and what it means for them and often feel helpless, particularly when things don't go their way at work. In my view, the intrigue lies in the fact that office politics is an inextricable part of one's experience in an organization and is critically important to understand, but is so often misinterpreted or ignored, in the hope that it will disappear. However, as long as there are people involved, there will be politics.

Susler: The workplace is an amalgam of people — those who want to get ahead, those who want to get along, people of tremendous intellect and drive and those who merely want to go along. Office politics exist in all workplaces, whether there are thousands of employees or only one. It is human nature that most strive to get ahead in the workplace, especially those filled with large numbers of bright, driven people. Office politics is really a derivative of the social contract.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT OFFICE POLITICS?

Martini: People often mistakenly give up the control they have regarding their professional fate by chalking up whatever happens to them to office politics, rather than taking ownership of the situation and responsibility for what they can meaningfully change. There will always be certain things we cannot change in our lives — and our working environment is no exception. However, we should not throw the baby out with the bath water by completely relinquishing the control we do have.

Another misperception is that you can rely solely on what people say and do in trying to figure out the politics in your workplace. There are other dimensions — one's attitude, motivations and personal agenda — that are essential to recognize and figure out with regard to those around you. You need to take a step back and understand what people say and do in the context of how they approach work so that you can better predict what they are going to do in any given situation as well as who their alliances are and how certain situations are likely to play out. The predictability factor is critical in determining how you should best react, if at all, to any given situation.

Susler: Other misperceptions are that it is all about manipulation and backstabbing, that you have to play dirty to get ahead and that you have to "win." None of these need to be the truth, and this approach ultimately leads to failure.

WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS YOU HAVE LEARNED ABOUT OFFICE POLITICS?

Martini: There are a few. First, it is important to recognize that office politics exists everywhere, and while each of us can contribute to trying to



PLAYING THE GAME

When 'The Office' becomes 'Game of Thrones'

By **CHRISTINA L. MARTINI** and **DAVID G. SUSLER**

make our environment a positive one, there are certain dynamics that are out of our control and which we may not be able to meaningfully change, at least in the short term. Thus, be realistic about whether the politics as it exists in your workplace is something you can successfully navigate and whether you can be happy and fulfilled at work.

Second, you need to acknowledge what I call "the games people play." Things aren't always what they appear to be; be cautious about what you believe, particularly when the information comes to you as hearsay. Understand there is usually a spin put on everything, either intentionally or unintentionally. This segues into another lesson learned — be careful what you say and do. You can be the straightest shooter there is, but if the people around you want to create drama, they may take something you say or do which is very straightforward and innocuous and spin and manipulate it to serve their purposes.

That's why it is really important to have at least one person at work whom you can completely trust, and who completely trusts you, so that you can share information and help each other navigate the political landscape. It's always good to have someone who can help you think through what's happening and how to handle certain people and situations and help you ensure things don't come back to bite you.

Susler: After my 2L summer, I asked my father (also a lawyer) about office politics. He said, "A

little bit of brown-nosing never hurt anyone; too much will kill you." I think this is the perfect guide to office politics. Another important lesson is that emotional intelligence is the key to successfully navigating office politics. You need to understand people, what makes them tick and make relationships with as many people in your organization as possible. Know who holds positions of authority and influence and get to know them, but be genuine and honest about it. "Game of Thrones," though couched as a medieval fantasy, is actually a great primer on office politics. [CL](#)

Christina L. Martini is a practicing attorney, author and columnist. She is chair of the Chicago intellectual property practice group and the national hiring partner of associate recruiting at DLA Piper and sits on its executive committee. She focuses on domestic and international trademark, copyright, domain name, internet, advertising and unfair competition law.

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To submit a question for future columns, e-mail questions.insideout@gmail.com