THE CONTROL OF DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After having studied this chapter and done the exercises, you should be able to do the following:

1. Understand how employee perceptions of political behavior influence whether the behavior is dysfunctional.

2. Describe the consequences of dysfunctional politics in the workplace.

3. Explain how managers can control dysfunctional political behavior.

4. Recognize what the individual can do to protect himself or herself against negative political tactics.

Top-level management at Custom Research, Inc., of Minneapolis was ecstatic when the firm won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, administered by the National Institute of Standards and Quality. The award meant that the company, a national market research firm, was recognized as a leader in providing quality research to its customers, and also had outstanding business processes.

The next step was to participate in the award ceremony to be held in Florida. A problem facing management was that it could afford to send only

50 of its employees from multiple locations to the big celebration. It was apparent that every employee wanted to attend the award ceremony. The choice of which 50 employees to send was difficult. One approach was to base the decision on seniority or job title, but this could be unfair. Many less-senior workers contributed heavily to performing quality research, and so did workers whose job titles might not indicate their contribution to quality. Management wanted to avoid showing favoritism in choosing employees for the Florida trip. The nomination of employees for the trip by managers and supervisors was therefore excluded as a method of choosing who would take the trip.

To be as fair as possible, top-level management then put every employee's name in a hat—including the president and the cleaning crew. It was the only way to make certain that every person at every level of the company had an equal chance to attend the celebration.[1] As a result, no employee could complain that "politics" decided which employees would get the perk of a trip to the national award ceremony.

Our final chapter in the book focuses on how the organization and the individual can control excessive, and therefore dysfunctional, organizational politics. First we study the perception of organizational politics because employee perceptions of the extent and type of political behavior often determine whether the behavior is dysfunctional. We then describe some of the consequences of dysfunctional politics that make its control a worthwhile effort. After that, we shift to a discussion of how managers can control dysfunctional politics, and how individuals can counterattack negative politics directed against them.

THE PERCEPTION OF DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Many workers express dissatisfaction with their jobs and companies because of what they perceive to be excessive politics. Phrases expressing these perceptions include, "This place is a political jungle," "I refused a job as a supervisor because I couldn't take the politics," and "I became a telecommuter so I could avoid the office politics." Dysfunctional politics are often in the eye of the beholder, so the eye or perception is essential in understanding the possible negative impact of political behavior on workers.

The importance of employee perceptions of political behavior has been the subject of many research studies. Researchers have found that perceptions of organizational politics are associated with (a) lower levels of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance, and (b) higher levels of job anxiety, and intention to leave the organization.[2] Here we look at several studies that illuminate how worker perceptions of organizational politics influence worker behavior.

Organizational and Individual Factors Associated With Perceptions of Politics

A study with 501 regular members, civilian members, and public servants of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police indicated that four situational factors were associated with employees perceiving their organization to be political. Male and female employees were more likely to perceive their organization as being political if they occupied lower job levels, and saw themselves as not having much autonomy or the authority to make decisions independently. A third contributing factor was seeing the workplace as low in formalization (many rules and regulations). The fourth factor contributing to perceptions of politics was a negative evaluation of the climate (or culture) of the organization.

Dispositional variables, or personality factors, also played a role in perceptions of politics. Workers who were more Machiavellian, and had a stronger external locus of control (blaming the environment rather than themselves), tended to view their organization as more political.[3] The implication here is that a person with ruthless tendencies who typically blames fate on personal outcomes is more likely to perceive the work environment as political.

A study conducted with 267 employed undergraduates and their supervisors investigated how feedback on performance influenced perceptions of organizational politics. The students worked an average of 30 hours per week. Perceptions of politics were measured by a questionnaire containing statements such as, "Promotions around here are not valued much because how they are determined is so political." A major finding of the study was that there was an inverse, or negative, relationship between the amount of feedback and perceptions of organizational politics. Specifically, when workers received high levels of informal feedback from their supervisors and coworkers, the workers were less likely to perceive the workplace as political. Supervisory feedback was found to be more influential than coworker feedback. An explanation offered

for the results is that when a supervisor gives inadequate or unclear feedback about performance expectations, decisions may appear much more politically driven.[4]

Political skill is another individual factor that might influence how badly a person is affected by perceptions of politics. A group of researchers investigated how political skill influences the amount of depressive symptoms a person develops when he or she perceives the work environment to be political. An example of a depressive symptom is, "Over the past month, things that usually don't bother me have bothered me." Study participants who scored low on political skill developed the most depressive symptoms when they perceived the climate to be highly political. In contrast, those participants with high political skill appeared to enjoy a political environment—and were more likely to have depressive symptoms in a nonpolitical work environment.[5]

The research of Gerald Ferris, G. S. Russ, and P. M. Fandt further explains the role of political skills in softening the potential dysfunctional effects of organizational politics. Individuals high in political skill may view an environment of heavy organizational politics as an opportunity to utilize that expertise instead of as a stressor. In contrast, individuals low in political skill, and therefore low in perceived control, are likely to see a highly charged political environment as a threat. As a result, these people are more likely to be stressed, as the study cited above confirms.[6]

The Impact of Perception of Organizational Politics on Job Performance

Employee age is a key individual or demographic variable affecting how the perception of politics might influence job performance. The age factor is tied in with the **conservation of resources theory**. This theory states that stress occurs with the loss of resources, and that events are stressful to the extent that they make demands that outstrip the resources used to meet those demands. Environmental conditions in the workplace, such as the perception of organizational politics, may threaten to (or actually) deplete resources such as status, position, or self-esteem.

Three studies were conducted with working adults to examine the interaction of perceptions of organizational politics and age on job performance. In other words, does a person's age influence whether his or her perception of politics will influence job performance? Results across the three studies strongly supported the hypothesis that higher perceptions of organizational politics tend to decrease the job performance of older workers. However, the

perception of politics did not influence the job performance of younger workers. The authors of the study suggest that the older workers may have fewer resources than younger workers Part of the reason for the depletion of resources is that older workers have faced so much work stress over the years.[7]

Being young may help a person shrug off the impact of politics on performance, and being conscientious might have a similar effect. Data were collected from more than 800 employees in four organizations. A major finding was that when workers perceived average to high levels of organizational politics, the personality factor of conscientiousness was related to job performance. When workers perceived low levels of organizational politics, conscientiousness was not related to job performance. Similarly, perceptions of organizational politics were negatively related to job performance only among workers of average to low levels of conscientiousness.[8] A plausible interpretation of these findings is that a worker who is conscientious will usually not let organizational politics interfere with his or her job performance.

An instrument designed to measure symptoms of dysfunctional politics in the workplace is presented in Exhibit 10.1. Apply the instrument to any workplace familiar to you.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICS

The consequences of dysfunctional politics overlap with the perceptions of organizational politics because the impact of many political actions only exists in terms of how the actions are perceived. Suppose a division head appoints her favorite niece as a "special executive assistant," a position that carries high pay and a private office. The majority of people who perceive the division head's move to be nepotism will be upset, and perhaps experience job stress. Yet some people may perceive the promotion as making good business sense and not as political because promoting somebody you trust to a key position is sound business practice.

As just implied, a negative consequence of dysfunctional politics is distress for individuals. Many people experience distress, for example, when they are the victim of backstabbing, or when they lose out on a promotion because a rival was shrewd enough to lose to the boss in a golf match.

A high degree of organizational politics becomes dysfunctional when the political activity distracts the worker, and job performance suffers as a

Exhibit 10.1   Symptoms of Dysfunctional Office Politics (the DOOP Scale)

The 10 statements below concern ethics in interpersonal relationships on the job. The more frequently any of these actions take place, the more likely it is that the organization or organizational unit is beset with dysfunctional office politics.

1. A conflict between two or more persons or groups was resolved by who held the most power rather than what would have made sense and would have worked better.

2. A person or group "got even" in some way with another person or group.

3. Information about what was going on at work was withheld from a person or group.

4. Information was reported about a person or group that has been intentionally exaggerated, misconstrued, and/or made mostly untrue by some other person or group.

5. A person or group was led to believe one thing when another was clearly true.

6. A person or group agreed with another person or group solely to "keep the boat from rocking."

7. A person's or group's worthwhile efforts or initiatives were intentionally undermined.

8. Confidential or unfavorable information about a person or group was reported and/or released in order to gain a special advantage.

9. A person or group who looked at things differently and had different points of view was punished and/or silenced by another person or group.

10. An organizational decision was based on self-interest rather than what made sense and would have worked better.

consequence. The distraction is strongest when the person does not want to engage in political behavior.[9] Instead of concentrating on the job, the person might engage in countermaneuvers against the political players, such as retaliating against an accusatory e-mail. The political victim might feel compelled to send an e-mail explaining his or her side of the story.

Another type of distraction caused by organizational politics is too much focus internally and not enough externally on customers.[10] For example, a manufacturing supervisor might spend a couple of hours during the working day planning a territorial battle against the finance group. A better use of those hours might have been working on adding value for customers. Managers attempting to resolve political disputes may also divert too much attention from positive matters such as dealing with customers and developing strategy.

Two studies with a combined total of over 650 workers including 64 fire-fighters investigated the relationship between the perception of organizational politics and feelings of disengagement from the job. When workers who perceived considerable politics did not have much emotional support from their supervisors, they tended to become disengaged from their work. When emotional support was high, the tendencies toward disengagement were much less noticeable, despite the perception of politics.[11]

Excessive political behavior in organizations can also be dysfunctional because it slows down decision making. Many meetings end without a decision being made because opposing factions want the decision their way so their side looks stronger. At one chemical company, an ongoing debate raged regarding whether to manufacture a wood sealer that would last three to four years on most fences, decks, and porches. One side argued that the new sealer would be an enormous seller. The other side agreed, but said that the revenue would not compensate for the lost sales from people who purchased and applied wood sealer annually. In the meantime, a competitor entered the market with a thick, long-lasting sealer, and gained a sizable chunk of the market.

MANAGERIAL CONTROL OF DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICS

To control the negative consequences of politics, managers must minimize or eliminate dysfunctional organizational politics. A far-reaching strategy would be for managers to be aware of the factors contributing to politics as described in Chapter 1, and then minimize those conditions. For example, if the environment

is uncertain and turbulent, top-level managers might attempt to stabilize the environment by such measures as eliminating acquisitions and downsizings for two years. This approach would be helpful also because some of the ambiguity that fosters excessive politics would be eliminated. The suggestions for minimizing dysfunctional politics presented in this section and outlined in Exhibit 10.2 relate to some of the causes of politics, and also offer new perspectives.

Create a Prosperous Organization

An ideal approach to minimizing dysfunctional politics is to have a prosperous organization in which people can earn high compensation and be promoted without having to discredit other individuals and organizational units. When people are well compensated financially and are enthusiastic about their work, they tend to concentrate more on tasks and less on posturing. Behaviors such as backstabbing are more prevalent during periods of austerity, including downsizing.

Business writer Jared Sandberg provides an example of how growth and excitement can reduce political behavior. He observed a couple of years ago

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Exhibit 10.2   Managerial Control of Dysfunctional Organizational Politics

1. Create a prosperous organization.

2. Set good examples at the executive level.

3. Establish a climate of open communication.

4. Develop congruence between individual and organizational goals.

5. Minimize favoritism and have objective standards of performance.

6. Reward honest feedback.

7. Emphasize the use of teams to reduce self-serving behavior.

8. Threaten to discuss questionable information publicly.

9. Hire people with integrity and honesty.

that the knowledge-outsourcing industry in India was growing so fast that it had not yet fostered the level of backstabbing, turf wars, and stealing credit often found in mature industries. In fact, if a boss plays favorites in India, he or she will be reprimanded by an HR representative.[12]

Set Good Examples at the Executive Level

Organizational culture is a strong determinant of the amount and type of political behavior, and executives help to establish the culture. As a consequence, top-level management that sets a positive example of nonpolitical behavior will encourage nonpolitical behavior throughout the organization. Hundreds of examples of nonpolitical behavior could be cited, but here are two key such behaviors: (1) When filling a key position, the CEO conducts a company-wide internal search, rather than simply handing the position to a crony. (2) Workers who express constructive disagreement about the company strategy are not fired or demoted.

An example of how an executive might attempt to set the stage to decrease dysfunctional political behavior took place when Dieter Zetsche became CEO of DaimlerChrysler AG in 2005. The new CEO said that a gathering of dealers in Las Vegas was "a great chance to set the tone from the beginning," and to make clear that under his leadership "what counts is performance," not internal alliances.[13] (Zetsche is no longer CEO, and Chrysler has been sold, but his message is still valid.)

Establish a Climate of Open Communication

Dysfunctional politics often arise from uncertainty and insecurity. Assume that organizational members are informed truthfully about such matters as the criteria for promotion, whether a merger will take place, or whether a product line will be outsourced. Under these circumstances, they will be less likely to engage in excessive networking in the hopes of forming the right alliance, and discrediting others. Open communication is also helpful for letting everyone know the basis for allocating resources, thus reducing the amount of politicking.

The potential role of open communication in reducing dysfunctional politics is illustrated by the words of Susan Kropf. When she was named president and chief operating officer for Avon Products Inc., she was asked, "How

did you avoid being hurt by office politics?" Kropf replied, "I have never really been involved in office politics that much. I try to keep egos out of things and stay focused on doing the best job I can. I'm direct with people, and I let them know that I don't have any hidden agenda. When you demonstrate that, other people play back to you in the same way."[14]

Develop Congruence Between Individual and Organizational Goals

When individuals and organizations share the same goals, dysfunctional organizational politics will often be reduced. Sharing the same goals is referred to as **goal congruence**. If political maneuvering will interfere with the company and individuals achieving their goals, workers with goal congruence are less likely to engage in excessive political behavior. The strategy works much like profit sharing. If workers participate in the profits, they are less likely to waste resources. A political example is that if a marketing specialist wants the company to succeed, he or she is less likely to agree with a bad idea by the marketing head just to please the latter.

A study conducted by L. A. Witt with 1,200 workers in five organizations provides support for the importance of goal congruence as a way of decreasing political behavior that could be dysfunctional. Witt concluded that one way to approach the negative impact of organizational politics is to ensure that group members hold the appropriate goal priorities. In this way, they will have a greater sense of control over and understanding of the workplace, and thus be less affected by organizational politics.[15]

Minimize Favoritism and Have Objective Standards of Performance

For many people, favoritism is synonymous with dysfunctional politics, so any steps managers can take to lessen favoritism will decrease the climate of negative political behavior. Top-level managers not practicing favoritism themselves would be a starting point in minimizing favoritism. If group members believe that getting the boss to like them is much less important for obtaining rewards than good job performance, they will kiss up to the boss less frequently. In an attempt to minimize favoritism, the manager must reward workers who impress him or her through performance-related activities.

A standard antidote to excessive favoritism, as well as other forms of political behavior, is for the organization to maintain objective standards of

performance. People have less need to behave politically when their contribution can be measured directly, such as a product development specialist helping create a successful product, or a tech support specialist fixing difficult IT problems. Setting objective standards of performance is not so easy for managerial and professional jobs because subjective evaluations are often used to evaluate performance in these positions. For example, it requires considerable personal judgment to decide whether a public relations specialist has done an effective job of enhancing the reputation of the company. So the specialist would still need to work hard at pleasing his or her manager.

Reward Honest Feedback

A dysfunctional form of politics is for people to say positive things about programs and proposals just to avoid falling into disfavor with managers. To cite the most famous adage about organizational politics, more people will be willing to say that the "emperor has no clothes" if making this statement does not lead to punishment. A suggested way to get rid of yes-people is to reward those who offer you honest feedback, even if it is not what you want to hear. Managers must let people know that they are looking for the unvarnished truth. Here is an example: "Alan, the last thing I wanted to hear today was that we are going to miss another production target. But I had to know. It took some courage for you to come in here. I appreciate that."[16]

Emphasize Teams to Reduce Self-Serving Behavior

As suggested by Jonathon R. B. Halbesleben and Anthony R. Wheeler, organizations might rely on teams to reduce dysfunctional political behavior. Teams sometimes reduce self-serving behavior because the team members identify with the group and may therefore want to be good team players. Team members who act too strongly on their own behalf, such as stealing credit for ideas, risk discipline including ostracism from the group.[17] Although team structures may reduce some aspects of dysfunctional politics, many team members will still go out of their way to gain individual recognition and disparage others.

Closely related to focusing on team structures is top-level management fostering "we" thinking rather than "us against them." Workers throughout the organization should be told frequently that they are stronger working cooperatively rather than engaging in infighting.[18]

Threaten to Discuss Questionable Information Publicly

Dysfunctional politics can sometimes be constrained by a threat to discuss questionable information in a public forum. People who practice devious politics usually want to operate secretly and privately. They are willing to drop hints and innuendoes, and engage in other forms of backstabbing, providing they will not be identified as the source. An effective way to stop the discrediting of others is to discuss the topic publicly.[19] As the team leader, suppose a team member says to you, "I'm worried about Jeanne. She looks so rundown lately that I think her personal problems are beginning to interfere with her work." Using the technique of threatening to discuss questionable information publicly, you might say, "What you say sounds serious. I would like you to bring it up in a team meeting with Jeanne present."

In addition to the manager threatening public discussion of questionable information, workers throughout the organization should be encouraged to do the same. Team member A might inform team member B that team member C said he had terrible IT skills. Following the threat of open disclosure, B would say to A, "Enough of these accusations. Let's meet with C and talk about what she said about me."

Hire People With Integrity and Honesty

A proactive way to decrease dysfunctional political behavior is to hire people whose personality and past behavior predict that they will behave with integrity and honesty. Currently, this approach is emphasized in hiring CEOs and in selecting political appointees. The idea of this careful screening is to minimize the chances that the person will embarrass the company or the political party once in office. Personality testing for Machiavellian tendencies and a lack of conscientiousness can sometimes detect people who might engage in devious politics. Reference checking is likely to be more definitive, and the reference check should search for answers to questions such as: (1) Which type of office politics did this person use? (2) Might you tell me about the most devious things the candidate did during your acquaintance?

In addition to attempting to hire people with integrity, it is also helpful to describe expectations about what types of political behavior will not be tolerated. For instance, job candidates might be informed that making excessive use of e-mail to defend one's position or to criticize others, and turf wars are unacceptable behaviors.[20]

PROTECTING YOURSELF AGAINST NEGATIVE POLITICS

Another key aspect of the control of organizational politics is to defend yourself when you are the target of negative political tactics. Not being able to defend yourself against negative tactics directed at you can result in such negative consequences as day-by-day distress, lowered job performance, and a sullied reputation. Here we describe four ways of protecting yourself against negative tactics.

Understand Political Forces Within the Organization

As with controlling politics from the executive suite, a strong defense is awareness of political forces within the organization. As philosopher Plato advised about 2,500 years ago, "Those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber."[21] When workers understand that political forces exist, they are less likely to be distressed by negative politics. This phenomenon is referred to as the *antidote hypothesis* because knowledge helps overcome the problem of negative politics.[22] An awareness of political forces would encompass the type of information presented throughout this book, yet here is a specific example:

> You are making a PowerPoint presentation at a meeting. You have detected that one of the meeting participants is a Machiavellian who enjoys manipulating people by needlessly pointing to their mistakes. During your presentation, he interrupts to say, "I notice that you keep switching the font size on your headlines. What is the problem?" Instead of apologizing to the Machiavellian, you stand your ground and say, "You have made an interesting observation, and perhaps I will standardize my fonts in the future. For now, I would like you to follow the presentation despite the frequent changes in font size."

The point here is that you have observed that the Machiavellian is trying to upset you. Your approach acknowledges the criticism without you losing your cool or counterattacking.

Develop a Clean Record and a Positive Reputation

A major protection against negative politics directed toward you is to have a clean record and a positive reputation. The clean record is particularly useful in protecting against blackmail, such as another person threatening to disclose a kickback you receive unless you grant him or her a favor. Similarly, a

person who develops a positive reputation can more readily defend against negative accusations: His or her side of the story is more likely to be believed.

As part of developing a positive reputation, it is useful to document your side of the story on any problem or issue that could be used against you by a rival. Defending yourself in this manner is often referred to as *posterior protection,* but is unfortunately necessary in some highly competitive environments.[23] A loan specialist in a subprime mortgage operation might believe that a particular loan is too risky, even for a company specializing in high-risk mortgages. The specialist might document his or her side of the story, mentioning his or her opposition to the loan. In this way, a Machiavellian in the office cannot blame the specialist if the loan fails.

Developing a good reputation helps a person defend against dysfunctional politics in another important way. With a good reputation, a person has more economic independence. A person with an excellent reputation more readily develops an external network that facilitates finding new employment should he or she lose out in a political battle. A manager might perceive a talented person as a rival, and therefore "tap" him or her to be on the next downsizing list. The person with a good reputation can more readily bounce back from an unwarranted job loss of this type.

Extend an Olive Branch to Rivals

A straightforward approach to defending oneself against attacks by rivals is to make peace with and befriend them. In this way, it is possible that the person attempting to discredit or manipulate you will cease the hostilities. In some cases, it is almost hopeless to win over an enemy, yet extending an olive branch is usually worth a try. Career coach Deborah Brown-Volkman says, "It's harder to be mean to someone you like."[24]

You will recall the example of the person who criticized the variation in font size during a PowerPoint presentation. The person being criticized might meet with the criticizer later, and say, "I enjoy working with you even though you go a little heavy on the criticism. What suggestions do you have so we can work better together?"

Confront Backstabbers

Much has been written in the business press about confronting backstabbers because backstabbing is perhaps the most widespread form of dysfunctional politics. Almost all of the advice centers on calmly and firmly confronting the

person who the evidence indicates is backstabbing you. A face-to-face confrontation is usually the best approach to dealing with the backstabber. Even if the confrontation does not repair the damage, talking can prevent resentment from building up and make you feel better. Confrontation may surprise your attacker, who probably assumes that you have not heard the negative things said about you.[25]

Treat the backstabbing incident like a business problem to be solved, instead of getting into an emotional tirade. Present the details in a manner such as, "You have been telling our boss and others that I ignore customer needs when I make suggestions for business process improvement. I want to know why you are criticizing me to others. Let's talk about the problem." The backstabber will sometimes deny having made the criticism, yet will nevertheless discontinue the behind-the-back negative comments.

A proactive approach to dealing with backstabbers is to inoculate yourself against them by expressing genuine admiration wherever you can.[26] In a sense, you build social capital that decreases the likelihood of a negative political actor making you a target. Find honest ways to compliment coworkers—even those you like the least. You might send e-mails to potential backstabbers complimenting them on something that went well, such as having received a recognition award. The person you praise is less likely to look for ways to diminish your standing in the company or unit.

Another perspective on dealing with backstabbers is to recognize your contribution to being backstabbed. Jerry B. Harvey reasons that backstabbing always occurs with the help of the person being slighted. "It is clear that backstabbing is not a crime committed by a solitary individual acting in isolation," Harvey writes. You need to confront yourself about your role in the process of being backstabbed.[27] For example, if you had not said negative things about a second party, the third party would not have had the ammunition to backstab you. As stated above, with a clean record you have less to fear about being attacked by negative politics.

SUMMARY

Employee perceptions of political behavior have been widely studied. One study found that employees were more likely to perceive their organization as political when (1) they occupied lower-level positions, (2) they saw themselves as having limited autonomy, (3) the workplace had low formalization, and (4) the employees had a negative evaluation of the culture. Also, workers who were more Machiavellian and had an external locus of control saw more

politics. One study found a negative relationship between the amount of feedback and perceptions of political behavior. Another study found that workers with good political skill were less likely to suffer depressive symptoms as a result of perceiving organizational politics.

Results across three studies indicated that higher perceptions of organizational politics tend to decrease the job performance of older workers, whereas the effect was not found for younger workers. Another study indicated that conscientious employees do not experience lower job performance when they perceive average-to-high organizational politics. Perceptions of politics were negatively related to performance only among workers of average-to-low conscientiousness.

Dysfunctional politics can lead to distress for individuals. A high degree of organizational politics becomes dysfunctional when the political activity is distracting, resulting in lower job performance. Too much politics can also lead to an internal focus rather than paying enough attention to customers. Too much organizational politics can lead to employee disengagement when employees do not receive much emotional support from the supervisor. Excessive political behavior can also slow down decision making.

Suggestions for managerial control of dysfunctional politics include: (1) Create a prosperous organization with ample resources; (2) set good examples at the executive level; (3) establish a climate of open communication; (4) develop congruence between individual and organizational goals; (5) minimize favoritism and have objective standards of performance; (6) reward honest feedback; (7) emphasize teams to reduce self-serving behavior; (8) threaten to discuss questionable information publicly; and (9) hire people with integrity and honesty.

Suggestions for protecting yourself against negative politics include: (1) Understand political forces within the organization; (2) develop a clean record and a positive reputation; (3) extend an olive branch to rivals; and (4) confront backstabbers.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Visualize any place in which you have worked where you perceived the environment to be political. What specifically led you to the perception that the environment was political?

2. When subordinates complain about excessive politics, one CEO tells them, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." What does this executive mean, and what do you think of her advice?

3. Explain how a barista at Starbucks might experience goal congruence with the company.

4. Give two examples of objective performance standards in your field that would be useful in minimizing political behavior.

5. Reflect back on several teams you have been part of, either on the job or in school. To what extent was it true that team members tended to minimize self-serving behavior?

6. Identify several behaviors a person might engage in so he or she would be perceived as not engaging in excessive politics?

7. Give two examples of opening lines you might use in a conversation designed to confront a coworker who you heard was backstabbing you.

CASE STUDY: THE NIGHTMARE IN THE LOGISTICS DEPARTMENT

Larry Smits was happy to join the distribution department of his company as a logistics specialist. His position centered on keeping track of shipments to customers and from vendors. A distribution specialist works extensively with computers to track shipments, but part of the job description involves telephone and face-to-face contact with company insiders and outsiders. As Larry enthusiastically explained his new job to his girlfriend, "Here's a great opportunity for me. I'll be using a sophisticated software system, and I'll have lots of contact with a variety of people. I'll be talking to marketing executives, purchasing agents, truckers, package-delivery people, and office assistants.

"Equally good, I'll be learning about a very important part of the business. If the company doesn't ship goods to customers, we can't collect money. And if we don't receive shipments of supplies that we need, we can't produce anything ourselves."

During the first four months on the job, Larry's enthusiasm continued. The job proved to be as exciting as he anticipated. Larry got along well with all his coworkers and developed his closest friendship with Rudy Bianchi, a senior distribution specialist. Rudy said that since he had several more years' experience than Larry, he would be willing to help him with any job problem he encountered. One day Larry took Rudy up on his offer. Larry was having a little difficulty understanding how to verify the accuracy of tariffs paid to several European countries. Part of Larry's

job was to make sure the company was paying its fair share of tariffs, but no more than necessary. Larry sent Rudy an e-mail message asking for clarification on three tariff questions. Rudy answered promptly and provided Larry with useful information.

When Larry next saw Rudy in person during lunch, he thanked him again for the technical assistance. "No problem," said Rudy. "I told you that I'm always willing to help a buddy. By sharing knowledge, we multiply our effectiveness." Larry detected a trace of insincerity in Rudy's message, but later thought he might be overreacting to Rudy's colorful way of expressing himself.

Several days later, Larry was reviewing a work assignment with his supervisor, Ellie Wentworth. She said to him, "How are you coming along with the problems you were having understanding how to verify tariffs? That's a key part of your job, you know."

Larry explained to Wentworth that he wasn't having any real problems, but that he had asked for clarification on a couple of complicated rates. He also pointed out that he quickly obtained the clarification he needed. Larry thought to himself, "Oh, I guess Ellie must have misinterpreted a comment by Rudy about my clarifying a few tariff rates with him. I doubt Rudy would have told our boss that I was having trouble. Why should I be paranoid?"

One week later, Rudy stopped by Larry's cubicle. At the moment, Larry had the classified ad section of the *Los Angeles Times* on his desk. "Are you job hunting, Larry? You're a rising star in our department. Why look elsewhere?"

"I'm not job hunting," said Larry. "I was just curious to see what kind of demand exists for logistics specialists. It's just part of my interest in the field. It's reassuring to know we're part of a growing profession."

"That's a great answer," said Rudy. "I was just pulling your chain a little anyway."

A week later, Ellie was reviewing some work assignments with Larry. As the discussion about the work assignment was completed, Ellie said, "I think highly of how you are progressing in your job Larry, but I want to make sure of one thing. Before we give you another major assignment, I want to know if you are happy in your job. If for any reason, you are planning to leave the company, please let us know now."

"What are you talking about?" said Larry with a puzzled expression. "I intend to be with the company for along, long time. I can't imagine what gave you the impression that I am not happy here."

As Larry left the office, he was furious. He began to wonder if some-one might be spreading malicious rumors about him. He muttered silently, "It couldn't be Rudy. He's supposed to be my friend, my mentor. But I have to get to the root of this problem. I feel like I'm being sabotaged."

Case Study Questions

1. What devious technique might Rudy, or another coworker, be using against Larry?

2. What motivation might a coworker have for raising questions about Larry's job knowledge and loyalty to the company?

3. How should Larry deal with his suspicions?

4. How effectively has Ellie dealt with her two concerns about Larry?

5. In what ways is Rudy a backstabber?

SOURCE: Reprinted with permission from DuBrin, A. J. (2004). *Applying Psychology: Individual and Organizational Effectiveness,* p. 252. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

POLITICAL SKILL-BUILDING EXERCISE 10

Confronting the Backstabber in the Logistics Department

The case about the nightmare in the logistics department serves as the background material for this role-play. One student plays the role of Larry Smits, who recently joined the logistics department. Another person plays the role of Rudy Bianchi, the supposedly friendly helper. Larry begins to think that it is Rudy who is spreading those malicious rumors about him. In the role-play scenario, Larry decides to have a "discussion" with Rudy about what has been happening. Larry is quite upset, yet he has no proof that he is being backstabbed by Rudy, and Rudy is defensive about having backstabbed Larry.

Observers of the role-play will look for Larry's confrontation skills, as well as whether the problem appears to be resolved. Look to see if it appears that Larry and Rudy will be able to salvage a working relationship.