

## Leadership Tips, March 2005

### How to navigate office politics and avoid getting caught on the “wrong” side.

(Feel free to forward this e-mail or use it for a team discussion.)

A variety of values, standards, and cultural differences sometimes manifest themselves in the form of office politics. When this happens, workers sometimes spar off against each other. As a business professional, you don't want to get caught in the winds and tides of politics. Here's how to stay clear:

- **Avoid camps.** Your safest route is down the middle, taking sides in neither camp.
- **Avoid cliques.** A clique is a small camp that does not have any direct opposition. Most cliques are composed of a small circle of people who stick together. You can see cliques at work during breaks and at lunch. Your challenge is to get along equally well with everyone.
- **Avoid critics.** Many critics are experienced people who criticize their job, the organization, their boss, their coworkers, or their customers. Be polite, but don't be taken in. Above all, don't let yourself be identified as a critic.
- **Avoid gossip and backbiting.** It can be tempting to get caught up in office gossip and office politics. Most people want to feel included and part of the group, but be cautious about sharing personal information. What you share could be used against you in the future. Limit conversations to work-related or neutral topics, and never discuss your salary or other confidential information (about yourself or others) with coworkers.

What to do when someone tries to gossip:

Ask yourself, “Is this person really trying to solve a problem or is he just complaining?”

- If he is trying to solve a problem, hear him out. Then ask: “Have you talked to the person or to your supervisor? If he says “no,” ask him if he will. You may even offer to go with him.
- If she is just complaining, you can stop her by saying: “I'm uncomfortable and don't want to be in the middle.” Or, “Could we talk about something else?” Or, “I have a tight deadline. Let's get together later.”

Do what you can to remove yourself from the situation. Just listening and staying quiet could be interpreted as agreement with the gossip. Honor your boundaries and either leave or stop the conversation.

## **Be a Problem Solver, Not a Problem.**

Many of us try to ignore or avoid problems or even complain or blame others. Being able to resolve disputes fairly strengthens relationships and establishes you as a skilled professional.

Here are some tips:

- Let others know when you have a problem or issue with them.
- Keep a neutral tone of voice, approach them privately, and show that you are open to discuss things.
- Set up a meeting at a mutually convenient time.
- Practice using “I” messages. For example, say, “I felt uncomfortable in the team meeting when you interrupted me.” Avoid saying, “You made me upset by cutting me off.”
- Listen. Let the other person fully express his side of the problem.
- Summarize to make sure everyone has the same understanding.
- Establish goals and expectations.
- Agree on the action plan with timelines.
- Have a formal follow-up to discuss what is working, what has been difficult, and what you have each learned in working through this issue. See if you need a mid-course correction.

Conflict and problems are not necessarily bad. It’s okay to disagree as long as both people are willing to listen and hear the other side. Regardless of how much you might feel offended or unfairly treated, a true professional learns to keep calm.

Let us know if you would like more information about our team building, communication, and conflict management workshops and services.

Warmly,

Marilyn and The Consulting Team

**(Contents of this newsletter taken from, *Developing as a Professional*, by Dr. Marilyn Manning and Patricia Haddock. Please e-mail us if you would like an autographed copy, \$13.95 + shipping. The book is also available through Amazon.com.)**

**Drawing:** Send us an e-mail describing your favorite "Communication Tip" by April 1st and your name will be entered in a drawing for a copy of *Developing as a Professional*.

**We would like to congratulate last month's winner, Connie Doyle, from University of California, Riverside.** Here is Connie's communication tip: Reward staff for completing a project, receiving kudos from a customer, and such, with a hand-written thank you note, lunch, or small gift (\$5 Starbucks card, for example). It's a small gesture, but it works well to increase staff morale and self-esteem, and it inspires them to keep up the good work. When you are good to your staff, they want to do a good job for you.

I hope you enjoyed reading *Leadership Tips*. Our next issue will feature tips on gender etiquette and intercultural courtesy. If you no longer wish to receive this newsletter, please reply to this e-mail and type "unsubscribe" in the subject line. Thank you!