

How to survive office politics and get ahead

Expert-approved ways to deal with any tricky colleague **BY SUSAN GRIFFIN**

You're back from your holiday, feeling recharged, until you remember that one colleague and a wave of dread washes over you. You know the one – the glory hog, office gossip or bully manager. Sometimes, the workplace can feel less like a professional environment and more like a reality show. In fact, 78% of us report feeling anxious about returning to work after annual leave.*

"Any time you bring people together, there will be politics," says Dr Mary-Clare Race, CEO of coaching company Talking Talent. Workplace politics are the unspoken ways that influence how things really get done. Toxic politics – underhand tactics or negative comments – can impact morale and affect your career path. But you *can* play the game smarter. "Office politics is not to be feared, it's something to understand," says Mary-Clare. "You can't remove yourself completely – in fact, you probably shouldn't, because underinvesting in the political side of work can lead to being overlooked, even when you're doing great work. But you don't have to play dirty. Just be self-aware and willing to engage in a way that's healthy."

Ready to finally tackle that colleague who drives you up the wall? We're here to help!

PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Have you ever received an email from a colleague that didn't directly criticise you, but left you with a nasty taste in your mouth? Passive-aggressive behaviour is an indirect expression of negativity. "It can stem from fear of confrontation – instead of expressing emotions openly, people resort to silence, sarcasm and subtle forms of sabotage," says Simon Phillips, a workplace culture expert and host of podcast *The Change Show*. "Passive-aggressive managers might insist: 'I'm not angry,' despite simmering with resentment," he adds. Sometimes, it's better to just hear it as it is.

What to do "With bosses, be solution-focused: 'I noticed the deadline has moved, can we talk through what to prioritise?' With peers, call it out gently: 'You seem frustrated, do you want to talk about it?'" says Simon. Be brave and model the kind of communication you want to see.

BLATANT FAVOURITISM

Do you notice that one person always gets extra praise and attention? "Favouritism often stems from unconscious bias," says Sarah Henson, senior behavioural scientist at CoachHub. "Managers tend to gravitate towards those who share their communication style or views. It can be a short cut for trust in high-pressure settings." Those who aren't favoured may notice they are left out of key conversations about decisions, causing feelings of unworthiness.

What to do "If your manager favours someone, ask questions like: 'I'm keen to learn how I can grow. What would you like to see from me to be considered



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for more responsibility?" says Sarah. For ongoing and obvious favouritism, you may need to raise it with HR. If you are the favoured one, there is a chance you'll feel isolated from the team. "Use your position to advocate for fairness," suggests Sarah.

BEING UNDERMINED

When a colleague spins a story to make themselves look good at your expense, it can feel like you're dealing with the enemy. "These people tend to operate from a place of fear, status anxiety, or a belief that success is a zero-sum game," says Mary-Clare. Examples include a peer passing off your ideas as their own, or your manager supporting you in private, but not in front of others. **What to do** If you feel safe to, speak to your colleague directly, Mary-Clare advises. "Something like: 'Just to clarify, I contributed to that piece – I'd like to make sure that's recognised.' Stay calm and keep it factual. If the behaviour continues, escalate it to someone higher up." Focus on the impact it's having on you, such as demotivation. "If you've done everything you can and the culture doesn't change, it might be time to consider whether that environment is right for you," she adds.

CONSTANT TITTLE TATTLE

Let's be honest, gossip is unavoidable. "Gossip exists because it fast-tracks belonging and information," says Beth Hope, an ICF-accredited executive career coach. "But it turns poisonous the second it strays from facts into character assassination. Factual, kind conversation builds trust, anything that erodes a colleague's reputation without evidence doesn't belong in your sphere." **What to do** Hopefully, you'll never find yourself as the topic of gossip, but if you do, confront the source. "Say: 'I've heard a story about me that isn't true, can we clear it up?' Stick to facts and, if the rumour mill keeps spinning, record examples and loop in your manager for support," says Beth. A bit of harmless gossip may go hand-in-hand with lending support to a colleague, but if you feel like they're trying to enrol you in whisper campaigns about others, Beth advises saying: "Interesting, I haven't heard their side, so I'd rather focus on the project." Then change the subject.

THE PSEUDO-BOSS

Pseudo-bosses are those that "inflate their authority", explains Beth. "Examples include copying senior leaders in on every email, dishing out tasks they can't actually assign and talking as if they hold the keys to the kingdom. Often, it's insecurity wrapped in ambition." They want power, and so delegate and dictate without having any right to – and it can be infuriating!

What to do Make it clear there is a boundary in place. "When they delegate work that doesn't fit your remit, say you are happy to help, but ask how this task links to agreed objectives or who's signed it off," says Beth. "Say: 'Thanks for the suggestion, I'll check with our manager so we stay aligned on priorities'. Legitimate tasks will come with context, while power plays will crumble under polite scrutiny." If it's starting to get to you, keep a record of incidents and ask your line manager for clarity on your roles. **F**