

First: Organization Chart versus Social Structure

Don't be confused between the two. First, we all have bosses and they have bosses, but that does not mean that they have to like each other, which is one reason politics starts. When you go into an organization, literally draw out an org chart of all the persons and departments that you work or have engagement. From there, and over the next several days or weeks, reference this chart through a different view - the Social Structure.

When mapping the social structure you need to ask yourself a few questions. Who do you see socializing together? Who do you see sitting together during meetings? Who do you see supporting each other in meetings or on projects? Who has lunch / or coffee together? Eventually you will see a pattern develop around certain people. When you see such a pattern, connect these persons or place a similar symbol or color mark on the org chart. In time you will see how the different social groups develop and have influence.

Secondly: Control versus Influence

The amount of this control is actually a lot smaller than you probably think. You need to keep this in check. Politics lives in this area still - but at least you will understand and perhaps expect it to through direct reporting structures and you will know where it is coming.

The area of influence is where politics takes on multiple roles and forms. It is where things are twisted and bent into arguments for or against something. Think about it. If you look at the social structure that you will have created you will see how information, positions, office pressure, etc - lives and is utilized.

Thirdly: Praise Publicly / Punish Privately

This tells a lot about a manager or person in this environment. Those that chose to follow this tend to look out more for the best interest of others, because they may have figured out it actually helps their own position in the long run. Those that do the opposite are more than likely the large power players in the office politics arena that don't really care what others think.

How does this all work? It is like a bunch of different networks, some closed – some open. When you understand how information is passed in the social structure networks – you will know how to get things done without actually needing to be the barer or messenger.

Lastly, no matter what people say to you about “this is between us” or “between you and me” don't believe it. Once you release information to someone else – it is gone. You cannot measure the amount of loyalty a person has to you versus their social structure.

If you stay consistent in what you do and say the office politics should not suck you into the land of confusion. You could end up understanding more than most and perhaps become more of an operator within the networks rather than fodder.