Office Power 101: How to Get Power At Work

The Power Moves | 12 April, 2020 | by Lucio Buffalmano

How do you acquire power at work?

Well, understanding [people and politics](#), having [good career strategies](#), a [great relationship with your boss](#), as well as being good at your work, all help.

But with this article, we will go a bit more in-depth on what exactly confers power in the workplace.

Contents

1. Results: The Power of The Hard Currency

Results matter.

Of course, they're not the *only* thing that matters.
And that's what can trip some people the first time they realize there is much more than just results.

They feel cheated and betrayed by a lying system. And they swing in the opposite direction.
They start believing, or professing, that results do not matter at all.

That's not true.
Avoid that mistake.
Do not neglect results and output for politics: **results and politics are *not* antithetic but interdependent**.

People who say "*it's not what you do, it's who you know*" rarely go far.
A healthier way of looking at results and politics is this: politics clear the path that allows your results to bring you upwards.

A few exceptions apply, but you're always better off having solid results and work output on your side.
Your work is what you can always turn to and say "see? These are my results, I'm putting numbers on the board".

Producing great work is not something you only do for your career.
Knowing that you can produce great work makes you more confident and more fulfilled.
People admire and respect those who produce good work. And for good reasons: doing your job well is the simplest, most effective way of being a good citizen and adding value to the world.

PRO Tip: Record your accomplishments in terms of $$$

Results matter, but they matter so much more if you can quantify them and record them.

Keep track of what your work meant in terms of dollars, or how much it saved. Save that, keep a record of all your KPIs, your past projects, and even all congratulatory emails you receive.

Your next negotiation for a raise or promotion, will be that much easier when you can drop the evidence on your boss' desk.

2. Politics: The Power of People-Tested Strategies

Politics is nothing but the human element of work.

It includes anything besides your skills and work output.
Alliances, feuds, coalitions, friendships, favors, backstabbing, self-promotion, sexual trysts, career strategies, conflicting goals, social gatherings… These are all politics.

Depending on which point of your career you are at, **politics can matter more than results**.
Studies showed that at managerial level networking is more important than how well your team is functions (more in Social Power).

Getting good at politics means increasing your social skills, emotional intelligence and, of course, understanding power dynamics.
This whole website helps you become a master operator when it comes to politics.

Also read:

- **How to master office politics**

| 7 Steps to Master Office Politics: A Field Guide

3. Skills: The Power of Mastery

Skills matter.

If you were forced to focus on skills, company's politics, or work output (results), I'd tell you to prioritize skills.
Not because the other two are not important, but because skills are transferable and last a lifetime.
Politics and work output are more company-specific, and evaporate the moment you step out of the organization. But skills stay.

There are two very different types of skills:

1. **Technical skills** = the knowledge that allows you to do your job (coding skills, accounting rules, laws and legal processes, etc.)
2. **Soft skills** = the knowledge that allows you to operate and execute with and *through* other people (persuasion, social skills, emotional intelligence, motivating others, confidence, leadership, etc.)

Obviously, the two at least partially co-exist in the same person.
A highly technical developer needs at least a minimum of soft skills to operate in a team. And a high-picture executive still possesses at least some technical skills.

Yet, depending on which one you prioritize, you get very different careers.
On average, **focusing on technical skills gives you job security, while focusing on soft skills gives you upward mobility**.

If we wanted to use a catchier tagline, we'd say that technical skills give you job security, while soft skills give you power ([read here of the day I truly realized that](#)).

3.2. Technical Skills: The Power of Expertise

"Technical" refers to all knowledge necessary for hands-on work and work that you do yourself, instead of delegating, managing, or organizing.

Technical skills matter most at the beginning of your career because your work output, as much as your initial career progression, depends mostly on your technical skills.

Some people only focus on technical skills for their whole career.
If you become good at your chosen trade, that's OK and you will also accrue lots of localized power.
The higher levels of power, leverage, and income, unlock when you become what's sometimes referred to as "guru". On, in more lay terms, the "go-to person" whenever there is a difficult problem to tackle.

Google veteran Kim Scott, author of "[Radical Candor](#)" refers to them as "rockstars" as opposed to "superstars", who seek growth.

You probably know someone like that in your organization.
It's the name that always comes up when things get complex and people say "oh, for that you need to ask X".
Well, *that* guy has a lot of power.
Triple that power if you are the go-to guy for topics that matter to the CEO.

Climbing On Tech Skills

You can make good money and get a lot of respect with technical skills only.

And some companies, like Google, allow engineers to climb the corporate ladder on technical skills only, without ever managing people or departments.
That way, great engineers can keep doing great technical work without ever managing others. If you prefer hands-on work, and you're in that type of company, you're good.

The Drawbacks of Technical Skills

The problem with only possessing technical expertise is that **you will not advance to board levels on technical skills only**.
Technical people do not call the shots. They execute what other people decide.

The Back-End Guy of A Rising Star

Sometimes a guru, or a "problem fixer", can rise quickly through the ranks by attaching himself to a soft-skills superstar. However, that also means you become their "guy in the backend".
They get the spotlight, and you do the work (sucker's trade?).

You can see an example in the movie "The Big Short" (in typical Hollywood dramatization):

Vinnie is the sot-skills superstar, doing the presentation, the quant is the tech rockstar, in the backend

However, it's risky to tie your fortune to just one guy.
And the final risk your bear over your whole career is that your skills might become redundant.
If one day a software can do what you're now doing, then you lose all your leverage. And you can rest assured no soft-skill guy is going to save you ass. Soft-skills guys have a knack for thinking of

themselves as better than the tech guys :).

3.3. Soft Skills: The Power of Power Dynamics Mastery

Soft skills are the skills that allow you to work with others and *through* others (people skills), or to envision and design the work that others will perform (strategic thinking).

By this description alone, it becomes clear that soft skills are for higher-level work.
And if you want to make it to executive levels, boardrooms, or become the CEO, then you need soft skills.

Soft skills also help you move upward because they include emotional intelligence, leadership skills, social skills, and knowledge of power dynamics.
Those skills allow you to operate within the political landscape, while also helping you come across as confident and authoritative.

I call these soft skills related to career mobility the "executive skills".
When you hear someone say that they are "upper management material" or they have the potential to be a top leader, it's because they mastered the "executive skills". They come across as confident and powerful, they command respect and, sometimes, can also command fear.

I like this scene from "Margin Call" to showcase the executive skills:

> **John Tuld**: It wasn't brains that got me mere, I can assure you that (= I didn't get here on technical skills)

Contrary to what he says, John the CEO is most likely very smart, instead.
He's just smart in a different way, not on technical skills, but on soft skills and power dynamics. He is the poster child of the alpha male CEO.

This website is all about learning executive skills.
For external training, I highly recommend you do public speaking and presentations. The two are similar, but there are some important distinctions.
They are both parts of the executive toolset, and they never go out of style.

4. Internal Friends: the Power of A Supportive Network

A long time ago I went to my very first mentor in my very first job with an inter-department power issue on my hands.

I thought I had been slighted and I wanted to hit back. Badly. I asked my mentor for advice and I will never forget what he told me.

Here it is for you, simple and life-changing:

> Make friends, not enemies

Needless to say, it doesn't mean being a pushover and accepting what's not acceptable.
But it does mean approaching all situations with the goal of making friends and allies –*all* situations-.
Because here is the rule of thumb: **friends and allies increase your power, while fights and enemies decrease it**.

Remember, for large networks, you don't need "close friends", you just need "friendly" and, possibly, a few friends around.

This is why [mixing power with warmth](#) is so important. So that when you approach someone, even when you don't know him yet you immediately get labeled as a "(cool) potential friend".

When you have friendly relationships with people around the company, anything you want to do will come easier.

A lot of work is done through informal networks. If you can't get your ass off your desk and get someone else to do something for you without having official authority on them, you're going to have a tough time advancing.

And the same is even true for bigger projects that can truly launch your career. If you have a cool idea that can help you fast track your career, your internal network allows you to check for feasibility, pitch it, launch it, and successfully bring it to completion.

And it's your supportive network that will share you the information about the next strategic move and the next opening you can apply for.

And remember: **you must be building relationships *before* you need them**. If you try to ask for a favor before you have a relationship, you're a burden. If you ask when there is already a relationship, then it's a normal part of the relationship quid pro quo.

PRO Tip: Avoid As Much As Possible Putting People In The "Enemies" Category

A crucial mindset to an effective friend-building strategy is seeing people for who they are, with flaws and all, *but not allowing the flaws to destroy the whole*.

Some people fall victim of black and white thinking, and you don't want to be one of them.
For black and white thinkers, people are good or bad, friends or foes. One mistake, one flaw, and they become enemies Guess what happens with that approach? The "enemies" category swells.

The worst approach is negative black and white thinking.
These people think there are too many "jerks" and "morons" around to make friends. In truth, it's an ego-protection mechanism.
So they stick to the one or two friends they have, usually other powerless colleagues going nowhere, telling each other how bad others are, so they can feel better.

Let them be that way.
But not you. Avoid that mentality: befriend everyone.

5. External Friends: Walk-Away Power

Your network is anyone whom you can call to ask for information, or introductions.

Internal networks are useful to move up.
But the external network is more useful to save your ass and/or to provide you with opportunities for switching jobs.

Networks also provide power and leverage against your employer because they help you find new jobs.
The bigger and stronger your network, the bigger your walkaway power.
That doesn't mean, of course, that you will (necessarily) use your network to threaten your employer. But it means that it's a positive insurance in case things don't work out.

One great tip from [Keith Ferrazzi](#) which helped me increase my network was to <u>always go to lunch with someone</u>.
Once you reached the periphery of the people you can reach to personally, send Linkedin messages to people you don't know yet or ask for introductions. Write to people in similar positions or in the same industry and say you'd like to know them because you're in the same industry.

So for example, if you do IT sales at SAP, reach out to people at Oracle, Sage, SunSystems, and Salesforce. Plus, other salespeople in your city.

And stay in contact with colleagues who left.

Especially if they stay in the same industry: they become a powerful source of information on what's happening at your competitors.

6. Alliances: The Organized, Mafia-Style Power

Allies are "special friends" that help you further your interests within the company and increase your personal leverage (and you increase theirs, of course).

Allies can be sexual trysts, spoken or unspoken alliances of "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" (transaction-based alliances), deeper bonds (what I call "brothers in arms"), or simply best friends at work.

As you can see, alliances come in two kinds:

1. **Machiavellian alliances**: you support each other to increase your personal power (nothing wrong with that unless you truly go out of your way to destroy someone)
2. **Genuine friendship**: you supposed each other based on emotional bond and mutual liking

The power of alliances must be one of the best-kept secrets in the world of business. Everyone talks about networking, but few talk about structuring alliances.

The reason might be simple: the standard career advice rarely tells you to do anything that might go against the interests of the company.

And alliances further *your* interests, and not necessarily those of the company.

Companies prefer to deal with you as an individual, because individuals are considerably weaker than duos (or groups).

Things that allies will help you with:

1. **Increase your negotiation leverage**: you can negotiate with an employer to join as a team (or as a duo), instead of two separate individuals, which gives you more power
2. **Increase your power against bad bosses**: it's easy for a bad boss to bully individuals when he can keep the team divided and fearful. But if the team is united, then it's one VS many
3. **Increase your power to oust bad bosses**: if your boss is an asshole, complaining as a team gives you immensely more power than as an individual. An individual is a problematic guy. A small group is at worst a mutiny (which must be still taken seriously), or the proof that the boss is an asshole
4. **Provide cover against attacks**: people will be more careful to criticize you publicly if they know there is a third party ready to join you
5. **Provide support for your ideas**: a simple "yeah, that could work" or "that sounds promising" might be all you need from your ally to let your proposal be considered more seriously by everyone else
6. **Report rumors and backstabbers**: an ally is a set of ears and eyes working for you, a free secret agent on your behalf
7. **Promote you behind your backs**: is your boss taking all the credit? Your ally can "casually mention" to whoever needs to know that it was your great work that made that success possible

Allies are a bit like mafias.

But in this case, you are furthering your interests within a corporation that, probably, [doesn't care all that much about you](). So, in my opinion, it's fair game.

How Many Allies Should You Have?

Usually, the larger the alliance, the more diluted the bond. Unless you can find a clique with whom you truly get along great, I recommend you keep your alliances as duos or trios.

7. Mentors & Sponsors: The Power of "Big Daddy"

[*"Help from above"*]()

Mentors help you with advice and career opportunities.
And both of those directly impact your clout and power.

But their impact on your power is also more direct.
Having a mentor from senior management means that you are friend with someone in power.
It's like when you're growing up in that tough neighborhood, and you befriend a local gangster. You're not just like the other kids, you can call the big brother when you need to.

With a powerful mentor, you have a made-man in your corner.
Sponsors are even better. They are like mentors who want to help you advance within the organization. A sponsor will more actively talk you up, nurture you, and prepare you for that next position.
While all mentor/mentee relationship requires that you support your mentor, with your sponsor you must truly show that you can -and will- pay him back when and if needed to. You don't necessarily have to, but you must show that you'd be willing. Otherwise, why would he go the extra mile to promote you?

The more junior you are and the bigger the power difference between you tow, the more you want to treat a sponsor like your bigger brother ally. He's your Batman, and you be Robin. Make him feel like a Batman, too. Yeah, you'll be a sidekick for a while. But you won't be a sidekick all your life. Eventually, you'll get to be Batman.
Act and behave as if you'd do anything to help and defend him. And they will reward you with that position you want.

The more senior and the closer you get to your sponsor, the more you want it to be a relationship of equals. But never forget that you must keep that relationship in balance. You *always* want to make your sponsor feel like you're his ally and you're ready to support him.

8. Money Talks: The Power of Bottom-Line Impact

The N.1 resource -and goal- for any business is money.

The greater the influence you can exert on your company's bottom line -or the people directly responsible for your bottom line-, the greater your power.

Profitable traders have lots of power, since they directly bring in money.

Salespeople and account managers are also close to the money. Now you want to leverage that position. Ideally, you want to become the only point of contact to your customers. Don't CC your colleagues in your communication or, God forbid, your boss. Develop very close relationships with your customers and you will develop immense leverage.
The same is true for investors or any other money provider.

8.2. Get In Line

Line is where the main work of the organization gets done.
And it's what the company bills for.

If you work in an accountancy company, then accountants are in the line position and IT and HR are staff positions. If you work in a data center, then IT people are in the line function and accountants and HR are staff positions.

When a company must fire people, they usually look at staff positions first. And people from line functions have an easier time climbing the organization.

Bonus: Positive Attitude

Positive attitude means optimism and a personality that brightens the team.

Basically, the kind of person people *want* to work with and include in important and visible projects.

We probably know some of these guys and we probably know their opposites too: those who complain, lament and bring others down.
The former stay and get promoted, the latter are the first to get the chop.

This factor is less important than the previous ones, since one can also be promoted while not being particularly loved by his colleagues. But still, it helps. Plus, it will make your life at work much easier if you can get along well with others, and if others like you.

This is a preview from Power University, the workplace module, where you can find more real-life examples and practical advice.

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