

Judge a Company's Politics Before You Climb Aboard **How to decide whether you'd be joining a team or a brawl**

By Ginger Lapid-Bogda

Joan Hendricks, a well-respected, high-level health-care executive in California, felt trapped in her job. So she was thrilled when asked to become adviser to the company president. Ms. Hendricks (not her real name) believed the new job, a lateral move, would provide more challenge and visibility. Her mentor warned that politics at the corporate offices could get extremely vicious and that the new position had "no teeth in it" but Ms. Hendricks was convinced she could rise to the occasion. She was wrong. Within six months, a resentful co-worker and supervisor made life so difficult for Ms. Hendricks that she quit, ending a 15-year career with the company.

For better or worse, politics are part of every organization's life, says David Nadler, president of Delta Consulting Group, a New York-based management-consulting firm. Work must be done, decisions made, conflict resolved, and promotions given, and politics inevitably play a role in these processes. However, "organizations have different degrees of political intensity," says Mr. Nadler. "In reality, this intensity runs the spectrum from clean politics, which is constructive and adaptive, to dirty politics, which is destructive and dysfunctional.

Different people have different reactions to office politics. Some thrive in environments of constant infighting, while others can't tolerate the slightest workplace disagreement. Fortunately, it's possible to determine where on the political continuum a given position is likely to fall before deciding whether or not to accept it.

"The savvy careerist would do in-depth work assessing the politics of a job before taking a position," says Beverly Kaye, a Los Angeles-based career development consultant who works with Fortune 500 companies. "If the political culture of the organization isn't a fit with you, it will affect your work, your output, and therefore, your career potential."

Evaluating the political status of a specific position requires investigating the politics of the job itself, the politics of the department, functional area, project team or division you'd be joining, and the politics of the organization as a whole.

Politics of the Job

To assess a prospective job, first you need to determine its standing within the company. A job's political positioning will become apparent when you ask interviewers, and then yourself, the following questions:

Ask Interviewers...

"Who does the position report to?"

"What committees, teams, and/or task forces are key to this firm's success, and what's the relationship of this job to those teams?"

"Who's been most involved in finding solutions to critical problems confronting this firm?"

"What are the position's areas of responsibility and level of authority?"

Then Ask Yourself...

"Is the job's level high enough, given what must be achieved?"

"Is the position in the right area?" (Should it be under operations, for example, not staff?)

"Will I have enough direct access to the people and information I need to be effective?"

"What kind of access will I have to valued problem-solvers?"

"Is my predecessor one of these valued individuals?"

"Is the span of control large enough to allow success in the job?"

"Will I be empowered to make appropriate decisions?"

Listen closely to what's said (and not said) in response to these questions. Ms. Hendricks, for example, was told she'd report to the executive vice president for administration, not the president. Ms. Hendricks naively believed she could make herself indispensable to the president and get the reporting structure changed.

It's also important to consider the kinds of tangible rewards associated with a job. See how the position's budget, salary benefits, bonuses, stock options, perks, and office space compare with those of others in the organization. Don't make assumptions based on experiences at past employers, however. A newly hired director for a medium-sized Midwestern company insisted on having a parking space with his name on it because, at his previous employer, assigned parking was an indication of being important. Although he eventually got his wish, he alienated many employees along the way because no one – not even the president – had a designated parking space. Within nine months, the director was asked to leave.

Next, assess the people part of the job, particularly your supervisor. "Picking your boss is as important as picking your job," says Steve McMahon, senior human resources director for Apple Computer's Pacific division in Cupertino, CA. "People make judgments about you based on who you work for, and this holds true in every industry."

Make it your business to ascertain your boss's management and work styles and reputation, advises Mr. McMahon. To avoid seeming abrasive, he suggests an indirect approach. For example, rather than say, "Tell me about the boss's management style," ask "What kinds of items does he like brought to his attention?" and "How does he respond when a subordinate disagrees with an idea or action?"

It's also helpful to find out what happened to your predecessor. Was he or she promoted or terminated, and why? Are there any internal candidates who want the job, and if so, who are they and how is this situation handled? Who would be reporting to your, if anyone, and what are the internal dynamics involved?

Politics of the Department

Before accepting a position, it's important to evaluate the larger political context – including the department, project group, functional area and division in which you'd be working. To assess the political leverage of the area you'd be joining, you need to find answers to the following four questions:

1. *How connected is the unit to the "core business"?* The closer a department is to an organization's core business, the more power it usually wields, which explains why line operations tend to be more powerful than staff departments. In health care, for example, where the core business is providing health-care services, providers (doctors, nurses, and therapists) generally have more clout than technicians and, in some cases, administrators. At computer companies, research and development departments wield great power because they're creating increasingly sophisticated products. If you're applying for a staff position, find out which departmental projects are most closely tied to the firm's mission.
2. *What strategic business challenges or crises does the department help the organization solve?* Some divisions derive their power from an ability to help the organization solve strategic challenges or crises. For example, when lawsuits abound or governmental regulations change dramatically, legal departments become more powerful. Similarly, in this era of global competition, units that lead the way in total quality management typically become influential. Feel free to ask interviewers about business challenges facing the company; prospective employers are often impressed by candidates who do.
3. *How is the department perceived by powerful groups and individuals, and why?* If powerful cliques consider your department important, they're more likely to offer the access to information and people necessary for it to be truly influential. Depending on whether their opinions are based on permanent or transitory conditions, however, you may or may not be able to inherit that power.
4. *What are the division's resources compared to other parts of the organization?* Companies invest in the areas they value most. A division with a large staff, big budget and a wide range of responsibilities will likely have the influence to match.

Politics of the Organization

The politics of a particular job are heavily influenced by the politics of the organization itself. During the interview process, you can learn a great deal about a company's political environment, says Warner Burke, president of a Pelham, N.Y.-based organizational change consulting firm that bears his name.

"Pay keen attention to how you're treated in the organization and in the interview," he says. "It tells you a lot about the political culture of the organization." Among the things to look for: How formal does it feel? How status-oriented is it? Is there a look-alike dress code? Are people friendly? Do they keep you waiting? Is lunch part of the interview process? Do they want to meet your spouse and, if so, is it to "check out" him or her, or because the company is family-oriented? How do people interact? Who must you talk to and how many times? Do they seem interested in your questions? Are they in complete control of the interview?

Be sure to ask your interviewer about his or her career in the organization. Also ask where organizational politics typically are played out, what makes people successful in the company, what kind of behavior gets rewarded and what gets punished, what causes conflict, how decisions are made, how important work gets done, how crises are managed, who the organization's heroes and villains are, and how big a role politics plays in employees' work lives.

You also should ask directly how much the employer values openness, says Marcia Worthing, senior vice president of human resources for Avon Products Inc. in New York. "Use the word candor rather than truth," she advises. "If a company gets upset or uncomfortable when you get into this subject, that tells you a lot."

It's critical to find out how and why the organization fires people. "For some companies, it's numbers, even if they're unrealistic," says Peller Marion, owner of a San Francisco outplacement and executive development firm that bears her name. "For others, it's whether your boss supports you, no matter what you do. Some companies never let people go, they just undermine them as a way of controlling them."

Also consider the type of company and industry you'd be joining. There's a "real difference in the way politics play out in companies where individual results and accountability are easy or hard to track," says Harold Johnson, senior vice president of Korn Ferry International, a New York-based executive search firm. "When tracking is difficult, such as in the insurance industry, politics – such as belonging to the right clubs and going to the right church – become the measure of whether you can be on the team. In retail, where tracking is essential, it's obvious if you hit the balls or not, and if you do, you're on the team," he says.

Jay Galbraith, a management professor at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and an expert on organizational strategy and structure, says several factors – size, amount of growth, amount of change, measurability of results – affect the type of politics played in an organization. "In small start-up companies or companies with a lot of growth, such as the computer industry, you don't see as much politics," he says. "In older, larger and slower-growth companies, having the right style and knowing the right people becomes more important. Staff departments and corporate departments are generally more political than field departments because, in the former, the results of one's work are harder to measure. Organizations also become more political when in the midst of an organizational change."

With this in mind, it's helpful to know the organization's history, current situation, and plans for change. Is there a merger in the future? Has it just completed a restructuring? Is it the kind of company that restructures every year?

Your analysis also should consider the role of top managers, because they set the tone for political action throughout the organization. For example, if senior management tends to be autocratic, authoritarian, and controlling and direct disagreement with high-ups is punished, employees may influence decisions through covert activities. If top management is collaborative and participative, staffers learn they can openly disagree with management decisions. Weak leadership tends to create an intensely political organization as

people at lower levels decide to take matters into their own hands. Inconsistent leadership tends to encourage high levels of infighting.

Getting the Facts

If you know where to look, there's a wealth of information about the politics of a prospective job at your disposal. Daily newspapers, television news programs, and business, news, and trade magazines often feature stories about a company's new leadership, restructuring plans, strategic changes, political infighting, or new products. Ask your local librarian to conduct a computer search of literature on the company, going back at least three years. Also ask the organization's investor relations department to send you copies of the three last annual reports. A careful read will alert you to management changes and provide insight into the corporate culture.

Networks, however, are the cornerstones of information about a company's politics. As you think about the networks you can tap, try to be creative. Obviously, you can ask professional contacts for their opinion, but friends, neighbors, people you've met through charity work, and other acquaintances also may have valuable information. Ask everyone you talk with whether they know anyone who knows anything about the company you're applying to. You'll put into motion a process that eventually will yield useful insights. If you persist, you'll be surprised by how much you learn.

Your network should include search consultants. Despite the fact that they work for employers, recruiters often are willing to provide you with delicate information, such as which groups within firms are most powerful. "Our job is to provide the company with people who stick," says Mr. Johnson at Korn Ferry. "We get paid our retainer whether or not someone is selected for the job. We want a repeating client, so it's in our best interest to help the candidate find out as much as possible about the job in order to ensure the best match."

Because employers recognize that well-informed candidates are more likely to become satisfied employees, they, too, may be receptive to your research. If you want to ask the company sensitive questions about the job, the best time to do so is after you've received an offer but before you've accepted it. You're most powerful at this stage in the hiring process because the employer wants to please you.

Even earlier, however, it's perfectly acceptable to ask interviewers for references, says Mr. Johnson. "Ask sincerely, 'Who can tell me what it's like to work here and work for this boss?'" he says. "Ask for names of people who have held the job, who worked for the boss, even [people] who left the organization. Talk to these people and ask them for more names. Discard the first set as handpicked and rely on the second set as your data source. For people who are willing to spend the time to do this, it's pure gold. It can prevent a lot of problems later on."

Be sure to pay attention to the information you gather, no matter how eager you are to accept an offer. As Ms. Marion warns, "People take jobs out of fear and refuse to see the handwriting on the wall, or they're so afraid that this is the only job that will come their way, they have blinders on." Adds Mr. Nadler in New

"Judge a Company's Politics Before You Climb Aboard," *National Business Employment Weekly*, 1991.

York: "If someone says, 'It used to be very political around here but it's changed,' it's best to stay away. Pathological politics get into the genetic code of an organization."

Ms. Hendricks, the health-care executive, fell into both of the above traps. She ignored warnings about the vicious politics of the corporate offices, thinking that she could handle them and that the new position was her only way out of a dead end. She didn't realize that taking a job with built-in political problems often makes succeeding in the job impossible.