

## **Office Politics and the Pursuit of Power** **Earning clout, and using it constructively, will help you succeed in your first job**

**By Ginger Lapid-Bogda**

Just four years after graduation, Steve Miller was named plant manager in Houston for Clorox Co.'s household products division. How did this M.B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley accomplish such a feat so quickly? He mastered the art of accumulating "on-the-job" power.

Political prowess is rare among young professionals. Too many new grads dismiss the idea of building in their first jobs, either because they don't understand how critical having power is to their careers, or because they think of power as either self-serving or destructive. Yet power is neither good nor bad. Like gasoline in a car, power enables you to move, but it doesn't dictate the direction.

If you learn to acquire and use power constructively early in your career, you'll likely enjoy tremendous professional success. Typically, having power at work depends on what you know, who you know and how you're known -- and has more to do with your ability to persuade, negotiate and cooperate than with your actual job title.

To build influence at your first job, consider what power bases are available to you and heed the tips that follow on how to develop them.

### **Power Base #1: Knowledge**

**Expertise.** Few new grads think of themselves as having expertise. Yet company decision-makers value the knowledge you've gained in college and through on-the-job experience. In fact, the more your particular expertise is needed by an organization, the greater your power. For example, when Clorox created an important career-development task force, Miller was appointed to it because he'd been exposed to a similar project at a company he'd worked for between college and graduate school. He was the only employee with such experience. To increase your expertise power base, develop skills in areas the company values and let co-workers and superiors know what expertise you possess. Avoid jargon when talking about technical subjects and don't give advice beyond your scope of knowledge. Also, use data to support your conclusions so others will trust your judgment, and share your expertise freely, keeping in mind that the more you share, the more everyone gains.

**Information.** At most companies, people with access to critical information about technology, customers, changes in the environment, employee attitudes or others matters are in key position to influence others.

To build this power base, start by developing reliable channels of information. Cultivate relationships with senior managers, support staff and employees from different departments who are in a position to know what's going on. The flow of information should be two-way, constructive, accurate and non-gossipy.

During discussions, ask questions and be open-minded and attentive. Understand what motivates people in your organization and industry; they'll be more likely to open up around you.

**Cultural traditions.** By making a concerted effort to learn a company's traditions, even newcomers can develop this power base. For example, at a large family-owned consumer products company in Kansas City, Mo., one rising star -- a recent University of Tennessee graduate -- is neither from the "founding family" nor from the Midwest. However, he overcame these obstacles by concentrating on turning in an excellent performance and learning the company culture during his first six months at the firm. He soon gained a reputation as a loyal, knowledgeable employee. To learn your company's traditions, make a point of finding out about its myths, heroes and fallen angels. Consider what makes people laugh in meetings. Ask what gets employees into hot water and how things get done.

## **Power Base #2: Personality**

**Charisma.** The ability to lead and inspire others doesn't always require being naturally outgoing and a skilled public speaker. For example, Steve Miller tends to be reserved and is frequently quiet in meetings. When he does talk, however, he comes across as sincere and trustworthy. This, everyone listens to him closely and his ideas often influence the final decision.

To develop your charisma, you must know yourself and be able to project that self-confidence to others. Read books on self-actualization, attend professional development seminars and spend time reflecting about your values. Solicit feedback from friends, family, co-workers, supervisors and other you respect. Listen carefully to people, try to determine what's important to them and tailor your messages accordingly. Also, learn how to tell a story, use metaphors and paint pictures with your words. If you're shy, experiment with video and other types of media to fine-tune your ability to communicate comfortably.

**Reputation.** Employers' perceptions of who you are and what you're capable of can determine how much you're allowed to achieve. To develop a good reputation, try to assume relevant responsibilities that capitalize on your strengths. If possible, avoid tasks in areas where you are weak and work on improving those skills through training or informational practice.

"Look for opportunities to be successful in small ways," says Gary Merrill, a vice president in Drake Beam Morin's consulting division in San Jose, California. "Find multiple, early, small wins." Then publicize your accomplishments (being careful not to appear self-serving), or get others to do that for you. Billie Alban, a management consultant at Alban & Williams in Brookfield Center, Conn., suggests demonstrating your knowledge at meetings or asking to make presentations to higher-ups. "It's essential to get visibility," Ms. Alban says. "You may be loaded with talent, but no one knows."

**Professional credibility.** Being well-regarded by peers at other firms can enhance your reputation inside your own company. To improve your stature, join trade or professional associations, then try to work your way into a leadership role by offering to give speeches or write articles. If your profession has a credentialing process, become certified. It's also important to dress and speak like other professionals in your field.

### Power Base #3: Relationships

**Political access.** To improve your access to top managers, build a network every chance you get. Attend company events and show a genuine interest in the people you meet. Actively look for a mentor. Have lunch with, call and drop notes to friends and others already in your network. Connect with informal opinion leaders (who can be found organizing popular company events) and official company bigwigs (who may agree to meet with you if you ask for help learning about the organization).

"Getting involved with voluntary organizations such as United Way is another good way to meet influential people," says Alban.

**Peer support.** Peers often affect your ability to get things accomplished. They can encourage or discourage their departments to cooperate with you and collaborate or compete with you at meetings. A peer may even one day become your boss, or vice versa.

It's important to get to know your peers as friends. Find out what they need from you and do what you can to deliver it, and try to work on projects that require you to interact directly and positively with them.

**Boss support.** The most obvious person from whom you need support is your boss. Whom you work for and how he or she perceives you can make or break your career. Steve McMahon, senior human resources director for Apple Computer Inc.'s Pacific division in Cupertino, Calif., believes that your boss's reputation can affect your career as much as the actual quality of your work. Mr. McMahon says that he's paid careful attention to who his boss would be at every step of the corporate ladder and, as a result, he's been promoted five times in eight years.

To win your boss's support, you must first learn his or her working style, strengths, weaknesses, goals and fears. Help your boss solve pressing problems and reconcile any conflicts between your preferred working styles. Finally, keep your boss well-informed to avoid unpleasant surprises.

Miller, for example, communicates actively with his boss and is very open to new information and advice. Knowing how to appropriately include his boss, as well as subordinates and peers, has been a cornerstone of Miller's success.

Remember that clout doesn't belong exclusively to executives with lofty job titles. New hires can use power constructively "to get through the red tape, get items on an agenda and get people to take a position," says Ron Brown, a San Francisco-based management consultant. If you do that, your career is sure to soar.