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Raise your hand if you hate politics: The shady, behind-the-scenes deal-making. The tradeoffs where neither party is satisfied. The game-playing that leaves us feeling disillusioned.

And we're not even talking about Washington.

Office politics have gotten a bad rap for some very good reasons. Just ask a woman. Over a multi-year period we examined the 360-degree performance reviews of hundreds of managers and conducted follow-up discussions with the executives themselves. Part of what we've heard is that men are much more likely to report that they are skilled at office politics, whereas women say they want to avoid it at all costs.

In our coaching interviews we've learned that women perceive political maneuvering as a violation of their moral code, saying things like, "I'd rather be a straight shooter," "I tend to look people in the eye and tell it like it is," or "I don't play favorites or trade favors."

When we talked to the ace political consultant [Mary Matalin](#) about this, however, we seem to have struck a nerve. "This business about politics at work being sleazy drives me crazy. Virtue can be the essence of politics. The reality is that politics can be just as virtuous or as sleazy as you are." Amen.

The reality is that politics is how power is managed on a practical basis everyday. And from what we've seen women are great at it. It has very little to do with morality and everything to do with managing relationships and getting the job done. In other words: it's not optional.

We've seen in performance discussions that women on average get strong nods of approval for how they forge relationships — managing clients, vendors, peers and direct reports. However, we tend to get lower marks when it comes to managing up. Some say it's a [matter of confidence](#), others site a [lack of sponsorship](#) in the sink-or-swim environment of upper management. Either way, here are a few of the tips we give women to help them [flex their political muscle](#):

1. **Make a map.** Most organizations have informal social networks that are just as important as the obvious corporate hierarchy — if not more so. It's worth your while to chart the peer groups that have influence. Is there a cross-section of functional experts who meet monthly to solve difficult problems? Get to know these people and understand their spheres of influence. Being aware of informal teams and alliances will help when you are trying to get buy in or influence a decision.
2. **Cash in your chips.** Women don't like to ask for favors or trade on relationships. According to a [research report](#) published by [The Center for Work-Life Policy](#), “To their detriment, women perceive cultivating relationships and mobilizing them on their behalf as, at best, an occasional necessity rather than the key exercise of leadership. They fail to see that the practice of seeking out powerful people, cultivating favor and cashing in those chips is itself a demonstration of leadership potential.” The reality is that all of us, throughout our careers, need to forge and cultivate relationships that are based on mutual interest.
3. **Campaign for your career.** We coach women to realize that they need to be politically astute and lobby for support. It is naïve to believe that you will be selected for high-level jobs without building a coalition. Campaign for your career as if you are running for office by articulating a perspective, creating a platform and lining up sponsors — and then doing it all over again as your agenda changes.

If these approaches strike you as unseemly, ask yourself why — and where your hesitation is coming from. Because the bottom line is that it's just not possible to opt out of the political game at work and still win in your career.

Jill Flynn, Kathryn Heath, and Mary Davis Holt — nationally recognized experts on women's leadership — are principals of [Flynn Heath Holt Leadership \(FHHL\)](#). They are co-authors of [Break Your Own Rules: How to Change the Patterns of Thinking that Block Women's Paths to Power](#).
