Twitter Thread by Julie Zhuo



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Do you struggle with "office politics," like when Colleague got a promotion because they seem to have the same hobbies as the boss?

Do you have no idea how to play the game?
Do you recoil at the very word?

Then this thread is for you ■

First, what exactly is "office politics?"

The definition I'll go with is that it's the actions people take to advance the things they care about in the workplace.

These can be:

1) The company hitting its goals
2) The success of one's projects and initiatives
3) A promotion
4) A plum assignment or leadership role
4) A change in workplace culture, values or process
5) The advancement of a colleague / group of people
6) Personal reputation

If you read this and think, "hmm, this list sounds boring and not at all bad," I agree with you!

Office politics has a negative connotation but is simply another manifestation of humans being complicated and having multiple, sometimes conflicting desires.

Our workplace desires feel more more high-stakes b/c:

1) there is clear hierarchy + power dynamic (ceos, managers, etc)

2) how we perform at work impacts our self-esteem, identity, and ability to sustain ourselves

3) we spend 1/3+ of our waking hours in our workplace

What happens when our desires are in conflict with a colleague's desires?

For example, both of us are angling for one leadership role, or there's a fixed budget and I'm hoping my project gets more, which means yours gets less.

Someone (usually a sr manager) has to make a call.

Imagine I am pretty confident that me or my cause is the better choice. But I am not picked. How will I feel? There are 3 scenarios

1) I'm disappointed but accepting of the decision
2) I'm upset bc the decision-maker was unqualified
3) I'm irate bc the criteria was wrong/unfair

"This is some political bullshit" is often used to explain why we didn't get what we wanted when we are sure we are in the right, and we do not trust the decision-maker or the process.

Sadly, there are many instances when we *are* in the right, and picking us would have made the company better off. We *are* more qualified for the role. Our project *would* have made a more meaningful difference than the alternative. Our cause *was* more critical to address.

But because of the decision-maker's poor judgment or biases (whether intentional or unintentional), the objectively best decision did not get made.

A particularly irksome version of this is when we perceive someone to be pushing or deciding something because it's good for them personally, but is worse for the company. Like promoting a worse employee the boss is buddies with. Or funding a "pet project" that doesn't matter.

But too often (and I confess to having done this myself in the past), we may label something "political" simply because we disagree with the decision, even if the decision was made with great intentionality and care on the part of the decison-maker.

Sometimes, decisions are made against us that are not personal. As much as we don't like to admit it, maybe there's a good reason we weren't picked for the role. Or maybe that "pet project" we think is stupid is a reasonable bet to make if we had all the context.

If you find yourself frustrated with office politics, the following may help:

1) Ensure that you know how your manager + their managers define success. Ask in 1:1s if this is not clear.

2) Make sure your manager understands how *you* define success.

3) ...

3) Communicate your case clearly. Write an e-mail, prepare a deck—do what works best for you. Always tie your case to what you understand success to be for your manager / their managers.

4) Continually hone your communication skills. It is a key advantage.

5) ...

5) Ask for explanations to decision-making processes when they don't go the way you expect

6) Ask yourself: did the decision-maker intend to do what they thought was best for the org?

7) If 6 is yes, ask yourself: do I trust the decision-maker's abilities and their values?

If your answer to 6 or 7 is no, the environment probably feels toxic to you, and you should try to get out.

Otherwise, make sure your perspective has been heard, and trust in the process. Don't take the decision personally. Disagreement isn't a bad thing; we all learn from it.

If you're a leader of a team frustrated w/ office politics, try the following:

1) Walk the walk + talk the talk in putting the company's goals above your personal goals

2) Create transparency around the process ahead of a decision. Eg what is the criteria for promotion?

3)..

3) Explain decisions thoroughly, especially the controversial ones.

4) Build trust with your team. Care about them. Understand their personal goals. Show up like the imperfect human you are. Open yourself up to feedback.

5) Repeatedly tell your reports how you define success.

If people trust you, and they trust the decision-making process, then they are more likely to trust your decisions, even when it differs from theirs.

(Fin.)