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OFFICE WARFARE

Strategies for Getting Ahead
in the Aggressive 80s

MARILYN MOATS KENNEDY

Macmillan Publishing Company

New York



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Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10022
Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Kennedy, Marilyn Moats, 1943—
Office warfare.

1. Success in business. 2. Organizational behavior.
3. Industrial sociology. I. Title.
HF5386.K2784 1985 650.1'4 85-2906
ISBN 0-02-562010-X

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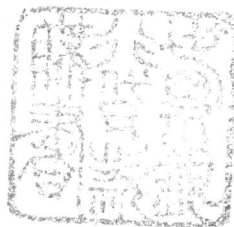
Special Sales Director
Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue
New York, New York 10022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Jack Meserole

Printed in the United States of America

8661617



OFFICE WARFARE



E8661617

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For the millions of working people
who've been victimized in the political wars.
Here's your chance to fight back!

Acknowledgments

Everyone who helped on this book should have had hazardous-duty pay! It was a battle. Getting people to talk about whom they've done in isn't easy. They don't like to talk about plots that went awry or plots that backfired. Therefore, we have protected everybody's identity. There isn't a real name used anywhere in the book—even of those who were successful! Some of their colleagues might see possibilities for new wars that we'd be guilty of igniting. All have been privately thanked.

Patricia O'Keefe came in halfway through the project and did great service in editing. Janet Shlaes worked throughout in research and editing. Donna Reimer virtually ran Career Strategies while I worked on the book. All three of these women were indispensable.

My husband, Daniel, and daughter, Anne Evelyn, suffered neglect with better grace than anyone has a right to expect. They deserve to be recognized for that.

The Northwestern University, Wilmette, and Evanston libraries were extremely helpful. The librarians answered our questions with enthusiasm.

My agent, Jane Jordan Browne, and my editor at Macmillan, Arlene Friedman, were always ready with suggestions, which we used.

Introduction

Want to develop unbeatable potential as a victim of office warfare? Just keep playing politics the way you did in the 1970s. Ignore what's changed and you're setting yourself up. Look at the recent past and you'll see why.

Remember the 1960s? Despite the Vietnam War the economy was in reasonable shape and jobs weren't that difficult to get. High school and college seniors looked forward to, and received, a variety of job offers. At prestigious colleges high grade-point averages meant competition for talent—even for English and history majors, much less accountants and engineers! The *Fortune* 500 companies courted and recruited the best talent they could find, while selling their stability, progressiveness, prestige, and long-term advancement opportunities. “Dropping out” for a few years to find oneself was not a problem—it even had a cachet of radical chic. After all, there were plenty of jobs “out there.” Taking time out only meant postponing your job offers, not reducing them.

The 1970s changed all that. Suddenly recruiters were an endangered species. On some campuses they came for “courtesy” interviews, which backfired. Instead of building company goodwill, they enraged students, who discovered there were no jobs. College graduates ceased protesting to become as sober-sided (some said dull) as their parents had been in the 1950s. Getting any job replaced getting the “right” job as entry-level workers vied for positions that people ten years older wouldn't have considered.

White males especially felt the heat as more and more women seriously pursued careers. The sixties male knew

that while many female peers might start as serious career women, most would drop out to become housewives and mothers. The seventies male couldn't count on that. While the seventies male might want a spouse whose dowry was an income that matched his, he certainly didn't want her as a competitor in his office. He discovered, to his continuing dismay, that he had no choice. She was not only there, but appeared to have settled in for the long run.

You can see this reflected in the civil rights laws. In 1974 Congress declared maternity a disability to be dealt with by employers as any other temporary medical condition. A woman's job might be held until she returned from maternity leave. Ten years before, maternity was a permanent condition, not a temporary disability. Women were expected to leave their jobs.

The 1980s brought to fruition the changes started in the 1960s, but without that era's prosperity. A lowered inflation rate, so prized by politicians and economists in theory, put tremendous pressure on workers to improve productivity, to take jobs more seriously, and, most important, to compete strenuously. The era of plenty had ended. What was left was a stagnant economy with a growth rate so low that there was no upward thrust to assist new workers. New jobs weren't being created at the same rate as in prior years. If someone missed a promotion, he or she couldn't count on another opportunity in twelve to eighteen months as had previously been the case. It now might literally take years before an opening occurred, especially among *Fortune* 500 companies.

The new, almost hysterical, emphasis on productivity had, and has, but one objective. Each worker must produce a greater amount of high-quality work for the same or less pay! Regardless of what a company says, bottom line, loyalty is out, increased turnover is in. How else to flat-line the salary curve? If people stay in the same job more than three years, they become very expensive help.

Many could be replaced by a less expensive beginner. Hence, the need for planned turnover.

But then how would new jobs be created? If each person produced more, the number of jobs would contract, not expand. If twelve workers did the work of fifteen, the company would be stronger, but what happens to the three displaced workers? Most people, neutral to positive on the productivity issue, failed to draw the obvious conclusion. They didn't see that the promotion they wanted wouldn't occur unless one of two things happened. Either the company's growth rate had to greatly exceed the national average, or the occupant of the coveted job had to leave or move up. It was an entirely new ball game. All of those people who, in the past, had taken the view that productivity was the patriotic way began to reconsider. It was only patriotic as long as it didn't negatively impact their careers.

One of the most profound events, in terms of its effect on the long-term prospects of professionals and managers, didn't even happen to them. Do you remember when Lee Iacocca, president of the Chrysler Corporation, convinced the United Auto Workers to agree to a pay cut in order to save the company? If you're a professional, you probably approved. You thought that union people were unproductive and overpaid. White-collar workers at Chrysler also took cuts and layoffs but that was easily explained. The company was in desperate trouble and they saw the problem through management's eyes. However, did you see the domino effect coming? Did you know that, inevitably, it had to reach you? Many people, because they didn't belong to a union, missed the message.

The message was obscured because professionals and managers believed their interests were identical with top management's. Never had so many people so miscalculated exactly where they stood! As we will see, top management did not, and does not, agree. They tend to see everyone beneath them as "labor." Not since the Depres-

sion had workers been asked to take pay cuts. What Chrysler did was force its workers to “buy” a piece of the company. The workers were going to pay for its rehabilitation whether they chose to or not. They were going to become “shadow” owners.

The Chrysler scenario electrified top management people everywhere. Eventually your top management, if they haven’t already, may look at you and say, “How much is your job with this company worth to you? Are you willing to take a five or ten percent salary cut?” At the very least, management in many companies is systematically getting rid of the annual across-the-board salary raise, which is the same thing. Since you don’t consider yourself overpaid (neither did the UAW), you need to look at your job and your relationship with your present company (or any future employer) in a whole new way. In 1985 it’s clear that owners, managers, and workers are changing their relationships. They may not be perfectly aware of the changes but by now most of the players know the script has changed. From our point of view, this change is important because it alters the internal politics of the company. Understanding these changes will alter your career planning as well as how you approach and participate in company politics.

Organizational politics is changing dramatically. The old mindset was a fairly gentlemanly one (except for the few buffoons who actually plotted and stabbed backs). “The politics here is murder,” they’d say. People laughed ruefully and commiserated with each other. The new game is deadly serious. People everywhere are thinking and strategizing about the political process. It’s a matter of survival. If the productivity movement works—and most experts think its impact will be felt to some degree everywhere—people will continue to work hard for the same, and inevitably less, money. As this change occurs, politics will become the key to advancement. Many people would argue that politics was always key and that there is no change. However, there is a change in degree. Many jobs are going

to be eliminated and people are going to be outplaced, de-hired, severed—any word you care to use. It's no longer just a matter of jockeying for power, influence with the boss, or promotions. The issue is survival and politics is key there, too.

Several years ago Peter Drucker began talking about the oversupply of middle managers. That was most ungrateful of him, since the people most likely to buy his books are the very people whose ranks he advised top management to thin. He was, however, pointing out both the obvious and the inevitable. Since managers work through others, in order to be more productive each has to manage more people. Thus some managers would become unnecessary and unemployed.

Where does that leave us now? All of these changes, most unlikely to be reversed as long as Japan, Inc., and Germany, Inc., stay on course, mean that politics will be the principal means of deciding who moves up, who stays, and who goes. Hence, the title *Office Warfare*. That describes the present situation precisely. People who would never before have been aggressive toward a peer or boss are up in arms. They're going to play hardball, however reluctantly, in order to survive. How office warfare occurs, and what to do about it, are the subjects of this book.

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Chapter 1. Who Started the War? Old Political Styles

The Political Watershed

In 1985 it's clear that 1979 was a watershed year in American history. Of course, very few people realized it at the time. Before 1979 office politics could often be joked about. It was taken very seriously by only a minority of workers, probably not more than 10 or 15 percent. At least half the people believed you could opt out, just duck all the push and shove. Someone would say ruefully, "Gee, there's a lot of politics in my office." Everyone within hearing distance would nod sympathetically. You could hear them in the cafeteria and in the coffee room saying, "I can't figure out what's going on—or why—but who cares?" It was chic to deprecate the office political system.

Most people quietly and firmly believed in the work ethic. If they worked hard, the effect of politics on them personally would be minimal to nonexistent. Enough people believed in the myth that hard work equals success to make that cliché a reality in some places. At least that's what people told each other.

Were they sincere? Focus groups conducted in 1984 in five major metropolitan areas (Chicago, New York, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.) indicate that, while aware of politics, the average professional or manager believed she or he could blunt negative politics by working a problem to death. One woman in Washington, D.C., said,

"I knew my boss didn't really like me. I knew he would prefer a man in my spot. Still, until two years ago [1983] he didn't act that out. Now he is."

There were gentlemanly rules to the "game" of politics that reflected social values at the time. These were unwritten, but still powerful, limits to what could and couldn't be done. One of the most powerful rules was "Know thy place," or "Respect the hierarchy." It was almost universally taboo to leapfrog over your boss and plot with his/her boss—especially if you would benefit professionally from the discussion. People had a sense of place within the structure. It meant something that your boss was a box above you on the organizational chart. There was a determined effort to honor the hierarchy. Besides, you might be fired if he or she found out you'd pulled an end run to his/her boss. If you did breach office protocol, your boss's boss was often part of your denouement because he/she told your boss what you'd done. This response reflected the need of each higher level of management to set a good example in honoring the hierarchy.

A second example of the political rules of this era was "Preserve face for the members of our team." You never embarrassed a co-worker, however much he or she deserved it. You didn't even help when someone did it to him/herself. Sometimes you saved the culprit from himself. To do otherwise would do public violence to the "team" facade that every department sought to preserve. You were expected to cover for the less capable. It was suspect to appear too competitive. "What's she trying to prove?" "She's certainly not part of our team," they'd whisper. Preserving the teamwork facade mattered to the majority.

Since 1979 more talk has spewed forth about the virtues of teamwork than ever before. However, there was more genuine teamwork before 1979 than at present. Now the rule is "Give the team lip service but no emotional support."

A third political rule was “The weak and incompetent must be protected.” The incompetent or criminally bewildered person, who littered the organizational chart, usually because top management was doing some pal or business connection a favor by hiring the person, was tolerated. Why not? It kept someone’s minimally useful relative off the street and off welfare—an accepted, although non-tax-deductible form of philanthropy. Other workers tolerated the person with as much good grace as their individual temperaments allowed. People who publicly objected were thought of as loners, chronic complainers, people who didn’t want to be part of the team. Peer outplacement would have seemed a terrible overreaction at the time.

A fourth rule was “The boat will come back. One missed promotion isn’t the end of the world.” A missed promotion or plum assignment, while disappointing, was not cause for extreme alarm. Other opportunities would arise. Organizations were expanding, creating upward thrust. Despite several business downturns, many people were still optimistic. If you weren’t promoted this time, there was certain to be another chance. Women believed this far less often than men. There was also a residue of loyalty on both sides of the desk. Your boss seemed to care how well you did. He or she was looking out for you. Paternalism was submerged, but was a real cultural and political value.

A fifth rule was “Keep the company green.” Age discrimination was tolerated. Until the early 1980s, people seemed less anxious to sue, especially those just over forty whose values did not include suing a long-term employer or boss. Some companies deflected potential age discrimination suits by using a “golden handshake.” This was an individual payoff plan in which, when a person’s years of service plus age totaled a certain number, say seventy-five, the person could take his or her retirement pay in cash and/or receive a year’s salary including benefits in exchange for leaving the company permanently. If the

worker in question believed that he or she could get another job—or simply wanted out of the present job—it was a good deal. There was an involuntary dimension, too. Many people took such offers because they felt they'd be pushed out under less favorable circumstances if they refused. Their foreboding was usually justified. In fact, in all of the companies offering such deals, golden handshakes were politically mandatory, according to messages passed through the grapevine, as often as they were voluntary.

The golden handshake didn't always get the job done, however. Universities, overstocked with tenured faculty, watched companies thin their ranks of older, supposedly less productive people, and tried to do the same. When they made the same kind of buy-out offers, the results were quite different. The computer science, math, and engineering faculties loved it. They left for industry, financially enriched by the experience. However, faculty in depressed and threatened departments, such as English and education, resisted enthusiastically, heating up the war. This resistance forced university CEOs to explore other ways to get rid of people.

It became nearly impossible for younger faculty to get tenure track positions, much less actually get tenure. Imagine the effect this had on office politics! (This is still a major problem.) Younger faculty found themselves in paroxysms of publishing and bootlicking—while feeling deeply resentful and sometimes punishing students in the process.

Rule six was “Hire women only when forced to.” Women were protected, at least nominally, by the affirmative action programs in larger companies. Looking back, the period from 1975 to 1979 looks like the golden age of upward mobility for women. Today's increasing on-the-job political action by women is motivated by the belief (and the fact) that President Ronald Reagan gutted the affirmative action programs, thereby making it easier for large companies to do as they please. Interestingly enough, not