



## When Politics Come Home

by Grace L. Judson

It's easy to see the part politics plays in the workplace, where you're thrown together with people you might not prefer to spend time with. But politics is everywhere, in every relationship, every contact between two or more people. If you think back to your last family disagreement, or to the last holiday meal you shared with family and friends (possibly one and the same event!), you'll see what I mean.

Interpersonal politics is the science and art of human interaction. When it's positive politics, you don't notice it, at work or at home. And because you generally expect the negative politics only at work, it's startlingly painful when it shows up in your personal life. Now it's affecting your life in a whole new way. It's undermining your support system and it's threatening the relationships that mean the most to you.

The good news is that the skills and tools that are effective in the workplace are just as useful in your personal life. In fact, my clients are often surprised when they find that our work together not only helps their careers advance, but helps them improve their personal relationships as well.

So though it may sound strange at first, the principles, tools, and approach are the same when you're dealing with interpersonal politics at home as they are when you're dealing with them in the workplace.

The question I'm most often asked is, "Isn't this manipulative?" No one wants to be perceived as manipulative in their personal or professional relationships (even those who sometimes *are* manipulative!).

Whether it's a difference of opinion, or you're expressing a desire you want someone to help fulfill, or you're simply asking for advice or for help, you're attempting to influence someone's behavior. Is that manipulative? Maybe yes, maybe no; it depends on your approach.

You can approach it with compassion, empathy, and an understanding of everyone's point of view. That's not manipulative. Or you can do it through guilt, judgment, and criticism. That *is* manipulative — and not a part of who you really are.

Compassion, empathy, and understanding are the foundation of what I teach and how I work with clients, whether we're talking about workplace or personal issues. Here are a few tips to help you manage the painful aspects of politics in your personal relationships. And just as the tips I offer for navigating workplace politics also apply to your personal life, so these tips also apply to office situations.

### Where's the Fear?

Whether yours or theirs, there is always fear involved when things become difficult. Neither of you may admit it, even to yourselves, but it's there.

Take a moment to breathe and step aside from your initial feelings of anger, defensiveness, and hurt. Note that I'm not asking you to suppress, ignore, or give up those feelings; they're real, and you need to experience them without self-judgment or criticism. But for the moment, step aside from them; reacting from them only perpetuates the struggle.

What is it that you're afraid might happen? What are you afraid of losing? Acknowledge it to yourself. By simply accepting your own fear, you'll start to feel more grounded.

Now that you've identified your own fears — and not until then; you come first in this process — what is the other person afraid of? What's being threatened in this situation, and where are his or her vulnerabilities exposed?

## Expect the Unexpected

Especially when you're in the middle of a recurring argument, it's easy to think, "Oh, here we are again. This is going to end badly, just as it does every time." This type of expectation is a self-fulfilling prophecy, simply because you react in anticipation of what you expect — often before it even happens.

Instead, allow yourself to be open to surprise. Open to an unexpected experience. Be willing to enter this conversation from a place of curiosity and not knowing what's going to happen. There's an innocence that arises from this perspective, a wondering and a dropping away of defensiveness.

## Offer Empathy

Start by giving yourself some empathy and understanding. As I said before, you *do* feel angry, defensive, hurt, or any of a host of other emotions. Those emotions are there; trying to tell yourself you "shouldn't" feel that way is doomed to failure and will only extend your pain.

When you've given yourself some attention and care, you'll have room to offer empathy and understanding to the other person.

Understanding doesn't mean agreement. Empathy doesn't mean becoming a doormat. You can be compassionate without acquiescing.

Understanding, empathy, and compassion tend to be unexpected in disagreements. Now you've surprised the other person, and that helps him or her step out of his/her own habitual reactions.

Offering understanding, empathy, and compassion is the essential first step to being able to hear what each other is saying. As long as you're reacting out of fear, you won't hear anything but what your fear is saying to you.

## Simple, but not easy

I freely acknowledge that what I've described sounds simple, but isn't all that easy to put into practice. Habit, fear, insecurity, anger — all that and more — make it difficult to step out of self-protective modes of behavior to offer the empathy and understanding that are necessary to make real progress.

But if you're sick and tired of being bitten by politics in your personal *or* professional life, isn't it time to try something new?

*"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."*  
Rumi, Sufi poet, jurist, and theologian, 1207-1273.

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