The Politics of SH&E

What Office Politics Are All About

In my twenty-plus years as an employee in the corporate world, I’ve been a consummate observer. I’ve seen just about everything there is to see. I’ve been on the upside and downside of mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, and divestitures. As a young SH&E professional, I always wondered how people climbed the ladder so rapidly and stayed aloft so long. It wasn’t just the star performers—in fact, few of the stars made it to positions of power and influence. I always hoped, as a Type A personality SH&E professional, that superior technical knowledge was the key to organizational success. It took me a while of spinning my wheels until I finally realized it wasn’t just technical ability, but something quite intangible. The proverbial, “It isn’t what you know, but who you know,” began to find a place in my five-year plan. This went against the grain of everything I had ever learned about succeeding in business.

I saw many incompetents rise to the top and stay there, much to the chagrin of my pay-for-performance, Protestant, work ethic. It wasn’t hard work after all, it was a combination of ability and who you knew. My goal was not to stay too long in middle management. In fact, I once posted in my office cubicle, “Temporary office of a rising young executive.” I had my five-year plan, but no mentor to guide me through the maze of corporate politics. One wrong move and I’m gone or pigeonholed for life. Being someone who abhorred failure, I had to find a solution. As an engineer, I wanted to call it political