

Uncover Hidden Power Structures

Career advancers look beyond the organizational chart to identify the true power structures within their company. They note personal alliances and identify who's well connected to the top. This way, they can exert subtle influence without playing office politics.

Here are some ways to spot the real power players where you work:

Learn from crisis management. Analyze a recent crisis in your organization. When faced with an emergency, who did the CEO see behind closed doors? Who was left out?

Look for technicians and other specialists who played key roles by providing high-level information or insights. These individuals may have tiny offices and unimpressive titles, but they may have a direct line to the head honcho.

Find the power centers. When the CEO wanders the halls, where does he stop and chat? And who gets the biggest budget? There's no better indication of top management's priorities than where it spends its money. A lavish budget for R&D or sales indicates a power center, a place that attracts plenty of positive attention. By finding a way to play a visible role in a power center's activities, you gain personal visibility as well.

Track leaders' careers. Do you know how the top three executives at your firm got where they are today? Where did they start? What's their level of education?

By reviewing the biographies of your top people, you gain clues to how they think and whom they respect. Example: A CEO who started out as a lawyer probably listens to attorneys more than others. A president who rose through the marketing department may have an affinity for people who propose new sales and marketing ideas.

Listen for a "buzz." When you're in the company cafeteria or waiting for an elevator, what business issues do you hear the top execs discussing? What's on their minds?

Find the source of real action in your company, whether it's new products under development, a new ad campaign or new processing systems. Attach yourself to these hot areas. Demonstrate your talents and make yourself the resident expert. This way, you'll exert far more influence than those who cling to dying fiefdoms.