We've got some bad news—or good, depending on how popular you are around the office.

Remember how your role models told you that elbow grease, more than popularity, paved the way to success? That the cool kids in high school wouldn't amount to anything because they didn't work hard? Well, it turns out that was fairy-tale talk. In reality, you should've skipped class—along with any kind of inspirational, feel-good morality lessons you learned—and done whatever it took to be cool. Because in reality, how high we rise in the management tree depends largely on how versed we are in office politics.

"If you'd have asked me when I first started this job, whether it was more important to be liked or more important to be good at your job, I'd of said 100 percent 'Good at your job,'" says Denise Wheeler, a partner, and labor and employment lawyer with the Fort Myers law firm Roetzel & Andress. "But after 15 years of looking through employers' hiring records, hands down, it's more important to be liked."

Easier said than done, Denise; especially for those of us with ticklish (some might say annoying) personality quirks. But like anything else, success in office politics can be learned and practiced. So to help sharpen your political fangs ... um, we mean skills ... Gulfshore Business asked three employment experts to outline the steps necessary to transform you from an office also-ran into a regular political machine. Just take it easy on the corruption; just because you practice politics doesn't mean you have to act like a politician.

I'm part of a team of nine that facilitates all marketing needs for all brands of our company. All of the brand managers do their own budgets for the year, and my boss makes a separate budget to facilitate each department's marketing needs. This includes business trips, various trade shows, media buys, etc. So if she wants to do a project but not pay for it, my boss will allocate it to a different department. This makes the marketing department come in under budget, meanwhile the other department comes in over.

Plus, my boss pays for ALL outside services on a quarterly basis. So, it looks like she's spending less, as opposed to having an annual lump sum in the first quarter of each fiscal year. And she charges other departments for these services each quarter. When I contacted one department to get their billing code, the department head said that they had been paying it at the beginning of the year without consulting my boss. Meanwhile, my boss has been charging her company quarterly for use of this service, which essentially funnels money back into the marketing department's overall budget. And then my boss essentially refused to let that department head see the invoice.

-Anonymous

JOSHUA SKY, THE SKY'S THE LIMIT CONSULTING

You just got a new job. Maybe even a promotion. Congratulations. You're now an immigrant in a weird country where you don't know the language, culture or customs. (Like Indiana Jones feasting on eyeballs in *The Temple of Doom.*) "There's a particular culture in every organization," says Sky. "Within that culture there are values, norms, things you can and cannot do, ways to behave and so on. In Southwest Florida, for example, the dress code is pretty casual."

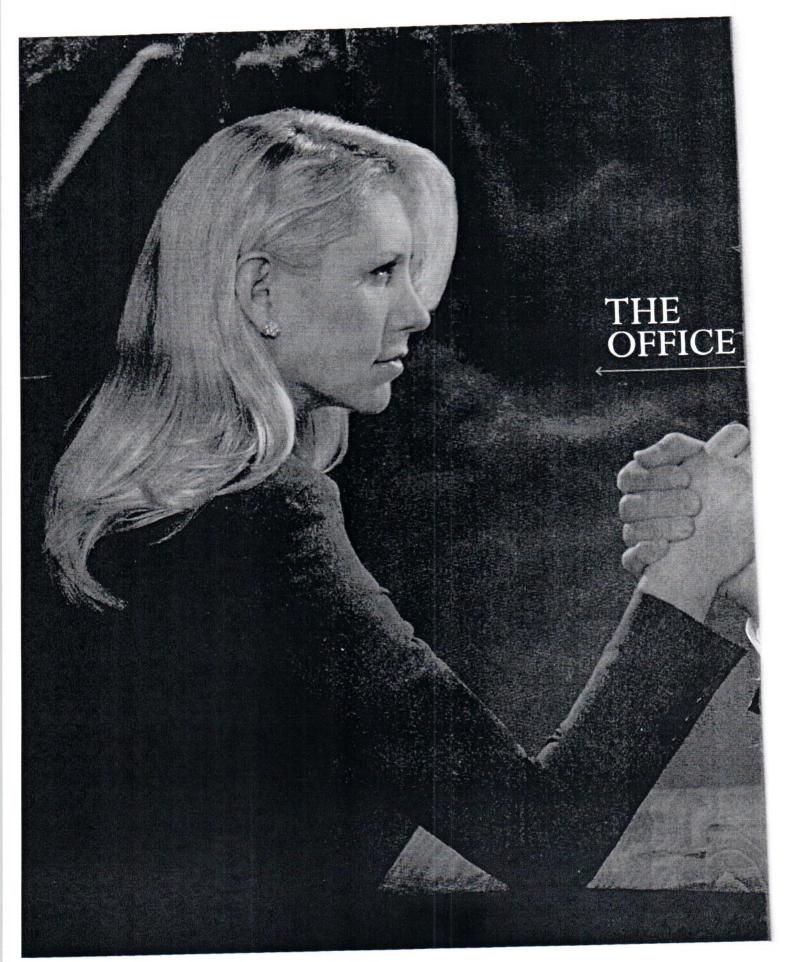
Sticking with the international travel analogy, says Sky, "The rules vary from country to country. There are functioning governments, corrupt governments, dictatorships. People have to know which country they're in. It's the same thing in business." Part of this naturalization process includes discovering who needs impressing and who to stay away from. The overriding question, however, is "What do you have to demonstrate to make yourself the right person when opportunity comes along?" says Sky.

Sky remembers a client who had trouble answering this question. A professional working in the Southwest Florida branch of a global company, Sky's client was highly educated and technically astute. In short, he was smart and knew the business backwards and forwards. As such, his boss wanted to promote him. The problem? His social skills lagged far behind his professional skills. "He had to

step out of his comfort zone, his technical education, to further his career," Sky says.

This professional was a no-nonsense character who presented his work to superiors and peers in one hard, uncompromising fashion. His boss had a similar style, causing the two to frequently butt heads. Disaster. "What's important to that boss? What values do they have? If you don't address those values, they won't look at you," Sky told his client. "Anyone can be noticed for running around in their underwear. [My client] knew he had to be noticed in the right way."

So, Sky's client began acquiescing to his boss when the two arrived at a professional impasse. Consequently, he was quickly promoted and now he's on equal footing with his one-time superior—and no longer forced to succumb when they quarrel. The overall message? Follow now. Lead later.



OFFENSIVE

There's no avoiding workplace politics, so play to win.

BY SPENCER CAMPBELL. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK KELLAR