Field Guide to Office Types for Chatelaine magazine

By Karan Smith

Whether it's stealing credit or bossing everyone around, there's always someone at work that makes you twitch. Take that Bully in the cubicle across the aisle. Or the Office Princess laughing with the boss. Work's hard enough – with the stress of layoffs and added load – without having to cope with this circus. But knowing how to navigate office politics is important to developing your career, says Franke James, founder of Toronto-based OfficePolitics.com.

Beyond all the antics – captured in the hit series *The Office* with its beet-growing, time-wasting characters -- you have to learn how to be a positive player in the game, she says. Those successful at the game know how to champion good initiatives. “You can have the best idea in the world, but if you don't know how to sort of stick-handle it through the system, it's not going to go anywhere.”

And in this economy, you need to be making peace with your cubicle mates.

“Now is the time to get along with people to prove that you're of value to the company and to show how you yourself are making a difference,” says Vicky Oliver, author of *Bad Bosses, Crazy Coworkers & Other Office Idiots*. Knowing how to navigate office politics, and its various players, also makes you more retainable, says Oliver, and more employable, if you ever get a pink slip.

So, here's a guide to six office characters, from the Climber to the Gossip, and tips from the experts on how to cope, what we can learn, and, deep breath, what to do if you see yourself becoming one.

**The Climber**

**Identifying behaviour:** Works at playing the game. Makes time only for colleagues he thinks can help him get ahead. Has been known to steal credit. Never dresses down for casual Friday.

**Often sighted:** Chatting with the higher-ups in the coffee line.

**Overheard:** “That reminds me of the successful project I spearheaded last quarter.”

**Cubicle clues:** A photo of himself, and his buds, at a New York Yankees baseball game. A rock-climbing calendar.

**Fictional hero:** Rocky Balboa.

**How to cope:** There are two ways to deal with a Climber -- either befriend the Climber and ascend with him, or assume he will self-destruct and leave him be, says Oliver. And be wary of the Climber's credit-snatching ways, says Dr. John Burton, a professor at the University of British Columbia in the Okanagan. “You need to monitor how they're behaving to make sure that they're not trying to get ahead by making you look bad.”

**If you recognize yourself:**

“Jealousy is a problem for the Climber,” says James, who originally founded OfficePolitics.com as a game that was “a little bit Machiavellian.” “Some of your co-workers may envy your fast rise and you will be the subject of gossip. Find ways to help others develop in their careers.”

**Surprises for the flock:** Ambitious employees have energy and drive, says Oliver. “They're often your go-to person when things get tough.” Adds James: While colleagues may belittle the Climber as a brown noser, bosses see him as helpful and attentive. “The Climber’s best asset is his knack for networking. Model yourself after him in this regard. Be social. Be helpful to others. Be a connector.”

**The Star**

**Identifying behaviour:**  Exhibits a certain celebrity self assurance. Always gets merit pay. Dresses well with a unique flair. Gets invited as the employee representative to corporate shindigs.

**Often sighted:** Working very hard -- this type's talent is recognized -- or totally relaxing, gabbing on the phone. The Star doesn't have to justify always “looking busy.”

**Overheard:** “Why yes, I am going to New York for that young executives' conference.”

**Cubicle clues:** Saleswoman of the year award. Bowling trophies. War medals. You get the idea.

**Fictional hero:** Samantha Jones

**How to cope:** “All 'Stars' love to have entourages,” says James. Make yourself useful to the Star by providing valuable information, research on projects and corporate insights and the Star will – likely – reward you.

**If you recognize yourself:**  Nothing is forever, particularly in this economy, says Oliver. “Today's Stars can be tomorrow's grunts. Don't rest on your laurels.”

**Surprises for the flock:** Model yourself after the Star's best attributes, suggests James: “The Star knows how to bring his or her accomplishments to the boss’s attention. ... The Star has good political acumen.”

**The Downer**

**Identifying behaviour:** Always complaining. Has been with the company longer than the boss. Weary of new projects, new ideas. Refuses to become adept at new technology.

**Often sighted:** Near the water cooler, in the hallway, in the cafeteria – these bluesmen don't like to keep it to themselves.

**Overheard:** “Management – guess what they've done now...”

**Cubicle clues:** Copy of the labour code on the desk.

**Fictional hero:** Eeyore.

**How to cope:** “Put a mental wall between you and that person because negativity is contagious,” says Oliver.

**If you recognize yourself:** Downers are hard to change, say these office politics experts. Consider self-improvement books or courses that will help you learn how to capitalize on your strengths in the workplace, says James.

**Surprises for the flock:** The Downer tends to be a whistler blower, and that can sometimes be good if there's something not right going on at work, says Oliver.

**The Gossip**

**Identifying behaviour:** Always speaks in a whisper voice. Always has the scoop on what's going down. Always asking for the scoop.

**Often sighted:** Milling around the lunchroom or outside the washrooms, anywhere people run into each other.

**Overheard:** “Can you believe what she said to him? That is SO wrong. I wonder if she'll apologize.”

**Cubicle clues:** A cute kitten calendar. *Canadian Idol* wallpaper on her PC.

**Fictional hero:** Ann Landers

**How to cope:** Gossips are fun and can bring a certain reality TV aspect to work, say these office politics experts, but Gossips build mistrust in the workplace. “By talking behind other people’s backs they are back-stabbing that person,” says James.

**If you recognize yourself:** Gossips are perceived as having too much time on their hands, says Oliver. “It makes them look like they're not busy and that's a really bad place to be in this economy.” Find other outlets for your tendency to dish – go on Facebook after work.

**Surprises for the flock:** “Use the Gossip as a model of what not to be,” says James.

**The Clock Watcher**

**Identifying behaviour:** Never puts in more time than necessary. Always has “home emergency” when any overtime from the team is required.

**Often sighted:** Keeping desk chair warm, except when on mandatory break. Watching the latest viral You Tube hit.

**Overheard:** “Hmm, it looks like it's going to be really nice this Friday. I think I feel a cold coming on.”

**Cubicle clues:** Photo calendar of their kids.

**Fictional hero:** Jim from The Office.

**How to cope:** “A year ago, you might have been like, 'Hey buddy, stay until seven like the rest of us and do your fair share,'” says Oliver. “Today you just take over the person's job.”

**If you recognize yourself:** In this economy, it's smart to direct more energy into your work, say these office politics veterans. Volunteer on projects that interest you, says James. “The reason you’re a Clock Watcher may be because you’re not in the right job.”

**Surprises for the flock:** Clock Watchers have a life outside of work, a healthy sign of work-life balance. But they take it to the point of bringing little passion to their work, says James. The upside for you? You can look almost like a Star.

**The Loner**

**Identifying behaviour:** Does he even know your name? No one really knows anything about this person. Never attends company functions. (Personally, you think this is the one who may go postal.)

**Often sighted:** Smoking alone outside, reading in the lunch room.

**Overheard:** Awkward silence if you corner him in the kitchen.

**Cubicle clues:** Aging phone books under the desk. RSI handouts on the cubicle wall.

**Fictional hero:** Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver.*

**How to cope: “**Recognize that the Loner is an introvert and show them some respect,” says James. “But let’s say this person is really weird. Observe. Document. Report to HR.”

**If you recognize yourself:** It's dangerous to be alone and politically unplugged in this time of layoffs. “Force yourself to attend social functions. You don’t need to be the centre of attention, just be present,” says James.

**Surprises for the flock:** “Loners can be hardworking productive workers. They like to keep their heads down and ignore office politics,” says James.

**Sidebar: Five tips to succeed at office politics**

\*Be slow to anger and slow to demand credit. Share information.

\*Stay focused on doing your own job well

\*Step into your co-worker's shoes. You'll gain insight – and a possible solution -- into your cubicle mate's annoying behaviour

\*Recognize that sometimes it isn't your problem to solve. “Sometimes your job is to help your manager do their job,” says ethicist Dr. John Burton.

\*Seek the advice of a mentor – someone from outside the company – who can examine the situation and help develop strategies

*Sources: Vicky Oliver, Franke James and Dr. John Burton*