

Love and Politics



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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Although I will readily acknowledge my eclectic taste in reading material, this week I've been reading two books that couldn't be any further apart with respect to style and substance.

[Handbook for the Heart](#) is a collection of thirty-four essays on love, happiness and personal growth. In his essay titled "The Mirror of Love," Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. explains that humans often project what they don't like about themselves onto others. That which we dislike in others may turn out to be qualities others see in us.

The image of an unhappy employee or volunteer who "protests too much" lingered as I picked up [Mob Rules: What the Mafia Can Teach the Legitimate Businessman](#), by Louis Ferrante. Recommended by our 2011 *Summit* keynote speaker Hilary Austen, [Mob Rules](#) offers 88 "lessons" from Ferrante's years as an "associate" in the Gambino family. This book of business lessons is not for the faint of heart or anyone uncomfortable with "colorful" language. My favorite "lesson" in the first half of the book is Lesson 6: "Don't End Up in the Trunk of a Car: Avoiding Office Politics". Ferrante writes, "Mobsters love the ponies, but they know the odds of losing at the track are far greater than those of winning. Getting involved in office politics is a bit like betting the ponies—odds are you'll lose. The guy who stays ahead is the guy who watches the races but doesn't bet."

In a new survey on employee satisfaction conducted by [Professionals for NonProfits](#) three out of four employees said that internal politics has hampered their ability to function in their job. While perusing the survey findings I began to wonder whether "office politics" might be an example of a sin that is easy to see in others, but hard to acknowledge in ourselves. Ask yourself:

- Do I personally contribute to the environment that I view as unhealthy and mission-draining?
- Does my behavior fuel the fire or douse the flames of political unrest in the nonprofit I serve?

Office politics take a costly toll on nonprofit missions:

- Talented but frustrated employees leave organizations they love, taking their skills, insights and energy elsewhere;
- Committed volunteers step back, instead of stepping up, as their enthusiasm wanes; and
- Prospective partner organizations take a "pass" on the opportunity to collaborate.

Do office politics get in the way of your nonprofit's mission? Consider the following steps to eliminate mission-

impairing distractions from your laser-like focus on mission advancement.

- **Revisit your open door policy.** If employees are congregating online to share their frustration, your “open door” might as well be shut. Have you made assumptions about the level of engagement in your nonprofit? Is “teamwork” official policy or a reality?
- **Ask whether your nonprofit’s values are alive and well inside the organization.** Is your commitment to treat consumers, clients and customers with compassion and fairness evident in the workplace? Do employees feel valued, supported and encouraged?
- **Be generous; err on the side of communicating openly.** Many nonprofit leaders adopt a “need to know” approach when it comes to sharing information with staff, not wanting to “burden” staff with information that may not be “needed” to tackle today’s “to do” list. Yet employees who are in the dark about the nonprofit’s plans and challenges are far more likely to find frustration and doubt, rather than comfort, in the dark.

Announcing a moratorium on office politics in your nonprofit is unlikely to quell speculation about the board’s plans, temper mounting frustration with the perceived disconnect between outward values and internal practice, or bring members of your team into your office for candid conversations about the challenges facing your nonprofit. Instead of insisting on candor and teamwork, take a minute to pause and look in a mirror. What values are you projecting to the employees and volunteers who rely on your leadership? Do you see the behaviors you detest in others in your own reflection?

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article and questions about the Center’s resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at [www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.