

---

# To Navigate Office Politics, Map Out Your Friends and Foes



By Andy J. Yap , INSEAD

## **Before you make a political move, draw a POWER map.**

*“The higher up the mountain, the more treacherous the path.” – Frank Underwood (House of Cards)*

Organisational politics is ubiquitous. If you think your workplace is without politics, then perhaps you have been blindsided. Everyone has different goals and motives, and alignment is rarely a given. In fact, one may have goals that may not be aligned with the organisation’s. Thus, leaders must learn the appropriate political skills to rally supporters and persuade resisters to “get things done”. More critically, as one ascends the organisational hierarchy, the politics gets messier as the stakes are higher. Perhaps fictional Frank Underwood was right to say: “For those of us climbing to the top of the food chain, there can be no mercy. There is but one rule: Hunt or be hunted.”

Politics is not a bad word. It’s about reaching a particular destination in a dynamic and oftentimes volatile landscape. Every personal or organisational

goal that you are trying to advance can result in a distinct set of allies and enemies. Even the relationships between these people can impact you. In organisations, there are three challenging situations that are highly politically volatile. First, when the organisation is facing a crisis, and leaders need to make swift decisions that would require support from its powerful players. Second, when you are leading organisational change or executing a new strategy, and some members are resistant to change. And third, when you are being evaluated for promotion to senior leadership. These situations can drastically shift the power dynamics in the organisation. Navigating such intricate terrain requires a map.

Take Victor (*a composite character inspired by real people I have worked with*), a project leader who has been working at a medium-size consultancy for eleven years. He is optimistic about making partner this year and knows that a vote on the matter is imminent. Victor has been doing well, but his expertise is in family business, a relatively niche area compared to his firm's two main cash cows: banking, and oil and gas (O&G).

Victor needs to make his case. He must persuade enough voting partners that they should bet on him, while doing his best to prevent other partners from actively blocking his path. To help individuals better manage political circumstances like these, I have developed the POWER map, a tool that sheds light on the complex personal networks that shape political situations.

Creating a POWER map first involves mulling over the following questions.

**Players** Who are the key players in this particular situation?

**Objectives** What are your key objectives and those of the other players?

**Weight** How much power do you and other players have?

**Enemies & allies** Who are your enemies and allies?

**R  
relationships** How are the relationships between the various players?

The players include all the people who may have a bearing on the particular goal you are pursuing. They may not involve everyone in the organisational chart – only the people who can impact your goal. To determine whether these people are enemies or allies, you first need to consider their objectives. People whose objectives are aligned with yours in the situation at hand can usually be thought of as allies.

Next you need to reflect on the relationship you have with these players and the relationship (if any) they have with each other. It can also be useful to mull over whether they themselves have known allies or enemies. As the old saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

In Victor's case, the players not only include all the partners likely to participate in the upcoming vote, but also other key figures who could influence it. In this consulting firm, the more partners from a particular area, the more power to that particular group. Victor thus has a natural ally in the only partner from the family business area.

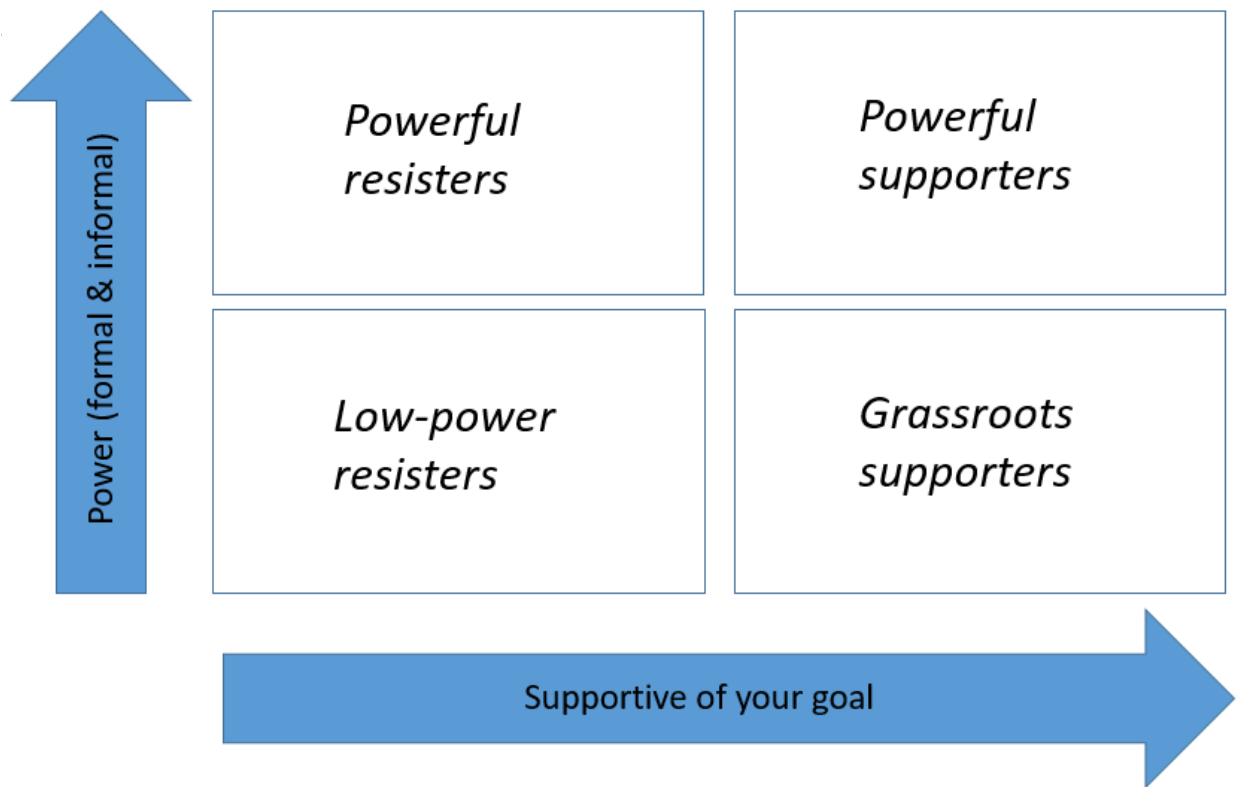
Victor also knows that the banking area partners are still upset that the O&G area ones managed to outnumber them last year (5 to 4). The four banking partners worry about the growing risk of a power imbalance. They could be moved to help Victor to prevent the nomination of a new O&G partner.

Victor has been commended for his work on a few deals he completed recently with the IT area; this may boost his value in the eyes of the two partners from that area. Besides, they are not putting any staff up for partnership, so they have no direct stake. Just like the banking partners, they may wish to limit the growth of the O&G coalition.

In addition, Victor regularly plays squash with the head of human resources (a fellow MBA alum). While this person is not a partner, she is very charismatic and has very high social capital thanks to her wide and diverse network.

Finally, Victor used to date one of the firm's legal assistants, and the relationship soured spectacularly. She now reports directly to one of the IT partners.

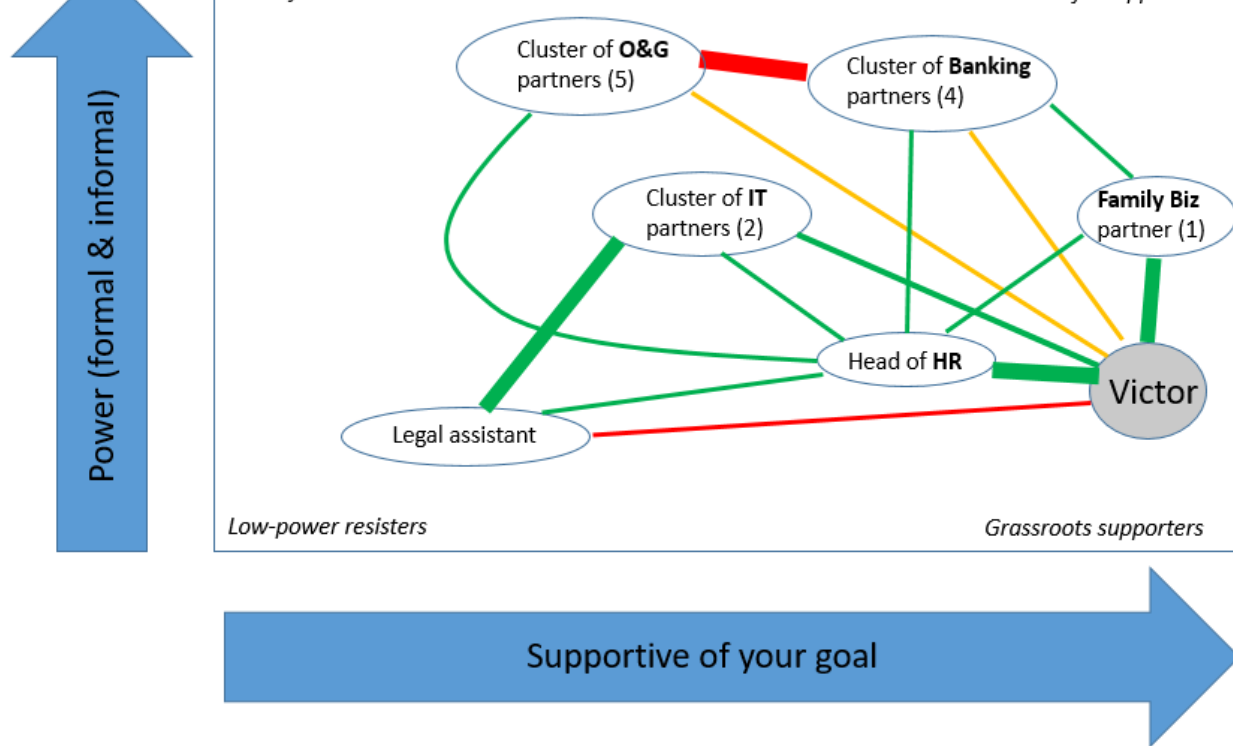
Thinking about your own situation, you may not be able to give definitive answers to all the questions presented in Table 1, but giving it serious thought is the obligatory first step.



Bear in mind that power is not just a matter of seniority in the organisational hierarchy. Certain people may yield influence (or informal power) far beyond their title, as is sometimes the case with executive assistants who have the ear of their boss, for example. Others may base their power on their expertise, their ability to read people or even their connections with powerful others. In fact, power is inherently a subjective matter. Fans of *Game of Thrones* may recall: “Power resides where men believe it resides.”

Finally, you should include yourself on the map, and trace lines marking the relationship you have with the other players as well as the relationships the players have with one another. Use different colours, for example, green to indicate a positive relationship, amber for neutral (with the potential to go either way) and red for danger. The stronger your relation is with that particular player, the thicker the line should be, regardless of whether it’s green or red. Sorting all the key people on a visual tool will help you gain clarity.

Victor’s political map would look like this:



Do not get overly concerned about getting the map exactly right. First of all, it is dynamic. Coalitions, friendships and alignment can and do change. The goal of the map is to give you a clearer sense of the people involved and how are they related, so you can plan your next steps in a more strategic way.

While this article is not intended as a primer on political moves, the standard way to deal with resisters first involves learning about them. Once you know what makes them tick, you can communicate with them to see if you can dispel misconceptions, bridge differences or otherwise win them over. If that is not feasible, your next move should be to stall them.

The higher the power of your resisters, the more obliquely you may want to tackle them. You may ask your powerful allies to help you manage people you do not have access to. You may consider the pros and cons of using a **two-step leverage approach**, which entails gaining leverage over an uncooperative party through a third-party.

Do not underestimate what grassroots supporters may do for you. Some may be vocal about their support, and the positive chatter may reach the decision makers. If your goal is to lead a culture change or implement a new strategy,

you will undoubtedly need the critical mass created by grassroots supporters.

Victor's story ends well. He started connecting with the banking partners, even inviting their families over to his home. He asked the family business partner to put in a good word for him (with a view on forming a coalition). Note that these networking norms are well regarded in this culture. Some cultures (organisational and national) frown upon such moves. His HR ally was able to check, over an informal coffee chat, whether Victor's ex held a grudge (she did not). That gave him the confidence to ask both IT partners for their support. On the day of the vote, the required number of partners supported him.

In recent television dramas – *House of Cards*, *Billions*, *Suits*, for example – the main characters often seem a step ahead of everyone else. In real life, most of us do not have fully internalised maps of every political situation. A visual tool can help us prepare for the inevitable battles in our corporate journey. While the map doesn't teach political tactics, it does allow you to identify whom you need to influence and whom you should try to protect yourself against. The map will not transport you to your destination like a magic carpet – but it will definitely help you chart your path.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/navigate-office-politics-map-out-your-friends-and-foes>

---

#### **About the author(s)**

**Andy J. Yap** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour and the Academic Director of the Centre for Organisational Research at INSEAD.