

Image building: a political art



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Maintaining and improving the image of libraries is core business for ALIA. Nothing it does is more important. Initiatives like Lobby for Libraries are clearly critical in emphasising the valuable work which members are doing and its importance to Australia, both commercially and culturally.

Yet an image is not, of itself, an active concept. Rather, it is an avenue for pursuit of a variety of objectives. A clearer, more positive image provides a better context within which librarians can promote themselves and their services. But no matter how successful it is, image building must be followed by practical action in workplaces if it is to produce tangible benefits for library workers.

Like it or not, this means organisational politics is every bit as important as effective political lobbying at the national level. In fact, for employees the latter will generate real outcomes only if close attention is also given to the former.

It is no secret that librarians often tend to neglect self-promotion at work. This has been costly already. And the more deregulated Australian wage-fixing and employment policy becomes, the greater those costs will be. With in-house job evaluation and internal relativity paramount in defining benefits, the ability of particular individuals and occupational groups to demonstrate their value to the organisation will become ever more important. For diffident people who do not feel innately comfortable 'playing politics', these are challenging times indeed.

A useful manual for dealing with them is a new book *Positive politics: overcome office politics and fast-track your career*, Mark Holden, Business & Professional Publishing, ISBN 1 875680 38 1. Holden begins by demolishing the notion that an organisation's activities can be assessed from the formal 'org chart'. The real action, he contends, can be found in the informal structures which make up a host of political webs, linking individuals in a variety of mutual-benefit relationships. This mass of interlocking webs is the basis for almost all the negotiation and compromise which actually generates organisational activity. Its existence and functionality is based almost entirely on 'office politics'.

Despite the pejorative overtones usually associated with playing politics at work, Holden argues convincingly that it is not politics *per se* which cause trouble. Rather, it is the fact that too often negative politics prevail. Often this occurs because the reasonable majority avoids the topic, leaving the field to the scheming minority — those we often think of as the Machiavellian types. The book defines negative politics as deliberate manipulation of other people for the sole purpose of personal gain, usually at the expense of both organisational and other people's interests.

The two dominant themes of the book are: avoid participation at your peril, and practise positive politics pro-actively and strategically if you wish to prosper. And there are numerous hints, tips and strategies for doing so. These include amusing characterisations of the various political players in the typical organisation: androids (the non-players); the streetwise (politically skilful, highly successful but basically decent); and hustlers (snake-oil types — virtuosos in the black art of negative politics — who peddle innuendo, rumour and misinformation to create stress and tension for almost everybody).

While all its contents are interesting and entertaining, perhaps the most valuable section for librarians seeking to advance their cause is that which deals directly with the way in which organisations actually work. The chapter 'Manoeuvring your way through organisational cultures' would fit very well in every employee's survival kit for the 1990s. Allied to the book's practical approach to human behaviour in the workplace this is a valuable resource for dealing with the continuing stress of a changing workplace.

Current broad attempts to boost the image of librarians should be strongly supported by all ALIA members. But none should forget the simultaneous need for personal self promotion in the workplace if a better image is to result in more than ephemeral change. ■

Unable to attend the Extraordinary General Meeting on 27 October 1998?

You may still register a vote by appointing another ALIA member to vote on your behalf at the meeting. Regulation B17 of the Constitution sets out the form for appointing a proxy. To appoint a proxy fill in the form below and return to **The executive director, ALIA, PO Box E441, Kingston 2604**, fax **02 6282 2249**. You may also e-mail responses in the format below to **enquiry@alia.org.au**. Forms must be returned by **20 October 1998**.

to: The Australian Library and Information Association

I, of ,
being a member of the Australian Library and Information Association
hereby appoint of
as my proxy to vote for me at the general meeting to be held on the twenty-seventh day of October 1998 and at any adjournment thereof.

Signed

this day of 1998.