

CORPORATE TABOOS — VOLUME II

*Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes*

**Issue #2**

# Office Politics as a Leadership Failure

*— How It Undermines Lean and Six Sigma Efforts  
and the Transparency and Merit Rules That Kill It*

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*The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

## The War Story

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The Lean transformation at Hartfield Components had been announced with genuine fanfare. The CEO had stood in front of the all-hands and used the words 'respect for people,' 'continuous improvement,' and 'breaking down silos' with what appeared to be conviction. A consulting firm had been engaged. Value stream maps had been drawn on large paper and photographed. Kaizen events had been scheduled six months out.

By month eight, three things had happened that the transformation roadmap had not accounted for.

The first was that the VP of Operations, Sandra, had quietly ensured that every kaizen event in her division was facilitated by one of her direct reports — not the cross-functional team the methodology called for. The insights that emerged from those events were funneled to Sandra first, edited for what she deemed 'appropriate framing,' and presented to leadership in a format that consistently positioned her division as the source of improvement and other divisions as the sources of the problems being improved.

The second was that the Quality Director, Marcus, had been excluded from two consecutive steering committee meetings by an 'administrative scheduling error' that everyone on the committee understood was not administrative. Marcus had, in a previous meeting, raised data showing that 60% of defects originated upstream in the process — in Sandra's domain. The scheduling error resolved itself after Marcus stopped attending the meetings.

The third was that the Lean coordinator, a sharp process engineer named Dani, had documented all of this in a memo to the VP of HR. The memo had been received, acknowledged, and filed. Dani had been reassigned to a project with no improvement scope three weeks later.

At month twelve, the consulting firm delivered its progress assessment: 8% reduction in cycle time against a 25% target, 4% reduction in defect rate against a 15% target, and a 'cultural readiness' score that was, charitably, in the low range. Their recommendation was 'accelerate leadership alignment and address political barriers to cross-functional collaboration.' The CEO nodded. He asked Sandra what she thought the barriers were. She said the real issue was 'organizational change fatigue.'

The Lean transformation was quietly deprioritized in Q1 of the following year.

***Lean and Six Sigma don't fail because the tools don't work. They fail because the political environment makes honest data and cross-functional truth-telling too expensive for anyone to sustain.***

## Name the Failure: Politics as the Anti-System

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Office politics, in its most precise definition, is the substitution of personal interest and alliance-building for merit and organizational purpose in the exercise of influence. It is not the same as organizational navigation — understanding how decisions get made and communicating effectively within that reality. It is the active manipulation of information, relationships, and processes to advance personal position at the expense of shared goals.

In most organizational contexts, office politics is a nuisance. In Lean and Six Sigma environments, it is a system killer. The reason is structural: both methodologies depend on conditions that office politics directly destroys.

What Lean and Six Sigma Require	What Office Politics Produces
Honest data that travels freely across functions	Curated data filtered through political interests before it reaches decision-makers
Root cause analysis that follows evidence regardless of where it leads	Root cause analysis that stops at the boundary of whoever controls the room
Cross-functional collaboration without territorial protection	Functional silos defended as political assets; improvement blocked at borders
Psychological safety to surface problems early	A culture where surfacing problems makes you the problem
Leadership that models waste elimination, including political waste	Leadership that participates in or tolerates the most expensive waste in the system
Standard work and accountability applied consistently	Standards applied to those without political protection; exceptions for those with it

Sandra's behavior at Hartfield was not merely unpleasant. It was technically incompatible with the transformation the organization had committed to. Every kaizen event she controlled produced data she had filtered. Every steering committee meeting Marcus missed was a meeting where the defect data he carried did not arrive. The improvement system was running on curated information, and curated information cannot produce real improvement — it can only produce the appearance of it.

## Why It Persists: The Political Ecosystem in Improvement Cultures

Office politics in improvement environments is not imported from outside the methodology — it grows from within it, fed by specific structural conditions that Lean and Six Sigma transformations reliably create.

### Lean Creates Visibility — and Visibility Creates Threat

Value stream mapping, process audits, and root cause analysis all do the same thing: they make what was previously invisible visible. Cycle time. Defect rates by source. Inventory accumulation by function. Wait time between handoffs. For leaders whose functional

performance has been obscured by complexity, this visibility is not an improvement opportunity — it is an existential threat. Political behavior in response to Lean is often, at its root, a defensive reaction to the loss of obscurity.

Sandra's behavior was not random. It was rational, given her incentives. The improvement data, if allowed to travel freely, would have established her division as the primary source of a significant defect category. Her political maneuvering was the organizational equivalent of a countermeasure — targeted at the measurement system rather than the root cause.

### **Six Sigma Creates Power Through Data — and Power Is Political**

In a Six Sigma environment, the person who controls the data controls the narrative. Black Belts and Master Black Belts hold significant informal power precisely because they can measure things others cannot. This creates a predictable political dynamic: functional leaders attempt to influence or capture the measurement process, challenge statistical conclusions that threaten their domain, or build alliances with data owners that compromise analytical independence.

Dani's memo documented what happens when the data function refuses to be captured: the analyst is removed from the environment where the inconvenient data lives. This is not unusual. It is one of the most common patterns in failed Six Sigma programs — and one of the least frequently named in post-mortems.

### **Leadership Participation is the Accelerant**

Office politics at the individual contributor level is damaging. Office politics at the leadership level is transformative — it redefines what the rules of the organization actually are. When Sandra controls the kaizen facilitation process and faces no consequence, the message to every other leader in the building is clear: the improvement system can be managed politically, and doing so is not merely tolerated but implicitly endorsed by the absence of correction from above.

The CEO's question — asking Sandra to diagnose the barriers to Lean adoption — was not neutral. It was the final signal that the political system was more powerful than the improvement system, because the improvement system's primary obstacle was asked to describe the improvement system's obstacles.

#### **The Lean Principle Most Organizations Ignore**

Toyota's foundational commitment to 'Respect for People' is widely cited and narrowly interpreted. Most organizations read it as treating employees with dignity. Toyota's original intent was considerably sharper: it means creating conditions in which people can do their best work — which explicitly includes eliminating the political games, information hoarding, and territorial behavior that prevent people from contributing fully. Political culture is not a soft problem in the Toyota framework. It is a form of waste — specifically, the waste of human potential — and eliminating it is leadership's responsibility.

## **The Transparency and Merit Rules That Kill Political Culture**

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Political cultures do not change through values statements or cultural aspiration alone. They change when the structural conditions that make political behavior rational are removed — when transparency makes the behavior visible and merit systems make the behavior costly. Here are the five rules that, applied consistently, make office politics operationally difficult to sustain.

### **Rule 1: Data Belongs to the Organization, Not the Function**

The most powerful political tool in an improvement environment is control of data. The countermeasure is simple in principle and requires consistent enforcement in practice: improvement data — defect sources, cycle time by process step, cost of quality by function — is owned by the organization, published to all relevant stakeholders, and not filtered or edited before it reaches the people who need it.

This means the defect data that shows Sandra's division as the primary source of a quality problem goes directly to the steering committee, attributed correctly, without passing through Sandra's editorial process. It means the kaizen event outputs are published as completed, not as Sandra prefers them to be described. It means the Quality Director's data does not disappear from the meeting when the Quality Director is excluded.

#### **Practical Implementation: The Data Governance Standard**

Establish a clear standard: improvement data is owned by the improvement function (Lean/Six Sigma team or equivalent), published to all steering committee members simultaneously, and not subject to functional review or approval before distribution. Any request to 'review before publishing' is treated as a process violation, not a reasonable precaution. The standard must be stated explicitly, enforced consistently, and violated consequences must be real.

### **Rule 2: Cross-Functional Facilitation Is Non-Negotiable**

Kaizen events, Six Sigma projects, and improvement initiatives facilitated entirely within the function being improved are structurally incapable of producing the cross-functional accountability the methodology requires. The standard must be explicit: improvement activities that affect or implicate more than one function require cross-functional facilitation and cross-functional representation — not as a courtesy, but as a methodological requirement.

Sandra's capture of the kaizen facilitation process was possible because no standard existed that made cross-functional facilitation mandatory. When no standard exists, political actors fill the gap with their own preferred arrangements. The standard closes that gap.

### **Rule 3: Improvement Steering Committees Have Fixed Membership and Attendance Accountability**

The 'administrative scheduling error' that removed Marcus from two consecutive meetings was possible because the steering committee had no attendance accountability standard. Meetings that key stakeholders miss without consequence are meetings that key stakeholders can be made to miss without consequence.

Fix the membership of improvement steering committees explicitly. Identify the roles required to be present for a valid meeting, not the individuals — so that if the Quality Director is unavailable, the quality function must be represented by a designated alternate, and the meeting outcome is not valid without that representation. An exclusion cannot be framed as an absence if the role, not the person, is what the standard requires.

#### **Rule 4: Political Behavior in Improvement Processes Is Named and Addressed as a Quality Failure**

The most important signal a leadership team can send about the boundaries of political behavior is to treat its violation of improvement processes not as a cultural issue but as an operational failure — the same category as a process deviation or a quality escape.

When Sandra filtered kaizen data, that was a process deviation from the improvement methodology. When Marcus was excluded from the steering committee, that was a process failure that compromised the integrity of the decision-making system. Naming these as process failures — rather than as interpersonal conflicts or political jockeying — changes both the frame and the appropriate response. Process failures are investigated. Root causes are identified. Corrective actions are assigned. Recurrence is monitored.

#### **Rule 5: Senior Leaders Must Model and Enforce, Not Merely Endorse**

Every rule above fails if senior leadership participates in political behavior or tolerates it in others. The CEO who asked Sandra to diagnose the barriers to the transformation she was undermining had, in that moment, definitively established which system — the political one or the improvement one — was actually in charge.

Senior leader behavior in improvement environments must be held to the same standard as any other process requirement. This means:

- Senior leaders do not control or filter improvement data that pertains to their domains.
- Senior leaders do not use scheduling, access, or resource control to suppress inconvenient analysis.
- Senior leaders who observe political behavior that compromises the improvement process address it as they would any other process violation — directly, specifically, and with consequences that match the severity of the behavior.
- Senior leaders ask the people closest to the data — not the people with the most political capital — what the barriers to improvement actually are.

### **The Six Sigma Diagnostic: Using DMAIC to Map the Political System**

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One of the most underused applications of Six Sigma methodology is the analysis of organizational processes rather than manufacturing processes. The DMAIC framework — Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control — applies to the information flow processes that political behavior corrupts just as cleanly as it applies to production defects.

DMAIC Phase	Applied to Office Politics Diagnosis
Define	Define the expected information flow for improvement data: from collection through analysis to decision-making. Define the boundaries of appropriate functional influence on that flow. Name specifically what constitutes a process deviation.
Measure	Measure the actual information flow: how many improvement findings were modified before reaching the steering committee? How many steering committee meetings lacked required representation? How many improvement actions were directed to functions other than those the data implicated?
Analyze	Identify where the gap between expected and actual information flow is largest. Which functions, which leadership levels, which process steps are the primary sources of information distortion?
Improve	Implement the transparency and merit rules above. Establish data governance standards, cross-functional facilitation requirements, and attendance accountability. Address the specific behaviors identified in the Analyze phase with specific process changes.
Control	Monitor compliance with the new standards through improvement steering committee reviews. Track the political behavior indicators identified in the Measure phase. Establish a process for escalating violations and document follow-through on corrective actions.

Applying DMAIC to the political process is not merely an intellectual exercise. It produces a documented, defensible record of where the improvement system is being compromised and by what specific behaviors — which is precisely the kind of evidence that makes addressing political behavior possible rather than merely aspirational.

## What a Low-Politics Improvement Culture Actually Looks Like

The goal is not zero conflict — robust improvement cultures have significant disagreement, because disagreement is what happens when honest data meets entrenched assumptions. The goal is conflict that is about ideas and evidence rather than territory and position. Here is what that distinction looks like in practice.

High-Politics Culture	Low-Politics Improvement Culture
Data is reviewed and 'framed' by functional leaders before reaching decision-makers	Data is published directly to all stakeholders by the improvement function; no functional review gate
Kaizen events are facilitated by the function being improved	Cross-functional facilitation is a methodological requirement; facilitated internally is treated as a process deviation

High-Politics Culture	Low-Politics Improvement Culture
Steering committee composition is fluid; absences create convenient data gaps	Committee membership is role-based; absences require representation; meetings are invalid without required roles
Political actors are described as 'resistant to change' and managed through cultural messaging	Political behavior that compromises the improvement process is treated as a process failure with root cause analysis and corrective action
The leader with the most political capital shapes the narrative of what improvements are needed	The data shapes the narrative; leaders respond to evidence rather than generating it
Improvement coordinators who surface uncomfortable findings are reassigned	Improvement coordinators have organizational independence; reassignment in response to findings is treated as retaliation

## Quick Reference: The Anti-Politics Audit for Improvement Leaders

Run these six questions against your current improvement environment. Any 'No' answer identifies a structural gap that political behavior will fill.

Audit Question	Yes / No — Gap Action
Is improvement data published directly to all steering committee members without functional review or editing?	No → Establish data governance standard; improvement function owns publication
Are kaizen events and improvement projects cross-functionally facilitated by design, not by invitation?	No → Define cross-functional facilitation as a non-negotiable methodological requirement
Is steering committee membership defined by role, with attendance accountability and alternate representation standards?	No → Redefine membership; establish meeting validity criteria; enforce attendance
Has any improvement coordinator or analyst been reassigned or marginalized following an inconvenient finding? If yes, was that addressed as a process violation?	No → Create explicit protection for improvement function independence; address past retaliation
Does senior leadership model direct engagement with uncomfortable improvement data — responding to findings rather than influencing them?	No → Senior leader behavior expectations must be made explicit and enforced by the CEO or governing body
Is political behavior in improvement processes named, documented, and addressed through the same corrective action process as other process failures?	No → Add political process violation to the improvement system's defect taxonomy; assign corrective action ownership

## The Bottom Line

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Hartfield's Lean transformation did not fail because Lean doesn't work. It failed because Lean requires conditions — honest data, cross-functional accountability, leadership that follows evidence — that the political environment made impossible to sustain. The consulting firm's final report named 'political barriers to cross-functional collaboration' in language polite enough that no one was required to do anything specific about it. The report was filed. The barriers remained.

Dani, the process engineer who documented what was happening, left eight months after her reassignment. She now leads the Lean transformation at a competitor. In her first month in the new role, she asked the executive team a direct question: 'What happens when the data points to your division?' The answers told her everything she needed to know about whether this one would work.

Office politics is not a cultural inconvenience. In an improvement environment, it is a quality failure — measurable, traceable to root causes, and correctable through the same disciplined processes the methodology applies to every other form of defect. The organizations that treat it as such are the ones whose Lean and Six Sigma efforts survive the first year.

***You cannot build a culture of continuous improvement on a foundation of strategic dishonesty. The tools will work exactly as well as the information they run on — and in a political environment, that information is never quite real.***

### Coming Up in Issue #3

The Silent Exclusion Trap — Deliberately leaving certain individuals or groups out of meetings, data, or discussions to maintain control or avoid challenge. Why 'need-to-know' cultures destroy engagement, and how Toyota's Respect for People principle provides a practical fix.

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