

# Choosing your political battles

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

Pick wisely to ensure leadership success.

**MARY\***, A NEW MANAGER in the operating room, prides herself on being a strong advocate for her staff, quickly acting on every issue with which she's presented. So she's a little surprised when her leader-mentor Susan tells her that she's developing a reputation for being overly aggressive. Susan, who explains to Mary that she's perceived in conflict situations as trying to win at all costs, suggests that this reputation could ultimately derail her career. She recommends that Mary learn to pick and choose her political battles more carefully.

One of the most challenging lessons new leaders like Mary learn is that not every battle is worth fighting. Marshall Goldsmith, an internationally known leadership coach, has written that a need to win too much is the number one behavioral flaw even good leaders need to overcome. There's a fine line between winning when it counts and being overly competitive about winning in every situation. While we might be tempted to battle through every conflict because we believe we're right, these battles can take enormous amounts of time and personal energy that would be better spent elsewhere.

And consider other less tangible and finite resources. For example, the goodwill of others in the organization and your own political capital should be reserved for situations where the consequences really matter. You can't take on every problem at work, as Mary was attempting, so choose your leadership battles wisely.

## Choosing your battles wisely

In studying her options in conflict situations, Mary first needs to remember that she's new in her role. Although she may be in a formal leadership position, Mary will find that people will be more likely to accommodate her requests after she establishes a strong leadership track record.

Understanding and navigating the organizational politics at work can be challenging. Most leaders have experienced a situation where it seemed they had buy-in for a solution to a conflict or problem, and then things suddenly and unexpectedly shifted.

There are costs to participating in political battles, so Mary needs to be sure that it's worth it. Organizational politics are inevitable in conflict situations and you'll always need allies. These alliances are built on reciprocity, and people will return the favor when you need it. Too often, leaders forget this and win insignificant battles but lose wars when the stakes are really important. Effective leaders have good radar for what matters to the organization and build political capital so that when they choose to fight, they're successful.

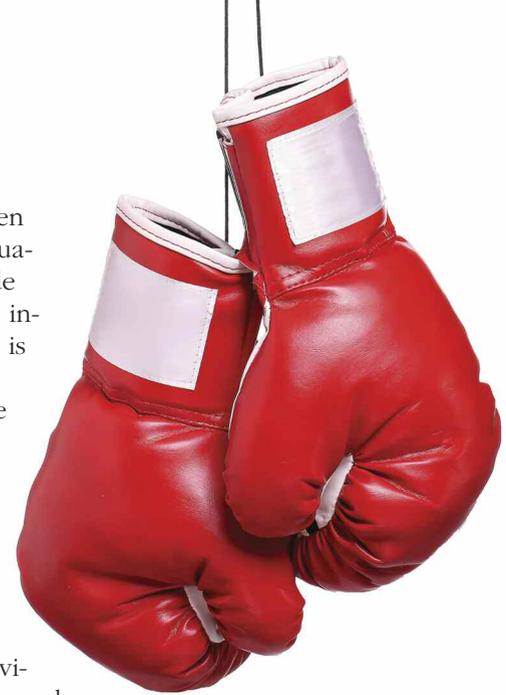
## Questions

In choosing which battles to fight, Mary should carefully reflect on the situation and ask herself the following questions:

### 1. Is this situation in my sphere of influence?

Both the Dalai Lama and the late Stephen Covey encourage considering whether we truly have influence in a conflict situation. While something might bother you and be in your circle of concern, as Covey described it, it may not be in your circle of influence. To make that determination, ask yourself whether you have true power to change the situation and how likely it is that you can implement a different process. If the answer to the power question is no, this might be a good battle for





a leader like Mary to pass on, despite pressure from her staff to take action.

## 2. Do I want to invest the political and social capital this battle might involve?

A wise leader-mentor once advised me that just because leaders can do something doesn't mean they should. Carefully consider how pursuing a battle will be viewed within the organization, and ask yourself whether the outcome will be worth the relationships that might get damaged. As a leader, Mary needs to remember that she doesn't have an unlimited supply of social capital and goodwill in her organization, so using it wisely is important.

## 3. Is this my battle to fight?

Some organizational battles are really none of our business, but others want to involve us anyway. Some staff will try to engage new managers in their own battles with other staff or departments when they're actually part of the problem. Mary should carefully collect the facts in the situation and think through any show of support she agrees to provide to someone else. Personal relationships and a desire to be a leader-advocate may pull us into situations where we take sides and invest energy but later come to regret it because there was no real right or wrong on the issue.

## 4. Is the timing right to fight this battle?

John Maxwell identified timing as one of his 21 irrefutable laws of leadership. He observed that timing is often the difference between success and failure in an endeavor or when dealing with a challenge. Sometimes, the organizational climate may not be ready for new changes or initiatives that you're proposing. As a leader, Mary may need to delay fighting a political battle because she hasn't yet laid the groundwork to ensure success.

## 5. What will happen if I do nothing?

Doing nothing may be the best option in some battles. While many leaders like Mary are tempted to be seen as action oriented, this might not be the best strategy in every situation. If the conflict doesn't involve serious professional practice, ethical, or legal issues, doing nothing may have no long-term impact. It takes a strong leader to think beyond the short-term and let things go rather than jumping into the fray and overreacting.

## Avoid winning the battle but losing the war

Some battles are worth fighting. After evaluating the

questions above, when confronted with a situation, Mary may decide she does need to get involved. How a battle is managed determines not only the outcome in the specific situation but also leadership success in future battles that may be even bigger and more important.

To successfully navigate a battle, leaders need to work diligently to establish trust with the others involved. Trust, which underlies, connects, and integrates human emotions, is essential for effective work relationships. Assigning blame will undermine trust and trigger resistance and resentment. Anger is common in workplace battles. If a leader like Mary ignores or rejects the feelings of others while pushing through her own agenda, the normal response is anger. Wise leaders allow for the expression of multiple viewpoints.

When involved in political battles, leaders need to craft messages that clarify their viewpoint but also express a desire to build better relationships moving forward. After the battle is over, Mary will want to reflect on the experience and how she can use the lessons learned.

## Our most powerful leadership weapon

Eckhart Tolle has written about the importance of viewing conflicts in our lives from multiple perspectives and taking a long-range view. He believes that some leadership battles can either be dealt with now or left alone and accepted as part of the present moment, which could change. While we would love a conflict-free workplace where political battles never happen, this is unrealistic. In conflict situations, the most powerful weapon we have is control over our own behavior. Choosing our political battles wisely may ultimately prove more effective than fighting in every situation. ★

Visit [AmericanNurseToday.com/?p=24976](http://AmericanNurseToday.com/?p=24976) for a list of selected references.

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\*Names in clinical scenarios are fictitious.

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