Many promising executives derail sometime during their careers, often because they weren’t very good at office politics.

Not playing the political game is often seen as a good thing, even a badge of honor. Some managers see it as proof of their integrity. They are going to succeed because of job performance alone.

They couldn’t be more wrong. Research finds that a person’s political skills are key to building a successful career—for the good of both themselves and their company. When talented executives combine a knowledge of what their company needs with an ability to get things done, everyone benefits. Conversely, when a promising career falters because of poor political skills, companies have to spend time and money finding a replacement, and performance suffers in the meantime.

Being politically savvy is not about pushing others down or being untruthful to advance your own cause. Instead, it means building networks—relationships—with people inside and outside your company who can provide useful information and assistance. It means not picking fights over issues that aren’t critical. It means informing others in the company about your contributions and accomplishments, and asking for advice and help, particularly from those senior to you. Self-serving? Sure. But there’s nothing wrong with that. If you are going to make a difference, you need to have power.

Here’s how companies can quickly recognize who among their otherwise-talented executives needs help at playing office politics—and how to give them the skills they need to be successful.

**Flash Points**

There are generally two times in every rising executive’s career that bring the biggest tests of their ability to manage organizational politics. The first comes after about five to seven years, when the person begins to take on roles that depend less on their individual performance and more on what they can accomplish through the people around them. The second is usually after 15 to 20 years, or when the person steps into a senior role with even more visibility, according to Bonnie Wentworth, an executive coach in the San Francisco Bay area. At this point, Ms. Wentworth says, there is much
less room for mistakes, and technical skills are largely irrelevant for career success.

Watch the behavior of people who are at these points in their careers. Are they showing or generating lots of (unproductive) conflict, stress and tension? Do they insist on getting their way all the time, or are they sensitive to smoothing the feathers of important others?

**Pick Your Battles**

Some brilliant people don't realize there are trade-offs that must be made to work successfully with others in an organization. One now-derailed executive remembers being asked by his boss, "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be effective?" Savvy people live to fight another day by avoiding situations where they and their ideas are going to go down in flames.

To best evaluate a person at one of these key junctures, pay attention to whether they inspire support and confidence through how they talk and act. Leaders hold on to their positions by maintaining support from their employees, customers and, most important, their bosses. When that support is gone, so are they. Inspiring confidence and garnering support comes mostly from being forceful, rather than remorseful.

When people appear to be struggling in their roles, there are several ways the company can help save its investment in their careers. Executive coaching is a growing and often helpful process. A good executive coach can get people to understand and stop their own self-defeating behaviors.

Coaches also can help people re-examine their values, and perhaps figure out whether they would rather be able to say, "I told you so," or acquire influence by being useful to those in power.

Power skills, like all skills, can be taught. Courses in how to understand and navigate networks of people in organizations have been shown to help win promotions. Even smart people can have all sorts of wrong ideas about interpersonal behavior. Sometimes executives need to learn some basic social psychology to set them straight.

**Status Signals**

For instance, people who appear forceful rather than sad or uncertain typically get more status. Something as simple as interrupting can signal and create power—people with power interrupt, those without get interrupted. Adopting a powerful, expansive body pose actually changes people's blood chemistry, reducing cortisol, a stress hormone, and increasing testosterone; the reverse happens if people adopt a hunched, restrictive, low-power posture.

Once people learn about the social psychology of power, they can use these principles to become more effective in their interpersonal interactions.
Good leaders master organizational dynamics, and help those who work for them do the same. When Zia Yusuf, now president and chief executive of San Francisco-based Streetline Inc., was an executive vice president at SAP AG, he went out of his way to advise people who worked for him how to interact with the 50 top people in the company. He told them whom they should have coffee with, who wanted to interact only over important matters and, most important, what each executive’s key performance indicators and critical objectives were.

Few executives receive or provide this sort of help. If more did, perhaps fewer promising careers would come off the rails.

*Mr. Pfeffer is the Thomas D. Dee II professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and author of "Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don't." He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.*