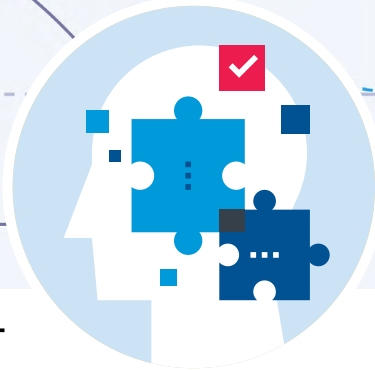


# 10 Steps



## TO THRIVING IN A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Finance professionals don't like to hear the words "power," "politics," and "budgeting" in the same sentence. Ideally, we'd like budgeting to be an apolitical process where decisions are solely based on data and objective criteria. Unfortunately, this is not the world we live in. Below we've outlined ten steps you can take to navigate power politics, maintain your ethics, and support positive outcomes for the community you serve.

**1 Don't hate the player.** Engaging in power politics is a natural response to the incentives that elected officials, government employees, and members of the public often receive in public finance.

**2 Don't hate the game.** Similarly, don't try to take politics out of budgeting—that would be neither reasonable nor desirable. Politics is how debates and conflicts are resolved in a democratic society. In fact, politics is often how the community's voice is heard in the budget process.

**3 Change the game.** Promoting ideas for better financial management to help the community thrive requires designing decision making processes that allow for constructive debate about public money and guide decision makers through the hard trade-offs public budgeting often requires.

**4 Share your knowledge.** The power of knowledge comes from sharing it, not hoarding it. If knowledge is never shared, it has no influence and isn't persuasive. Sharing knowledge helps others appreciate how finance professionals see the world, which can make them be more receptive to finance professionals' ideas.

**5 Build your professional credibility.** Without professional credibility, a finance professional's knowledge will be ignored. You can build your professional credibility by demonstrating integrity and honesty and producing results for the community.

**6 Use the power of agenda-setting.** The finance professional may not be the final decision maker in many public finance debates but is often the "decision architect"—the one who designs the decision making environment to help decision makers arrive at their best decisions. This includes things like helping decision makers ask the right questions, setting clear priorities, and considering wise options, which is the essence of "changing the game" of power politics.

**7 Stay cool, calm, and rational.** This can turn the tables on critics. Finance professionals should present themselves as calm, reasonable, and willing to compromise while being committed to core principles. They should also pick their battles, staying focused on the policies and decisions that matter most for the organization's fiscal sustainability.

**8 Say yes, when possible, to make it easier to say no when necessary.** Finance professionals can sometimes gain a reputation as "Doctor No" by constantly rebuffing ideas for programs or services that involve spending public money. This works against producing results for the community. The solution is to say "yes, if..." as in "yes, we can add that public health position if we can find a new source of ongoing revenue to pay for it or reduce expenses elsewhere." Use your knowledge to help identify sources of offsetting revenues or savings.

**9 Understand the interests of every player to find "win-win" solutions.** The quickest way to come out of the losing end of decisions is by not knowing or by ignoring the interests of other players. Understanding and appealing to people's interests is vital.

**10 Build coalitions around common goals and values, not convenience.** Finance professionals should not be the center of attention but should build strong coalitions. To do this, they can explore opinions, seek common ground, and frame common benefits. If a coalition can be built around a shared goal or vision, it will be easier to negotiate the specifics of a strategy to get to the goal.



These steps are adapted from the GFOA research paper "Power, Politics, and Budgeting: Don't Hate the Player, Don't Hate the Game, Change the Game."

Read the full paper: [gfoa.org/materials/power-politics-and-budgeting](https://gfoa.org/materials/power-politics-and-budgeting)