

## EP120

**Elaine Lou Cartas:** I was 21 interning at the East coast, bright-eyed, full of ideas. So I did what I thought you were supposed to do as an overachiever, paid attention, took initiative, and went straight to the VP with my observations and recommendations. I know you're like, oh my God, this crazy girl. I was still am and I'll never forget that meeting.

I walked in with optimism and walked out, realizing I had no idea. How workplace culture or politics worked. It was awkward, tense, and a turning point, and that moment taught me something. We weren't taught in school. Because doing your job well isn't enough. It's also knowing how to navigate people power and unspoken dynamics from there.

Ironically, after that internship, after I graduated college, I went straight into politics, working in political campaigns as a fundraiser and as a daughter of Filipino immigrants. Proud daughter of a Filipino farmer who immigrated here. I just felt lucky that I get to contribute to this country that.

Has changed so much for us. So I learned fast how to manage up, how to influence people decades older than me now I'm decades older, and how to navigate ego and gatekeepers. narcissists sometimes, especially in rooms full of men, and those lessons have. Stayed with me throughout my career. First in politics, then in nonprofit sector.

I notice a pattern of friends and colleagues constantly coming up to me with the same questions. Elaine, how'd you stay calm and not lose it? At that meeting? How did you get buy-in from everyone? Especially since you're so young, you're the only woman, you are the only, and how do you, navigate?

All this political stuff. Eventually I just realized it wasn't about survival. It was a skillset, a mix of emotional intelligence, understanding power dynamics, culture, and recently, 'cause it's new using ai. I'll also say I am the first one born here in the States. The only daughter of two brothers. And so I quickly learned how to have conversations between different generations and perspectives.

And so through my personal background and even in the workplace, I've learned politics are everywhere. But when you understand them through the lens of both emotional intelligence and using tools like AI to prepare, influence and reflect. You learn to lead authentically. So in this episode, I'm showing you how to navigate workplace politics and I will also say it's about getting feedback.

Recently I did a talk to 100 female leaders in hospitality brands, of Hilton Marriott. Price line, United Airlines, American Airlines, Norwegian Carnival, and we talked about communicating with confidence. We only did have one hour, and I always like asking for feedback as one would when you wanna improve your leadership and communication.

One was Elaine, we didn't get to touch much on workplace politics. So this is my, I'm sorry we didn't have enough time. I'm sorry we didn't cover it. So I'm covering it now. And for those of you that weren't at the talk and you're like. Oh, this is a gift. You are welcome. All right, let's drop the beat.

Let's talk about what workplace politics even means. Backstabbing, gossiping, bullying, which by the way, I've gone through all of 'em. I worked in politics, so it was gonna happen, and thank goodness I don't anymore. But I will say I will always vote. Local, state, national, and special elections. And what does it mean to, when people talk about workplace politics, what does that mean?

It means understanding who has influence and who thinks they do unspoken rules of decision making. Navigating egos, alliances, and hierarchies. Now, you might be thinking, Elaine, I don't want to play this game

like I think about Kendrick Lamar's halftime show. You don't have to, and trust me. There's been times where I've been at jobs where the workplace politics was so toxic I left.

Now I'm not saying you have to leave unless, yes, it is toxic, but the workplace environments I enjoyed. Yes, each company department has their own political dynamic. I just understood. How power was flowing. And it's not about losing yourself, even though, let's be real. There are some people who do, but you can lead and be yourself by simply understanding that emotional intelligence.

A KEI is the anchor. Now sometimes people think about EI emotional intelligence as fluffy. We don't really need it. It's about doing really well in your work. Yes. And just wanna share with you the stats. A study by TalentSmart found that 90% of top performers who score high on emotional intelligence, our leading.

Departments, organizations, because of EI, an EI emotional intelligence, has been shown to be a stronger predictor of leadership success than technical skills or IQ because it's not just how smart you are, it's how well you manage yourself and others. So conscious conversations is the framework I use to train and coach my clients.

And as I talk about workplace politics, I want you to put on some glasses. Maybe we already have some right now, but okay. Fake glasses. And I want you to treat every human interaction meeting and talk like a scientist, not just your professional ones, but personal ones. Why? 'cause there's so much information you can gather about yourself and others.

Before I enter any. Room Zoom room conference. I observe like a scientist I look at who might be very well respected, who are those decision makers. I also note those who might be toxic narcissists, steamrolls the conversations. I just take note of it and I also take note of what's important to them. More importantly, I see how people, including myself deal with conflict and.

What tends to be our trauma response when we go through high stakes conversations or difficult conversations. And just to recap, there are four trauma responses. There is fight, flight, fawn, and freeze. And I'll give examples of how it may show up for you at work or personal life fight, for example, this might look like.

If someone disagrees with their idea, and maybe for you wanna yell and you wanna say something like, why don't you agree, I don't get it. We always have to do your ideas. Pro tip, it's being calm. Asking the question, can you help me understand why? The reason why I came up with this idea is because I noticed there was challenges with what we're currently doing.

By the way, throughout this whole episode, I will be talking about powerful questions you could use because it's not necessarily just about figuring out the right answer, but questions and how to communicate with other people so that you yourself stay calm as well as the other person. Now the second trauma response is flight.

Maybe you're in a tense situation and you just wanna leave. It's just too much for you. So you straight up walk out of a room or zoom room or teams, whatever you use. Pro tip, and this is okay to say at meetings and say it calmly, Hey, I need some time to process this. Give me five minutes, I'll be back. Or can we just reschedule for tomorrow?

I wanna honor both of your time as well as mine. All right, fun. And I used to be like this, especially in the beginning of my career. I know a lot of fellow females may relate to this, where we make a mistake. I'm like, oh, I'm so sorry. Yeah, I'll, stay later. I'll work this weekend. I'll work on that project.

So there's a lack of boundaries. Pro tip, when you get asked to do something and you're not quite sure if it's within your roles and responsibilities, always wait 24 hours before responding. If I'm not 100% sure about something to add on my plate, whether it's attending an event or meeting or doing another project, I wait.

And that's been hard because I was I've been so used to just putting out fires right away, but now I've just learned to wait. The fourth trauma response is freeze. This might look like. Someone giving you feedback and you freeze. You don't know what to say. Pro tip, what you can do if you're in a free state, 'cause I've been there too, is just restate it.

So this is what I hear you saying. A, B, C. Did I hear that correctly? If you notice, regardless of what you're. Trigger response might be when you're in a high stakes conversation is to be calm. And how do you do that? You pause, you breathe. The Navy Seals has this technique called box breathing. When there are moments of stress, they have to make a quick decision.

It's breathing in four seconds. Holding that breath for four seconds and then breathing out four seconds and then it's repeating it again. The reason being is that when we're in stress, we don't have oxygen. We're breathing like really short breaths. If you've ever been panic and anxiety attacks, you're not breathing that much and to make sure you get out of that trauma response is taking deep breaths 'cause less oxygen.

You can't think which means more stress. And if you want to understand the brain science behind this, I studied cognitive sciences in undergrad, which is the study of the brain. We make calm decisions with our prefrontal cortex, what animals don't have. But what happens when we get triggered, our amygdala, which is our fight, flight, freeze, and fawn response, it takes over.

So we're not making. Strategic decisions, and then in addition to our amygdala taking over, our hippocampus comes into play and with the hippocampus, is that part of the brain? It reminds us of the past experiences and tells our amygdala like, Hey, this is a similar situation to the past, but that doesn't always mean it's true.

For example, something I had to work on in my twenties is when someone. Used to give me feedback. I thought I was a failure. 'cause growing up, being Asian and being less than an A was a failure. I had to rewire it and stay calm and take it as when I get feedback, it allows me to improve and I'm grateful someone feels safe and comfortable enough.

To give me feedback. I remember one of my mentors would always share with me, and this helped me reframe, and she was just such an incredible mentor of mine. She would say, Elaine, the moment someone stops giving you feedback is the moment they've given up on you. So feedback is a gift. Another thing when it comes to emotional intelligence and how to improve your communication is ask for feedback from others that you trust.

Whether you're a direct supervisor or colleagues you trust and ask, what's one thing I need to work on when it comes to communication and leadership or. What's one thing I do well and one thing I need to work on when it comes to communication, leadership, and I add that second question. 'cause sometimes we don't wanna just know all the bad stuff.

We wanna know the good stuff too, right? Then keep track of it just like we debrief after meetings. Debrief if you coughed when you're nervous or debrief. Hey, I said liked too many times.

I know this episode is so good and you're like, how can I get more of this? I have a newsletter that comes out every Thursday that's free. Fun and full of real talk. It's a live journal, LGA on Leadership and Life with actual scripts behind the scenes stories and lessons from mistakes I've made so you don't have to for work and life.

Just go to [elaine.liu.com](http://elaine.liu.com). Join. That's

aecom. Join back to the. Now when it comes to communicating with other people, I always tell my clients to have a team dashboard or a memo of each person and project, and take notes, each person's name, the project you're working on with them, their goals, what's important to them, their communication style, who they get along with and why, and how to prep for anything they may disagree with you on.

I want you to pretend you are a lawyer and you are preparing for what someone may say that has a different perspective from you. if you are a parent or if you're not a parent, an aunt or an uncle, you know this. Each kid is different, which is similar to. Workplace politics with individuals, groups, and departments.

It's understanding the dynamics and how to work with them, and also keeping notes and tabs of who has more influence on decisions. Write this down in memos. How can you get to be known by them? If you're working virtually, make note of topics, projects, and issues that's important to those influencers. Not the same ones on social media, by the way.

And bring it up to them in meetings, conversations, and emails. And with each meeting, email interaction, prepare. Now, I know I've been talking about EI the whole time. How can AI be integrated into this? I use AI all the time. Give context using the team dashboard memo or data that you've collected with each individual project and team.

And you could use prompts like, Hey, I'm meeting with A CFO. Who cares about A, B, C? Clearly numbers, and there are challenges with DEF. This is the role for this project. Here's some scripts I plan to share during the meeting based off what I've shared with you at the CFO, any edits I've even used AI where I know that I might be long-winded in an email with a decision maker and it needs to be succinct.

I actually did this recently pitching. Myself for this national conference in 2026, and I told ai, Hey, I have these three ideas to pitch. Here's the email. Can you make this really easy for the decision maker to read? And it's just good to have another pair of. AI eyes. I also wanna share, I don't copy and paste every single thing from ai.

Also, please do not copy and paste the M dashes. It's very obvious when you use AI and sometimes AI just sounds so robotic that clearly it's not a human. And yes, I use AI to prep for this podcast, but even right now as I'm talking to you, I'm like. Off script. Actually. I wrote a lot of it, but what I used AI to do is help me outline this script and then I use my words into it.

Otherwise, I don't know, it would just sound very robotic. Now, after integrating observations and data from your emotional intelligence, the memos, the team dashboard that I share, and then getting feedback from ai. It's time to practice. Practice like you do if you play sports, like I used to play basketball and track.

I do Muay Thai. I used to play the violin before I had recitals and concerts. I would practice that violin. It's very similar. Actors and actresses do it. Comedians who have Netflix specials before they had that Netflix special. They are practicing their lines, their punchlines in different improv places in the country and the world to see what works for people.

Even this idea of doing this podcast episode on how to navigate workplace politics came from the talk that I shared earlier, because that was something. All of you wanted support, and I was like, oh, I should talk about this. And then recently I was talking to another company who wanted me to speak, and we were talking about doing a bridge on AI and EI oh, this is data.

I should use it. So even though this is my second business, I've been a coach for eight years now. I'm constantly refining things based off of feedback and data I'm getting from others. And I am using AI to help edit how to make it more clear. And it's very similar to even Google when researching data points or research that stats that I could provide when I'm presenting or pitching.

Now, I know you are gonna love this part, but how do you deal with workplace politics without being dirty? All right? Remember, you don't need to be the loudest or bulldoze conversations. Think about what are perspectives you can bring that are not being seen, and ask yourself, how can you be calm during those high stakes conversations?

And as I shared it, is doing those breathing exercises from the Navy Seals. Four seconds in, four seconds out, four seconds out. And remember, influence is not about having the right answers all the time. It's about asking the right questions to have people rethink and give them space to calm. I appreciate what someone said at my talk.

I always, whenever I do talks and workshops. I tell these amazing leaders and executives, I'm not the only person who's an expert here and has lived experiences. You're experts as well. And one woman shared a powerful question you can ask if someone is yelling at you or being rude. And it's, can you rephrase that question or statement in a way I can't understand?

And it's such a respectful way where oh yeah, I was bad. Oh yeah. What is my question? Why am I here? It goes back to what are the goals, and here are even more questions you could ask. What does success look like for you here? What are you concerned about in this project? Is there anything that hasn't been said yet that should be? These questions show that you're not proving, you are guiding.

What I have learned as a coach is my clients. Yes, I give feedback, but I always give. Agency to clients of, does that resonate with you or not? And if it doesn't, why? So we can figure out an answer that works for you. In addition to influence during meetings, water cooler talks on stage. If you're presenting like me, I also wanna remind you what happens off stage.

Remember who supported you. Do you mention them at meetings and conversations? I really appreciate when so and so helped me do this. It actually helped save us money and time. Now I wanna end this episode with questions for you to consider and reflect on. So you're gonna wanna look at the timer so you know when you go back and journal on these questions when it comes to workplace politics.

And if you notice, I'm doing exactly what you should do when you're in those high stake meetings. It's asking you questions to rethink. So these are five powerful questions. Number one, where am I avoiding workplace politics because it feels fake or manipulative? And what would it look like to engage with power consciously, not performatively?

Number two, am I undervaluing the quiet power players in my org who get things done without the title. How can I learn from them? I wanna pause here. I think so often we think the decision makers and influencers, like I said, not the social media ones, the ones in your organization that it's all about titles.

You know what I learned throughout my career, those EAs, those executive assistants, power players, I remember I had, a job and where I was a fundraiser and my boss at the time. Like she would tell me like, I don't know how, but you get along so well with the president's ea. Everyone has a difficult time with her, but you get along with her.

And so she loved that I was able to connect with her, which allowed my boss to connect with the president really well. So it's not all about the titles. Third, what is the story I carry about power and where did that belief come from? Is it inherited culture and upbringing? Outdated? Is it mine to keep, and I'll pause here.

This one, I had to unlearn it. I come from an Asian culture. It's about respecting your elders. And in this workplace culture, I've learned, wait, I'm here because I provide value add. How can I provide value add to these organizations, companies and leaders who hire me? Whether here. As a CEO of my own company or when I was an employee, so I've had to unlearn that.

Fourth, where can I lead by bridging instead of battling? Is there a conflict or misalignment where I can play the role of connector? And this is a lot of help me understand this is bringing it back to, I just wanna remind everyone this is the goal. And number five, how might I use my emotional intelligence?

More proactively instead of reactively, where can I prepare for influence rather than repair damage? And I'll pause there. I had to do a lot of work on that where. Even now I notice that there's decisions I wanna make. no, I need to figure this out today. I am like, wait, no, I need more information.

Elaine, you are not forever 21. Don't let that young 21-year-old come back, take your time, collect more information. You don't need to react right now. All right. I hope you go back to those five questions so you could journal and reflect on it.

If there's one thing I want you to take from this, you don't have to play dirty to play smart. You can be emotionally intelligent and politically strategic. You can build power without losing yourself. Because the truth is politics are everywhere. And when you learn how to pause, see the patterns and prepare, you can stop reacting and you can start leading.

And if you know someone who could benefit from this episode, by the way, I'm giving you a little coaching tip to help with your influence is, hey, for this episode, to a colleague, to a friend. Share a note with how this might resonate with them. You could be like, oh my gosh, remember that difficult meeting?

How to handle so and or This project that you're working on, this episode will be helpful. Share with them, and if this episode really helped you, do me a favor. Leave a five star rating or review on the app you're listening to. It helps more leaders like you find this show. My team and I created this podcast 'cause we wanted to provide a free and accessible way for others to get this education.

And if you're like, Elaine, this is amazing. I wanna go deeper. if you and or your team need coaching or a speaker, then schedule a call with me to see if it's a good fit and you'll receive three action items. You could schedule that [call@elainelou.com](mailto:call@elainelou.com) slash call. That's E-L-A-I-N-E-L-O-U com call.