Human Resource Management Review 23 (2013) 357–365

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/humres

Organizational political climate: Shared perceptions about the building and use of power bases

Erin Landells [a,*], Simon L. Albrecht [b]

[a] School of Psychology and Psychiatry, Monash University, Building 17, Clayton Campus, Wellington Road, Victoria, 3800, Australia
[b] School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Mt Gravatt Campus, Queensland 4122, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Organizational politics
Political climate
Perceptions of organizational politics
Positive politics

ABSTRACT

Organizational politics continues to be acknowledged as a real and important dimension of organizational functioning. Most research has focused on 'perceptions of organizational politics' where organizational politics is conceptualized negatively and its relationship with detrimental individual and organizational outcomes is demonstrated. We argue that organizational politics can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional climate level construct and that 'organizational political climate' can be both functional and dysfunctional. We propose and explain a four dimensional model of organizational political climate informed by existing theoretical perspectives on power bases. The four key dimensions are represented by the building and use of personal power, positional power, connection power and informational power. We also highlight the need for a comprehensive measure of organizational political climate which is underpinned by the four dimensions and which enables an assessment of the extent to which the organizational political climate is functional and/or dysfunctional. In summary, we recommend that HR practitioners seek to understand the functional and dysfunctional dimensions of organizational political climate and implement practices to foster a positive political climate. We overview practical implications for HR managers and suggest a future research agenda.

1. Introduction

In their extensive review of thirty years of organizational politics research, Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, and Ammeter (2002) concluded that the majority of research regarding perceptions of organizational politics had been negatively biased with the early negatively framed definitions and measures shaping subsequent research. As an example, organizational politics has been defined with reference to "activities that are self-serving, illegitimate, and often harmful to the organization or its members" (Rosen, Chang, Johnson, & Levy, 2009, p. 203). Such activities include back-stabbing, self-promotion and ingratiation (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1979; Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Hochwarter, Kacmar, Perrewé, & Johnson, 2003).

The negative conceptualizations of organizational politics have been reinforced by researchers' widespread use of the Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS; Ferris & Kacmar, 1989, 1992; Kacmar & Carlson, 1997; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991) as a measure of organizational politics and the Perceptions of Organizational Politics Model (POPM; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Ferris et al., 1996, 2002; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991; Kacmar & Carlson, 1997) as an organizing framework. The POPS has been described as "the de facto standard of measurement for political perceptions" (Miller, Byrne, Rutherford, & Hansen, 2009, p. 282) and the POPM as the most widely-referenced framework for understanding perceptions of politics (Chang et al., 2009). Although the reliability of the POPS has been consistently demonstrated (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997; Harris & Kacmar, 2003; Kiewitz, Restubog, Zagenczyk, & Hochwarter, 2009; Miller et al., 2009), it focuses on negative practices and behaviors (Dipboye

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Erin.landells@monash.edu (E. Landells), s.albrecht@griffith.edu.au (S.L. Albrecht).

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doi:10.1016/j.hrmr.2012.06.014

& Foster, 2002; Fedor & Maslyn, 2002). Items which illustrate the negative bias include "People in this organization attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down", and "Telling others what they want to hear is sometimes better than telling the truth".

Extensive research utilizing the POPS has demonstrated the detrimental effects of perceived politics on individual, team and organizational outcomes. A meta-analysis by Miller, Rutherford, and Kolodinsky (2008), integrating the results of 59 studies conducted across more than 20 years, noted strong relationships between organizational politics and job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.45$), job stress ($\rho = 0.45$), turnover intentions ($\rho = 0.44$), and organizational commitment ($\rho = -0.41$). Similarly, Chang et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis of 70 studies demonstrated detrimental associations between perceptions of organizational politics and outcomes such as strain ($\rho = 0.48$), turnover intentions ($\rho = 0.43$), job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.57$), and affective commitment ($\rho = -0.54$).

In summary, extensive research has demonstrated detrimental organizational outcomes associated with organizational politics as measured by the POPS. This body of research poses challenges for HR practitioners given that organizational politics is widely recognized to be highly pervasive (Chang et al., 2009; Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010) and increasingly recognized as a fact of organizational experience (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Based on these findings, it is clear that "HRD professionals cannot afford to ignore organizational politics and view it as irrelevant" (Yang, 2003, p. 474).

Despite extensive empirical research on organizational politics, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the definition of the construct (Drory & Romm, 1990; Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011; Provis, 2006). Drory and Vigoda-Gadot (2010) recently observed that "the wide variety of definitions of organizational politics suggests that the concept is in transition and under continuous debate" (p. 195).

The present paper offers an extension and a consolidation of current conceptualizations of organizational politics. Drawing from the organizational politics, power and climate literatures we propose a model showing how organizational politics can, at least in part, be framed at the level of organizational climate. We define 'organizational political climate' as shared perceptions about the building and use of power in practices and workarounds regarding policies and procedures to influence decision-making, resource allocation and the achievement of individual, team and organizational goals. Four power bases (positional, personal, informational and connection) inform our definition and our model of organizational political climate. We further propose that the organizational political climate can be both functional and dysfunctional. As described below, we suggest HR practitioners can use the model to gain insight into their organizational political climate and to implement practices aimed at fostering a functional and positive political climate.

2. Organizational political climate

2.1. Organizational politics and organizational political climate

Empirical research regarding organizational politics has focused on varying levels of analysis. As previously noted, to date, the major focus has been on broad 'perceptions of organizational politics' (e.g., Ferris & Kacmar, 1989, 1992; Ferris et al., 2002). However, researchers have also focused on political behavior (e.g., Cohen & Vigoda, 1999; Farrell & Petersen, 1982), political tactics (e.g., Allen et al., 1979; Zanzi, Arthur, & Shamir, 1991; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001), and, more recently, political skill (e.g., Ferris et al., 2005; Perrewé & Nelson, 2004; Treadway, Hochwarter, Kacmar, & Ferris, 2005). Perceptions of organizational politics have also been assessed at varying levels including the individual (e.g., Brouer, Ferris, Hochwarter, Laird, & Gilmore, 2006) and the team (e.g., Treadway, Adams, & Goodman, 2005). The range of research foci has prompted consideration of levels of analysis issues within organizational politics research (Dipboye & Foster, 2002). Overall, there are opportunities to more clearly understand organizational politics, to specify its dimensions and to identify how it impacts at varying levels of analyses. As previously noted, the present paper focuses on organizational politics with organizational climate as the level of analysis.

Although a number of researchers have noted a relationship between perceptions of politics and organizational climate (Dipboye & Foster, 2002; Ferris et al., 2002; Liu, Liu, & Wu, 2010; O'Connor & Morrison, 2001), the research streams on politics and climate have "proceeded in a largely independent manner" (Kiewitz et al., 2009). Others have positioned 'perceptions of organizational politics' as a dimension of organizational climate (Dipboye & Foster, 2002; Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995). Dipboye and Foster noted that collective or aggregated perceptions of politics are "essentially dimensions of climate at the group or organizational level" (p. 265). Parker, Dipboye and Jackson identified a politics factor as one of 15 factors in their organizational climate measure. Their six-item factor included items such as 'The real world within the organization is one of undercutting and behind the scenes politics'.

A limited number of researchers have explicitly recognized the notion of an organizational political climate, arguing in support of a stand-alone political climate (e.g., Drory, 1993; Treadway, Adams, et al., 2005), paralleling conceptualizations of functionally specific 'climates for something' (Schneider, 1975) such as 'service climate' (Schneider, 1980) and 'safety climate' (Zohar, 1980). Treadway, Adams, et al. (2005), for example, argued in support of 'political sub-climates' on the basis of their finding varying perceptions of organizational politics in different departments within a retail organization.

Building on arguments proposed by Treadway, Adams, et al. (2005) and Drory (1993), we propose that perceptions of organizational politics can sensibly be measured at the level of organizational climate. Just as organizational climate is said to consist of 'shared perceptions' about organizational policies, practices and procedures (Reichers & Schneider, 1990; Schneider, Gunnarson, & Niles-Jolly, 1994), organizational political climate might similarly be seen to consist of 'shared perceptions' of practices, policies and procedures specific to organizational politics.

Organizational practices, as opposed to organizational policies and procedures, provide the clearest insights into an organizational political climate. Organizational political climates are framed around perceptions of how people, in practice, *work*