Personnel/Human Resources Management: A Political Influence Perspective

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Abstract

It was suggested over ten years ago that new and different perspectives needed to be applied to the Personnel/Human Resources Management (P/HRM) field in an effort to promote theory and research and expand our understanding of the dynamics underlying P/HRM processes. Both theory and research are emerging which characterize important P/HRM decisions and activities as substantially influenced by opportunistic behavior of both subordinates and supervisors. The purpose of the present review is to systematically examine the P/HRM field from a political influence perspective, reviewing existing theory and research and discussing future directions.

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Personnel/Human Resources Management: A Political Influence Perspective

The field of Personnel/Human Resources Management (P/HRM) has evolved, over the years, from a largely record-keeping, maintenance function to one of generally acknowledged strategic importance to the organization (e.g., Butler, Ferris, & Napier, 1991; Rowland & Ferris, 1982). Furthermore, from a research standpoint, P/HRM has advanced from a primarily atheoretical, "problem-driven" discipline (i.e., research generated by the need to solve real-world problems or address issues of major importance to the practice of P/HRM), to one actively concerned with both theoretical and methodological development. Over ten years ago, Ferris (1980) called for alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives on P/HRM efforts to advance our understanding and promote theory and research. In recent years, a number of different perspectives have been taken in the P/HRM field, including economic/utility and international, as well as the more macro-level organization theory and strategy perspectives. Some of these perspectives have been examined and reflected in previous Yearly Review articles (Fisher, 1989; Mahoney & Deckop, 1986).

The purpose of this Yearly Review article is to examine the P/HRM field from a political influence perspective; a perspective that has been actively pursued in other fields, but has only recently been suggested as a way of viewing the P/HRM field (Ferris & King, 1990; Frost, 1989). A reasonably comprehensive

review is reported on theory and research concerning political influence processes and how they emerge to affect key P/HRM decisions and activities.

The Political Influence Perspective

Organizational scientists have developed different notions of what constitutes political behavior, and these notions have come from a number of different disciplines. Some have defined politics in terms of the behavior of the interest groups to use power to influence decision making (Pettigrew, 1973; Tushman, 1977), or through coalition-building and bargaining (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980). Others have focused on the self-serving and organizationally nonsanctioned nature of individual behavior in organizations (e.g., Burns, 1961; Porter, 1976; Farrell & Peterson, 1982; Mayes & Allen, 1977; Schein, 1977; Gandz & Murray, 1980). Still others have characterized organizational politics as a social influence process with potentially functional or dysfunctional organizational consequences (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1979; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989b; Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1981), or simply the management of influence (Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980). While subscribing to aspects of several of these definitions, Pfeffer (1981b) more directly established the linkage between politics and power, and conceived of organizational politics as "the study of power in action" (p. 7). Mintzberg (1983) referred to politics as "individual or group behavior that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in the

technical sense, illegitimate -- sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise (though it may exploit any one of these)" (p. 172).

Yet other views of political influence have adopted a decidedly more social psychological perspective, and have conceptualized such influence as impression management, often isolating on the particular tactic of ingratiation (e.g., Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Liden & Mitchell, 1988; Ralston, 1985; Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977). Schlenker (1980), a leading impression management theorist, has defined impression management as "the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions" (p. 6). Whereas the foregoing do not exhaust all possible definitions of political influence, they provide a representative sample.

It appears to be of much less use, for purposes of this article, to offer yet another definition of the politics construct, than it is to capture the essence of and develop a working notion of political influence that makes sense for our examination of P/HRM decisions and activities. Consistent with this objective, the notion of political influence as the management of shared meaning adopted by Ferris, King, Judge, and Kacmar (in press) is used in this article. This notion is derived from Sederberg (1984), who believed politics consists of any deliberate attempt to "create, maintain, modify, or abandon shared meanings" (p. 7) among participants in social settings. Rather than inherent properties of situations, meanings are the

result of our responses to those situations and our subsequent interpretations. Whether more or less, we all have a say in the interpretations of those events and some consensus forms, usually legitimized by organizational symbols and myths. These "shared meanings" then provide guidelines for future interpretations and organizational behavior. The idea is to manage the meaning of the situation to produce the outcomes desired.

According to Sederberg (1984), all behavior is not political since the emphasis is on deliberate attempts to control the meanings shared by all. This omits non-deliberate behavior such as routine or mindless activity and types of deliberate behavior that are not specifically geared toward creating, maintaining, or altering shared meanings. Characterizing political influence as deliberate attempts to manage or control the meanings shared by others provides an interesting opportunity to examine how employees in organizations, as well as job applicants, use this process to influence key human resource decisions. This characterization is similar to the "managed thought" notion proposed by Chatman, Bell, and Staw (1986) in their discussion of the role of impression management in organizations.

Political Influence Tactics

A number and variety of different political influence tactics have been identified and examined in organizational research (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Porter et al., 1981; Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Yukl & Falbe, 1990). However, it is probably most convenient, for the

present purposes, to think of influence tactics as falling into two categories: assertive tactics and defensive tactics. Perhaps the best known assertive tactic is ingratiation. Ingratiation can take a number of forms such as favor doing, other enhancement (e.g., flattery), opinion conformity (i.e., expressing opinions similar to a focal other), or subservient behavior (the "utility or humility"). Other types of assertive tactics involve self-promotion, or the act of bringing to light one's personal accomplishments, characteristics, or qualities in order to present oneself in the most favorable manner. Self promotion can take at least two different forms, materializing as entitlements or enhancements. Entitlements involve verbal claims of responsibility for positive events or outcomes that have occurred, even when one cannot actually be rightfully credited with such outcomes. Enhancements refer to attempts to exaggerate or make more of one's accomplishments than is justified. Thus, the category of assertive influence tactics involves proactive efforts to manipulate or manage images conveyed to important others, and consequently to manage shared meanings. Most of our research has focused on employee assertive tactics because this category is more typical of the ways the dark side of politics is played out in human resource systems, as we will see in the following sections of the paper.

The other category of influence behaviors is defensive tactics, and refers to more reactive attempts to circumvent negative outcomes. For example, in situations of poor

performance, employees may utilize tactics such as apologies, excuses, justifications, or disclaimers in order to prevent negative consequences (e.g., Wood & Mitchell, 1981). Taken together, these two categories of influence tactics provide some indication of the nature of political influence tactics in organizations, and the diversified portfolio of techniques that are brought to bear upon human resource systems and decisions. Furthermore, not all influence behaviors are similarly perceived or equally effective, as will be seen in the subsequent review of empirical research.

The P/HRM Context: Antecedents of Political Behavior

Political behavior, like any other behavior in organizations, does not operate in a vacuum. The use of influence tactics is undoubtedly enhanced by some aspects of the environment and suppressed by others. Past theoretical efforts and empirical findings have suggested the existence of several environmental antecedents to political influence behavior.

Ambiguity and Formalization

Ferris et al. (1989b) have suggested that influence behavior is more apt to occur in ambiguous environments. One way to define ambiguity is the absence of information. When ambiguity is high, the individual may have few clues in which to direct their behavior. Absent clear behavioral cues, Ferris et al. argued the greater the probability of furthering one's self-interest by engaging in influence behavior. As Ferris et al. have suggested, when the situation is ambiguous -- meaning

that clear evaluation criteria do not exist -- reliance is often placed on subjective criteria for personnel decisions. Given Mintzberg's (1983) reference to the informal nature of political behavior, ambiguous environments with reliance on the subjective is an environment in which the use of influence tactics is likely to flourish. For example, Gilmore and Ferris (1989a, 1989b), discussing ambiguity in the context of the employment interview, offered the interesting proposition that inexperienced interviewers with little information about the job provide a receptive forum for applicant influence behaviors.

The importance of ambiguity on the use of influence tactics has been reinforced by the findings from several studies. Fandt and Ferris (1990) found that ambiguity coupled with accountability led to greater management of information by individuals. Closely related to ambiguity is the degree of formalization in organizations. Formalized procedures in organizations serve to reduce ambiguity in order to place closer controls on behavior. Thus, in highly formalized organizations individuals would be expected to be less likely to perceive that their influence tactics would be effective. Mintzberg's (1983) research demonstrated that political behavior was weakest in formalized organizations. However, Ferris, Judge, and Rowland (1990) found no significant relationship between perceived formalization and the use of influence tactics.

Spatial Distance

Ferris et al. (1990) argued that one of the more important situational determinants of influence behaviors may be spatial distance, or the proximity in which subordinates work with their supervisors. Ferris et al. hypothesized that the effect of spatial distance is likely to depend on the type of influence tactic employed. For tactics oriented toward the job (e.g., covering up a negative event), distance between the supervisor and subordinate was thought to allow greater opportunity to enact job-focused tactics beyond the watchful eye of the supervisor. However, tactics oriented toward the supervisor (e.g., volunteering to help the supervisor with his or her tasks) obviously require the supervisor's presence! Therefore, decreased spatial distance was thought to promote the use of supervisor-focused influence tactics. Ferris et al. found that spatial distance did result in significantly greater use of supervisor-focused tactics, but no significant decrease in the use of job-focused tactics.

Accountability

Caldwell and O' Reilly (1982) found that those having the most responsibility were more likely to manage impressions. In a sense, these individuals have the most to lose in terms of their position power by not managing impressions. Further, Pfeffer (1981a) argued that one way for high position holders to add to their power base and perceived image is to present favorable impressions. Fandt and Ferris (1990) found that accountability

interacted with ambiguity in the management of impressions. Those in conditions of high accountability and low ambiguity manipulated information more.

Instrumentality

Ferris et al. (1989b) hypothesized that instrumentality was an important determinant of influence behavior. Those individuals perceiving an environment rewarding the use of influence tactics are more likely to be inclined to use such tactics. Conversely, those seeing little or even negative reinforcements for influence behavior may understandably be reluctant to use them. Janson and Von Glinow (1985) corroborated this when they argued that political behavior is most likely to occur when rewarded by the organization.

The nature of the environment in reinforcing political behavior, in addition to shaping the use of influence tactics, may also affect the way individuals perceive their environment. Those who perceive the organization environment as hostile to the use of influence behavior may see use of influence tactics as threats to their careers. On the other hand, individuals perceiving influence behavior as a means to enhance their career are more likely to see influence as an opportunity. Ferris et al. (1989b) argued that these politics perceptions, in turn, are likely to affect the individual's behavior (e.g., withdrawal) in the organization.

As suggested by Ferris et al. (1989b), the perceptions of the instrumentality of influence behavior, or whether political

influence is likely to be seen as an opportunity or threat, probably is molded by how one's supervisor's influence behavior is reinforced. Research by Weiss (1977, 1978) suggests that employees often model the work values and management styles of their supervisors. Given this, it stands to reason that when the supervisors' behavior is instrumental in achieving valued outcomes, such behavior is more likely to occur.

The Role of Individual Differences

Just as the characteristics of the environment are likely to explain variance in influence tactics, differences between individuals also likely affect influence behavior. In fact, past work in the impression management area has identified several individual characteristics thought to affect influence behavior.

Self-Monitoring

Those who possess the desire to manage impressions will undoubtedly require the ability to control their own behavior to be successful. Self-monitoring is a personality construct that concerns exactly this -- the ability of individuals to monitor and control their behavior (Snyder, 1987). The individual high on self-monitoring is one who can carefully scan the environment for social cues, and modify their behavior accordingly. This is obviously an important skill to the implementation of influence tactics.

Self-monitoring has received some empirical attention. Caldwell and O' Reilly (1982), investigating situations in which decision-makers were faced with failure, found that

self-monitoring significantly predicted the extent to which they engaged in opportunistic behaviors. Von Baeyer, Shirk, and Zanna (1981) found that self-monitoring predicted impression management tactics by applicants in the context of the interview. On the other hand, Ferris et al. (1990) found that self-monitoring showed some relationship with job-focused influence tactics, but no relationship with supervisor-focused tactics. Finally, Fandt and Ferris' (1990) results indicated that self-monitoring significantly predicted the use of information manipulation, particularly when accountability was high.

Self-Attention

Self-attention refers to the extent to which individuals direct attention toward, rather than away from, themselves (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Those that direct attention away from themselves can be expected to focus attention on others. Those concerned with other's thoughts, in turn, might be more motivated by this concern for others' impressions to manage these impressions (Fenigstein, 1979). Unfortunately, no empirical data is available on the role of self-attention in influence behavior. Thus, it remains an important area for future research.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety, as its name implies, represents the degree to which individuals experience anxiety when in the presence of others (Watson & Friend, 1969). A significant manifestation of this anxiety is the fear of negative evaluations from others (Leary, 1983). It is reasonable to expect that those fearing

negative evaluations from others will tend to be more motivated to manage these evaluations. Arkin, Appelman, and Burger (1980), in a series of studies, demonstrated that individuals high in social anxiety were more likely to attempt to present a favorable image of themselves. Thus, it appears that individuals afraid of negative evaluations by supervisors or co-workers may be more likely to avoid negative impressions by managing them.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellians (Machs), after their namesake, are individuals who will do most anything to enhance their self-interests, including manipulation, lying, and exploiting the misfortunes of others (Christie & Geis, 1970). These behaviors obviously represent the dark side of influence behavior. Research supports that high Machs are more likely to manage impressions of others (Kauffmann & Steiner, 1968; Pandey, 1981; Pandey & Rastogi, 1979). Touhey (1973) has argued that Machiavellianism allows goal attainment only to those skillful enough to conceal their underlying motives. Perhaps supporting this hypothesis are results by Ferris et al. (1990) that found that subtle behaviors such as volunteering to help the supervisor led to higher performance ratings and resource provision while more obvious behaviors such as making the supervisor aware of one's accomplishments led to lower performance ratings and resource provision. The skillful gamesman is able to make a distinction between those likely to be effective and those likely to backfire. Further, it appears that the supervisor is able to

make this distinction as well.

Locus of Control

One individual difference variable seemingly ignored by past researchers is locus of control. Ferris et al. (1989b) argued, following Bandura (1977), that those who fundamentally believe they can change their environment (internal locus of control) may be more likely to engage in influence behavior. Accordingly, individuals possessing an internal locus of control would be expected to be more likely to take the initiative in attempting to influence the impression others have of them. On the other hand, those with an external locus of control see themselves as helpless to external events, and would likely see any effort to manage impressions or influence others as futile. While the proposition may seem reasonable, empirical data is needed to test the hypothesis.

Gender

It is clear that women traditionally have operated from inferior power positions in most organizations (Kanter, 1977; Lips, 1981). Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) found that men consistently had greater access to resources for power (e.g., peer networks, mentors) than did women. How this power difference operates on the use of influence tactics is unclear. It may be that women, because they are in a weaker position of power, are more motivated to gain power and use influence tactics to this end. Ferris et al. (1989b) argued for these very power reasons that women are more likely to see their work environment

as political. Although the relationship between politics perceptions and political behavior is unclear, it would be unusual for an individual to behave politically in an environment they perceive as apolitical.

There is some empirical evidence regarding gender effects on influence behavior. Von Baeyer et al. (1981) found that women presented themselves in a more feminine manner when the interviewer possessed such stereotypes about women ("women should be passive, attractive, not independent, and make coffee"). On the other hand, Dipboye and Wiley (1977) found that moderately aggressive female applicants were rated as favorably as moderately aggressive males, and that passive males and females were rated equally negatively by college recruiters. From the perspective of the evaluator, two studies have shown that there is a self-matching bias in performance ratings. Surprisingly, however, both studies found that managers rated same sex subordinates lower than opposite sex subordinates (Izraeli, 1987; Rose & Stone, 1978).

Age

Ferris et al. (1990) argued that age was likely to negatively predict the use of influence tactics. Several studies have reported that a greater degree of influence behavior is perceived to take place at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy (e.g., Gandz & Murray, 1980; Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980), and one could reasonably assume that position in the hierarchy is positively related to age. However,

research by Kipnis and his colleagues (e.g., Kipnis et al., 1980) would lead one to infer that different tactics of influence are employed in different situations and levels in the organization. Thus, whereas older employees might engage in influence tactics, it is reasonable that they would engage more in the use of direct, logical reasoning approaches than using manipulative, ingratiating types of tactics. However, in the Ferris et al. (1990) study, age failed to predict the use of either job-focused or supervisor-focused influence tactics.

Consequences of Political Influence for P/HRM Activities

Research recently has begun to examine the role of political influence in a number of P/HRM activities, including personnel selection, performance evaluation, promotion and career mobility systems, the feedback process, and compensation decisions and activities.

Personnel Selection

Personnel selection has been a rich area for research on political influence. A useful way to classify research on impression management is by who is doing the managing. Most attention has focused on influence behavior by the applicant, although there has been some attention to how politics might affect managerial selection decisions. In general, almost all research has been conducted on the employment interview. Because of the face-to-face contact and interpersonal dynamics of the interview, this is not surprising. Accordingly, much of the following review focuses on the interview, although as Knouse

(1989) pointed out with the letter of recommendation, the interview is not the only area of the selection process subject to influence behavior.

Applicant impression management. Practitioners in the selection area have long recognized that there is a strong incentive on the part of applicants to actively manage the impressions selection decision-makers form of them. It has been a relatively recent development, however, that researchers investigating selection decisions, particularly the interview, have systematically examined the effect of impression management on selection decisions. Some theoretical works have appeared on the role of impression management in the selection process. For example, Jones and Pittman (1982) and Tedeschi and Melburg (1984) developed taxonomies regarding specific types of behaviors applicants engage in to manage impression in the interview. Tedeschi and Melburg distinguished between assertive (positively projecting a strong image) and defensive (excuse-making and rationalization) influence behaviors. The authors further distinguished between tactical (short-term) and strategic (long-term) focused behaviors. One assertive strategic behavior that has received considerable empirical support is the effect of physical attractiveness (including grooming and attire) on interviewer decisions (Beehr & Gilmore, 1982; Cash, 1985; Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Forsythe, Drake, & Cox, 1985; Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, 1986). Gilmore and Ferris (1989b) provided an overview of research on this and the other dimensions

of Tedeschi and Melburg's taxonomy.

It is clear that, in general, impression management by applicants influences interviewer judgments. Virtually every study that has examined impression management in the interview has found an effect. In fact, in a recent study, impression management techniques were found to have a much more powerful effect on interviewer judgments than objective qualifications (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989a).

What may be more important to explore is that different types of influence tactics appear to lead to different outcomes. Baron (1989) recognized this when he argued there is a "too much of a good thing" effect in terms of applicant influence strategies. While the use of impression management may lead to higher evaluations, there is a point at which there is overkill. For example, Baron (1986, 1989) found that both pleasant scent and being well-dressed improved interview judgments when used alone, but when used together led to lower evaluations than causal attire and no scent. Baron's empirical findings are consistent with what common sense would tell us. For example, smiling and eye contact has been found to lead to higher interviewer evaluations of job candidates (Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Imada & Hakel, 1977). However, those individuals that never cease to smile or continually stare at the interviewer would obviously not be highly evaluated!

Managing the perceived similarity between the interviewer and applicant appears to be an important tactic. Baskett (1973),

Frank and Hackman (1973), and Schmitt (1976) all reported that similarity between interviewer and interviewee favorably affected interviewer evaluation of the applicant. Applicant strategies such as agreeing with comments made by the interviewer to promote perceived similarity do seem to improve interviewer evaluations of the applicant. An interesting example of how this similarity process operates is found in the previously cited work of von Baeyer et al. (1981). To review, they found that female applicants attempted to present themselves in a more feminine manner when they knew the interviewer held traditional stereotypes of women. Thus, managing similarity may extend to matching oneself to particular stereotypes.

Interestingly, it appears that, in general, controlling types of influence tactics (dominance, self-promotion, etc.) lead to job applicants being more successful in the interview than applicants who engage in more submissive or passive influence tactics (Dipboye & Wiley, 1977, 1978; Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1990; Tullar, 1989). This runs contrary to conventional wisdom that argues being deferential and tractable to the interviewer is important. On the contrary, it appears that those who "toot their own horn" are the ones that get ahead in the interview, perhaps due to the expectations in this context.

Impression management by selection decision-maker. Up to this point we have dealt only with the applicant side of influence behavior. However, it is important to note that the interviewer or selection decision-maker may also be motivated to

employ, and in fact actively use, influence tactics. As indicated earlier, Gilmore and Ferris (1989b) have argued that managers may prefer individuals similar to themselves. The motive behind this may be political. Perhaps managers like individuals similar to themselves because this allows them to build coalitions and contribute to their own power base. While this does not imply that managers will actually use influence tactics in the selection process, it does suggest that political motives may underlie selection decisions. Wanous (1989) reviewed several studies that found what recruiters say, and how they say it, is important in determining whether the applicant accepts or rejects an offer. The fact that the organizational impressions interviewers projected consistently influenced applicants job choices provides a strong incentive for recruiters and interviewers to use impression management techniques. However, future research needs to address the extent to which interviewers actually do so.

Managing the impression of fit. The significant relationship between perceived similarity and interviewer evaluations was reviewed earlier. Perhaps one of the more important goals of those using influence tactics in the selection process is to increase the evaluator's perception of the fit between the applicant and organization. In concept, this transcends similarity between the interviewer and interviewee to similarity between the applicant and the organization's culture. It may be that the specific influence tactics used depend on the

situation, but the overall goal of enhancing the perception of congruence between the characteristics one has to offer and what the organization values remains the same. Therefore, the notion of fit may hold the promise of explaining how and why individuals seek to manage impression in the interview, and the extent to which they are effective in doing so.

Most writings of fit have been plagued by imprecision, emphasizing nebulous terms such as "right types" (Klimoski & Strickland, 1977; Schnieder, 1987). Rynes and Gerhart (1990) have argued that such notions add little to the understanding of fit. Although it may be nebulous by nature, fit is perhaps best understood as the degree to which the characteristics (dispositional and demographic traits, values and goals) of the applicant or employee match those of employees considered successful in the organization. Because most interviewers probably consider themselves successful employees, this may actually translate into how closely the applicant resembles the interviewer(s).

The inclusion of fit as a criterion in the selection process may relate to organizational strategy. By selecting individuals consistent with overall business strategies, organizational performance may be enhanced. Writers in the strategy area have argued this to be the case (Gupta, 1986; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Szilagyi & Schweiger, 1984). A way to implement strategy is by designing an organization's culture to enhance strategic objectives (Butler et al., 1991). Firms may select employees who