

THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS ON THE WORK OF THE
INTERNAL HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL

by

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ABSTRACT

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The coveted epicenter for the contemporary human resource professional is partnering with other internal business leaders to fulfill the organization’s mission through sound and ethical business principles and human resource practices. Over three decades, the discipline has matured into one that includes transactional practices along side the more sophisticated organizational development and consultative work. In contemporary business, it is customary for organizations to partner with either internal or external human resource professionals to assist with the people management or strategic elements of the business. The evolution of the discipline over more than thirty years is appropriate and attests to the contributions that can be made by individuals skilled in the

human resource and organizational development competencies. Excellence in the discipline centers on the ability to communicate with and influence diverse groups. The activities of the discipline live side by side the phenomena of organizational politics which impacts every aspect of contemporary business life.

Organizational politics has been discussed in earnest in the literature over the last two decades. The concept of organizational politics and the perceptions of organizational politics in the work place evolved during the 1990's and are considered to be a primary component in contemporary business practices. Therefore, it is appropriate to explore the relationships that exist between the discipline of human resources and the environmental phenomenon of organizational politics in contemporary business settings. The two are unavoidably linked through common work place actors, settings, and scripts. The examination of the resulting impact on human resources is the focus of this study.

The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent and how organizational politics impacts the work of the internal human resource professional. The qualitative research methodology includes a focus group and interviews of senior human resource professionals holding positions in financial services and professional services firms in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Chicago, Illinois. The research interpretation follows methodology proposed by Clive (1999). The study extends the existing research in this area by focusing on the impact of organizational politics on practicing human resource professionals. The suggested implications for the future of the human resource discipline will also be provided.

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DEDICATION

This study and the Masters of Science degree which follows are dedicated to my father, Elmer Palen. My father's unbridled faith in me always led me to higher ground. He is observing this accomplishment from beyond; but I continue to hear his words of encouragement and sense his wisdom each day. So, this is for you, Dad. Thank you for believing in me with your unwavering faith. You have made all the difference in my life. I will love you forever.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On the twelfth floor of a shimmering, glass thirty-five story office building in a Midwest metropolitan area, a female human resource professional stands in front of a full length glass window in her office looking out on the sea of glass towers that house the influential and powerful – leaders of organizations. She ponders her next meeting and the one after that in which she will offer advice and counsel on employees, their jobs, their compensations, their futures. That evening, she will attend a professional meeting where others like her will be discussing leading people and leading organizations. She is intensely aware of the tension between leading people *and* leading organizations. This tension pivots on politics, that almost indefinable, intangible but highly influential element existing in all organizations.

This study examines the impact of organizational politics on the work of the human resource professional. The human resource domain examined includes both the Human Resource Management and the Organizational Development realms. Human Resource Management (HRM) “is defined as the effective utilization of employees in order to achieve the goals and strategies of the organization” (DeSimone and Harris, 1998, p. 6). It includes recruiting and selection, compensation and benefits, employee relations, and human resource planning. Organization Development (OD) refers to “the process used to enhance the effectiveness of an organization and the well-being of its members through planned interventions” (French & Bell, 1990, p. 54). These definitions intimately link two dependent but simultaneously independent variables: the employees

and the organization. This linkage is the vortex of the tension that exists for the human resources professional in the daily execution of their role.

Organizational politics refers to behaviors “that occur on an informal basis within an organization and involve intentional acts of influence that are designed to protect or enhance individuals’ professional careers when conflicting courses of action are possible” (Drory, 1993; Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1981). Politics is a specific quality of the organizational dynamic which impacts all aspects of business life. The impact on the work of the human resource professional is marginally explored and examined in research literature.

The political model (Drory, 1993) of organizations joins the rational and organizational process models as domains by which to understand how organizations function. It provides a meaningful lens through which to view the work of the human resources professional. Ferris and Judge (1991) examined human resource management in light of both the rational and political models and posit that,

The human resource perspective has been viewed as overly optimistic about the possibility of maximizing individual *and* (italics added) organizational needs, and underplaying (or even ignoring) the issues of competing interests, power, and politics. Such criticisms raise the questions of whether a political perspective can contribute meaningfully to our understanding of Human Resource Management.

(Ferris & Judge, 1991 p. 448).

Human resource professionals operate in complex business systems comprised of competing goals, values, and motives. The ability to effectively influence within and across the system is central to the overall successful implementation of the defined role in

both Human Resource Management (HRM) and Organization Development (OD). Bridging the well-being of both the organization and the employee is central to the effective implementation of both HRM and OD. If it is advantageous to strategically position the human resource practice, what makes it so difficult to accomplish? Clues to the answer are found in the phenomenon of organizational politics.

Statement of the problem

The human resource discipline focuses on the achievement of organizational goals through the implementation of effective organizational and employee strategies. Partnering with companion disciplines and business leaders in the pursuit of productivity and profitability is the means by which the members of the discipline accomplish the charter. When collaboration is purely and effectively accomplished, positive business results follow. Effective, strategically positioned human resource programs executed in conjunction with a strategy that meshes with effective implementation, enhances firm performance (Richard & Johnson, 2001). However due to the dynamic of organizational politics, a tension often exists which causes a profound affect on the stated role of human resources. What is the impact of organizational politics on the work of the human resource professional?

Purpose of the study

The importance of understanding the organization and human resources from the political frame of reference is important as it extends the knowledge of the linkage that exists between the organization and the human resource practice. Additionally, it provides insights into the current state of the relationship. Numerous questions form the exploration of the study. How do human resource practices adapt and adjust their

mission to co-exist with the political forces? Are there positive and negative impacts to the work that are the result of organizational politics? How do individuals in the human resource profession manage in a political environment? What are the implications for the future of the discipline? These questions along with numerous others are critical in understanding contemporary organizations and the function of human resources.

Assumptions of the study

Several assumptions lie at the center of this study. (1) The study assumes, due to the results of significant scholarly research, that effectively positioned human resource practices which are aligned with the organization's strategic goals are able to create positive results for the organization if a genuinely collaborative environment is present. (2) The assumption is made that the organizations represented in this study value the human resource discipline. (3) The study assumes that the term "organization" refers to those professional services firms including law firms, accounting and consulting firms, and financial services firms.

Definition of terms

Organizational Politics: "Behaviors that occur on an informal basis within an organization and involve intentional acts of influence that are designed to protect or enhance individuals' professional careers when conflicting courses of action are possible" (Drory, 1993, p. 59).

Human Resource Management (HRM): "The effective utilization of employees in order to achieve the goals and strategies of the organization" (DeSimone and Harris, 1998, p. 6).

Organization Development (OD): “The process used to enhance the effectiveness of an organization and the well-being of its members through planned interventions” (French & Bell, 1990, p. 54).

Human Resource Professional: Individuals who hold positions within organizations and are responsible for managing and leading either or both Human Resource Management or Organizational Development aspects of the organization.

Influence: A power indirectly or intangibly affecting a person or event. Power to sway [or persuade] or affect based on prestige, wealth, ability, or status.

Limitations

This research does not include the perceptions and thoughts of human resource professionals who are in positions as external consultants or outsourced service providers. The focus of the research is with organizations that are considered professional services firms specifically law firms, accounting firms, financial services firms, and engineering firms. Therefore, the conclusions cannot be generalized to organizations other than professional services firms.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods are employed using both focus group and interview formats. The focus group comprised of six senior human resource professionals (two males and four females) employed in professional services firms and a joint interview with two senior human resource professionals (one male and one female) form the sample from which data is collected and interpreted. Transcribed video and audio transcripts of each session were analyzed for themes, perceptions, and insights of the participants and then categorized to discover relationships. The data were interpreted by

the researcher and validated for authenticity by the participants. Interpretations are contextually grounded ensuring that conclusions are based on the participants' specific experiences.

Interviewing is the key to many forms of qualitative educational research (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Seidman (1998) provides a framework for understanding and interpreting data gathered by way of the interview.

Researchers must ask themselves what they have learned from doing the interviews, studying the transcripts, marking and labeling them, crafting profiles, and organizing categories of excerpts. What connective threads are there among the experiences of the participants they interviewed? How do they understand and explain these connections? What do they understand now that they did not understand before they began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What confirmations of previous instincts? How have their interviews been consistent with the literature? How inconsistent? How have they gone beyond?
(p. 4)

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to interpret the self-interpretations of others as they speak, listen, and reveal their specific experiences, feelings, and beliefs related to the topic under exploration.

In this study, the qualitative research methods (focus group and interviews) address a specific concept – organizational politics and its impact on a specific group of professionals – senior human resource incumbents working in a specific type of organization – professional services firms. Through data collection and interpretation, the individual and collective experiences, feelings, and beliefs of the participants provide

a lens through which one is able to understand the impact of organizational politics on the human resource professional from a contextually sensitive viewpoint. Seidman provides credibility for the process when he states, “Interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their actions.”

Construct validity is achieved by comparing the collected, categorized, and interpreted data of the participants to the concepts of organizational politics and the role of the human resource professional as represented in the literature. Face validity is achieved through a verification process with the participants ensuring that interpretations and conclusions represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Triangulation of the data using multiple literature and research sources, focus group and interview data collection techniques, and validation of the conclusions with the participants provides a solid framework of verification of the results.

Extending the body of knowledge

The impact of organizational politics on the work of human resource professionals and how politics influences the directions, choices, and results of both human resource management and organization development occupies little space in the research literature. This study extends the body of knowledge by focusing on the experiences of senior human resource professionals in professional services environments as they interact with and work inside political environments in an effort to fulfill the HRM and OD charters defined earlier.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organization theory encompasses a broad spectrum of management as well as sociological concepts. One aspect of organization theory is that of politics and the associated behaviors and reactions that individuals and groups experience by working in a political environment. This literature review explores concepts associated with organizational politics from its recognition and emergence in the literature to more recent research explorations regarding perceptions, impacts, and mitigating work place factors. The review includes an explanation of the 1) origination of the concept in the literature, 2) definitional struggles surrounding the concept, 3) perceptions of organizational politics including antecedents and consequences of political environments. The goal of the literature review is to establish a foundational understanding of politics in the work environment as well as a familiarity with the current literary discourse.

In addition to the literature review on organizational politics, an abbreviated discussion of rhetoric and dialectic focusing on Aristotle's theory of ethos, logos, and pathos is provided as well as comments regarding the concept of power. Finally, the concepts of organizational politics, rhetorical theory, and power are related to the emerging role of the human resource professional.

Origination of politics in the literature

The literary discourse regarding organizational politics began in the 1970's with a focus on aspects of power and bureaucracy in the work place specifically focused on management and leadership (Drory & Romm, 1988). Mintzberg (1985) acknowledges that the topic received only fragmented exposure in the literature prior to the 1980's and

associates the phenomenon primarily with conflict. The initial literary explorations attempted to justify its existence and relevance and struggled with defining the experience (Drory & Romm, 1988). Like the unseen elephant in the living room, one knows it is there, even though, it is difficult to describe and define. The researchers' attempts to define and quantify the felt but intangible environmental phenomenon were journeys into the realm of the unknown and followed the roots of the early human relations view of management.

The human relations movement forged new inquiry into the discourse regarding human behavior in the work place. As early as 1938, Chester Barnard described the organization as a social structure integrating traditional management and behavioral science applications (DeSimone & Harris, 1998). While social scientists explored human behavior, motivation, and need fulfillment in relationship to work, management practices primarily remained modeled after a mechanistic organizational structure. In the late 1970's and early 1980's the social sciences met head on with organizational management methods. The term human resource development was embraced by the American Society for Training and Development in 1980 forming the marriage between the worker and the work place. This union gave momentum to the discourse on organizational behavior with the publication of numerous articles and books on the subject.

The label 'organizational politics' found its way into the literature and textbooks on organizational behavior in 1983 in publications by Robbins, Hellrigel, Solcum and Woodman (Drory & Romm, 1988). Notwithstanding the mention, organizational politics remained relatively undefined. Mintzberg (1985) couples politics with influence when he

writes that “politics may be considered to constitute one among a number of systems of influence in the organization...the others [include] authority, ideology, and expertise may be described as legitimate in some sense.” Drory and Romm (1988) posit:

Considerable disagreement exists among the writers with regard to the definition of the term. Beyond the relatively wide agreement that political behavior involves an attempt at influencing others there is a wide difference with regard to the purpose, the means and the circumstances which distinguish political from non-political organizational behavior.

Once the concept received a label even though undefined, it was ripe turf for grounded theory and hypotheses. The literary dialogue continued with the struggle to define the playing field.

The evolution of the definition

Organizational scientists have offered various definitions of politics incorporating elements of behavior that are formal and informal, sanctioned and non-sanctioned, focused on the use of power and influence, or based on coalition building. Pettigrew (1973) described it as the use of power to influence decision making. Others link it to the dysfunctional characteristics of organizations (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayers, 1979). Mintzberg (1983) refers 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 (p. 172). A definition that captures an important nuance is “impression management” which isolates a tactic of ingratiation or social engineering as a means to employ political influence (Gardner & Martinko, 1988. p. 322). Impression management

as defined by Schlenker (1980) is “the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions.”

Mintzberg (1985) linked politics and conflict in his discussion of the political arena in organizations. He introduced three basic dimensions of conflict in organizations – intensity, pervasiveness, and duration (or stability). These variables were associated with four forms of the political arena: confrontation, shaky alliance, politicized organization, and complete political arena. Mintzberg hypothesized that organizations are thrust into and out of all four forms of the political arena or systems of influence. He identified thirteen political ‘games’ played to “counter resistance, build a power base, defeat a rival, or change the organization” (p. 134). These identified political games formed three types of impetus that give rise to the political arena: 1) change in fundamental condition of the organization, 2) breakdown in established order of power, 3) major pressure from influencer(s) to realign a coalition or change the configuration. His hypotheses centered on the belief that conflict must be controlled and contained or the organization would succumb to influential political pressures.

Mintzberg (1985) also held that the political arena in organizations had a functional role. He believed, 1) a system of politics in organizations is necessary to correct certain deficiencies and dysfunctions, 2) leadership could be enhanced by bringing the strongest members of the organization into positions of authority in a somewhat Darwinian manner, 3) politics promotes a full debate of issues, 4) politics promotes necessary organizational change blocked by legitimate systems of influence, 5) politics can facilitate decision-making, 6) politics causes a realignment of coalitions and a shift in power, 7) politics speeds up the death of a spent organization. Mintzberg’s

dispassionate epistle on the political arena of organizations promotes a balanced viewpoint. However, he reveals an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon, when he writes, “while this author is not personally enthusiastic about organizational politics – and has no desire to live in a political arena...he does accept its purpose in a society of organizations” (p. 152). At this early stage in the literary discourse, politics is heavily linked with open conflict originating either externally or internally to the organization.

Drory and Romm (1988) offer seven concepts as key elements in defining organizational politics: 1) behavioral means consisting of three types including formal, informal, and illegal, 2) acting against the organization, 3) power attainment, 4) conflict, 5) concealed motive.

The three types of behavioral means are divided into formally sanctioned political behavior, informal or non-sanctioned behavior, and illegal behavior. Using the terms prescribed, discretionary, or illegal to depict the three types, Drory and Romm articulate the differences by suggesting that prescribed behaviors fall within the realm of the acceptable, discretionary behaviors are informal, acceptable but non-sanctioned, and illegal behaviors are prohibited within the organization. Acting against the organization includes behaviors that go against the formal organizational goals and interests.

Although, Drory and Romm (1988) admit that this aspect of the definition is controversial. Power attainment is considered by many as a central characteristic of organizational politics “to the extent that the two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably” (Drory & Romm, 1988, p. 166). Conflict surfaces in their definition and is suggested to be a state that exists between parties involved in organizational politics. The concealed motive element of the definition is described as a “major

characteristic often accompanying political behavior (p. 167). They continue, “the true motive is concealed because the actor believes that it is unacceptable, and a false but acceptable motive is presented instead” (p. 167).

In a more recent study by Drory and Romm (1990), they suggest that there is no common, basic definition that captures the entire complexity of organizational politics. Out of a desire to pin down the phenomenon, the literature captured an evolution of definitions moving from the specific to more general explanations of behaviors affecting the organization which might be either formal (sanctioned) or informal (non-sanctioned).

Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson (1995) point to Ferris’ work which describes politics as an “intentional social influence process in which behavior is strategically designed to maximize short-term or long-term self interests” (p. 892). This definition allows for both functional and dysfunctional outcomes for individuals, groups, or organizations. Consensus building is a type of political behavior which may allow beneficial decisions to be made. However, dysfunctional political behavior may also be encompassed in this definition in the form of self-serving policies which have a long-term negative affect on the organization.

The dissection of the concept in an attempt to arrive at a common definition continues in recent literature. Zanzi (2001) offers that “while previous organizational research has been concerned primarily with either a general definition of politics that considers both positive and negative aspects of politics or a specific definition that focuses solely on negative political behaviors” (p. 246). He sought to integrate the definitions and explored the positive and the negative political tactics that people actually

employ at work. Like Zanzi's, recent explorations by researchers focus more on the perceptions and impact of the phenomenon than on the definition.

Perceptions of political influence

Possibly as a result of the definitional debate, research on organizational politics shifted to employee perceptions including measurement and mitigating factors of a political environment. Robbins (1983) concluded that all behavior in organizations is political. However, Drory and Romm found in a 1988 study that organizational politics is more associated with informal than with formal or illegal behaviors. In fact, the Drory and Romm study found that employees' perception of politics are dependent upon circumstances and that as circumstances or elements of a situation vary so do perceptions regarding the politics. Departing from previous definitions that include lists of political characteristics including power, control, hidden motives, Drory and Romm posit that organizational politics is dependent upon a set of circumstances that employees may perceive as political. Drory and Romm's work proposes an if A than B relationship between behavior and politics. Meaning if A in relationship to B creates a perception of organizational politics, than absent the condition A, the resulting behavior, B, may or may not be considered as politically charged. The study concludes that perception of politics is shaped by a set of circumstances that are defined by the employee.

Much of the work related to the perception of organization politics revolves around the research of Ferris, Russ, and Fandt (1989) who developed a subjective framework of organizational politics which posits that workers perceiving high levels of organizational politics are dissatisfied with their jobs. They also claimed that workers

who are lower in the hierarchy and have an external locus of control experience the organization as more political.

Ferris and Kacmar (1992) embraced an earlier work by Gandz and Murray (1980) who suggested that “rather than exclusively an objective state, it is appropriate to construe organizational politics as a subjective experience and, thus as a state of mind” (p. 94). Ferris and Kacmar focused on the “cognitive evaluation and subjective experience of those behaviors and events occurring in the work environment that seem to constitute political behaviors” (p. 94). They proposed a model of organizational politics perception that formed a relationship between organizational, environmental, and personal factors that influence job involvement, job anxiety, job satisfaction, and withdrawal from the organization. They proposed that perceptions of organizational politics defer in direct relationship to one’s position in the hierarchical. An employee at a lower level perceives more politics than those higher in the organization. Additionally, they proposed that organizations that are more centrally controlled are inherently more political.

Ferris and Kacmar conducted two separate studies to determine antecedents of organizational politics perceptions. In the first study, they found that feedback, job autonomy, skill variety, and opportunity for promotion correlated with perceptions of organizational politics. Additionally, they found that age, sex or supervisory status did not correlate positively with perceptions of politics. In the second study, they found that relationship with supervisor, work group cohesion, and opportunity for promotion all were statistically significant for predicting negative relationships with organizational politics perceptions. Interestingly, Ferris and Kacmar found that work group cohesion accounted for the largest variance in job satisfaction. They concluded that,

organizational politics perceptions play a role in employee job dissatisfaction, and more specifically, that it is the coworker and clique (political) behavior of politics perceptions that seems to explain this role. This makes sense in light of the critical role coworkers play in influencing employee definition and interpretation of work environmental stimuli (p. 111).

Ferris and Kacmar's study advanced the research regarding the perceptions of organizational politics by providing correlations to supervisory and coworker behavior as well as opportunity for promotion. In their concluding statements, they offer a mitigating caution.

Most people perceive only the dark side of politics, and indeed there is a dark side, characterized by destructive opportunism and dysfunctional game playing. However, politics can be positive as well, for organizations and for individuals...politics are essential to the effective functioning of organizations. Individuals who become proficient at playing politics may realize greater job and career-related rewards. In fact, in the present research, organizational politics perceptions were associated with higher (not lower) job involvement (p. 113).

These two studies by Ferris and Kacmar provide insight into employees' perceptions of organizational politics. Following their research, Drory conducted further inquiry into the perceptions of politics.

Drory (1993) designed the Political Climate Scale for use in a study of 200 employees. He hypothesized that two factors impact one's perception of organizational politics: satisfaction with superior and satisfaction with co-workers. His rationale was that,

employees who have access to sources of organizational power and status, are in a position to take advantage of the political game and to gain a greater share of organizational benefits than they formally deserve. Consequently, they may not consider OP as necessarily undesirable or detrimental to their own interests. Low status employees, on the other hand, who are not in a position to benefit from a political decision-making style are more likely to feel disadvantaged in a prevailing political climate. Their attitudes toward their work situation are therefore more likely to be negatively affected (p. 63).

Drory's results supported his hypothesis.

Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson (1995) launched a study using Ferris' framework of organizational politics which includes perceptions of employees in relationship to levels of hierarchy, locus of control, and satisfaction levels. The primary focus of their study surrounded the notion of trust and its correlation to the perception of politics.

Specifically, they hypothesized that,

Trust may moderate the extent to which organizational politics is related to positive or negative attitudes. Respondents who are high on trust are less likely to perceive politics as a threat than those who have a low level of trust...participants who have a high level of trust do not perceive a need for political action and are consequently less likely to engage in politics than those with lower levels of trust. When participants with high levels of trust engage in politics, they are more likely to engage in legitimate, constructive political behavior than those with low levels of trust (p. 897-898).

Surprisingly, their hypothesis was not supported by the research. In fact, they found support for Ferris' claims that certain types of job and work qualities influenced perceptions of politics. Ferris' research found that job promotion possibilities affected one's perception of negative politics. Parker et al. found that, "respondents perceived fewer politics to the extent that they believed that there were career development opportunities, rewards and recognition for good performance, and cooperation among work groups" (p. 908). Additionally, they found that the strongest correlate of the perception of politics existed in the element of intergroup cooperation. This little studied variable had a surprisingly powerful relationship to the perception of organizational politics. They suggest that this finding provides important managerial direction to help reduce the negative affects of organizational politics. By providing opportunities to reward cooperation and integrative organizational structures, managers may mitigate the negative impact of organizational politics.

The work by Parker, Dipboye and Jackson (1995) also suggests several important contributing actions related to employees' perception of organizational politics. Employee perceptions of the organization as political were associated with lower levels of overall satisfaction; believing that the organization does not value high work standards, challenging work, and integrity; evaluations of senior management as ineffective; perceiving that the organization does not support innovation; and, believing that employees are not loyal to the organization.

O'Connor and Morrison (2001) studied both situational and dispositional predictors of perceptions of organizational politics. They found like Ferris, Russ, and Fandt (1998) that,

Job autonomy, formalization, and organizational climate were negatively correlated with perceptions of political activity. Male and female employees were more likely to perceive their organization as political if they (a) occupied lower hierarchical levels within the organization, (b) saw themselves as possessing low levels of job autonomy, (c) believed the workplace was low in formalization, and (d) negatively evaluated the climate of their organization (p. 307).

Additionally, they found that two dispositional variables impact perception of politics.

Both external locus of control and Machiavellianism were correlated positively with perceptions of organizational politics. Specifically male and female employees who evidenced greater levels of Machiavellianism and a more external (or less internal) work locus of control tended to view their organizations as more political (p. 307).

The most powerful finding that emerged from the O'Connor and Morrison study was the relationship between organizational climate and the perception of politics. "This variable may be an important determinant of whether an employee views his or her workplace as political" (p. 309).

An aspect of the organizational climate is teamwork. Valle and Witt (2001) analyzed the correlation of organizational politics and teamwork. They hypothesized that "individual perceptions of teamwork importance would lessen the negative effects of politics perceptions on job satisfaction" (p. 379). Working from the framework proposed by Ferris et al (1989), Valle and Witt studied 355 white-collar employees of a private sector, customer-service organization in the eastern United States. Using Kacmar and

Ferris' Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS) (1991), they assessed the perceptions of the value of teamwork within the organization. They found that, the relationship between politics perceptions and job satisfaction was stronger among employees reporting low levels of teamwork importance than among individuals reporting high levels of teamwork importance. Teamwork importance was relevant to job satisfaction only when employees perceived average to high levels of organizational politics (p. 385).

This study demonstrated that the effects of teamwork importance on organizational politics were statistically significant even when control features of gender, ethnic minority status, tenure, and supervisory status were included.

Valle and Witt (2001) conclude that organizational politics subsumes all forms of influence in organizations and includes both positive and negative connotations. Influence, they comment, drives much of the activity in today's organizations and ought to be the focus of additional research in the correlation with organizational politics.

The concept of influence is intricately associated with organizational politics (Valle & Witt, 2001). In fact, a common denominator of many of the definitions discussed earlier in this chapter incorporate the element of influence (include list of researchers and dates). Therefore, it is both appropriate and instructive to examine the concept of influence as found in rhetorical theory. An exploration of the rhetorical concept of influence rounds out this literature review.

Rhetoric and dialectic according to Aristotle

Aristotle defines rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever" (Rhet. I 2.1, 1355b26-27). Aristotle

reserved rhetoric to describe the art of persuasive speech making which employs ethos (character of the speaker), logos (argument), and pathos (creating emotion in the listeners). Aristotle describes a similar but different form of communication art as dialectic. Dialectic is used to describe the practice and theory of conversation and employs the use of logos (Krabbe, 2000). He delineates the differences between rhetoric and dialectic on the basis speaker/audience interactivity, scope, and scale. Simply stated, rhetoric is reserved for speeches delivered to groups in a continuous flow while dialectic is an even exchange between two actors. More importantly, though, he distinguishes rhetoric as solely persuasive – a means by which to arrive at single-mindedness regarding an issue through the use of ethos, pathos, and logos. Conversely, dialectic is a means of cooperative inquiry employing the art of questioning and logos to arrive at truth and knowledge. Both rhetoric and dialectic may share a common goal of persuasion by fostering arguments on both sides of an issue.

The possibility of arguing both sides of an issue by employing artful rhetoric or dialectic open up the possibility of misuse known as sophistry. Krabbe (2000) describes the situation,

One could deliberately argue for the wrong side of an issue (even though Aristotle says we should not do so). Hence there is a black rhetoric besides the white rhetoric that Aristotle recommends. In dialectic the situation is not different, only here the black side is known by a special name: sophistry (p. 209).

At the heart of Aristotle's concept of rhetoric is ethos or character. Arguably, although not delineated by Aristotle, ethos is also quite relevant in dialectic since sophistry seemingly might involve an absence of character. To fully appreciate

Aristotle's concepts of rhetoric and the dialectic, one must understand the concept of character. The origins of Aristotle's view of character may have been influenced by Homer's *Iliad*.

Kennedy (1998) argues that Homer's *Iliad* was an important catalyst for later theories of persuasion. "Some techniques of rhetorical theory are already evident in the speeches of the Homeric poems to such a degree that later antiquity found formal rhetoric everywhere in Homer" (p. 35). Since Greeks and Romans learned to read by way of the Homeric poems, Kennedy asserts that "The attitude toward speech in the *Iliad* strongly influenced the conception of the orator in Greco-Roman civilization" (p. 10). Aristotle's thoughts on persuasion were formed, in part, by Homer. Karp (1994) states that "Homer was a forerunner of, if not an influence on, later explicitly philosophic formulations of theories of persuasion (in particular, those of Plato and Aristotle" (p. 34). The concepts contained in the *Iliad* contributed to Aristotle's development of truth, justice, and persuasion. While the *Iliad* may have influenced the notion of ethos, there are important distinctions between the later view of ethos held by Aristotle and those that articulated in the *Iliad*.

Frobish (2003) contrasts the concept of Aristotle's ethos and Homer's view of ethos as described in the *Iliad*.

Although Aristotle suggests the universality of ethos as a factor in all persuasion, his theory is focused most specifically upon establishing the appearance of trustworthiness before an audience that did not know the speakers by reputation or personal contact. Therefore, external factors such as one's authority or prestige were typically nonexistent or inconsequential to those speaking. The speakers in

the Iliad are kings or sons of kings, who were called forth into battle, only to find themselves engaged in uneasy dialogue with their peers. External factors become crucial to credibility and the presentation of trustworthiness in the Iliad (p. 18).

In the Iliad, character was as a man acted. “His identity or character was strengthened through heroic deed or ruined by some act of cowardice” (Frobish, 2003). Finley (1954) adds, “There was no weakness, no unheroic trait, but one, and that was cowardice and the consequent failure to pursue heroic goals.” Assessment of character in the Iliad pivoted on one’s ability to act in a manner deemed reasonable, trustworthy, and honorable. Traits associated with character included wisdom, courage, style or eloquence, patience, foresight, bravery, skill, honesty, circumspection, and graciousness. Regardless of status – king or pauper – character in action was considered to be a critical asset. It is one’s quality of character in the Iliad that caused one to be listened to and followed into battle. Persuasiveness was impossible apart from a positive assessment of character.

Conversely, Aristotle viewed character as ascribed to a speaker “when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible...this kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak” (1.21356a7-10). “Ethos then is established through discourse, according to Aristotle, when one portrays himself or herself as having practical wisdom, good moral character, and a concern for the audience” (Frobish, 2003). This view of ethos moves away from the *action determines character* model of the Iliad and towards the *actor creates character* model. The actor creates character model encompasses all three of Aristotle’s concepts of rhetoric –logos, pathos, and ethos. An actor using logic

(logos) to arouse an audience's emotion (pathos) attempts to persuade. Once persuaded, the audience ascribes a degree of character (ethos) to the actor.

Character to Aristotle was a perception which might vary from one interaction with an audience to another. Homer's concept of character rested on one's ability to be listened to as a result of reputation. Aristotle's concept of character rested on one's ability to persuade; and is the model that formed the basis of rhetorical theory. Rhetoric as described by Aristotle is "the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever" – a clear enunciation of the purpose of rhetoric.

Persuasion, in Aristotle's view, was a result of artful rhetorical facility and involved elements of style, tone, and delivery. In book 3 of Rhetoric, Aristotle comments,

Delivery is of the greatest importance, but has not yet been treated by anyone. In fact, it only made its appearance late in tragedy and rhapsody...Now [delivery] is a matter of voice, as to how it should be used for each emotion, when it should be loud and when soft and when intermediate, and how the tones...should be used, and what rhythms are adapted to each subject...But no treatise has yet been composed on this, since the matter of style itself only lately came to be considered, and it seems a vulgar matter when rightly understood. But since the whole business of rhetoric is to influence opinion, we must pay attention to delivery, not as being right, but necessary...[For delivery] is of great importance owing to the [hearer's lack of skill] (Johnstone, 2001)

This ancient acknowledgement of the importance of style, tone, delivery, and rhythm for the sole purpose of influencing opinion establishes the foundational elements of rhetorical theory.

The genesis of rhetorical theory is found in the early works of Homer (Frobish, 2003), read and massaged by Aristotle and taught by Plato and the Sophists. Current teachings in rhetorical theory are deeply rooted in the Ancients, especially Aristotle, who articulated the importance of the fundamentals of delivery, style, tone, the Socratic method, the appeal to emotion, the division of a speech into parts, and the interest in diction and word-choice. These concerns are “likely to have been a fundamental part of the *logon technē* as it was taught and practiced in the 5th century BCE” (Johnstone, 2001). The ultimate goal of the rhetorical act, according to Aristotle, is to persuade or influence in order to sway opinion. The ability to cause movement in the audiences’ opinion and thereby their behavior, is rooted in the rhetorical convergence of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* and is a form of power.

Power

Latin has three words to define different types of power: *auctoritas*, *potestas*, and *potentia* (Hopfl, 1999). *Auctoritas* is a capacity to initiate and to inspire respect. Persons or organizations may have this type of power. It is likened to moral authority. Individuals with this type of power are listened to, they provide counsel and guidance. “Understood in this way, *auctoritas* is indeed indispensable in any association of human beings, especially in times of crisis and disorientation” (Hopfl, 1999, p. 222). *Potestas* is power which is bestowed as a result of holding a particular office. The office or the position gives one the means and the right to act. It is magisterial power. *Potentia* is the

exercise of incentives and rewards as ‘powers’ which encourage compliance and dispel sanctions for noncompliance. In essence, it is the right to command or coerce through the use of incentives and rewards.

Michel Foucault’s (1979) refers to power as a pervasive, intangible network of forces which weaves itself into our slightest gestures and most intimate utterances. Power does not reside in things but in a network of relationships which are systematically connected. More specifically, power (hegemony) is “a set of practices, primarily of a discursive provenance which seeks to foreclose the indefinite possibilities of signifying elements and their relations, in determinate ways. These views of power closely resemble Aristotle’s view of rhetoric. Foucault uses terms to describe power such as force, network of relationships, gestures, utterances, discursive provenance coincide with Aristotle’s rhetorical and dialectic elements of dialogue, word choice, delivery, style, and pathos.

Power as viewed by Foucault departs from the Latin expressions of power moral authority, positional power, and coercive incentives and towards an interactive, dynamic, and discursive definition.

The emerging role of the human resource professional

Why are Aristotle’s thoughts on rhetoric and dialectic relevant to a discussion on organizational politics and the human resources professional? In the post-modernist view of organizations, multiple and evolutionary changes have shaped viewpoints of organizations. These include a shift from a mechanistic view of organizations to one which considers that organizations are composed of various and sometimes conflicting narratives vying for legitimacy and power. As a result, social scientists began to

understand “organizations as cultures and as political arenas” (Tsoukas, Cummings, 1997).

Whereas earlier theorists focused predominantly on what they thought were the context-free aspects of organizations, in more recent times, there has been a growing appreciation of the language-mediated texture of organizing and of the consequent need to understand questions of meaning and power (Pondy, 1983; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Moch & Huff, 2009; Weick, 1979).

Mintzberg (1985) describes the development of strategic management, as strategy not as the outcome of a rational process of planning, but as whatever emerges from a process of creative, often playful acting. The view of organizations as cultures rich in multiple narratives proffered by actors each vying for legitimacy and power is the stage on which the work of the human resources professional is performed. Mintzberg’s reference to playful acting correlates to Aristotle’s counsel to employ whatever means available to influence opinion. Herein lays the work of the human resource professional in contemporary organizations.

The human resource professional of the new millennium must be equipped to navigate an organization’s culture and the various narratives at play or one’s practice will be confined to transactional instead of consultative contributions. Marnie Green (2002) describes the necessary competencies of the consultative HR professional. “They are now expected to be problem-solvers, conflict resolvers, coaches, and liaisons with lots of organizational savvy. This expectation is a huge shift in what organizations have traditionally expected from HR” (p. 112). This new role requires competence in oral communication skills including delivery qualities of tone, style, and pacing. Most

importantly, they require that the human resource professional has established credibility or character traits which illicit trust, respect, good moral and ethical standards, and reliability. Gilley and Gilley (2002) take this critical competence to yet a higher level of expectation,

Organizations are comprised of a myriad of individuals with different perspectives, assumptions, experiences, personalities, agendas, goals, and ambitions. Therefore, it is essential that you [the human resource professional] develop the skills appropriate to effective work with people to achieve desired outcomes. Political navigators develop an understanding of the political arena in which the organization conducts business. Absent these skills and insights, you will fail to develop the type of influence necessary to bring about long-term systemic change (p. 270).

The ability to navigate the political waters of an organization is the highest hurdle human resource professionals must vault in order to be considered viable. The focus of this research is on the how HR professionals choose to navigate the waters and the impact on their work.

Summary

The review of current literature richly interacts with the varying definitions of organizational politics as well as employee perceptions of environments which are viewed as political. Antecedents and consequences along with mitigating factors are also well researched and discussed in the literature. Interestingly, absent from the current research and resulting literary discourse is a treatment of the phenomenon of organizational politics on the emerging role of the human resources professional. Ferris

and Kacmar claim that, “Politics in organizations is simply a fact of life” (p. 93). If this is factual, then the work of the human resource professional is inescapably affected by organizational politics. Yet contemporary social scientists have neglected to hypothesize and discover the impact of organizational politics on the emerging role and work of the human resource professional.

The qualitative research contained herein contributes to and extends the body of knowledge by providing insight into how current HR professionals experience organizational politics in their work places and the impact on the work.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Contemporary research on organizational politics focuses primarily on defining the concept or measuring its impact on employees. The amoeboid definition of politics includes but is not limited to the qualities of power and influence (Pettigrew, 1973), impression management (Schlenker, 1980), conflict (Mintzberg, 1985), concealed motives (Drory & Romm, 1988), and intentional and strategically used social influence (Parker et al., 1995). Employees' perceptions of organizational politics as well as its antecedents and consequences are well researched and documented (Drory, 1993; Ferris et al., 1989; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Gandz & Murray, 1980). However, several questions remain unanswered in the research. For instance, how do leaders use politics as a method of influence? How is individual contribution affected by politics? Specifically, this research examines how human resource professionals adapt and adjust their behavior to work with and use political influence. Are there positive and negative impacts to the work that are the result of organizational politics? What are the implications for the future of human resources? These questions along with numerous others are critical in understanding contemporary organizations and the function of human resources. Whereas the impacts, antecedents, and consequences of organizational politics are well studied and documented, an obvious void exists - the corollary impact on those who lead and influence other organizational leaders as well as employees – the human resources professional. To address the literary void, a focus group of human resource professionals along with two separate interviews was conducted.

Focus group and interview process

On February 19, 2004, a focus group of five human resource professionals convened for two and a half hours to discuss the topic question of this study. The group was facilitated by an organizational development consultant. The consultant guided the discussion through two rounds of questions. The first round covered topic areas which included: the definition of organizational politics, aspects of a culture that give rise to politics, mitigate the affects of politics, or those that contribute to or detract from an organization's effectiveness. The second round of discussion covered topic areas related to perceptions regarding the impact of politics on the work of human resources, how politics is experienced, the positive and negative impacts, as well as thoughts about overall impact to future of the profession. On February 26, 2004, two separate one and a half hour interviews were conducted with human resource professionals covering the same topic areas explored by the focus group. The focus group was video taped as well as observed by the researcher. The interviews were conducted by the researcher and audio taped.

Participants

The focus group members and interviewees were identified and requested to participate by the researcher. Prior to the focus group session, each received a written invitation outlining the area of research and the discussion topics. The focus group participants included:

- human resource manager (female) with fifteen years of experience in a regional financial services firm
- internal recruiter (female) with six years of experience in law firms

- human resource operating officer (male) with eighteen years of experience in an architectural/engineering firm
- human resource director (female) with fourteen years of experience in a law firm
- human resource manager (female) with fourteen years of experience in regional financial services firms

The interviewees included:

- two regional human resource directors with 10 (male participant) and 15 (female participant) years respectively in an international accounting and consulting firm

Focus group and interview content analysis

The video and audio tapes were reviewed, analyzed, and themed by the researcher. Keeping with the purpose and intent of qualitative research, participants' experiences as well as group reactions to those experiences are preserved and reported. Interpretation is provided by the researcher while the participants validate the interpretations by confirming the findings in individual sessions with the researcher. Verification of the results is achieved through the triangulation of data using focus group and interview findings coupled with published literature.

Limitations

Inherent in the study are several limitations:

- Human resource professionals in professional services firms provide the data; the results and interpretations should not be extrapolated to other types of organizations.

- Two men and five women participated in the study. Gender differences were not taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results.
- It is assumed that the comments made by the participants represent their candid and honest assessments and observations.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The results of the focus group and interviews are captured by exploring the participants' contributions grouped into a four categories: 1) defining the culture of professional services firms: *The context*, 2) defining organizational politics: *The concept*, 3) defining two critical competencies for a human resources professional in the professional services environment: *Influence and character*, 4) defining the impact of organizational politics on the work of the human resource professional: *Results, values, and socially responsible leadership*.

The context

Professional service firms provide the context for the work of all of the human resource professionals who participated in the study. To fully appreciate the results and findings of the study, one must understand the contemporary professional services firm. The firms represented in the study include two law firms, one architectural and engineering firm, one brokerage and investment banking firm, and one international accounting and consulting firm. The law firm, the architectural firm, and the accounting/consulting firm are privately held and represent partnerships. The brokerage/investment banking firm is publicly held. The firms range in size from 120 employees to over 6,000. The firms employ specialists who provide clients with expert advice, counsel, and design in investment strategy, or structural engineering, or the law.

Significant post graduate education is represented by each technical expert in addition to numerous years of experience perfecting his or her craft. The product or

contribution produced by the resident expert in each of these fields is advice, counsel, strategy, or design. In essence the product is intellectual capital and is intangible.

The leadership model at play in many professional services firms involves technical experts who move into management and leadership roles. In each case, the firm's promotion track to manager or leader is a direct result of demonstrated excellence in one's technical field. However, a management curriculum is typically not included in the educational experiences of the technical expert graduating from law school, the school of engineering, or in finance. It is in this context that the human resource professional practices his or her craft. Understanding the track to management is relevant since the majority of the work performed by these human resource professionals is integrated with the work of the technical expert/manager/leader. Therefore to understand the nature of the human resource work, one must understand the mindset and educational background of the managers and leaders.

Technical experts are rewarded and deemed successful based upon the ability to deliver excellent work product in a specialized, focused area. Therefore, it is important for the technical expert to remain a content expert in his or her field. As a result, these individuals are viewed as problem solvers. Maister, Green, and Galford, (2000) contribute to the literature about professional services firms when they state,

In the professions, problem solving is highly valued. Problem solvers...abhor a vacuum. They are very uncomfortable with the uncertainty inherent in the early parts of the trust-development process. They seek to fill silences with hypotheses, and they seek to fill hypothesis gaps with data questions. It is not surprising that...a hint of ambiguity or uncertainty is uncomfortable. Advisors are...trained

not to ask open-ended questions, but rather to ask closed-ended ones that reinforce hypotheses and showcase brilliance (p. 142).

Maisters, Green, and Galford identify the element that contributes to the tension surrounding the technical expert as manager/leader. Through training the technical expert focuses on problem solving by way of closed ended questions that reinforce his or her thought processes resulting in preserving the perception of brilliance.

By its very nature, managing and leading people requires discovery through open ended questions that create a shared vision and journey. Phillips (1997) writes,

Leadership is leaders acting - as well as caring, inspiring and persuading others to act - for certain shared goals that represent the values – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of themselves and the people they represent. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders care about, visualize, and act on their own and their followers' values and motivations (p. 8).

The three key leadership points in Phillips' description involve the use of behaviors that inspire instead of the use of coercive power, a bias for centering actions around shared goals, and a respect for the values of others in concert with his or her own convictions. Effective leaders have an intuitive understanding of human nature that combines with the ability to care, establish trust, and build alliances. They are able to work in teams, which in turn, leads to exceptional skills in fashioning consensus, compromising when necessary, and valuing diversity of thought, ability, and culture (Phillips, 1997).

The technical expert who ascends to a managerial or leadership position is ill-equipped to work in the manner described by Phillips but rather relies on his or her training as a sophisticated problem solver when engaging with employees. To further

complicate the organizational dynamic, the expert is often required to play two simultaneous roles – continue as a producing resident expert and manage employees.

The professional services firm context poses a unique type of human resource challenge. Management and leadership roles are often held by individuals without education in the fields of human psychology and the behavioral sciences or training in the areas of human resource management and organizational development. Often, they juggle two contrasting roles within the organization. The value set of the technical expert centers around problem solving out of a sense to show brilliance. This focus on self aggrandizement is contradictory to sound leadership principles. DePree (1989) describes the art of leadership as,

One who serves...Leadership is a concept of owing certain things to the institution. It is a way of thinking about institutional heirs, a way of thinking about stewardship as contrasted with ownership. The art of leadership requires us to think about the leader-as-steward in terms of relationships: of assets and legacy, of momentum and effectiveness, of civility and values (p. 10).

The dynamic in which the human resource professional works is in an environment of ownership versus leadership and individual achievement versus team.

The concept

The research participants used a variety of terms and examples to describe the concept of organizational politics. The following list captures the participants' descriptions:

- “it exists in all organizations”
- “the use of power and influence”

- “the abuse of power and influence”
- “the way things work in an organization”
- “one needs to understand it and use it to succeed in the organization”
- “people who do not understand organizational politics and experience a political miss-step do not succeed and end up leaving the organization”
- “understanding how things work and using it for your advantage”
- “it is associated with the hierarchy”
- “it is a power dynamic between people”
- “use of power to scheme for ill-gotten gain”
- “underlying conflict or jockeying for position”
- “gamesmanship”

One participant commented that while “politics has a negative connotation” in so much that if one comments that he or she “works in a political environment it is not thought of as a good thing.” The participant concluded that it was due to “politics” that his manager was thwarted in terminating him. Another commented that she had been able to gain wide support for her ideas through the use of organizational politics. Essentially through the establishment of trust with constituents, she was able to garner support for her ideas. Yet another mentioned that in large part his success in the organization was a “direct result of his ability to maneuver within the dynamic of politics.” Both in the focus group and in the interviews there was general agreement that politics has a negative first impression. But once fully explored, the participants commented that politics is used for both positive and negative again.

There existed an interesting distinction between the participants. Two of the participants self identified as working in “highly political, negative environments.” Specifically, environments in which politics is used to obtain power, thwart individuals, and scheme in a self-serving, survival atmosphere. While their underlying experience with politics is contextual and therefore negative, they readily admit that even their success rested on the use of politics. Five of the participants commented that politics is a “way of life” in the organization. It is the “way things work.” Key to these individuals is the ability to understand politics and navigate within it.

Clearly, like the researchers who struggle with the definition the participants, too, employed a variety of terms and examples or stories in an effort to define organizational politics. However, definite commonality is apparent in participants’ and contemporary researchers’ definitions of organizational politics. Parallel descriptions are noted in the Table 1.

Table 1

Parallel descriptions of organizational politics:

| Researcher | Definition | Participants’ Definition |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Pettigrew (1973) | -power and influence based on coalition building | -power and influence based on relationships |
| Allen et al., (1979) | -linked to dysfunction in organizations | -abuse of power and influence |
| Mintzberg (1983) | -divisive, illegitimate, informal behavior | -scheming use of power |
| | -systems of influence, linked to conflict | -conflict, jockeying for position |
| | -darwinian model for success | -use of politics to succeed |
| | -results both in “games” and positive change | -gamesmanship; can be positive |
| Gardner & Martinko (1988) | -impression management | -power dynamic between people |
| Schlenker (1980) | -attempt to control images in social interaction | -use of influence to gain support |
| Drory & Romm (1988) | -power attainment, concealed motive, conflict | -power, scheming, conflict |
| Parker et al., (1995) | -intentional social influence for self interests | -necessary for individual success |

Researchers and participants track in similar definitional genre in the attempt to isolate and identify the qualities associated with organizational politics. Clearly, human resource professionals view organizational politics in a manner consistent with contemporary research literature.

The literature review illustrates the shift in the literary debate from definitional traits to identifying the perceptions of politics in an environment. A comparison of the published research with the participants' perceptions of work place politics is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Trait comparisons of work place politics:

| <u>Researcher</u> | <u>Perception Trait</u> | <u>Participants' Perception Trait</u> |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Drory & Romm (1988) | -dependent upon a set of circumstances perceived as political | -environment influences perception |
| Robbins (1983) | -all behavior in an organization is political | -exists in all organizations |
| Ferris et al., (1989) | -workers perceiving high levels of politics are dissatisfied | -dissatisfaction coupled to politics |
| Ferris & Kacmar (1992) | -politics is a state of mind | -politics are situational |
| | -politics is aligned with position in hierarchy | -related to hierarchy and power |
| | -coworkers play role in influencing perceptions | -politics are related to situations |
| | -proficient players may realize greater career rewards | -effective playing of games leads to success for self and others |
| Drory (1993) | -satisfaction with superior and coworkers along with status influence perception of politics | -politics correlates with hierarchy |
| Parker et al., (1995) | -negative or positive perceptions of politics related to trust levels | -trust is key ingredient to perception of political environment |
| | -inter-group cooperation correlates to positive perception of politics | -inter-group cooperation may foster competition and give rise to politics |
| | -perceptions relate to organizations' values regarding work standards, integrity, innovation, loyalty | -perceptions of politics tied to demonstration of values |
| | -perceptions of career development opportunities, rewards and recognition relate to lower levels of politics | -value congruence in decisions regarding career development, rewards/recognition |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| O'Conner & Morrison (2001) | -locus of control impacts perceptions of politics | determine perception of politics |
| Valle & Witt (2001) | -teamwork mitigates perception of politics | -ability to play games relates to perceptions -teamwork may foster political games |

Similarities exist between the researchers' findings regarding the perception of politics and the participants' views of perceptions including antecedents and consequences. Of note, both researchers and participants identify that the perception of politics is situational and how one views the situation or one's "state of mind" factors into the strength of the perception. The notion that politics "exists in all organizations" is shared by both, along with the concept that proficiency in "gamesmanship" leads to success. Generally, both groups find that politics is equated with dissatisfaction – even though, both researchers and participants describe positive aspects of organizational politics.

A particularly noteworthy similarity is the shared perception that trust is a key ingredient in the perception of politics. Parker et al., (1995) found trust, may moderate the extent to which organizational politics is related to positive or negative attitudes. Participants who have a high level of trust do not perceive a need for political action and are consequently less likely to engage in politics than those with lower levels of trust. When participants with high levels of trust engage in politics, they are more likely to engage in legitimate, constructive political behavior (p. 897-898).

According to the participants, legitimate, constructive political behavior is viewed as a skill - the ability to navigate the environment - versus actual bone-fide political gamesmanship.

A second noteworthy similarity is the association of an organization's demonstrated values with perceptions of politics. As Parker et al., (1995) finds, an organization's value congruence in the areas of high work standards, challenging work, integrity, management effectiveness, innovation, and loyalty are directly related to perceptions of low politics. The participants commented that value congruence with demonstrated behaviors is associated with lower levels of politics.

The differences between researchers and participants are perhaps more interesting than the similarities. Parker's (1995) findings that manager inspired teamwork may mitigate of the perception of politics in the environment was not a perspective shared by the participants. Rather the participants indicated that in a competitive work place environment, teamwork may actually foster the playing of political games. One participant who describes his environment as highly political provided an example of teamwork contributing to the playing of political games. He described that the firm's performance evaluation system was used not only for communicating feedback on performance but also as a measure to evaluate line managers and regional human resource professionals. The regional managers along with the human resources managers received positive rankings if the region completed a high number of evaluations on employees. Regions and therefore regional managers were jockeying for high ratings in completed evaluations. The regional managers teamed together and fabricated evaluations in an effort to improve the metrics. To the participant, this example illustrated the misuse of teamwork in a highly competitive environment. Teamwork was politicized in order to achieve a superior rating.

A second distinction between the published research and the participants involves one's locus of control and the perception of politics. Rotter (1966) described internal locus of control as an individual with a strong belief that he or she,

“can control his own destiny is likely to be more alert to those aspects of the environment which provide useful information for his future behavior; take steps to improve his environmental condition; place greater value on skill or achievement reinforcements and be generally more concerned with his ability, particularly his failures, and be resistive to subtle attempts to influence him” (p.25).

O'Connor and Morrison (2001) found that one's locus of control contributed to the perception of an environment as political. Specifically, if one has an internal locus of control, one perceives the environment as less political. Conversely, if one experiences an external locus of control the environment is perceived as more political. For the participants, locus of control was not mentioned as a determinate of one's perception of politics. Rather, perception of a political environment was associated with whether or not the organization's decisions were consistent with the organization's stated values.

A third important distinction between researchers' findings and the participants' view relates to the difference regarding politics and the perceptions of career development opportunities, and rewards and recognition for good performance. Parker et al., (1995) found that employees who believe that opportunities exist for career development and reward perceive lower levels of politics in the organization. The participants, however, believe that it is not the perception of opportunities that leads to lower perception levels of organizational politics. Rather, it is the firm's alignment of

decisions related to career opportunities and rewards to its stated values that leads to lower perception levels of organizational politics. The congruence of values and decisions is the pivot point for employee perceptions regarding politics according to the participants. This critical distinction provides the foundation for two essential competencies necessary for the human resource professional working in a professional services environment.

Influence and character

"O, what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do, not knowing what they do! (Shakespeare, (IV, i, 19-21). Claudio speaks these angry words at his wedding to Hero. He has been duped once again by Don John, who has been scheming to break up their impending wedding, and now seems to have succeeded. Don John had one of his followers, Borachio, stage a love scene at Hero's bedroom window, with a woman dressed in Hero's clothes and whom Borachio called by that name. Claudio was lured into watching this scene, and became immediately convinced (again) that Hero was unfaithful to him. At their wedding ceremony, Claudio loudly denounces Hero, accuses her of lechery, and refuses to marry her. Hero's father believes it, as well, and joins Claudio in condemning her. She faints in shock over these false accusations, and everyone believes she is dead; everyone except the Friar, who does not believe in Hero's guilt, and plans to expose the wrong-doers for their evil plan. Shakespeare's comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, provides a humorous portrayal of political scheming. The Friar sees through the politically induced charade and brings the voice of truth and reason. The ability to see through the scene, read the audience, and offer new insight is the work done by the

participants in their roles as human resource professionals. One participant described the skill as a “gift.” The others in the focus group agreed. So, what exactly is the “gift?”

The theatrical metaphor is fitting. The organization and its culture is the stage upon which actors create the art of business plans, organizational charts, job responsibilities, competitive analyses, investments, services, revenues, and profits. The scripts contain stories of victories and losses, relationships, opportunities, demonstrations of brilliance, trust, values, and power. The narrative is marked with influence, persuasion, listening, questioning, and emotion. The “gift” is the ability to assimilate the play and all its components and influentially propose a different script.

The participants in both the focus group and the interviews identified two fundamental competencies critical to the part played by senior human resource professionals: 1) the ability to influence, and 2) the demonstration of character. The two roles are intimately linked and if not in harmony, result in internal dissonance. The marriage of influence and character are obvious partners and are embedded in Aristotle’s actor-creates-character model. In the model ethos, logos, and pathos combine to create the power of influence based on character. But, if ethos or character is absent from the model, sophistry takes root resulting in misguided or the misuse of influence.

Deciphering organizational challenges and situations, envisioning options, challenging respectfully, while influencing and aligning solutions with one’s values and the organization’s values is the work these participants do on a daily basis. It is impossible to be successful in the work if the individual is unable to establish his or her character with the audience. Mintzberg (1989) describes the organization as one rich in multiple narratives proffered by actors each vying for legitimacy and power. Gilley

(2002) concludes that to be effective with the “myriad of individuals with different perspectives, assumptions, experiences, personalities, agendas, goals, and ambitions” which make up the organization, one must be a “political navigator [and] develop an understanding of the political arena in which the organization conducts business. Absent these skills and insights, you will fail to develop the type of influence necessary to bring about long-term systemic change” (p. 270). The participants identified traits necessary for successful navigation in the political arena. Table 3 illustrates the traits captured in the participants’ own words and associated to Aristotle’s actor-creates-character model.

Table 3

Influence and character traits:

| Participant Identified Traits | Aristotle’s Model |
|--|--|
| Approach managers from their perspective first It’s all about the audience and relating to them Need to be able to talk their language Need to speak to what drives them Find commonalities and build from there Read people, be sensitive, and use intuition | pathos - empathy, identify with the audience |
| It’s all about influencing and persuading Find points of agreement first and then move on If you find that argumentation is used on you, you have to be able to turn around and use it, too Need to be as effective in communicating as they are Need to understand their points and speak to them | logos – the use of logic |
| Have to be willing to tell the story honestly Need people to like you in order to enlist them as a listener Need to demonstrate that you are trustworthy Need to build on trust | ethos – character |

Must be respected to be listened to

Must display a moral compass

Cannot be wishy-washy, must convey substance

Krabbe (2000) describes the art of dialogue as a cooperative inquiry exploring both sides of an issue with the goal being persuasion. This persuasive inquiry is the influence competency the participants point to as critical in their role. Professional services firms and partnerships in particular are unique in that the professional's right to give advice needs to be earned. Whether it is the technical expert providing advice and counsel to external clients or the internal human resources professional providing advice to internal clients, it must be earned. Maister (2000) writes about the experts in professional services and the necessity of earning the right to provide advice.

The truth is that receiving answers to important questions is not something anyone does lightly. We all want to hear solutions to our problems, but we are not at all included to take them seriously unless the person giving the answers has "earned the right" to give them. Earning the right has three parts: 1) understanding the client's situation [pathos], 2) understanding how the client feels about it [pathos], 3) convincing the client that we understand both the previous two items [logos] (p. 43).

Persuasive dialogue provides the human resource professional the tool that when honed enables him or her to be effective within the organization's political arena. One of the participants in the focus group commented, "We are the politicians. We are the one's who peddle influence in an effort to affect peoples' lives." Another added, "You need to say the right thing at the right time. Sometimes you need to push the envelope. You need to be okay to stand alone." Another said, "It's okay to take a fall sometimes. You

need to build respect and trust when you want to change management's direction." She added, "You need to be able to layout options for considerations and be willing to coach and guide the discussion in the right direction." Yet another offered, "Sometimes you need to catch them [the technical expert] when they are alone. Then, they are more willing to talk and listen to what could be changed or where they might need help." With others in the room, the need to display technical brilliance is too compelling. These comments illustrate that to navigate the political arena requires the finely honed tool of influence.

Influence, however, does not stand alone in either Aristotle's model or in the perspectives of the focus group and interview participants. Character is its partner. To Aristotle, character is established through discourse when one displays practical wisdom, good moral character, and a concern for the audience (Aristotle, 1.21356a7-10).

Character was not a topic of inquiry in neither the focus group nor the interviews. Instead, the questions involved inquiry around what the participants considered to be critical to influencing. The descriptions provide a compelling depiction of character. The following statements are representative of their comments.

- "It is important to have a moral compass."
- "Need to understand that what you do is important to society as a whole."
- "It is up to us to have a social, moral compass in the balance between success and greed."
- "We uphold the values and provide the venue to discuss fairness."
- "Value congruence and being able to represent your own values is critical."

- “We need to be able to respectfully challenge suggestions and actions out of our responsibility as the conscience of the organization.”
- “If you find that your values are not in synch with the organization you must leave. The only alternative is to compromise your values and beliefs and that is debilitating to both the organization and yourself.”
- “Influence is built on trust and respect. If you can not establish that, you will be ineffective.”
- “Informal communication channels of influence contribute to the building of trust.”
- “HR is the advisor, conscience; our role is to bring enlightenment. That means people need to have confidence in you; believe in you; have faith in you.”

The participants paint a picture of character that one person described as, “we are the rabbi, priest, pastor, counselor, friend.” At the same time, another described the role as, “we are the support that compliments the business; we do not drive the business.” Yet another commented, “I help them understand that everyone has value.” Quite a different perspective was shared by two individuals who describe their environments rich with “negative political games.” They expressed a deep desire to fulfill the role with the qualities described above by the others. But, due to the intense negative political arena in which they work they are “unable to do the right thing.” Each participant endorsed these qualities as being inherent to the role and critical to effectiveness. Both individuals who felt thwarted in fulfilling this aspect of their role, due to negative politics, shared their plans to leave their respective organizations in the near future.

Influence and character are certainly not the only competencies required in the human resource profession. Although, they seem to be critical competencies needed to navigate the organization's political arena according to the participants. However, it seems reasonable to conclude from the participants' discussion, that in a highly negative political environment professionals are challenged to "do the right thing" even with well honed influence and character competencies.

While the ability to influence effectively and demonstrate substance of character are two critical competencies, the impact of organizational politics on the human resource professional, according to the participants, involves a challenge to the very heart and soul of how one fulfills the role.

Results, values, and socially responsible leadership

The central purpose, the heart and soul, of the human resource role, as described by the participants, involves positioning oneself so that one is able to influence the alignment of organizational decisions and values as well as to influence socially responsible leadership.

The work of the human resource professional encompasses the arena of Human Resource Management and Organizational Development. Both pivot on enhancing effectiveness of people and organizations (DeSimone & Harris, 1998; French & Bell, 1990). The rally call for human resource professionals over the last two decades has been to be at the "table" and to become a strategic business partner. The partnership thrusts the human resource professional into a whirlwind made up of business objectives and financials, competition, power-brokering, political maneuvering, and self-interests. The complexities of the contemporary business world include issues of globalization and

diversity, ethics, outsourcing, a multi-generational workforce, leadership crises, and value differences. This is the environment described by the focus group and interview participants. This is the table at which they have a seat.

A white page published on the Society of Human Resource Management web site describes “being at the table.”

The people who have a seat at the table are sitting there because they put the needs of the organization first. Their decisions are based on what is best for the company, not on what is best for their department or for themselves, individually. Taking that viewpoint is not always easy—and it’s not always popular. But if you aren’t able to align yourself with the needs of the organization, you cannot expect to be taken seriously. This doesn’t mean that you must be a “yes-person.” It simply means that when you present a proposal or frame an argument you need to do so in terms of how the organization will benefit from implementing your suggestion. To gain a seat at the table, you need to have a broad business focus. (Grensing-Pophal, 2000).

This troubling depiction of “being at the table” and the role of the human resources professional in the new-millennium brings into focus the dilemma faced by the research participants. As one participant stated, “we are at the table...we’re there, we’ve made it. But, now it’s about what we’re going to do there.” The white paper description of the role is not one embraced by the research group. Rather, each of them offered individual stories of struggling with the games and the value compromises, as well as the ethical dilemmas to “doing the right thing” for people and the organizations. More than one expressed the need to have a view of the “broader social perspective” or their work

“being important for society as a whole.” The concept of providing a moral compass for the organization was common for the research participants as was the idea that the responsibilities of the role extend beyond the bricks and mortar. The statement made by Grensing-Pophal (2000), that those at the table “put the needs of the organization first. Their decisions are based on what is best for the company, not on what is best for their department or for themselves, individually” is counter-intuitive according to the participants. It speaks to a myopic view of the human resources role. Hatcher (2002) captures the essence of their sentiments.

Opportunities now exist for HRD to assume leadership in enhancing ethical and socially responsible organizations...We must act on knowledge and understanding to enable us as individuals and as part of a profession to add value beyond the instrumental. We need to view our organizations as part of the greater whole and understand their role in either building a better future or helping to destroy any chance that we might have for one (p. 16).

This type of leadership speaks to a view of the organization that extends beyond shareholder profitability. Hatcher (2002) comments, “leadership is social responsibility...ethical leaders are socially constructive; they move people beyond economic self-interests toward an ideal that benefits others – human and nonhuman” (p. 55). As one participant commented, “We are at the table. Now it’s about what we’re going to do there.” Other participants added, “Our role is to bring enlightenment.” “It’s not just about making money.” “It’s not always about the bottom line.” “We need to influence forward thinking leadership.” This concept of leadership was described by one male participant when he said, “Maybe that explains the existence of HR. HR exists to

break through all of the politics and help accomplish the business objectives through people in an ethical manner.” Herein, lays the impact of organizational politics on the work of the human resource professional.

Being at the table implies a positional power or potestas and provides the opportunity to engage in the discourse regarding business results, decisions that align with stated values, as well as that of the organization’s internal and external social responsibilities. Others concurred and offered: “There is a constant struggle for results, power, and more competition.” “What happens is that the drive for results is so strong that what are rewarded are not the actual results but the political shenanigans which occur in an attempt to achieve the results; some HR people get caught up in it.” Out of a desire to engage in partnering with the business line comes the danger of exchanging the influencer role on value congruence with that of a results driven bottom manager.

Organizational politics impacts human resource professionals in two insidious ways. First, the compelling desire to be at the table and align strategically may entice the exchange of influencing decision making that is congruent with organizational and individual value sets with being a bottom-line driven business partner. Second, it may dull the deliberate development of ethically and morally responsible social leadership skills by over-emphasizing shareholder return.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary

The primary focus of the Human Resource Management and Organizational Development is to enhance the effectiveness of people and of organizations through a multi-faceted discipline involving human behavioral and social sciences along side business and management practices and principles. The human resources discipline has matured over several decades and in contemporary business is often considered a respected business partner. The impact of organizational politics on the work of the internal human resource professional gives rise to a tension which weaves its way through the diverse roles and responsibilities inherent in the position. The tension causes the professional to make choices regarding how he or she fulfills the role.

The concept of organizational politics found its way into research literature during the decade of the 1970's. A literary debate ensued regarding its definition as well as how it is perceived in the workplace. The definitional debate regarding politics, yet unresolved, shifted to measuring and examining employees' perception of politics in the workplace. Caught in the continuing desire to measure and predict both antecedents and consequences of a political environment, the impact of politics on leaders and specifically on the human resource professional is open for exploration, study, and reflection.

This qualitative research study examines the impact of politics on the work of the human resource professional. Focus groups and interviews provide the data for analysis. The context of the study is professional services firms located in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Chicago, Illinois. Since professional services firms provide the backdrop, it is

appropriate to understand the contextual implications for human resource professionals who work in this environment.

Professional services firms primarily employ technical experts who are rewarded and deemed successful based upon his or her ability to deliver excellent work product in a specialized, focused area. Therefore, it is important for the technical expert to remain a content expert in his or her field. As a result, these individuals are viewed and rewarded for problem solving abilities. Further, management and leadership roles are often held by these same individuals who are not educated in the fields of human psychology and the behavioral sciences or training in the areas of human resource management and organizational development. Often, they juggle two contrasting roles within the organization that of technical expert as well as manager/leader. The juggling of two roles -one in which he or she is trained; one in which he or she is not trained - pose challenges for the human resource professional which culminate around issues of leadership and teams.

In this study and through a focus group and interviews, participants provided content regarding two critical competencies necessary to be effective in the professional services environment: influence and character. These two competencies are examined in the study using Aristotle's actor-creates-character model.

Description of the political environment of professional services is also provided. All the participants' view of politics is that it exists in all organizations. Two of the research participants described their environments as highly and negatively political. Some of their observations and experiences provide a glimpse of the impact of politics on the human resource professional who works in a negative political arena.

The participants offered insight and comments that underscore the tension that exists in their roles. The desire to be at the table and be a business partner may at times create a tension or incongruence with how they fundamentally view their responsibilities. The role of acting as a strategic business partner at times may force a trade off between being the moral compass, the conscience of the organization, and the socially responsible leader.

The raw focus group and interview data provided material that when themed and interpreted offered a perspective of the impact of organizational politics on human resource professionals in professional services firms. Specifically, there is compelling desire for these professionals to be at the table and align strategically with the business. This desire and positioning of the role affects the work in two ways. First, it may entice the exchange of influencing decision making that is congruent with organizational and individual value sets with being a bottom-line driven business partner. Second, it may dull the deliberate development of ethically and morally responsible social leadership skills by over-emphasizing shareholder return.

Limitations

This study focused on the professional services environment. Specifically, the participants represent two law firms, an international accounting and consulting firm, an architectural and engineering firm, and a regional investment banking firm. The results and interpretations should not be extrapolated to other types of organizations. The participants included two men and five women. Gender differences were not taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results. Additionally, it is assumed that the

comments made by the participants represent their candid and honest assessments and observations.

Conclusions

The study produced four significant findings. The first two findings involve competencies required for the human resource professional in a professional services environment. 1) To be effective, human resource professionals must be able to influence highly skilled, fact-based technical experts. 2) To be an effective influencer, human resource professionals who work in these environments must demonstrate character. The second two findings involve the impact of organizational politics on the work of the human resource professional. 3) There is a compelling desire to be at the table and align strategically with the business. This may entice the exchange of influencing decision making that is congruent with organizational and individual value sets with being a bottom-line driven business partner. 4) This exchange may dull the deliberate development of ethically and morally responsible social leadership skills by over-emphasizing shareholder return.

Previous research on organizational politics primarily focuses on issues of definition and perception. Many of the comments made by the participants in this study underscore prior research in the area of the definitional struggle. Like the researchers who struggle with the definition the participants, too, employed a variety of terms and examples or stories in an effort to define organizational politics. However, definite commonality is apparent in participants' and contemporary researchers' definitions of organizational politics. Similarities exist between the researchers' findings regarding the perception of politics and the participants' views of perceptions including antecedents

and consequences. A particularly noteworthy similarity is the shared perception that trust is a key ingredient in the perception of politics as is the consistent demonstration of values for both the organization and the individual.

Three important distinctions emerged that deviate from prior research. First, Parker (1995) found that teamwork is a mitigating influence on politics. Second, he also found that the perception of career opportunities and rewards produced a lower level of politics perception. Third, O'Connor and Morrison (2001) found that having an internal locus of control influenced a lower level of politics perception. The participants' experiences did not support the prior research. Conversely, some participants' experiences led them to believe that teamwork, at times, may foster a negative political environment. Also, the locus of control is less vital to the perception of politics for the participants than value congruent decision making.

Implications

When asked about the future of human resource management and development within the professional services environment, the participants overwhelmingly responded, that value congruence and moral and socially responsible leadership is central to the role. Several commented that it is important for human resource leaders to be self-aware and centered regarding his or her personal value set. It was clearly stated by several that if one's personal values are not in alignment with the lived values of the organization, leaving the organization is the only option. Further, socially responsible leadership that extends beyond the walls of the organization holds a prominent place with the participants.

The blueprint for those in the profession is clear. The currency of the Human Resources Management and Development profession is influence, character, and value-centered, socially responsible leadership. What does this mean? The meek should not apply. Further, business schools and universities must equip students for a profession that requires value-centered leadership as much as it requires knowledge of task analyses, return on investment formulas, and customer satisfaction measures.

Recommendations

The author acknowledges the limitations of this study. Further research ought to include quantitative analysis that would either compliment and/or challenge the findings and interpretations of this study. Broadening future studies to include more diverse industry types would add insight to the current success factors and future challenges inherent in the human resources profession.

EPILOGUE

A ringing telephone jolts her back from the skyscraper inspired reflection to real time. The caller ID indicates who is on the other end of the call. Picking up the phone she automatically responds.

“Hi there!” She pauses. “Yes, I have a few minutes.” “I remember that we discussed it, yes.” “Hmmm.” “What happened since then?” “Oh, I bet that has been difficult. How do you feel?” “Well, what other options have you explored?” “How much?” “Yes, that is a lot.” “Do you have some time to discuss this with your staff before we make the final decision?” “Well, I think it is really important to talk with them, maybe there are some options that we just haven’t thought about.” “I’d like to be there with you.” “Good, how about if we meet tomorrow?” As she hangs up the phone; her father’s words echo in her mind. “Be true to what you believe. Be in harmony with your soul.”

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