Review

Organizational Politics: Issues and Coping Strategies in Nigerian Context

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This paper aims to unfold the employees’ perception of organizational politics issues while working and the ways they adapt to cope up with it. Organizational politics has been perceived as a threat; negatively influencing levels of staff retention and work productivity. Hardly any attentions have been focused on the employees’ attitudes toward the perceived people involved in organizational politics and the survival strategies in such an environment in the Nigerian setting. It explains the emergence of five major themes namely issues, perceived threat, attitude towards the people involved, coping strategies and intentions to leave. It has x-rayed the emotional circumstances that employees go through while working in a politically influenced environment especially in Nigeria.

Key words: Organization, politics, work and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

An environment where everyone agrees with each other is a rare phenomenon. People are generally favorably biased towards people they know, like and trust, even when they are trying to be impartial. Be it as it may, some aspects of office politics have become a part of human existence. It simply reflects the reality of human nature and interaction. Politics is often regarded as a fact of life in organizations and the premise that every organization is composed of people that have varied task, career, and personal interests (Anderson, 1994) allows us to understand an organization as a political entity. The idea of politics stems from the view, where interests are divergent, and society should provide means of allowing individuals to reconcile their differences through consultation and negotiations. Ferris et al. (1966) defines organizational politics as those activities carried out by people to acquire, enhance, and use power and other resources to obtain their preferred outcomes in a situation where there is uncertainty or disagreement. In this sense, the meaning of politics in an organization is conceptualized as the exercise of power to negotiate different interests among members while maintaining one’s interests in certain organizational issues. The importance of organizational politics lies in its potential consequences and effect on work outcomes. Theoretical arguments suggest that politics often interferes with normal organizational processes (e.g., decision making, promotion, and rewards) and damages productivity and performance at individual and organizational levels.

Thus, this paper’s objectives therefore are to disclose some issues and coping or survival strategies while working in any politically influenced environment. It explains how prevalence of politics in the Nigeria organization affects employees’ psychology, ultimately resulting in poor performance.

ISSUES

The 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 and Romm, 1988). There is a growing acknowledgment that politics plays a prominent role in organizational policies and processes and is likely to influence several important work-related attitudes and behaviors. For example, perceptions of organizational politics have been found to be related to...
increased job anxiety (Anderson, 1994; Cropanzano, 1997), reduced job satisfaction (Nye and Witt, 1993), reduced satisfaction with supervisor (Drory, 1993; Ferris et al., 1996b), and increased intent to turnover (Cropanzano et al., 1997). Additionally, research suggests that individuals who perceive high levels of organizational politics also are likely to enact political behavior themselves (Ferris and Ashkanasy, 2000), thereby creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

The importance of organizational politics lies in its potential consequences and effect on work outcomes. Theoretical arguments suggest that politics often interferes with normal organizational processes (e.g., decision making, promotion, and rewards) and damages productivity and performance on individual and organizational levels. Empirical attempts to support this notion have proved equivocal. Some studies have found a negative relationship of organizational politics to job attitudes or stress-related responses (e.g., Drory, 1993; Ferris et al., 1996a, 1996b). More recent works have suggested that politics enhances withdrawal behaviors and turnover intentions (Bozeman et al., 1996; Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, and Toth, 1997), but others found no such relationship (Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson, 1995). All these studies overlooked the relationship between organizational politics and other possible work outcomes, such as direct negligent behavior and actual job performance.

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 is essential to the effective functioning of organizations. Individuals who become proficient at playing politics may realize greater job and career-related rewards. Some researchers have suggested that organizational politics perceptions are not always negative for the employee. For example, Ferris et al. (1989) suggested that while some individuals perceive organizational politics as a threat, others may perceive politics as an opportunity. In these situations, organizational politics perceptions may have a positive (or at least a less negative) impact on employee attitudes.

When using performance ratings to achieve personal goals, raters may desire to project a positive image, secure organizational resources for one-self, and avoid confrontations with, or disapproval from others (Fisher and Ashkanasy 1989). Similarly, raters may see multi source feedback system as an opportunity to influence pay raises and to improve interpersonal relationships (Harris et al., 2007). In these situations, organizational politics perceptions may be perceived as an opportunity, rather than as a threat. Drory and Rosen (1988) concluded 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 correlation with organizational politics.

THE PERCEIVED THREAT

The perceived threat refers to the impact that the employees have in their mind when they realize that something “wrong” is happening which they are not able to understand. Such a situation was created due to the politically disturbed environment. It particularly refers to the psychological hassle that goes on in the mind of the employees while working in such an environment. In a politically disturbed situation, people seemed to be quiet, scared and threatened. They were very well able to sense some danger but could not pinpoint it. The perception of working in such an environment has also found to be affecting the participants psychologically. Employees do not only have to go through tremendous stress and pressure under such situations, also they may not know what to do. This could be an invisible attack, which they could only sense but could not do anything about it and consequently suffer. This ultimately could make them feel even more uneasy and scared.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS PEOPLE INVOLVED IN POLITICS

Attitude towards people involved refers to the views and opinions that the employees develop towards those who are perceived to be actively involved in influencing the political climate. People have different views and perceptions towards those whom they perceived (seen) to be involved in organizational politics. Some of the people will agree to the fact that such people, who are involved in organizational politics, get a kind of label and are known for that. Being involved in politics had developed mixed feelings amongst the people against those involved.

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies refer to the ways and means that the people resort to in order to deal with politics while working in such an environment. Different people find out different ways to cope with the politics prevailing in the organization. One of the strategies that could be adopted by some people is “at your mercy”. By this, it means, out of fear, people surrender themselves to the people in politics. It is believed that this strategy is usually adopted by a good number of people in various organizations. The second type of strategy that could be adopted by some of those who are aggressive by nature and believe in the principle that is “I don’t care” or come what may”. This strategy can equally be used by a number of the employees. It may also be of interest to say that almost
all employees are in some amount of politics in the organizations. A third strategy that can be applied by some employees is to believe in the concept of “let’s flock together”. By this, it means that these people have accepted that they themselves are interested in organizational politics. The last strategy that could be used by some employees is to prefer to turn a blind eye to those activities that are taking place in the organization. These are the people who would prefer to continue to do their works as efficiently as they have been doing. These people are aware of the various happenings going on within the organization and also have the idea of the reasons behind such happenings but they prefer to remain quiet. The best way to survive in a political environment is to become a part of it.

Intentions to leave

Intention to leave refers to the situation when an employee, over a period of time, realizes that, it is difficult for him or her to survive in the organization. It is a situation when people realize that they are being unnecessarily harassed. Hence, they intend to move out of the organization in search of better work climate. Usually, there is a possibility that soon they would leave their current organization and had been contemplating on such a move for quiet sometime.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Organizational politics is being perceived as an evil and is negatively affecting the morale of the employees. More than 90% of employees will agree that they feel uneasy and a fear of threat was always there while working in such an environment. This disclosure suggests that generating insights into the “dark” sides of behaviors in the organization is important for both the development of knowledge regarding office politics and for conceptualizing contemporary organizational life.

However, a key contribution of this article is the provision of insights into the emotional status and feelings that employees develop while working in such an environment. A number of scholars of organizational politics have noted the impact of such an environment on job attitudes and stress-related problems (Nye and Witt, 1993). This article adds to the knowledge of organizational politics through contributing grounded insights into the views, opinions, and strategies that employees adopt to cope while working in such an environment. Further, I contribute insights regarding various coping strategies adopted by employees to survive in such an environment.

This article also tried to throw some insight into the political behavior of the employees in order to survive in such an environment. Some preferred to be under the shadow of their perceived strong people involved and become their followers in order to feel safe. Others preferred to face the perceived politics by challenging them upfront.

This article has tried to highlight the fact that employees are highly sensitive to their work environment and their views and perceptions get influenced by the culture prevailing in the organization. The role of emotions at work has recently been the focus of much research (Arges et al., 2004). New interest in the effects of mood on work behavior has been influential in turning attention to the more emotional side of workplace experiences (Fisher and Ashkanasy, 1989). The prevalence of politics in the Nigerian organizations highlights the negative emotions of the workers such as worry, fear, anger, and sadness are causing work stress. “Negative emotion” has been described as intense unpleasant feelings, both experienced and expressed, such as fear, shame, apprehension, and anger (Parker et al., 1995) which are directly associated with stress, anxiety, tension, and emotional pain (Fisher and Ashkanasy 1989). These negative emotions correlate with individuals’ negative work-related attitudes (Croppanzo et al., 1997) and health problems (Frost, 2003), and can prove contagious (Cacioppo and Rapson, 1994) with deleterious effects for other employees’ levels of cooperation and performance.

Conceivably, positive emotional experiences would facilitate the open discussion of differences, which would lead to constructive conflict management (Hochwarte et al., 2003). This could be possible through problem-focused or emotion-focused coping (Drory and Rommit, 1988). Problem-focused coping relates to actions taken by an individual to change the nature of the disturbing factor(s) in the environment. Emotion-focused coping involves efforts by an individual to alter his or her reactions to the situation at hand. Both forms of coping are commonly used within the context of each stressful encounter, and the proportion of problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping is partially determined by the amount of perceived controllability over the situation (Kumar and Ghadally, 1989). In an attempt to capitalize on the ‘subjective’ factor, HRM sought to mould employees in the image of the new ‘model worker’ by way of selection, training, and appraisal (Fisher and Askunary 1989). Secondly, emotional support could also be provided by an organization to improve the situation. Emotional help is one aspect of social support understood more generally to include the provision of information necessary to get work done (i.e., information support), the provision of financial assistance (i.e., instrumental support), and the provision of advice, guidance, and feedback (Bozeman, 1966).

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, management should take appropriate steps to curb the political environment prevailing in the organization.
The management should encourage equity and transparency and promote a culture of organizational support amongst the employees. Some authors have demonstrated how politics in organizations could be helpful for members of the organization and for its strategic decisions. Concurrently, the human resource department should adopt a proactive approach in implementing performance-based career growth and succession planning. This not only helps in strengthening employer-employee relationships but also motivates employees to focus on productive activities, leading to growth of the organization. Emphasis should focus on motivating managers and above to discourage such activities and providing juniors with equal opportunities, and discouraging politically motivated actions. Induction programmes should clearly state that such behaviors are not encouraged or rewarded. These approaches may require changes in disciplinary codes. While such changes may prove an effective means of discouragement, I recognize that such issues are likely to be difficult to implement and police.

Although companies may attempt to discourage politically motivated activities, it seems logical to suggest that the reduction of such activities is linked to employee perception of whether career growth and development of employees are equitable and transparent. While political climate and its influence on employees are highly subjective, efforts should nonetheless be directed at understanding issues from diverse viewpoints. Effective human resource practices, supported by top management, can help to create a healthy work environment and employees need to be promoted to develop such a culture, which is based on mutual, trust and support. Finally, while efforts to discourage the prevalence of organizational politics and encourage transparency and performance-based career success may prove worthwhile, practitioners should also consider whether aspects of their organization’s culture or leadership style are inadvertently encouraging the prevalence of such an environment.

REFERENCES


