The Role of Organizational Politics in Performance Appraisal Process

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational politics is an important determinant in the pay systems based on performance evaluation as both supervisors and subordinates have a possibility to affect the results of the appraisal process. Sometimes supervisors might be tempted to manipulate ratings in order to influence the behavior of their subordinates or even to affect their own position in the organization. The main characteristics of organization politics are the readiness of people to use power in their efforts to influence others and secure their own interests or, alternatively, avoid negative outcomes within the organization. Organization politics is usually described as a self-serving behavior which seeks to achieve self-interests, advantages and benefits at the expense of others.

Many experts and researchers have stated that political behavior is a natural part of the performance appraisal process. For example, Murphy and Cleveland (1995) pointed out that it may be irrational to give accurate ratings if they are about to hurt the manager. In situations like this it is easier to follow one’s own motivates and manipulate ratings. Also Longenecker, Sims and Gioia (1987) very openly brought up that it is only human to consider the impacts of one’s ratings. Since managers need to live with their decisions, it would be even hurtful not to think what will happen after each rating. Furthermore, Longenecker and associates (1987) found out that the supervisors, who seem to continuously manipulate the ratings, don’t usually admit that their behavior is in any way political. Quite contradictory, they consider manipulation as a part of good management and define all kind of organization politics as a tool which helps them to balance effectiveness and survival.

The main objective of this paper is to find out to what extent organizational politics exists in the case organization (n=143) and whether the overall political climate within the organization is related to political considerations in performance appraisal process. The results indicate that the respondents have perceived rather considerable amount of politics at their organization. Furthermore, employees in the case organization have experienced also some political behavior during their performance appraisals. The results also indicate that there is a correlation between the general political climate and perceived political considerations in performance appraisals.

DEFINING THE STUDY ISSUES

There is some confusion concerning the proximate terms which are often represented together when organizational politics is discussed. The most commonly used and definitely one of the most important synonymous is power. It has been widely recognized (see e.g. Vigoda 2003) that both politics and power are significant part of human behavior as they affect the ability to secure one’s goals and interests in a social system. Most definitions of organizational politics refer to informal effect on enhance the actor’s proportion of organizational resources and benefits (Drory & Beaty 1991, 249). Organizational politics is usually related with the situation such as power struggles, conflicts over the sources of power and possibilities to influence (Vigoda 2003, 9). Furthermore, organizational politics is quite contextual and perceived differently by different persons, thus it can be understood also as a state of mind. Conflicts can exist as well as power can be exercised, but this may not be defined as political by some organizational members. While others may define some routine bureaucratic procedure as intensely political, others interpret it as a simply bureaucratic procedure, per se. (Gandz & Murray 1980, 245.)

According to Gandz and Murrays’s research, generally the politic was considered as bad, unfair, unnecessary and unhealthy. (Gandz & Murray, 1980, 243). Thus, it could be argued that the definition of organizational politics tends to have negative perspective concentrating on the dark side of the human behavior, like manipulation. On the other hand, organizational politics as a social process can have functional as well as dysfunctional consequences, and might inflict harm or be helpful for the workers. The examples of organizational politics’ positive effects are career
advancement, enhanced position and success. On the other hand, loss of strategic power and negative feelings towards others represent the negative outcomes of organizational politics. Nonetheless, political behavior is essential if person wants to be a good employee and succeed in the organization. (Vigoda 2000, 190.)

Performance appraisal system, when operating as the organization designed and intended it, has inherent power. In such system, raters evaluate employees accurately; identifying each employee’s strengths and weaknesses and distinguishing among the good and poor employees. (Murphy & Cleveland 1995, 101-102). However, this is not the case in most of the organizations. Like Longenecker and colleagues as well as many other researchers (see for example Berbardin & Beatty, 1984) pointed out, performance appraisals take place in an environment that may not be completely rational, straightforward, or objective. Thus, the political perspective is emerged as an important and pervasive issue affecting the habit how managers evaluate their subordinates. (Longenecker, Sims & Gioia 1987, 184, 190.)

Previous research indicates that the overall climate of the organization seems to have an influence on the effectiveness of the performance appraisals. Organizations that are characterized by climates of mistrust, threat, defensiveness, low support, and poor communication are very difficult ones in which to do the performance appraisal effectively. (Lawler 1981; Lawler 1990; Heneman, Ledford & Gresham 2000.)

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this paper is to find out to what extent organizational politics exists in the case organization (n=143) and whether the overall political climate within the organization is related to political considerations in performance appraisal process. The objectives of the study can be described as research questions as follows:

RQ1: To what extent organizational politics are perceived to exist in the case organization?

RQ2: Is general organizational politics correlated to perceived political considerations in performance appraisal process?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The used data was gathered by survey questionnaire from one Finnish government agency shortly after their annual performance appraisals were conducted. The survey investigated employees’ attitudes towards performance appraisal and performance based pay system in general. All together 321 questionnaire were sent by mail to the organization’s contact person who delivered them to the employees. The total response rate was 49.1 % as 157 questionnaires were returned. However, only the responses from employees in non-managerial position will be included in the analysis, and thus the final number of observations will be n=143.

In order to measure the extent of overall organizational politics, the scale developed by Kacmar and Ferris has been used (Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale). This original scale includes twelve items which are used to describe 1) general political behavior, 2) political behavior to "get ahead", and 3) ambiguity in pay and promotion policies and rules (Fields 2002, 119). However, in this study only the items measuring general political behavior were used in order to distinguish it from any other kind of politically colored behavior. Furthermore, in order to tap the political behavior within performance appraisal, the scale designed by Tziner, Latham, Price and Haccoun was used (Political Considerations in Performance Appraisal Questionnaire).

The respondent’s perceptions of organizational politics will be described as means. The relation between general political behavior and perceived political considerations in performance appraisal process will be tested by Pearson’s correlation and linear regression analysis.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results indicate that the respondents have perceived rather considerable amount of politics at their organization. For example, employees believe that in their department has always been an
influential group that no one ever crosses. Moreover, according to the respondents some people seems to always get things their way because no one wants to challenge them. The respondents also seem to believe that favoritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead within the organization. Respondents also stated that they have seen changes made in policies that only serve the purposes of a few individuals, not the work unit or the organization.

Employees in the case organization have experienced also some political behavior during the performance appraisals. Especially they seem to believe that supervisors' appraisals are reflected by personal liking or disliking of employees. Moreover, according to the respondents the appraisals are affected by the extent of sharing the same basic values with the rater as well as employees’ ability to inspire enthusiasm in the supervisors who appraises their performance.

According to the Pearson’s correlations the overall political climate seems to correlate especially with the items measuring how the relationship between the rater and ratee steers the performance appraisal discussions. Correlation between overall political climate and perceived personal liking or disliking (r=476, p=000) as well as sharing the same values with rater (r=455, p=000) seems to be quite strong. The regression analysis points into same direction. The relationship between the rater and ratee is strongly related with overall political climate (β=.37, p=.01).

The results indicate that the social context is a determinant factor within performance appraisals. Especially personal liking or disliking is believed to steer performance appraisals. These observations strengthen the results of previous studies concerning political considerations within performance appraisals. Performance appraisals are very sensitive situation were political behavior is believed to be a significant element. However, it is very difficult to have effective performance appraisals when supervisor-subordinate relationships are not supportive of appraisal processes.

REFERENCES AND LITERATURE


