BUSINESS ORGANIZATION AS A POLITICAL ARENA: DEVELOPING A MODEL OF MANAGERS MANAGERIAL CAREER SUCCESS FROM POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and develop a model of career success that can be applied as a framework for managers to develop their career. Thus, this article will review an important yet under-investigated topic, a political arena-specific model of career success, using personality, skill and behavior attributes, as predictors of career success. Drawing from past research on career theory, the effect of organizational politics on career success was hypothesized to depend on the type of influence tactic employed. Research shows that many factors have been identified as predictors of career success, but there is inconclusive evidence in relation of organizational politics to these factors. This paper will review the influence of personal characteristics and organizational politics on business manager’s intrinsic and extrinsic career success in the context of business organizations. Specifically, this paper reviews three sets of predictor’s variables: political personality traits, political skill, political behavior, perception of politics influence career success of business managers. The model needs to be tested empirically. The results thus will serve to improve organizational career planning management and can help individuals to manage their career in business organization.

Keywords: Business managers, Organizational politics, Career success

INTRODUCTION

Career success has been a popular research topic that has received much attention in career management literature since the late 1950s (Greenhouse, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Lau & Pang, 2000; Nabi, 1999, 2001, 2003; Joseph, Boh, Ang, & Slaughter, 2012; Supangco, 2011; Roziah Mohd Rasdi, Thomas N. Garavan, Maimunah Ismail, 2013; Hennekam, 2015). A large amount of literature has investigated work outcomes, managerial advances, career attainment, career effectiveness, career advancement, career planning, career paths, and career satisfaction. There were a number of models and frameworks have been proposed to explain the phenomena of career success. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present a model of career success from political perspective. An underlying premise of this study is to view the business organization as a socio-political arena where individuals or special interest groups compete for resources and power. Mintzberg (1985) proposed that performance, effectiveness, and career success in an organization are determined less by intelligence, personality, skill, and attitude and more by social skill and political behavior. Therefore, the way to get ahead in an organizational career is to build social and political competence because business organizations are very complex political arenas. The question why some business managers are more
successful in their careers than others is among the prevalent and interesting issues in previous research. In sum, from an organizational political perspective based on Mintzberg argument, the question that will guide this review is: do the personal attributes in term of political personality traits, skill and behavior of business managers influence their career success? This paper has the following objective: To investigate the influence of personal attributes in term of personality, skill and behavior from political perspective on career success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career success

Career success has been discussed extensively in the academic field of career development literature. Career success is conceptualized as an outcome in terms of the objective and subjective elements of achievement through an individual’s career experiences (Nabi, 1999; 2001; 2003). Career success often involves a promotion in organizational hierarchy, a rise in salary, an increase in power, a broad job responsibility, and a feeling of satisfaction with the career. In particular, career success has been defined as “the real or the perceived positive psychological outcomes and work related achievements one has accumulated as a result of one’s work experiences” (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 2001. p. 846). Similarly, Melamed (1995, p. 217) defined career success as “the subjective and objective aspects of achievement and progress of an individual through an organization or occupation.” However, career success is an evaluative concept where the judgments of career success depend on who does the judging (Judge et al., 1995). There is no single measure of career success. Therefore, there are different indicators for career success to different jobs.

Underlying Theories of Career Success Studies: The political theory of leadership

The political theory of leadership could be used as a theoretical basis for studying career success from political perspective. Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter, & Ferris (2002), proposed a political theory of leadership, which specifies that leader interpersonal qualities (e.g. social capital, cognition, political will, and personality) affects the political behavior utilized by a leader. Leader interpersonal qualities and Political behavior will affects the important individual-level outcomes of the leader such as leader effectiveness, performance evaluation, promotion, and reputation. Specifically, a leaders’ political behavior will increase his or her organizational power, increase his or her interpersonal reputation, and earn him or her greater organizational rewards. Leader outcome also influence by target outcome in terms of affective, cognitive, attitude and performance. Based on the theory, it is proposed that personality, social capital and behavior will influence career success (promotion, mobility, compensation)
Organizational Politics and Career Success

Politics is often regarded as a fact in an organization. The phenomenon of organizational politics has become the focus of empirical research in the area of management since 1990s (Kacmar & Ferris, 1991; Zahra, 1998; Perrewé, Ferris, & Guercio, 1999; Witt, Andrews, & Kacmar, 2000; Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Valle, Witt, & Hochwarter, 2000; Vigoda, 2000; Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Eran Vigoda & Cohen, 2002; Carlson, & Bratton, 2004; Andrews, Witt, & Kacmar, 2003; Poon, 2003, 2006; Harris, James, & Boonthananom, 2005; R. B. Harris, Harris, & Harvey, 2007; Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2009; Miller, Rutherford, & Kolodinsky, 2008; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010; Ul Haq, 2011; Vigoda, 2007, 2010; Atta & Ahmad, 2012; Harris, 2013). This phenomenon in modern organizations has been shown to have an important effect for individuals, groups, and other stakeholders. Indeed, past research in career literature has limited its focus on the effect of human capital, motivational, organizational structure, organizational politics and individuals’ differences on career success.

Although many definitions have been proposed, politics can be defined as “the processes, the actions, and the behaviors through which potential power is utilized and realized” (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 30). In the past, Pfeffer (1989) suggested a study to use the political perspective approach research to understand career success in organizations and suggested political skill as a necessary competency for
effectiveness in an organization. In addition, Mintzberg (1983, 1985) suggested that performance, effectiveness, and career success are determined less by intelligence and hard work and more by social astuteness, positioning, and perceptiveness. Hence, the way to get ahead in a career is to build social and political competence. To date, the relationship between organizational politics and career outcome has received limited empirical study. Earlier studies have shown political factors to be related to career outcome (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Pfeffer, 1989; Zanzi et al., 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Seibert et al., 2001; Todd et al., 2009). Very few empirical studies focused on political knowledge and career outcome in the Malaysian context. For instance, there were studies of the effects of organizational commitment (Poon, 2004a) and performance appraisal (Poon, 2004b) on career outcome and on the outcome of organizational politics (Poon, 2003; 2004c). Roziah Mohd Rasdi, Thomas N. Garavan and Maimunah Ismail (2013) studied the relationship between networking behaviour and career success.

Organizational politics plays an important role in organizational policies and likely influences several important work-related attitudes and behaviors. According to Kacmar and Baron (1999), the political activities in organizations have four elements in common. First, political activities are not considered part of an individual's job and not sanctioned by the organization (Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Second, self-serving activities lead to desired outcomes for the individual, at the expense of others and the organization (Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Third, the real motivations behind the behaviors are often hidden from others (Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Fourth, political behaviors tend to occur in competitive environments with unclear rules about how resources and outcomes are allocated (Kacmar & Baron, 1999).

Vigoda, Vinarski, and Ben-Zion (2003) argued that politics in the workplace, its nature, antecedent, and impact on work outcomes has become a stimulating field of study for the management scientist. Organizational politics is often considered dysfunctional to an organization because it has the potential to disrupt the organization’s efficiency and effectiveness (Kacmar et al., 1999). In addition, it can have detrimental effects on employees. A workplace that is widespread with politics is stressful to work in, is not conducive for promoting positive job attitudes, and is likely to have a high employee turnover.

Vigoda (2000a) stated that organizational politics can be more destructive for public administration than for private organizations. The importance of organizational politics lies in its potential consequences and its effect on work outcomes (Vigoda, 2000a; 2008; 2010). Thus, politics often interferes with the normal organizational processes such as promotions and rewards (Vigoda, 2000a). Thus, it is proposed that:

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P1: \text{Political perceptions level in organization will influence the relationship between personal characteristics and a business manager's career success}
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Predictors of Career Success from political Perspective

The Machiavellianism Personality Trait

A Machiavellianism personality is referred to a stable, individual negative character that includes manipulating others for personal performance and success. This type of personality is correlated positively with perceptions of organizational politics and is often against other people’s self-interest (O’Connor and Morrison, 2001). Machiavellianism is the term derived from Niccolo Machiavelli who wrote The Prince in 1532 where the methods for manipulation and gain of powers were detailed and explained. Machiavelli's perspectives are well known as "In the actions of men…from which there is no appeal, the end justifies the mean" (Machiavelli, 1531 cited Christie & Geis, 1970, n.p) and the belief that unethical behavior is acceptable, even necessary, if it helps attain goals or protects a job position. Modern scholars have adopted the perspective of Machiavelli to examine and understand the political dynamics in organizations (Hochwater, Kacmar, & Witt, 2000). Machiavellian type individuals are described as manipulative and as having little care for the feelings or wellbeing of others. They try to control others by using many influence tactics. The literature suggests that Machiavellian attributes are relatively stable and that they develop before adulthood. Mixed results were found in the study about the relationship between Machiavellianism personality and career outcomes. For instance, Christie and Geis (1970) and Wakefield (2008) found no relationship between Machiavellianism and socioeconomic success but Valle (1995) found that the Machiavellianism personality was positively related to politics perceptions and political behaviors. Researchers have studied the presence of the Machiavellian traits in various occupations such as bankers (Siu & Tam, 1995) and lawyers (Valentine & Fleischman, 2003) but very few have examined the Machiavellianism personality trait among managers.

The Need for Power Personality Trait

Power is viewed as an individual’s ability (real or perceived) to influence others or to have power over others. The Need for power (Npow) personality is “a stable individual's basic desire to influence and lead others to control an environment” (Ammeter et al., 2002, p. 720). This personality trait is based on the need theory of motivation developed by McClelland’s Trichotomy of Needs (achievement, affiliation, and power). The Need for power refers to “the desire to obtain scarce resources or control over activities within an organization” (McClelland, 1985, p. 35). According to this theory, one way through which influence over others can be accomplished is by creating bases of power (e.g. referent, expert) (McClelland, 1985). Thus, it is expected that individuals with a high need for power will engage in self-focused ingratiation tactics in order to develop sufficient bases of power that will enable them to maximize control over their environments (Ralston, Giacalone, & Terpstra, 1994).

Research has demonstrated that employees high in the need of power tend to be high performers in supervisory positions and tend to be rated as having good leadership abilities (Steers & Black, 1994). Research also suggests that an individual’s need for power is positively associated with organizational politics. Kumar and Beyerlein (1991) found a significant positive correlation between the need for power
and political activity. Kirchmeyer (1990) observed that the need for power was positively associated with self-reported levels of political activity among female managers. Thus, it is proposed that:

\[ P2: \text{Political personality trait (Machiavellianism / Need for Power) contribute to a business manager's career success} \]

Political Behavior

Career behaviors are the actions that individuals take to achieve their career goals. The behavioral approach assumes that individuals have a certain control over their career choice and advancement and can therefore assess their career prospects and enact appropriate career plans and tactics that contribute to career success (Greenhaus & Parasuram, 1993). Research shows that individual behavior such as career impatience, a willingness to relocate and perceived marketability (Eddleston et al., 2004), and political behaviors (Zanzi et al., 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Valle, 1995) have a significant influence on career success. In particular, Judge and Bretz (1994) conducted the first study of the influence of political behavior on career success. The study found that some political influence behaviors have a positive relationship with extrinsic and intrinsic career satisfaction (Judge & Bretz, 1994). The finding indicated that ingratiatory behavior positively predicted extrinsic career success and intrinsic career success (Judge & Bretz, 1994). Individuals who used ingratiatory behaviors toward their supervisors more often reported a higher level of job satisfaction (Judge & Bretz, 1994). Thus, it is proposed that

\[ P3: \text{Political behavior contribute to a business manager's career success} \]

Political skill

A number of researchers have reported that political skill influences career success. The results from the Ferris et al. (2008) study showed that political skill influences income, hierarchical position, and career satisfaction. Todd et al. (2009) revealed that political skill dimensions are significantly related to total promotions, career satisfaction, life satisfaction, and perceived external job mobility but are not significantly related to total compensation. The dimension that had the strongest associations was networking ability, which was related positively and significantly to all five outcome variables: (a) total compensation, (b) total promotions, (c) career satisfaction, (d) life satisfaction, and (e) perceived external mobility (Todd et al., 2009). Wolff and Moser (2009) also showed that networking was related to concurrent salary, the growth rate of salary, and career satisfaction. In summary, previous research studies have shown that political skill is related to the career success of an individual. Thus based on these arguments, it is predict that:

\[ P4: \text{Political skill contribute to a business manager's career success} \]
CAREER SUCCESS MODEL FROM POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Based on literature review and political leadership theory, a model is developed. The career success model is shown in Figure 2. The model consists of extrinsic and intrinsic career success as the dependent variable (DV), key individual components: Political personality traits, political behavior and political skill as independent variables and political level as the moderation variable (MV). This model proposes that all three individual components will influence managers' career success in highly political environments of organization.
Figure 2. Political model of career success

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has aimed to develop a model of career success based on political theory of leadership for explaining manager’s managerial career success from political perspective. The developed model would lead to an empirical study on career success of business managers in Malaysia. This model suggests that individual factor could potentially predict career success. Specifically, model suggests that personality, behavior and skill will influence career success of managers in highly political organization.

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ISBN 978-967-13903-0-6
Psychology, 85(3), 472-478


ISBN 978-967-13903-0-6


