The dark side of employee behavior: An explanation of factors instigating organizational politics

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Organizational politics is becoming a nightmare for the employers, especially in developing countries, because of its devastating effects on the achievement of organizational objectives. The culture specific reasons of the development of organizational politics posed a great challenge to behavioral sciences experts and made it necessary to study the reasons why employees engage in organizational politics. This study examined the factors playing key role in the development of organizational politics. Data was collected from 15 academic staff members of Punjab University, using semi-structured interviews among the available qualitative research methods, indicated the instigating role of different factors in the development of organizational politics. Culture of the organization and influence of national political parties were found to be the most significant factors. Employees consider it necessary for survival in the organization. Managerial implications are also discussed.

Key words: Organizational politics, developing countries, behavioral sciences, qualitative research, culture.

INTRODUCTION

Politics in organizations is such a reality that it has become a necessity to gain control over scarce resources of organization, promote ideas, pursue individual goals and often make one’s image better in organization (Buchanan, 2008). It is very difficult to remain away from politics in organization because of the mystery and potential benefits for the users of organizational politics (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2010; Yen et al., 2009). The employees may be respected for standing aloof from politics in organization, but the career growth of such employees will be slow and they will be presumed to be an easy target (Buchanan, 1999, 2008; Miller et al., 2008). This inevitability of organizational politics makes it as important as performing the job itself in the organization.

The concept of organizational politics evolved as a result of the collaborative effort of practitioners and academicians of the various fields in the social sciences such as political science, sociology, psychology, management, and public administration (Parvin et al., 2011). This idea has brought about some fresh thinking into the conventional approaches that had dominated the literature on management.

In literature of social sciences, politics is generally referred to as a process by which group of people resolve their conflicts but contrary to this, in practice politics is considered as a negative force used to get personal benefits (Kacmar and Baron, 1999; Vigoda-Gadot, 2003). The term organizational politics is used by the practitioners in the similar negative sense. In practice organizational politics is generally referred to as the negative side of power relations (Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 1996; Harris and Kacmar, 2005; Katrinili et al., 2010) and influence processes between individuals or groups in the internal and external organizational environment (Vigoda-Gadot, 2003).

Conventionally organizational politics has been viewed from two perspectives; macro politics and micro politics. Macro politics was the focus of attention in most of the earlier studies (Allison, 1969; Kaufman, 1964; Pandarus,
the use of organizational politics is unavoidable (Abbasi et al., 2010). The role of organizational politics in this context becomes more significant and result oriented in public sector organizations because of their proximity to the powerful political institutions and policy making bodies (Vigoda-Gadot and Kapun, 2005). Therefore, there is no doubt about the predominance of power struggles, use of influence tactics, and continuous clashes among a large number of stakeholders in the public sector organizations for achieving personal goals. The purpose of this study is to find the factors that contribute to the development of organizational politics and it will be helpful for the policy makers to devise pragmatic solutions for countering organizational politics.

METHODOLOGY

The study is aimed at uncovering the factors that instigate organizational politics in the organizations. This objective made this study an explanatory study. The qualitative research methodology was used in this study because the explanatory needs of a study are found to be best served by using qualitative method of research (Flick, 2006; McNabb, 2008; Yin, 2003). To fulfill the objective of the study, the embedded case study design was used because it helps in reliable and valid explanation of the variables under investigation (Yin, 2003). In this research design Punjab University was selected as a single case and then multiple sub units of analysis were selected from Punjab University academic staff members to get information about organizational politics practices in Punjab University.

Sample and sampling technique

The academic staff members of Punjab University were taken as sampling frame and each academic staff member of Punjab University was the unit of analysis. The factual data about the involvement of academic staff members in organizational politics was not available from any official source of Punjab University. Therefore, using political track record as evidence for selecting academic staff members in sample was not possible. One reason remaining for asking members of academic staff about organizational politics in Punjab University was his/her reputation of involvement in organizational politics. Because of this reason snow ball sampling technique among the available non-probability sampling techniques was used in this study.

The academic staff member having reputation for high level of involvement in organizational politics was contacted and requested to participate in this research. Such an individual was traced with the help of senior faculty members. This respondent was then asked to refer to some other academic staff member who was involved in organizational politics. In this way with the support and cooperation of respondents, 15 academic staff members involved in organization politics were traced and interviewed. According to Yin (2003), 6 - 10 cases, with replication logic, in aggregate would provide compelling support to make any sound conclusions (Yin, 2003).

The replication logic is similar to that used in multiple experiments. First 5 cases were used to establish some theoretical arguments and later ten cases were used to find whether initial findings were replicated in next cases or not. If all cases selected exhibited some similar patterns then it was inferred that research findings are valid and highly reliable (Yin, 2003).
Rational for selection of target population

Why would someone spare some time to study the research conducted on politics in organizations, especially when it is the case study of an academic institution. Many superlatives are used when academicians are asked about their work (Vigoda-Gadot, 2003). Some of the academicians emphasize autonomy of work, others argue that being a source of knowledge transfer and knowledge creation is the most pleasant thing and others mention excitement of educating and teaching the next generation. However, when requested to give critical analysis, academic persons try to emphasize the demanding nature of job, the slow career growth, the experience based promotion system and difficulties in having publications in your name. Personal experiences of the people in the field of academics also indicate how politically academic institutions function (Vigoda-Gadot, 2003). It is thus firmly believed that everyone who is part of academic system, or some other system like it, will agree that politics in our academic institutions is of equal worth and have equal influence as producing quality research and performing our job in a professional manner.

This was the main stimulus behind selection of University of the Punjab as target population in this study. Also, public sector is much more involved in the organizational politics because of its proximity to policy making bodies and dependence on government for getting monetary and non-monetary resources. The public sector stakeholders in this regard use different ways to satisfy their interest at the expense of others and this phenomenon reaches its maximum importance in case of developing countries, like Pakistan, where supply of resources is very limited as compared to demands. It can be inferred on this basis that a public sector academic institution could be a best place to study organizational politics.

Data collection

Since the purpose of the study was to explain the concept of organizational politics as it was perceived by the respondents, so the data about the research questions was collected using semi-structured interviews because it is the most useful method of data collection for studies of explanatory nature (Flick, 2006; McNabb, 2008). Also it provided flexibility and openness to the researcher regarding the information to be collected. In order to have some guideline for asking similar questions from all the respondents and also to fulfill the reliability and validity requirements, the interview guide was prepared keeping research questions and literature reviewed in view.

The members of academic staff included in the sample were given a briefing by the researcher about the nature and purpose of study. They were assured confidentiality of information provided by them and that the data to be used for academic purpose only. With prior appointment the respondents were interviewed using interview guide. Information provided by the respondent was repeated in the presence of interviewee in order to enhance the reliability of the data. All the interviews were recorded with prior permission of the respondents. Each interview was transcribed after conducting it to assure that maximum information provided by the respondents was available for data analysis (Flick, 2006).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews was analyzed using pattern matching data analysis technique (Flick, 2006; McNabb, 2008) for the analysis of qualitative data. The data analysis and interpretation was broken down into a series of steps for using pattern matching technique of data analysis.

Factors stimulating use of organizational politics

There is always some objective behind doing any activity with high level of involvement. Since organizational politics is highly operative in Punjab University and its successful users are employing much more energy. Therefore, it is very important to know the factors which stimulate the employees to use organizational politics at such high level. It is found after analysis of the data collected that academic staff members get attraction for involvement in organizational politics from factors like: culture of Punjab University, scarcity of resources, as a matter of survival in Punjab University, hierarchical differences, non-implementation of merit system, achievement of personal goals, interference of external political parties. These factors include both organizational and personal factors motivating the academic staff members to participate in organizational politics.

Culture

Park et al. (2004) defined organizational culture as “the shared, basic assumptions that an organization learnt while coping with the environment and solving problems of external adaptation and internal integration that are taught to new members as the correct way to solve those problems”.

Culture of every organization is unique and developed with the passage of time. Organizational culture has two aspects: Visible and invisible (Al-Alawi et al., 2007). The visible aspect of organizational culture is reflected in prescribed rule and regulations, written policies and code of conduct and in the mission and objective of the organization. However, the invisible aspect includes implicit shared values and beliefs that develop the perception of employee about how to perform in organization (McDermott and O’Dell, 2001). This invisible part plays a vital role in the development of culture of the organization.

Similarly Punjab University has both visible and invisible parts of its culture. The invisible part of culture of Punjab University has not only made the use of organizational politics as a desired act in the culture, rather it has made it like a necessity to survive in the present culture of Punjab University. This matter of using organizational politics by the academic staff members in the Punjab University for their survival provides it as form of legitimacy because doing something to survive in organization when everyone is doing the same is not illegal. Ferris and Kackmar (1992) also found that culture is strong stimulus to use organizational politics.
The politics favored culture compels the newcomers and the existing members of the Punjab University to engage in organizational politics. As a result of it academic staff members who have the capacity to design the policies and procedures of university, they create loopholes in these policies and use them for their interest when needed. This exercise allowed by the culture of Punjab University is creating lot of troubles in the smooth functioning of Punjab University. The importance of organizational culture with such a great effect on organizational politics is not found in the literature.

Scarcity of resources

Scarcity of resources is another factor found to encourage academic staff involvement in organizational politics. In the literature reviewed Buchanan and Badham (1999) and Gray and Ariss (1985) pointed out the significance of scarcity of resources and resource management as the contextual factors that result in political involvement of members of organization. This is in line with the finding of this study that organizational politics are stimulated by scarcity of resources. If there are sufficient resources to achieve the different goals possessed by the individual members of the organization, then there will be nothing disputable.

Since scarcity of resources is such an element that can never be denied, therefore it can be a said that organizational politics can never be avoided however it can be said to have minimum effect. Therefore, the effect of organizational politics can be controlled in Punjab University with proper resource management.

Hierarchical differences

It is found in the data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the faculty members of Punjab University, that position in the organization matters a lot in the political involvement of an academic staff member. It appears that, as Aryee et al. (2004), Drory (1993), Maidison et al. (1980), Novellie et al. (1994) and Pettigrew (1973) have argued, that hierarchical differences play an important role in stimulating the members of organization to participate in politics. Therefore, it can be established on the basis of this study that the more hierarchical differences the more active will be the organizational politics. But Zanzi and O’Neill (2001) argue against it by finding in their study that organizational politics have increased in today’s flat corporate hierarchies. This difference may be due to cultural differences because culture is found to be a very important element in organizational politics. The nature of hierarchical differences is such that it has become the goal of employees to reach at the top.

The use of organizational politics at different levels highlighted another aspect that the involvement in micro and macro politics is related to the position of a person. The academic staff members having designation of Assistant Professor or below are active participant of politics at departmental level (micro level) whereas the faculty members having position of Associate Professor or above are more inclined towards university level (macro level) politics. The impact of organizational politics at macro level is higher because resources of university are controlled and allocated at macro level and the resource dependency (Pettigrew, 1973) provides the chance to engage in organizational politics.

Non implementation of merit system

The flaws in implementation of merit system and lack of transparency in the policies and procedures provide the opportunity to the users of organizational politics to play their role in making the politically decisions biased. A typical trigger of conflict in organization is lack of knowledge of employees about organizational policies and procedures. Ferris and Kackmar (1992) found organizational politics to be negatively related to the strict implementation of formal policies and procedures.

When the incidents of merit violation come to the knowledge of public through mass media, they become an evidence of malpractice in this respect in Punjab University. Such incidents hurt the reputation on Punjab University very badly.

Interference of national political parties

Punjab University has such proximity to the national politics that all the political parties have their organs operating here one way or the other. Many of our national politicians have remained students at Punjab University. These political parties influence the students’ admission process and faculty hiring process. This external factors allowing the academic staff members to use organizational politics is considered as part of social influence (Doldor, 2009) in the literature studied. Since national funds are under the control of political parties and they are responsible to provide these funds to the public sector organizations therefore Punjab University is dependent on political party running the government for getting funds. This dependence provides the opportunity to the political parties to get their work done as scarcity of resources is already found to be related to higher use of organizational politics.

Conclusion

It is evident in the qualitative data collected through in-
depth semi-structured interviews from the academic staff members of Punjab University that employees at all levels in Punjab University take part in politics and decisions made in Punjab University are politically dictated, therefore participation in organizational politics have become a matter of survival in the organization for academic staff members. Also when academic staff members observe that achievement of personal goals is possible only with their political involvement because merit system is not implemented transparently in Punjab University, they start using organizational politics at high level.

High level of employee involvement in organizational politics causes severe damages to the achievement of organizational objectives. Organizational politics in Punjab University is a very complex problem because a number of powerful stakeholders are getting benefits by promoting politics in Punjab University. Several organizational and individual factors contribute to the academic staff engagement in organizational politics. When organizational politics is proved to be dysfunctional for the performance of organization, in that scenario “nip the evil in the bud” is the best strategy to get rid of organizational politics, as all the interviews suggested that eradication of organizational politics is one way to achieve the objectives of Punjab University with the help of organizational politics.

REFERENCES


