



THE POLITICS OF HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT; A COMPLEX NECESSITY IN ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract:

This paper provides a theoretical discussion of the political nature of human resources management (HRM) in organisations. Challenged with the paucity of research on the politics of HRM, the discussion reviews literature on studies of organisational politics broadly and then develops a framework to help understand factors that result in positive and negative use of politics in HRM in an organisation. The study concludes that three factors determine the politics of HRM. Namely, clarity of HR theory of change, visibility and consistent application of HR operational excellence standard and the satisfaction-and-performance nexus inherent in all senior leadership HRM decision-making processes and outcomes.

Keywords: politics, human resources management, organisational culture

1. Introduction

Managing human resources (HR) has become an important consideration for all organizations in an age of global competition, in which all organizations without exception must compete for talent, whether they are in the public or private sector or are non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The increasing assertiveness and visibility of customers in the age of public policy activism, with a voracious appetite for value for money in the delivery of public goods and services by these organizations has also made it even more essential to secure and manage human resources as the most critical resource of any organization. Increased competition and pressure on leadership in organizations breeds organizational politics in human resources management decisions. In reality, HR practices have brought to the fore issues related to power, influence, and politics in human resources management in organizations. When applied to the workplace, it means senior leadership decision rights to hire, pay, promote, and separate employees are an inherently complex political “film” with multiple “dramatis personae” playing

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various roles and enacting intriguing plots with the aim to secure positive outcomes. Politics in HR is a fact of organisational life that can be mind-boggling and energy-sapping. HRM technical approaches, project models, practices and outcomes are influenced by various political conditions, and it is time to increase research on this topic. Political behavior is very necessary in management development. (Ryan 1989). McShane and Glinow (2000) defined workplace politics as an attempt to influence others using discretionary behaviours to promote personal objectives. The political nature of human resource management (HRM) is one of its least studied aspects, and awaits further theoretical exploration and understanding.

This article examines the often under-appreciated political nature of HR and provides a framework to understand the complex characteristics and importance of the politics of HRM.

2. Literature Review

Ferris and King (1991) found that the use of influence in the organization is positively related to the managers' positive attitude toward his/her employees, i.e., the more an employee uses influence in the organization, the more his/ her performance is appreciated. Political influence in decisions on selection and promotions, for example, can be affected by managerial biases. Gandz and Murray (1980) and Bacharach (2005) also believe that political behavior is necessary in many cases, especially if someone has an interest in advancing in the organization and being acknowledged by their co-workers and employers as an effective and efficient staff member or as a talented manager.

Delbridge *et al.*, (2011) and Batt & Banerjee (2012: 1745-6), for example, reviewed 1000 HRM studies in management and HRM journals after the mid-1990s and found that most studies (particularly those in US journals) treated context as background, and that few examined the impact of institutional setting on HRM systems. In a research conducted by Aransyah & Hetaim (2021), they argued that politics is an organizational activity associated with power and personal status, and politics is common within organizations. They concluded there are five indicators that lead to political behavior namely unclear objectives, budget allocation, decision making, salary and promotion, power, and job dissatisfaction. Ikoromasoma (2021) examined workplace politics and administrative manipulation in tertiary Institutions and specifically looked at how misuse of power leads to conflict and poor leadership as a result of workplace politics. The study concluded that organizational culture is a confirmed moderator of workplace politics and administrative manipulation.

Understanding the inherent politics in leaders' behavior in HR managerial decisions and processes may lead to constructive outcomes for the employer, the employees and the organization as a whole. For example, Dipboye (1995: 55) argues that at times, *"decision makers resort to political behavior in which they deconstruct HRM procedures"* (i.e., staffing, appraisal, compensation, training) *"to provide support, justice, and empowerment"*. Various studies have examined the harmful effects of political behavior on employees' performance levels (e.g., Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Kumar &

Ghadially, 1989; Vigoda, 2003; Ferris *et al.*, 1996). This behavior has negative aspects such as ingratiation conduct (Liden & Mitchell, 1988), which lead to a rise in stress and pressure at work (Ferris *et al.*, 1996; Frost & Egri, 1991; Matuszek, Nelson, & Quick, 1995), unfairness in evaluating employees' performance (Tziner, Latham, Price, & Haccoun, 1996), and the formation of negative attitudes towards work among employees with different statuses (Drory, 1993). The image arising from these studies corresponds largely to the perceptions of the organizations' members with regard to this phenomenon. A study conducted by Gandz and Murray (1980) found that employees usually consider politics in HRM to be an unfair, evil, irrational and unhealthy behavior but at the same time, a necessary skill for those who want to get ahead and be promoted in the workplace. These findings were later supported by Voyer's (1994) study. Cheng, J. L. (1983) also examined the use of influence and power tactics within organizational context. Regarding HRM, Ferris and King (1991) found that the use of influence in the organization is positively related to achieving particular interest-based outcomes.

The politics of HR manifests in various forms of power, influence, and competing interests in decision-making concerning the allocation of resources on talent acquisition, compensation, performance management, learning and development, succession planning (Coleman, 2026). In a recent study, we argued that there are inherent organisational politics dynamics during a change management process to transform HR practices with effective HR strategies. This is indeed at the heart of organisational change to transform HR practices and culture. The politics of HR is about the study and manifestation of various forms of power, influence, and competing interests in decision-making concerning the allocation of resources. Politics in human resources management concerns all the processes that influence the determination and allocation of power. The politics of HR refers to the tricky nexus between politics and human resource management. In many research on organisational change, it is clear that navigating organisational and employee effectiveness outcomes is influenced by the politics of HRM. The politics of HRM provides a frame to examine and understand the influence of political behavior by managers and employees on leadership decisions on HRM within organizations. Power, influence, and bargaining are political factors that affect talent management systems and practices in organisations. The use of power is part of organisational life (Pfeffer 1981, 1992).

Differences in perspectives in managerial decisions on HR need to be grounded in the political and rational context. Manager's 'rational' choices follow from enterprise risk management principles and assumptions that certain HR practices complement existing resources and strategies. For example, the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991) argues that firms have an advantage when they have access to inimitable and valuable resources. A resource-based view of HR is inherently political. Marxist Theory of Social Classes, the Group/Pluralistic Theory of Politics and other various analytical frameworks in political science have given useful insights into the processes involved in influencing the use of power and authority over individuals in a society. One of the most popular definitions was offered by Harold Lasswell, who described politics as who gets what, when and how. Another equally popular definition was given by David Easton,

who said politics involves the authoritative allocation of values. Based on the above, we argue that the politics of human resources management within an organisation can be extended to also cover leadership decision rights over the allocation of resources and the resulting opposition of perspectives from employees or their representatives on procedural and substantive rules in HR. This is aligned with the RBV model. Kinnie Kinnie & Swart (2013) argue that resource-based advantages include human capital advantages (skills), social capital advantages (trusting/reciprocal relations), and organisational processes advantages (where practices, values and organisational systems align), which can all be enabled by appropriate HRM practices. There is a competition for the stock of resources in HR decision-making processes, and if they are fairly allocated, it constitutes a mutual gain for all stakeholders.

It can thus be argued that leveraging the politics of HR is key to underpin HRM practices, and they must be anchored on a core set of values, such as service to the customer and/or quality in design and function (Purcell *et al.*, 2009).

The politics of HR involves the creation of coalitions (mobilization), having a loyal constituency, managing various interests and as and when the need arises, making compromises to facilitate the realization of one's interests and organisational resources. Tichy's (1983) Technical Political Cultural model helps to understand the political, technical and cultural dynamics in HR and how bargaining takes place by interest groups. In the exercise of decision-making mandates on HR, the political dynamics are the views of dominant groups, including bargaining by powerful organizational groups. The cultural dynamics constitute the shared symbols and values which make up the organizational culture. He argues that these strands must be managed together or realigned for organizational effectiveness.

Bacharach (2005) asserts that politics is an essential skill for managers who wish to get things done. The art of how to get them on your side is crucial at any rank and has human resource implications. Dipboye (1995: 55) argues that at times, "*decision makers resort to political behavior in which they deconstruct HRM procedures*" (i.e., staffing, appraisal, compensation, training) "*to provide support, justice, and empowerment*". Whetton and Cameron (1991) argue, for example, that politics and force are marks of a personal ability to change and contribute to the environment by using a variety of assets aimed at improving products at work. People who have force, power and influence can shape their environment according to their own will, while those who do not make use of these assets remain unsatisfied and ungratified (Putnam, 1995). Conflicts and politics in HRM create a balance between those who have power and those who lack it, improve the organization's flexibility and ability to deal with a changing environment, prevent stagnation of the organizational units, sometimes promote growth and rejuvenation, prevent group-thinking and enrich decision-making processes (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Pfeffer, 1981). Politics is also a key factor during institutional change processes. (Burns, 1961).

Ferris and King (1991) argue that many of the problems associated with the traditional functions of the human resource system relate to ambiguity in the process of managing the flow of people into the organisation and matching a person to the work

environment. The Flow of People function of HR is largely responsible for this matching during recruitment, job analysis, performance evaluation, learning and development. When standards are clear and uncompromising, the likelihood of the development of ambiguity to trigger the use of political machinations is low, and the political aspects of managerial HRM decisions become less dominant and less negatively influential. However, when standards for staff selection, promotion, or any other change in human roles and tasks are vague, those with greater power and influential assets can increase their involvement in processes and affect them with unprofessional, parochial, sectoral, or personal considerations. Although the connection between politics and human resource management seems obvious, there is a lack of empirical studies on its meaning and implications.

Ferris and King (1991) are among the few researchers who have suggested a relationship between HRM and organizational politics. Their perspective is that the use of influence behavior in HRM is affected by the skills of the user, ambiguity in the decision context, and propensity to use influence behavior.

Two major components of the Ferris and King (1991) model are political skills and the use of influence behavior. Bacharach distinguishes between two types of political skills (elsewhere defined as tactics; e.g., Kipnis *et al.*, 1980; Erez & Rim, 1982) that help individuals build coalitions and maintain them in the long run. Among the “positive” political skills are persuasion, rationality, exchange, and even assertiveness, ingratiation and impression management. The “negative” political skills include manipulations, dis-information, mis-information and the use of upward appeals. In his view, positive politics in HRM appears where people know how to use positive influence behaviors and tactics, and try to avoid negative behaviors.

People with certain personality types are more likely to use politics in HRM decision processes. For example, those with Machiavellian orientations, those with a great need for power, or those who are highly competitive or motivated for success are more likely to be involved in the politics of HRM to pursue their interests. Some may see it as a legitimate conflict, while others may see it as less legitimate and more controversial. This type of politics of HRM is the result of the constructive use of power and influence in the human resource ecosystem. If “positive” political skills are used, the legitimacy of political behaviors increases even further, which again results in positive/constructive HRM (Drory *et al.*, 2010).

Developing a set of positive political skills is crucial to creating an effective political environment and an organizational space that does not create unfairness. The application of politics in HR requires a culture of “positive” political skills at the expense of the “negative” skills (Drory *et al.*, 2010). The politics of HR is deemed to be positive when employees use political skills that are legitimate and accepted by others, and lead to feelings of equity, fairness, willingness to invest effort and be involved in decisions. Finally, the readiness (or propensity) of employees to use politics is another factor that may affect human resource decisions and HRM (Drory *et al.*, 2010).

Based on the literature review, we propose a framework that helps to predict indicators of the occurrence or non-occurrence of the use of positive or negative politics in the management of HRM in organisations.

3. Politics of HRM Framework

As our contribution to knowledge on the politics of HRM, we propose a framework that integrates three variables that are key to understanding the extent to which actors in HRM in organisations will use positive or negative political tactics to influence HR decisions. The variables are clarity of the theory of change of HR strategic outcomes, visibility of HR operational excellence standards, satisfaction and performance nexus of HR processes and outcomes.

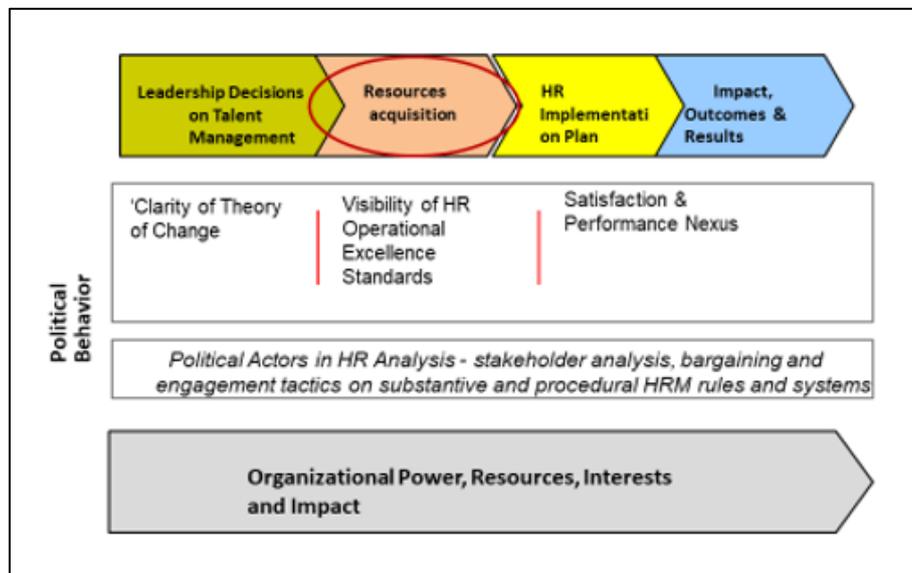


Figure 1: The Politics of HRM Framework

- Clarity of Theory of Change of HR Strategic Outcomes - High Level versus low level politics.** Thesis - An HR theory of change defines the overall employment value proposition and future employment touch points that deliver organizational and staff effectiveness outcomes. These are reflected in HR strategies and thematic strands, technical approaches and project models with clear outputs and outcomes on what success looks like and how they will be tracked through key HR performance indicators. This becomes the “benchmark” for the allocation of resources by senior leadership. Negative political behavior to influence HR decisions is minimised as decisions and interactions are based on the data and insights from the HR strategy implementation processes. Where a theory of change does not exist to frame HR decisions, there is a high probability of the use of negative political behavior in decision-making spaces to influence decisions. If managers and staff have a high level of clarity on the theory of change underpinning the organisation’s HR strategy, the use of negative political tactics is minimised. This will result in a low level of politics in HR decision-making.

- **Visibility of HR operational excellence standards - *High level versus low level.*** Thesis - HR Operational excellence processes and standards in an organization provides a pathway to design, review and implement decision rights on organizational structure, headcount budgeting and financial planning, performance-based payments, staff capacity building and knowledge management. Clarity on HR operational excellence helps to build the right culture and capabilities and consistency amongst managers and staff to enable them to use key systems effectively and work within the redefined processes. The application of negative political behavior is minimized since it builds a continuous improvement mindset, and this becomes part of the culture. Leaders, managers and staff are able to recognize problems before they happen and rectify them at source on their own, using pre-established work standards without resorting to negative use of politics to influence HR processes and outcomes. Clarity of HR operational excellence process improvements and related decision rights are undertaken in a systematic way. Once stronger operational processes are in place, little management intervention driven by organizational politics will be required in business-related activities, as organizational actors in HR decision spaces work within defined parameters to achieve quality and impact. When HR management practices, processes and systems are visibly available, accessible, understood and utilized, there is a low probability that managers and staff will apply negative political tactics, power, influence, manipulations and disinformation to advance their interests. High visibility of HR operational excellence standards leads to a low level of negative politics in HRM.
- **Satisfaction and Performance Nexus - *Processes versus outcomes.*** Thesis - in any HR decision-making, if the process is fair and the outcome is positive (*PFOS*), staff feel satisfied. If the process is fair and the outcome is negative, (*PFON*) staff feel dissatisfied. If the process is unfair and the outcome is positive, (*PUOP*) staff feel lucky. If the process is unfair and the outcome is negative, (*PUON*) staff feel aggrieved. In effect, the relationship between processes and outcomes and their fairness or otherwise determines the extent to which managers and staff use positive or negative politics in matters of HRM.

In this model, the outcomes are organization-wide and viewed from the perspective of the positive effect when there is an integration of a theory of change, operational excellence and fair HR processes and outcomes. Positive political dynamics in HRM decision processes will be high as employees will identify positively high HR politics with wider organisational outcomes of impact and sustainability. If “negative” political skills are used, the credibility of political behaviors reduces even further. An example of the negative politics of HRM decision dynamics is when parties have high political capacities but use them to advance narrow agendas. Such cases may include a lack of fairness in compensation decisions and a lack of transparency in succession planning, disciplinary and grievance processes.

For example, when a Chief HR Officer (CHRO) is politically unskilled, any decision that they take will be irrelevant when competing with decisions made by senior leaders in the organization. This reduces the entire HRM function to irrelevance, and senior leaders do not see a line of sight between HR key result areas and overall organisational strategic priorities and impact. Where CHROs are focused on personal gains rather than investing in positive political engagement with senior leadership and staff in designing and implementing a coherent HR strategy that contributes to organisational success, they hurt the credibility of the function and are perceived by their peers as lacking the political skills required at the C-suite level.

Another key factor in line with Tichy's Technical Political Cultural (TPC) model is to consider the cultural context, which provides the wider political situational context within which the organization operates. Using political power in HRM to influence organisational dynamics is also affected by the organisation's culture. One of the most popular definitions of politics, which is very relevant in HRM, was offered by Harold Lasswell, who described politics as who gets what, when and how. Another equally popular definition was given by David Easton, who said politics involves the authoritative allocation of values. Based on the above, we argue that the politics of human resources management within an organisation can be extended to also cover leadership decision rights over the allocation of resources and the resulting opposition of perspectives from employees or their representatives on procedural and substantive rules in HR. Aligned to our model, we also argue that the politics of HR is manifested in Industrial relations processes and outcomes. Political skills are a key requirement for managing the legal aspects of employment relationships in human resources management. Industrial relations in HR are amplified during the interactions between employers and staff/ their work councils/representatives. When substantive rules in HRM e.g. rules on policies on wages, training, performance management, and the procedural rules in HRM e.g. rules that define due process in handling disputes or grievances are anchored on a clear theory of change, visible HR operational excellence standards, this helps to create trust and positive workplace dynamics and obviates the need for negative political tactics to influence managerial decisions in HR.

4. Conclusion

Our study concludes that:

- The politics of HRM means political influences within an organisation can influence the way talent is acquired and nurtured. Leadership decisions are enabled by bargaining triggered by internal alliances and coalitions, personal biases, organisational culture, rather than solely on merit. Effective HR internal controls help HR leaders and senior leaders with decision rights to navigate these power dynamics to ensure that talent decisions are driven by organisational culture and competencies fit, while also balancing internal relationships and pressures. Senior Leadership exercises decision rights over HR functions. Their political behavior—whether transparent, subtle, visible—can influence

organizational policies, culture, staff and organisational welcome outcomes. Understanding the politics of HR entails recognizing these influences and finding ways to mitigate biases or power imbalances that may affect the extent to which HR operational excellence contributes to improved business performance.

- The politics of HRM reflect the power dynamics, interest-based bargaining and political maneuvering present in organisations. In line with our model, the politics of HRM plays a significant role in decision-making processes on talent acquisition, organisational justice and resource allocation.
- Staff behavior at work is inherently political. Staff form strategic alliances based on shared interests or professional aspirations. These strategic coalitions can influence promotions, job assignments, and performance evaluations. HR leaders and senior leaders need to remain neutral, managing the politics of HRM decisions while enabling a culture of fairness and transparency. The external political environment also plays a critical role in shaping the politics of HR practices and strategies. Regulatory standards, policies, employment relations laws, and societal norms all shape the political dynamics of HRM in organisations.
- To effectively manage the intersection of politics and human resources, HR professionals and senior leaders must develop a deep understanding of organizational power structures, cultural dynamics, and external political ecosystem and ensure transparency in engagement with senior leadership and staff, as well as accessibility to HR operational excellence standards and processes so decisions on application, violation or non-compliance with HRM policies and practices are grounded on facts and not speculations or political relationships.

HR leaders are the guardians of organisational values. In line with organisational values, they need to strengthen their competencies in trust building, strive for data and insights-driven policy analysis and policy activism in the corridors of power, so they are empowered to navigate difficult conversations, manage opposition of perspectives on HR strategic priorities and operations delivery to ensure a very high correlation between HR strategy and organisational performance.

Using literature review on the few studies done on organisational politics and HRM, our paper argues that research on the Politics of HR is gradually building up, and this is very significant to connect organisational behavior, change management and the politics of HRM since power, relationships, and interest-based bargaining are at the core of managing talent in organisations.

4.1 Limitation

This discussion has provided a theoretical model to help understand the key components of the politics of human resources management. It is our hope that additional studies will be done to test the assumptions of the model with empirical data.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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