POLITICAL SKILLS AND LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS –
ANALYZING THE DYNAMICS
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Abstract
The purpose of this empirical study is to explore the influence of political skills of employees on levels of a Learning organization among employees employed in financial sector of Pakistan. Statistical Population for the study includes employees of banks and audit firms of Punjab in Pakistan. Sample of 143 valid questionnaires was received out of 300 distributed questionnaires. Regression was used to explore impact of Political skill of employee on levels of learning organization. Results of the study showed that politically skilled employee provide impetus that enhances learning in the organization because statistics showed strong impact of political skill on levels and dimensions of learning organization. Main Hypothesis and sub-hypothesis are statistically supported. Our sample size was limited to just 143; a future research should be carried out with larger sample size by targeting different public and private sector organizations. Organizations should consider political skill while induction and a Learning organization should nurture this skill to attain utmost level of learning.

Key Words: political skill, learning organization, individual level learning, group level learning, organization level learning

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Introduction

Seeking knowledge from cradle to grave is valid for organizations as well, because they have to survive in a dynamic environment and need to inculcate learning at every stage of organizational life cycle. A learning organization is described as a strategy for improving to get competitive advantage and improve organizational performance (Weldy and Gillis, 2010). In 21st century organizations are witnessing more and more complexity, technological changes, more competition so to survive in competitive environment an organization needs to be prepared more vigorously for learning than ever before and every organization should become a learning organization. Learning organization has emerged as an important concept in Management sciences for Organizational development (Song et al., 2008). The subject of organizational learning was stimulated by Peter Senge in his book “The Fifth Discipline”. He identified five skills needed for organizational learning which are system thinking, personal mastery, mental model, shared vision and team learning. Learning organizations have got importance in the management sciences because it improves performance of organizations (Wong et al., 2012).

Organizational politics are ever-present in the organizations and have extensive effect on different organizational processes (Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Employees of an organization may engage in different political activities. For example, managers who have large social capital are likely to manipulate and influence the resources of organization (Treadway et al., 2004). Many employees are engaged in a number of unlawful political activities such as political grouping, pay and promotion decisions on the base of favoritism.
and adoption of specific behavior that are deliberately adopted to secure and protect self-interests, mostly these activities are not intended for the welfare of their organization. Extensive literature has been found in the area of organizational politics because it is an integral part of an organization, and because resources are scarce and conflict of interests has made organizational politics unavoidable. Most of the literature reveals negativity of organizational politics (Buchanan and Huczynski 2004; Cropanzano, Pfeffer 1981) but some positive dimensions of politics have also been explored by some researchers Butcher and Clarke 2002; Hartley and Branicki, 2006; and it is known as political skill. Political skill for this research could be defined as the ability to understand others at work and use that knowledge to influence others to act in a way that enhances one’s personal and organizational output (Ahearn, 2004).

Management scholars have recognized the importance of learning organizations and doing research in its different dimensions, for example pedagogical challenges in learning organization (Olsson, 2014), understanding employee knowledge (Dunham and Burt, 2011), scaffolding in organizational transition (Johana, 2014), organizational learning and work place spirituality (Sorakraikitikul and Siengthai, 2014), organization learning through participative practices (Cooper, 2014), learning organization and innovative behavior (Park, 2013), the influences of learning organization culture, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Jo and Joo, 2011), organizational learning research: past, present and future (Argote, 2011), learning organization and organizational performance with mediating role of innovation and knowledge transfer (Ali pour and
Karimi, 2011; Plazas (2011) explored tacit knowledge in organization. Kenny (2006) explored a link between strategy and learning organization; Fisher and White (2000) worked on downsizing in a learning organization; Tsang (1997) explored dichotomy of organizational learning and the learning organization. Coopey (1995) worked on the learning organization, power, politics and ideology. In 2005, Lawrence et al., suggested that organizational learning and organizational politics are not antithetical and managers should recognize the importance of organizational politics to foster learning culture in the organization. So to the best of my knowledge there is no such study in which political skill and learning organization have been examined empirically.

Organizational politics

Organizational politics are those activities in the organization intended to get and manipulate organizational resources in a way that lead to desired benefits (Pfeffer, 1981). Literature of organizational politics reveals three dimensions: General political behavior, pay and promotion policies and “Go along to Get ahead” (Ferris, 1999). General political behavior refers to the behavior of individuals who behave in order to gain benefits for themselves. ‘Go along to get ahead’ means go along with trends in the organization and do not take actions, and pay and promotion policies refer to political behavior of organizations in pay and promotions. Organizational politics is basically perception of individuals that impedes the process to achieve organizational goal (Ferris et al. 2002).

There are number of studies that revealed negative relationship of organizational politics with attitudes and behaviors at work. And
performance measures; such as satisfaction at work place, commitment with organization and positive relationship with job disengagement, stress at work, turnover intentions, and negligent behavior (Chang et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2008; Vigoda, 2000, 2001).

Gray and Ariss (1985) suggested that organizational politics is basically intentional act of individuals or groups to gain maximum output in conflicting situations. All definitions in the literature of politics revealed influence processes on organizations at macro or micro level. There are several dimensions of organization politics. First dimension regards organizational politics as general social behaviors that play an important role in the performance of organizations (Pfeffer, 1981). Organizational politics could be assessed through influence tactics used by employees at different occasions that are aimed, self-focused and sometimes focus is on organization (Kipnis et al., 1980, p. 440). There are different studies on organizational politics in this regard but the Kipnis et al.’s study has got major importance in this literature because it contributed theoretically and empirically. Kipnis et al. (1980) suggested that organizational politics is the way in which people at work influence other organization members such as their colleagues, subordinates, and their objective is sometimes to satisfy themselves and sometimes to achieve organizational outputs. The work of Kipnis et al focuses on moderate aspect of organizational politics (Drory, 1993). The major contribution of this study was the identification of different dimensions of tactics that people use to influence others in an organization such as (1) assertiveness of employees, (2) employees ingratiate with colleagues, (3) rational exchange of words and dealing, (4) sanctions in doing certain acts, (5) exchange
of ideas, (6) appeal to superiors, (7) blocking, and (8) coalition among organizational members.

Gazdz and Murray (1980) identified organizational politics as a state of mind. Zhou and Ferris (1995) argued that this notion does not reflect objective reality but based on a subjective perception. The perception of organizational politics was explored by Ferris et al. (1989) at length, who based his theoretical model of perception of organization politics on Lewin’s (1936) argument that people respond what they perceive and not according actuality. More recently, Kacmar and Ferris (1991) and Kacmar and Carlson (1994) developed a scale of perceptions of politics to measure Perception of politics perceived by employees in the organization.

**Learning Organizations**

In Management Sciences the concept of the learning organizations is being discussed since three decades. The publication of four books provided major impetus to the perspective of learning organizations: Organizational learning: Theory, Method and Practice (Argyris & Schön, 1978), the Fifth Discipline: the Art And Practice of the Learning Organization (Senge, 1990), Learning Company Model: A Strategy For Sustainable Development (Pedler et al, 1991) and Sculpting the Learning Organization: The Art and Science of Systematic Change (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). According to Watkins and Marsick (1993), the concept of the learning organization is defined as an “Organization that strives for learning continuously and transforms itself; learning also enhanced organizational capacity for innovation and growth. A learning organization has embedded systems to capture and share learning”.

A learning organization is dynamic and flexible organization capable to survive in critical situations, and deals in changing and
complex environment (Al-adaileh et al., 2012). Inkpen and Crossman (1995) explored that learning organization incorporates effective learning in the organization and performs better among competitors. To anticipate future environment and adopt measures accordingly is distinctive feature of learning organization (Ghorbanizadeh and Baeidi Mofradnia, 2012). A learning Organization is a big source of competitive advantage that helps organization to compete vigorously in the industry (Shahabi, 2007).

Slater and Narver (1994) defined a learning organization in more realistic way as the organization that continuously acquires and communicates knowledge about market, products, technologies, and business processes, and this knowledge is often based on experience, experimentation, and information provided by customers, suppliers, competitors, and other sources.

Jensen (2005) defined learning organization as “an organization involved in continuous scanning of environment to elicit and creating information and induce individuals to convert information into knowledge and manage this knowledge between the individuals so that new insight is obtained”. Song, Kim & Kim (2007) described the learning organization as structure-based learning environment which induces individuals to learn and transform knowledge for enhancement of organizational learning process. The institution of learning oriented culture is of grave importance to boost learning – based performance improvement in the organization (Ellinger, Ellinger, Yang & Howton, 2002). Khadra and Rawabdeh (2006) argued that a philosophy of learning organization gives rapid response to changing environment. Garvin (1993) described the characteristics of a learning organization as a smart organization

ISSRA Papers 2016
that is adept to acquire, create and communicate knowledge (Song et al., 2011). Senge et al. (1994) in his book identified five skills for learning which he called disciplines of a learning organization as personal mastery, mental scheme, shared vision, team learning and systematic thinking (Youzbashi and Mohammadi, 2012). Watkins and Marsick (1996) defined learning organization as an organization which strives for continuous learning and improvement and always ready for change (Awasthy and Gupta, 2012).

Marsick and Watkins (2003) further identified three levels of learning such as individual level, group level and organizational level. They further identified dimensions of learning organization:

- Continuous learning; learning is designed in a way that individuals learn by working; opportunities are provided for growth and education.
- Inquiry and dialogue; individuals obtain skills to express their vision and capacity to listen to others’ vision; culture is changed to support questioning, feedback and experimentation.
- Collaboration and team learning; tasks are conceived so that teams present different ways of thinking; it is expected that teams learn to work together; collaboration is culturally valued and recognized.
- People empowerment for the people dimension; individuals are involved in establishing and implementing the vision; the decision process is decentralized and the responsibility is
distributed in order to stimulate individuals to own the change.

- Embedded systems: Technology systems are created and integrated to tasks, systems are maintained and its access is provided.

- Environmental connection; individuals are helped to see the effect of their job in the organization as a whole; the organization is connected to its community.

- Strategic leadership for the structure dimension. Leadership uses learning in a strategic way to generate results to the business.

In learning subsystem the levels of learning are three: individual level learning, team level learning and organizational level learning. Learning of individual is part of organizational learning but it is the responsibility of organization to incorporate that learning into the organization. Line managers and HRD professionals can enhance knowledge of individuals by informal learning methodologies (Argyris and Schön 1999). Method of formal learning is different from informal learning because formal learning is structured and control way of learning (Marsick and Watkins 2001).

Senge (1997) explained that team learning is possible when individuals collectively learn as a team, and through team learning performance of an organization is improved. "An organization is said to be a learning oriented organization where people acquire, generate knowledge and obtain knowledge and disseminate that obtained knowledge and continuously adapt and change their behavior to explore more knowledge and innovation" (Garvin 1985).
Relationship between Political skill and Learning Organization

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) supports model of the study and provides bases for the relationship of organizational politics and learning organization because social learning theory describes individual learning and suggests how individuals establish their values, attitudes and behaviors because of role models. In organizational context role models are superiors, who have more authority and decision powers to give and control rewards to their subordinates. Role models become more effective if they get legitimacy and credibility (Brown et al., 2005). Social learning theory describes two method of learning: learning from one's personal experiences and vicarious learning that is learning from observing and analyzing experiences of others. For example when an individual learns networking with others. It helps him in getting work done and feel comfortable to discuss mistakes with socially astute superiors; they learn in the process of feedback and inquiry. Once learning occurs, reinforcement in the environment maintains that behavior (Davis and Luthans 1980).

Many researchers marked organizational politics as positive skill needed in organization functioning Pfeffer 1981). Ferris et al. (2005) reported that politically skilled employees are present at all levels throughout the organization, and are capable to influence others in order to get things done (Andrews et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2007).

Some researchers pointed out some positive outcomes of OP, Ferris et al. (1989) found that Perception of organizational politics increase job involvement of employees, the stress may act as an opportunity for employees and make them gain something from the state of affairs. Employees tend to respond in such circumstances by putting more time and effort (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005; Schuler, 1980). These desirable outcomes of organizational politics
decreases the strain among employee (Ferris et al., 1993), and increases their job involvement (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992) and performance in the organization (Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006). Employee perceptions of self-serving, illegitimate political activities at work have consistently negative relationships with employee attitudes and behaviors (Chang et al., 2009). Literature reveals that the high degree of Machiavellianism leads individual to emotionally disconnect in their connections with other employees (Christie and Geis, 1970).

Hence, hypotheses are formulated as follows:

**H1.** Organizational politics has a positive impact on a learning organization.

**H1a:** Organizational politics has a positive impact on individual level learning.

**H1b:** Organizational politics has a positive impact on group level learning.

**H1c:** Organizational politics has a positive impact on organizational level learning.

Based on theoretical background following conceptual model is developed (Figure 1)
Methodology

As the study is empirical research and thus to test the research hypotheses, questionnaire survey method was used. Convenient sampling technique is used for sample selection. Questionnaire was distributed randomly among employees of different private sector banks and audit firms through some contact persons, personal distribution, and emails. Organizational politics was measured using 18- items developed instrument of Ferris et al., (2005). People marked their agreement/ disagreement to each question (e.g., I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others.” on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .86.

Continuous learning variable was assessed using 28- items developed instrument of Watkins and Marsicks (1996). Continuous learning and dialogue and inquiry are considered as individual level learning. Its Cronbach’s alpha was .78. Team learning is categorized into group level learning and its Cronbach’s alpha was .79. Remaining four dimensions are included in organizational level learning (embedded system, empowerment, system connection and leadership) and its Cronbach alpha was .70. People marked their agreement/ disagreement to each question (e.g. In my organization, people openly discuss mistakes in order to learn from them.) on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5).

Face and content validity was done by the supervisor and other academicians in the field of organizational learning and knowledge management. Pilot testing was done using samples of 50 employees. After pilot testing it was realized that some people perceived
learning organizations incorrectly, so definition of Learning Organization was included on top of the questionnaire for later survey. Moreover confirmatory factor analysis was used to construct validity and results of CFA confirmed valid construct. SPSS version 20 was used to analyze the collected data of the study. Firstly data was analyzed through descriptive statistics (Mean, standard deviation and skewness). Correlation and regression analyses were done to determine impact of Organizational Politics on Learning Organization.

**Inter correlations for employee job outcomes and predictor variables (N=143)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>OP</th>
<th>ILL</th>
<th>GLL</th>
<th>OLL</th>
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<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ILL</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GLL</td>
<td>.85**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>OLL</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>1</td>
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Note. *p< 0.01;

OP: Organizational Politics, ILL: Individual Level Learning, GLL: Group Level Learning, OLL: Organizational Level Learning.

Table 5 presents bivariate correlations among the variables. According to Cohen and Cohen (1988) r²= .10 indicates small effect size, r²= .30 shows medium effect size and r² = .50 large effect size. All the variables have significant correlation with each other. Organizational politics have strong relationship with individual level learning and group level learning, it correlation is .77 and .85 respectively.

Regression results of hypothesis H1a, H1b & H1c: Organizational Politics predicting Individual level learning (ILL),
group level learning (GLL) and Organizational Level learning (OLL).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Adj-R²</th>
<th>t-statistics</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.604</td>
<td>.603</td>
<td>14.70</td>
<td>216.33</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLL</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.859</td>
<td>.723</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>368.1888</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLL</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.594</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>8.77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV: Organizational politics, DV1: individual level learning, DV2: group level learning, DV3: Organizational Level Learning, P<0.01.

Hypothesis 1a stated that Perceived Organizational (OP) would be positively related to individual level learning. Results of the table indicated that Organizational Politics are positively related to Individual Level Learning (β= 0.77, p< 0.01), providing support for H1b, R² indicate over all fitness of model, R² = .60 and it represent that Organizational Politics could bring 60 percent change in Individual Level Learning. Hypothesis 1b stated that OP would be positively related to group level learning. Results of the table indicated that Organizational Politics has positively related to group Level Learning (β= 0.85, p< 0.01), providing support for H1b, R² indicate over all fitness of model, R² = .72 and it represent that Organizational Politics could bring 72 percent change in group Level Learning. Hypothesis 1c stated that OP would be positively related to Organizational Level Learning. Results indicated that Organizational Politics has positively related to Organizational Level Learning (β= 0.59, p< 0.01), providing support for H1c, R² indicate over all fitness of model, R² = .35 and it represent that
Organizational Politics could bring 35 percent change in organizational Level Learning.

**Discussion**

This study contributes to the literature of organizational Politics. First, its findings enrich the scope through which relationship between organizational politics and dimensions of learning organization is viewed. To the best of my knowledge this study is the first that worked on this model. Second, findings of the study also demonstrate Organizational Politics and its impact on different levels of Learning Organization.

Political skill significantly enhances predictive ability of employees and they understand organization’s processes more accurately. Political skill significantly impacts individual level learning, group level learning and organizational level learning as Ahearn et al. (2004) state that a leader needs to be effective in political skill if they want smooth functioning in the team work and collaboration among team members. The study contributes to usefulness of political skill and marked it as one of the antecedents of a learning organization because politically skilled employees are smart and adapt according to the needs of their surroundings (Ferris et al. 2007). Further, these individuals are able to show their behavior compatible to those working around them and assure their sincerity and genuine disposition and this particular characteristic made them to work well in group.

One of the important definitions of Learning Organization is “The ability of organization being flexible and capable to cope with changing environment”, so obviously less uncertainty enhances capability of organization to deal with change and Political skill enables individuals to make their environment more certain and
reduce the negativity as much as possible. Some researchers also noticed that individuals with high political skill do not get disturbed because of perception of organizational politics (Mintzberg 1983) because such individual have grip on their environment and have less issue.

Besides contributing in the field of organizational politics, this study also offers insight into the field of Learning Organization. Surprisingly, no research has explored the relationship of learning organization and politics. At work place people acquire financial benefits, companionship, and social relationships (Cropanzano, Kacmar and Bozeman, 1995). In acquiring these benefits individuals have to put their effort, time and energy. Organization can be compared with markets where one individual pays something and in return takes something so employees in organization also need favorable environmental factors to invest their skills, talent and more specifically their motivation (Rusbult and Farrell, 1983; Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers and Mainous, 1988).

**Managerial and academic Implication**

This research paper is the first empirical and quantitative attempt in the domain of Organizational support, political skill and Learning Organization so it paves the way for other academicians to consider this topic for future researches and further extend this work. It is suggested to organizations to consider political skill while inducting people in the organization (Ferris et al. 2005a, b) because politically skilled individual make people to better find their way in the organizational processes.

**Recommendations**

The main thesis of this research work was to highlight importance of Organizational Politics and its impact on different
level of learning in the organization. Results are in line with the previous literature that political skill includes social capital, good gestures, connections, friendships, ability to appear sincere, and show genuine concern and interest in others and necessary for employees in the organization. (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981, 1992). Bacharach and Lawler suggested that to incorporate organizational politics, alignment among members in the organization is prerequisite. In addition, Pfeffer also suggested that to influence others, connections and networking is important.

We can deduce from results of our model that political skill in organizations is not anathema that needs to be settled down but it is something that should be nurtured in the organization. Pfeffer (1981) identified positive political perspective organization politics. He argued that political skill is needed to flourish in the organization context and offered more research in this dimension of organizational politics. Mintzberg (1983) also seconded him and referred to political skill as positive tactics in the organization such as persuasion, manipulation, and negotiation. In this study positive result of organizational politics and Learning organization shows that organizational politics play an important role in organization learning.

Politically skilled individuals convey a secure and calm disposition that attracts other people in the organization and they feel comfortable and this relaxed environment creates conducive environment for continuous learning, people help each other learn, they confidently identify skills they need for future work tasks, People discuss their mistakes without any reluctance in order to learn from them, people give open and honest feedback to each other People who are good in Political skill are more outgoing
people and do not show haughty attitude rather they are more humble and modest because they give more attention and respect to others.

The study revealed that people good in political skills not only accurately behave in different social situations at work but they have also good tact to put away their self interest and show genuine sincerity and get things done from others for example strategic leadership is important dimension of organizational level learning and if leadership is politically skilled it will impact employees of the organization and keep them in the way of learning skillfully.

Employees especially group leaders should have this political skill for example managers or group leaders should be good at using their connections and networks to make things happen at work, good at building relationships with influential people at work, they should have a good idea about important people in the organization and have sound relationship with them. Superiors should adapt to behave friendly and show genuine interest in others. Similarly employees should be capable to build good rapport with colleagues and influential people in the organization, they should be able to talk so effectively with others, and be adept at getting favor of people and getting people to praise them, able to make people feel relaxed and happy in their companionship. Leaders should assess hidden agendas of others by concentrating on people's appearances and also understand people deeply in a smart way. So Organizations could develop supportive culture in the organization and nurture political skill (Ferris, Anthony, Kolodinsky, Gilmore, & Harvey, 2002).

Thus politics in the learning organization is not unconstructive but has many positive aspects in learning organizations (Lawrence
et al., 2005) but it should be appreciated and incorporated in the organizational processes and leverage by managers and employees. Future research should be done by incorporating personal factor as mediator and organizational factors as a moderator in this theoretical framework. In personal factor personality could be the most important variable that should be checked in this theoretical framework. Our sample size was limited to just 143 a future research should be carried out with larger sample size and greater response rate by targeting different public and private sector organizations of Pakistan, so large sample from multiple cities is recommended. Research was limited to only ten different banks so more organizations should be considered in the future study.

Bibliography


