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V. Marie Vicher

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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Teaching Political Savvy as a Workforce Skill

V. Marie Vicher

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Abstract

The theoretical framework for this article is based on Charismatic Leadership Theory. This article reflects recent research (including the popular business press) in the area of political skills. Political skill is defined as political astuteness and social intelligence in the workplace; political savvy assumes the existence and inevitability of “office politics”. Based on this research the case is made for educating our future workforce in political savvy. A basic model for curriculum development is included specifically for teaching political savvy in a classroom.

Introduction

While there have been numerous inspirational approaches to leadership discussed in the classroom, particularly as it pertains to work, one of the most researched theory has been charismatic leadership. This theory viewed leaders as individuals who had the ability to motivate and encourage others through their words, ideas, and behaviors (Robbins, 2005). Many organizational scientists have shared their perspectives of leadership in terms of the inherent political nature of work environments. This variable has been referred to as “political skill” by such authors as Mintzberg (1985) and Ferris, Perrewe, Anthony, and Gillmore (2000). Other authors described this variable as “social competence” (DeLuca, 1999), or political savvy (Truty, 2006). Whether these skills were called charismatic or political, there has been much debate regarding the usefulness of these skills.

Research on either side of the debate of whether these skills were teachable versus being innate has been accumulating in the literature. Are political skills psychological, biological or environmentally acquired? And are there benefits in terms of more adept coping with workplace stressors and knowledge of how to interact with organizational cultures? Can these skills be taught in a classroom format and if so, is there value for students in practicing these skills? A case will be made for teaching political savvy in the classroom in this article. The author will also introduce a curriculum development model for instructing political skills in the classroom.

Political Skills

Some overlap has been noted to exist between the construct of political skills and other social effectiveness constructs in part due to their shared beginnings in

Thorndike's early social intelligence theory (1920). Other similarities have been noted to exist with some personality characteristics that focused on social interaction.

However, Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwater, Douglas and Anmeter (2004) distinguished the political skills construct as being distinctive due to the focus on work organization interactions as opposed to more general social interactions. Other authors (Perrewe', Ferris, Funk & Anthony, 2000) pointed out that while political skill had much in common with other social skills and emotional intelligence; it was also unique in that it was probably the first social skill construct to focus on behavior at work. These authors suggested that political skill was a combination of knowing what to do and knowing how to do it in a manner that was effective and convincing but not obvious. Job performance and career success have been reported as two means of assessing how politically savvy individuals were in the organizational environment (Perrewe' et al., 2000).

The utilization of political and social skills has been reported for some time. However, a new idea has surfaced regarding the notion that the effective use of these skills can reduce job stress. Perrewe' et al. (2000) has developed a model in which political skill is thought to directly reduce managers' perceptions of organizational and other than organizational stressors. When managers' had political skill, they were less likely to perceive their environment as stressful. Research has found that issues about self-preservation and dealing with feelings could lead to social anxiety with possible health risks (Leary, 1995). It was argued that managers with high political skills were more confident in their abilities to control images, impressions and interactions at work. They were then less likely to perceive their situation as stressful. When seen as less

stressful, the work environment was less likely to be perceived as a psychological or physiological strain.

Additionally, political skill was seen as a moderator or buffer between perceived stressors and strain in the work environment. Politically skill was argued to be used as a coping mechanism to reduce the negative effects of stressors. Proactively dealing with problems in this way was associated with improved physical and mental health (Cohen, 1987). While many executives have been reported to thrive in organizations where there were high levels of stress; others fell apart. Some were proficient in coping with complex and dynamic uncertainty, accountability, politics, and the interpersonal aspects of a manager's job; others were not.

If political skills can be taught, then the positive effects of political skills on workers and the work environment could be a worthwhile area of research. Courses in political skills could be developed for adult learners and undergraduate students who often have difficulty in transferring learning to the workplace. If there are fewer perceived reports of work strain and more instances of resistance to possible consequences of on-the-job stress by those with a high degree of political skills, then this, too, would be a promising area of study in workforce education.

Political skills have been defined by Ahearn et al. (2004) as “the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives” (p. 311). Other authors suggested that successful social influence was needed and that these included mastery of an assortment of skills and the capability to choose and apply them to suitable situations.

Political savvy in the workplace has also been called political intelligence (McIntyre, 2005), political astuteness (DuBrine, 1990; Reardon, 2005), political ability (McIntyre, 2005), and political acumen (Reardon, 2005). These descriptors represent the composite of skills needed for successfully steering through the political waters of an organization to achieve leadership goals (Truty, 2006). Political savvy assumes the existence and unavoidability of “office politics”. DeLuca (1999) defines office politics as “how power and interests play out in the organization” (p.43).

Nature and causes of worker stress are numerous and may vary from person to person. However, changes in organizational structure, function and operation of both internal and external environments over the past two decades have been noted to increase competitive positions (Perrewe’ et al., 2000). Stress has been defined as a state that occurs when persons perceive that demands exceed their abilities to cope with those demands. In competitive markets this occurs frequently.

Related Literature Review

A literature search was conducted on each of the variables included and the major theoretical framework. The following databases were searched: Educational Abstracts, Business Source Premier, Psychological Abstracts, and Communication and Mass Media Complete. A summary of this search is included in this chapter.

The conceptual framework of this study was derived from Charismatic Leadership Theory as discussed by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and House (1977). Charismatic leadership theory suggests that followers often credit a leader with heroic or extraordinary abilities when they observe certain behaviors (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Although there have been many studies that have attempted to identify personal

characteristics of the charismatic leader, the most well documented has isolated five such characteristics that distinguish charismatic from non-charismatic leaders: vision, personal risk to achieve that vision, sensitivity to both environmental constraints and follower needs, and exhibited behaviors that are unusual (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). The following further describes these key characteristics. Vision and articulation illustrates the leader having a vision, expressed as an idealized goal, it suggests a future better than the status quo; the leader is able to clarify the importance of the vision in terms that are appreciated by others. Personal risk refers to the willingness to absorb personal risk, incur high costs and exhibit self-sacrifice toward achieving the vision. Environmental sensitivity suggests being able to realistically assess environmental constraints and needed resources to bring about change. Sensitivity to follower needs refers to perception of the abilities of others and responsiveness to their feelings and needs. Unconventional behavior is the last of the key characteristics and refers to the engagement in novel behaviors that are contrary to norms.

It has been suggested that there is evidence of a four step process by which charismatic leaders actually influence their followers (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993). The first step begins with the leader articulating an appealing vision. The vision provides a sense of kinship for followers by connecting the present with a better future for the group. Then, the leader conveys high performance expectations and communicates to the group an enhanced sense of self-esteem and self-confidence in his/her assurance that they can perform. The leader next articulates, verbally and behaviorally, a new set of values, thus setting an example for followers to emulate. Lastly, the charismatic leader

demonstrates self-sacrifice and engages in unconventional behavior to illustrate courage and convictions about the vision.

Vision is a prominent component of charismatic leadership and deserves some discussion in order to distinguish vision from other forms of direction setting. A review of various definitions of charismatic leadership suggests that “a vision has clear and compelling imagery that offers an innovative way to improve, which recognizes and draws on traditions, and connects to actions that people can take to realize change. Vision taps people’s emotions and energy. Properly articulated, a vision creates the enthusiasm that people have for sporting events and other leisure-time activities, bringing this energy and commitment to the workplace” (Nutt & Backoff, 1997, p. 309). The properties that are key in vision appear to be inspirational possibilities that are value-centered, realizable, with advanced imagery and articulation. Visions should be able to create options that are unique, inspirational and offer innovative new ideas to promote organizational distinction. If a vision does not extend a clearly displayable view that will enhance the organization, then it will probably fail. Visions must be timely and fit the circumstances as well as fit the distinctiveness of the organization. It must be seen as attainable by the people in the organization and perceived as possible yet challenging. Visions are more easily accepted if they have commanding images and are clearly expressed (Hauser & House, 2004; Robbins, 2005; Zaccaro, 2001).

Although there continued to be a small minority of individuals who thought charisma could not be learned, most experts appeared to believe that individuals could be trained to adopt charismatic behaviors. One set of authors suggested a three step process in learning to become a charismatic leader (Richardson & Thayer, 1993). First, a person

must have kept an optimistic viewpoint to develop an aura of charisma; used passion as a means for generating enthusiasm; and utilized non-verbal as well as verbal communication skills. Second, an individual drew others to him/her by creating an inspirational bond that encouraged others to follow them. Third, the person tapped into others' emotions to encourage their potential. Researchers have replicated studies where they have taught others' these skills (Howell & Frost, 1989).

There was a growing body of evidence that indicated charisma may not have been generalizable; that its effectiveness may have been situational (Robbins, 2005). Setbacks at many companies led by charismatic leaders seemed to suggest that there was a negative side to charismatic leadership which may have potentially undermined organizations. Achievement of high levels of performance may not always have been the product of charismatic leadership. Charisma seemed to be most appropriate when an ideological component was involved or when there was a great deal of stress and uncertainty in the environment (House, 1977). This may have been the reason that charismatic leaders tended to emerge more often in areas of politics, religion and wartime; or in the infancy or life-threatening crisis of a business. In addition to ideology and environmental uncertainty, another situational factor that was reported to limit charismatic appeal appeared to be the level of the person in the organization. Visions tended to be created by top executives; lower level individuals though charismatic tended not to be noticed outside their units.

When the fascination with charismatic leadership reached its peak in the 1990's, leaders were commanding huge salaries, unprecedented autonomy and resources, and many benefits of royalty. Many of these individuals used their power to remake

corporations in their own image resulting in blurred boundaries between their personal interests and those of the company; personal goals and self-interest overriding the company's goals. Often ego-driven and intolerant of criticism, these leaders surrounded themselves with those who agreed with them, rewarded them for pleasing the leader and created a climate of fear in challenging the master. Results seemed to have shown leaders who recklessly used the organization's resources for personal benefit, broke laws, and crossed ethical lines in trying to gain financial assets (Robbins, 2005).

On the opposite side of this discussion, there was an increasing body of research that demonstrated imposing correlations between charismatic leadership and high performance and satisfaction among followers (DeLuga, 2001; House, Woycke & Fodor, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Waldman, Bass & Yammarino, 1990). Those working for charismatic leaders appeared motivated to exert extra work effort and expressed greater satisfaction because they liked and respected their leader.

The first major construct discussed in this paper was political skill. Many organizational scientists have shared their perspectives in terms of the inherent political nature of work environments. This variable has been referred to as "political skill" by numerous investigators (Ferris, Perrewe, Anthony & Gillmore, 2000; Mintzberg, 1985). Other authors describe this variable as "social competence" (DeLuca, 1999). This author will attempt to further define and describe the construct of political skill as reflected by a variety of researchers in the field and with particular attention to applicability for classroom teaching.

Ferris et al. (1999) suggested that political skill included the necessity to not only be able to read and comprehend, but to be able to employ influence and control in

social instances in such a way that it would not be seen as overt. Instead it would be viewed more subtly in an unobtrusive and implied manner. They argued that politically skillful people developed an instinctive ability to perceive organizational situations because they were adept at reading events well and increased their understanding of and power over events through the attainment of tacit knowledge. They also suggested that individuals with a high degree of political skill may have possessed a great deal of self-discipline demonstrated by delaying their own satisfaction. Confidence and personal security were said to be by-products of political skills developed through understanding and control over work events.

Some authors have linked political skill to leader effectiveness, suggesting that political skill was a critical component to leadership effectiveness (Ahearn et al., 2004; Ferris et al., 1999; Mintzberg, 1983). Brass (2001) suggested that political skill facilitated working with other people, becoming more effective networkers and coalition builders and increased the ability to create social capital. Perrewe', Ferris, Funk and Anthony (2000) described political skill as "an interpersonal style that manifests itself in social astuteness and the ability to engage in behaviors that give impetus to feelings of confidence, trust, and sincerity" (p. 1). These authors further suggested that these skills could be learned to some degree but were mostly based on "tacit knowledge". This type of knowledge was acquired through assorted learning experiences over a period of time and often viewed as common sense, intuition or savvy. This concept had also been described as practical intelligence by some authors.

A complex set of political skills had been noted to include: intuition (Reardon, 2005); the ability to quickly assess who held power in a situation and who was "just

faking it” (McIntyre, 2005, p. 24); the ability to initiate discussion of controversial issues without provoking or offending others, and to develop and use self-defense techniques as needed (McIntyre, 2005); impression management and development of support for ideas (DuBrin, 1990); knowing when to sidestep trouble makers, follow chain of command, and be friendly but cautious with others (Cardillo, 2005); and the ability to wisely use the grapevine (DeLuca, 1999).

In an effort to capture the political skill construct Ferris et al. (1999) developed an initial six item measure in an attempt to identify aspects and features of this variable in a succinct and one dimensional approach. These authors’ definition of political skill reflected some insight into other people in the workplace and the use of that information to influence others. Therefore, understanding others was demonstrated in the items: “I understand people well” and “I find it easy to envision myself in the position of others”. The measure assessed the use of knowledge by workers to influence items such as: “I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me”; “I am good at getting others to respond positively to me” and “I usually try to find common ground with others”. Ahearn et al. (2004) reported that in their assessment this scale did an adequate job of representing the definition of political skill. Ferris et al. reported that political skill related modestly to understanding of events, self-monitoring, positive affectivity, extraversion, empathy, conscientiousness, and delay of gratification (1999). This study reported a not significant relationship between political skill and the strain reported on-the-job, even though there was some evidence in that direction. A second study reported by Zellar et al. (2002) cited evidence to sustain this theory of an inverse relationship between job-

induced tension and political skill. They reported a significant negative relationship between both cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety and political skill. Other related studies reported regarding leadership as a process of social influence and how a good leader has a range of abilities and skills and knows when to use them in the most appropriate ways.

The second major construct discussed here is the perception of organizational politics and political savvy by workers in organizations. Organizational politics have not been legitimated by organizational leaders, so skills for managing them competently have rarely been discussed. The literature suggested that political savvy was a necessary element for leadership success, however, there seemed to be a lack of instruction or coaching offered to develop this skill. Truty (2006) argued that formal skills development for political savvy ought to be offered to students and workers at all organizational levels to include a formal educational curriculum. Reardon (2002) suggested that politics in organizations involved going outside the usual channels and that nearly every manager had done so at one time or another. Real political moves were often the ones that were unwritten, an unorthodox means of getting things done. Many have viewed office politics as being negative: back biting, manipulative, and immoral. However, DeLuca (1999) countered that it might be unwise to ignore or avoid office politics because there would be others who could use it to their advantage.

How Are Political Skills Learned or Not Learned?

The literature suggested evidence that political savvy development appeared to be mostly left to chance with little or no formal education or training (Truty, 2006) and not systematically taught in the workplace because organizational politics seemed

to be covert (DuBrin, 1990). Some authors suggested that those who might not be aware of political behavior occurring behind the scenes in the workplace might be experiencing a “political blind spot” preventing them from recognizing and accepting these invisible behaviors (DeLuca, 1999). Often times, there was the belief that behavior must be ethical and rational and that decisions in the workplace should be based solely on technical merit. However, Reardon (2002) indicated that due to competition for jobs, individuals attempting to retain positions of power would deliberately withhold information about how to uncover the process of the “secret handshake”.

When workplace training was accomplished, it tended to be offered by outside training or consulting sources and delivered to higher level managers for leadership development or remediation. Truty observed that individual forms of instruction on political savvy was noted to occur, but tended not to effectively connect with issues of power, privilege or politics in the organization. In fact, several authors (Johnson, 2006; Truty, 2006) have noted issues of inadequate instruction in political skills within organizations to certain portions of the population, including women and minorities, disadvantaging them further in the workplace

ceasing to do well in their boss’ eyes, they get such vague feedback as, ‘you’re not being a team player’. Most women fail to realize that employees are judged on interpersonal and not technical skills as they progress in their careers. And interpersonal skills often rise and fall on the nuances of male and female cultural differences (Heim & Golant, 1992, p. 6).

DeLuca (1999) suggested learning about the culture and “work with the culture of the organization” before developing a strategy for attaining one’s goals in the workplace (pp. 123-124). Other authors cautioned that political skills may not be taught in the workplace due to the difficulty of recognition; different cultures may exist together in different areas of the same organization (Truty, 2006; Wood, 2001). Wood also bemoaned that little or no coaching was being done by experienced workers to assist the new ones in an organizational culture. Continued objections to the current direction of schooling by Woods (2001) suggested

rewards come with the right answer, for example, that rewards are not contingent on relationships forged with the instructor and significant people at school. You didn’t have to invest in the relationship. You didn’t have to worry about your social skills. Social skills were generally developed and displayed by hanging out with friends, our peers (p. 1).

Finally, while some believed that political savvy was simply “common sense”, it appeared that not everyone has been privy to it. DeLuca (1999) suggested that these savvy people were not aware of their skills; they did not question them; and they saw no necessity in teaching them to others. DeLuca added that “conceptualizing behaviors and attaching labels to them is an essential part of turning unconscious competence into conscious competence” (p. 217). Gaining knowledge regarding workplace politics and acquiring political skills was, therefore, explained mainly by trail-and-error or self-development (Truty, 2006). While it was suggested that most people learn from a young age how to behave in such contextual settings as church, school, home, and

public places, most were never taught how to behave in the workplace (Cardillo, 2005). Truty (2006) suggested that “the good news is that all authors [she] consulted believe that political savvy can be developed” (p. 221).

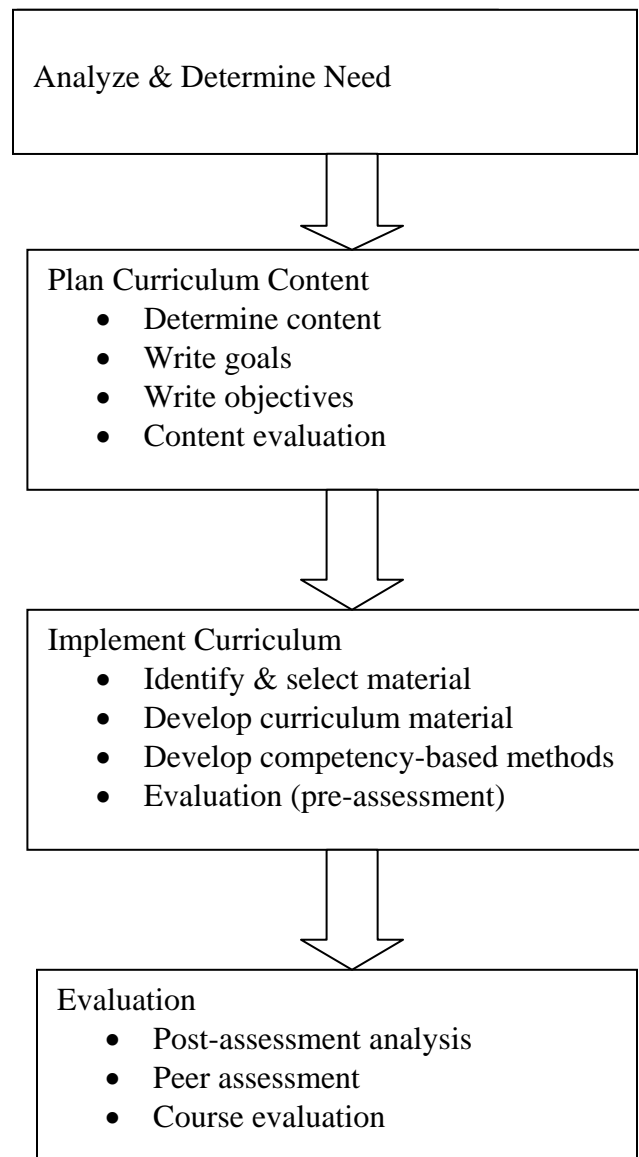
Conclusions and Implications

The existing literature on trends in the workforce suggested that there will be increasing need for training new workers to be better able to adapt to cultural requirements in the workforce. Authors suggested that political skill reflecting future changes in the workplace will be projecting greater emphasis on social interaction due to changing organizational roles (Ahearn et al., 2004). Leaders will need to become even more adept at reading workers and being able to persuade them to behave in ways that help meet organizational goals and objectives. Political skill will become a necessity to those workers who wish to advance and succeed. With more pressure on individuals to succeed, it is predictable that their levels of stress will increase exponentially. Those people who have obtained more proficient political skills will be more likely to be not only successful but to experience less stress in their work lives. Continuing research in this area will be needed and will be branching out into new areas such as those explored in this paper.

Additionally, given the significance of political savvy for all workers, this author believes that increasing consciousness about and teaching political skill should not be left to chance but should be addressed systematically within the educational system. More specifically, classes should be made available to students at the high school and college undergraduate levels focusing on political savvy; what it is and how to develop it. Because organizations continue to find this topic taboo, “it is incumbent

upon higher education institutions to provide a safe place for free and deliberate unveiling, exploration, discussion, strategizing, and critiquing of office politics” (Truty, 2006, p. 221). There follows a basic curriculum development model based on Finch and Crunkilton (1989), which allows for inclusion of many of the ideas suggested in this paper with particular attention to on-going assessment.

FIGURE 1
CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR
TEACHING POLITICAL SAVVY



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