Leaders’ Political Skill, Organizational Politics Savvy, and Change in Organizations - A Constellation

Imran Qaboos Cheema
Hafsa Amin Cheema
Kashif Ashraf

School of Business and Economics
University of Management and Technology

Although leadership concept has been a topic of inquiry from the last one century particularly in business organizations, there has been relatively little research that addresses the impact of its different dimensions on organizational change. Some scholars have explored the effect of transformational leadership on cultural change but it is a broad effort. In this paper we develop a conceptual framework that articulate which specific dimensions of leaders will enable them to accept change and then mobilize and motivate their followers for its acceptance.

In this paper we have limited the scope of discussion by defining leadership general influential role in all work settings without differentiating among its different theories and typologies. Then we focus on two important dimensions of leaders’ i.e. political skill and better understanding of organizational politics and their effect on organizational change. We have taken organizational change in broader sense that includes all forms of change e.g. mergers, acquisitions, culture etc.

A few studies have attempted to conceptualize independent relationships between organizational politics, political skill, and different personal and organizational outcome. This paper searches into the effects of leaders’ political skill in conjunction with their organizational politics savvy on organizational change. We present a model that
Leaders’ Political Skill, Organizational Politics Savvy, and Change in Organizations - A Constellation

conceptualizes this leading process. It is argued on the basis of the research and theory of leadership, political skill, organizational politics, and change that leaders who have political skill can develop a better understanding of organizational politics and can also use different influencing skills particularly their political skill to initiate, promote, and lead a positive change in organizations. This “right stuff” will make them more effective in managing friction and resistance against change and ultimately enable them to cope with dysfunctional conflicts. We develop propositions regarding the political skill of leaders and its influence on organizational change through better understanding of organizational politics. These propositions also throw light that a leader with innate or developed political skill can develop a better understanding of organizational politics and also a savvy of organizational politics can brush up their political skill. To our view these both comprehend each other and can give more favorable results if employed simultaneously. By this we have tried to explore the leaders’ qualities and skills which motivate acceptance of change by individuals during and after change process. Implications for practice, future potential research areas, and limitations of the paper are also given.

A few studies have attempted to conceptualize independent relationships between organizational politics, political skill, and different personal and organizational outcome. This paper searches into the effects of leaders’ political skill and their understanding of organizational politics on organizational change. We present a model that conceptualizes how organizational leaders manage the change in organizations by using their political skill and organizational politics savvy. It is argued on the basis of the research and theory of leadership, political skill, organizational politics, and change that leaders who have political skill can develop a better understanding of organizational politics and can also use different influencing skills particularly their political skill to initiate, promote, and lead a positive change in organizations. This “right stuff” will make them more effective in managing friction and resistance against change and ultimately enable them to cope with dysfunctional conflicts. After defining leadership, leaders’ political skill, organizational politics, and change in organizations, we develop propositions regarding the political skill of leaders and its influence on organizational change through better understanding of organizational politics. Implications for practice, future potential research areas, and limitations of the paper are also given.
Introduction

Leadership concept has been prevailing throughout the history of human. Normally researchers start it from ancient Greece philosophers and try to find its traces in the philosophic thoughts of Socrates. They make Plato’s *The Republic* as the starting point about their leadership thoughts and articulate his view that the world’s problems would be solved only when philosophers will become kings or kings would take up philosophy. In *The Republic* he also detailed some of the skills and other relevant characteristics of the ruling class. After that the work of Machiavelli (1961) comes as a “literary model of sorts” i.e. *The Prince*. Recently Keohane (2005) has proposed some better qualities to prospective leaders. He takes Machiavelli’s *The Prince* as a model in terms of format for his suggestions to organizational leaders, and offers his opinions either in agreement or disagreement. He has adopted the normative approach in his thoughts same as of Machiavelli and paid attention to what leaders actually do. The key of leadership is to influence and motivate others (Iacocca, 1985) and their ultimate objective is to boost up the productivity of organization through people. They are in the business of capital and they have one law: the business of money to make money (Akbar, 2006).

The literature of political theory reveals that at first the leadership concept was built up on the phenomenological level i.e. the society then it boiled down to a concept at the organization level and in the end it became a practice concept for leaders. For our paper we attempt to theorize it for all categories and typologies of leadership without any differentiation (e.g. between leadership concept from dispositional point i.e. Transformational, Transactional, Charismatic, and from situational point i.e. Autocratic, Democratic, Bureaucratic, and Laissez-Faire) because according to Simon (1952) sometimes every arbitrary selected unit does not define a suitable level for scientific study. Much of the leadership is a social influence process. This requires a broad set of skills and knowledge of when to apply them. This is the realm of political skill and organizational politics savvy. Political behavior is also an influencing behavior in a sense that in this an individual attempts to influence others to achieve some ends, either personal or organizational. Therefore it is the intention of the influencer that qualifies the influencing behavior. Politics is an inevitable part of organizations and political skill is essential for all types of leaders. Therefore for inborn or learned political skill and understanding of organizational politics phenomenon the concept of leadership is taken here in its generic influencing role. Same is the case for all the organizational situations because every situation requires political skill. Change is the only constant factor in this world (Iqbal, 2003) and same is the case with organizations as Berquist (1993) argues that in postmodern world, organizations have to deal with as much chaos as order and change is a constant dynamic. Change has been an ongoing process due to environment threats or within organizational forces. It has proven to be a significant and popular mean for achieving organizational growth and corporate diversity and expansion (Cartwright & Copper, 1992). It is the responsibility of leaders to promote change and to create vision (Bass, 1985). Bass and Avolio (1994) emphasize that change is accomplished through the leader’s implementation of the unique vision of the organization through powerful persuasive skills, characteristics, and actions. As
per demand of the change, for a more typical leader there appear to be many missing skills rather than just one. Failure of leadership in managing change seems to result from an intricate synergy of leadership deficiencies i.e. political skill and poor understanding of organizational politics. Hence the purpose of this paper is to understand the role of leaders’ political skill and their understanding of organizational politics in organizational change.

In the work of Ferris, Berkson, Kaplan, Gilmore, Buckley, Hochwarter, & Witt (1999), Ferris, Perrewe´, Anthony, & Gilmore (2000), Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, Kacmar, Douglas, & Frink (2005), Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ferris (2004), Perrewe´, Ferris, Frink, & Anthony (2000), Perrewe´, Zellars, Ferris, Rossi, Kacmar, & Ralston (2004), Perrewe´, Zellars, Rossi, Ferris, Kacmar, Liu, Zinko, & Hochwarter (2005), and Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter (2004), by and large political skill has been considered as having a direct or moderating role for different organizational outcomes e.g. for team performance, role conflict, and job stress. Their research sounds that this skill can give desired results exclusively. We will take the definition of political skill by Ferris et al. (1999), Perrewe´ et al. (2004), and Ahearn et al. (2004) and will go a step further by suggesting that this skill can give more favorable outcomes when combined with leaders understanding of organizational politics. The second contribution of the paper is that we will try to find the relationship of these two constructs with organizational change. To the best of our knowledge no one has explored this area. In the next sections we will define the key constructs to develop our propositions and to present our model.

Leadership

Leadership concept surfaced in the business world in the early 19th century (Davis & Cushing, 1999). The apex of the leadership is to enable ordinary people to produce extraordinary things while facing challenges and change and to constantly turn in superior performance to the long-term benefit of all the concerned constituencies (Charlton, 2000). The following brief wording from many definitions is chosen to describe the difference between management and leadership: legitimate power and control vs. empowerment and change. The role of leaders in organizations has been changed entirely due to change in global environment. Now the notion of leadership is not attached with a person who only controls the employees. It is replaced with the leaders who are visionary, assist employees to plan, organize, lead and control their activities. Michela and Burke (2000) view is that leaders are hoped to initiate organizational change and to generate followers acceptance by effecting and changing their perceptions. Yeo (2006) is of the view that the development of employees in order to create a learning environment and to emphasize self-management and entrepreneurial behavior is the responsibility of business leaders. Due to unpredictable, diversified, and complex work situations different kinds of leaders will emerge to lead in ways different from those of the past (Jooste, 2004). In the following discussion we will reflect on the evolution of leadership and conceptualize it for this paper.
The Past–Present–Future Leadership Scenario

In the past, patterns and characteristics of the organization were hierarchical structures and authority, inflexibility, formalization, centralized controls, a stable environment, and less competition within and outside. Organizations believed that change was for someone else. Most of the markets were of selling nature and the philosophy to run an organization was to produce and dump into the market. Due to the dynamism in the environmental forces, breadth and change in consumers' needs, desires and preferences, markets has become more turbulent and volatile. In these circumstances organizations have to adopt outside-in approach and bring drastic changes (Day, 1990). For example Cartwright and Schoenberg (2006) have reported that in 2004, 30,000 acquisitions were completed globally, equivalent to one transaction every 18 minutes. The total worth of these acquisitions was $1900 billion, greater than the GDP of several large countries. In this new organizational context positions and responsibilities are less static and more open-ended, and the familiar upper, middle and lower level boundaries are being redrawn and even some of them are being removed to meet the competition. In the past the emphasis has been on how leaders oversee the work of people within fixed units (Chapman, 2001). Recently leadership competence is important, assessing past impacts and current reality, matching job requirements with strategic human resource systems to address the future. The main focus is on the identification of strategies and factors that may explain the performance of individuals and organizations. Future departmental level leaders should undergo transformation from implementers to aggressive entrepreneurs. The middle level managers are playing the role of coaches and mentors instead of controllers, and top-level leaders are leading their organizations by setting direction and objectives of business rather providing sufficient resources (Chapman, 2001). The lesson of the past is that leaders should identify future trends in technology, social and culture developments, demographics, economics, politics and market expectations that can influence organization and force them to bring a change (Jooste, 2004). In this scenario leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. Leaders therefore must be skilled in change management process and motivate others to follow it (Van Kinppenberg & Hogg, 2003). Hence one of their prime jobs is to predict and lead or manage change by mobilizing and motivating followers and for that purpose they need political skill and organizational politics understanding.

When one goes through the leadership literature extensively he identifies that it has been produced by two camps i.e. of dispositionalists and situationalists. The leadership theories produced as the phenomena of situation are Group and Exchange Theory of Leadership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), Contingency Theory of Leadership proposed by Fiedler, and Path-Goal Theory by Evans and House. The theories of Leadership that are mediated from personality paradigm are Great Man Theory, Transactional, Transformational, and Charismatic Leadership Theories. From the past few years leaders skills has become the topic of research for theorists e.g. the work of House and Podsakoff, and of Whetten and Cameron (Luthans, 2002).
In addition to influence, leadership has been defined in terms of processes, personality compliance, particular behaviors, persuasion, power, goal achievement, interaction, and role differentiation, initiation of structure, and combination of two or more of these aspects. As a matter of fact we do not undermine and deny any of the paradigms but for this paper we lean toward the later view i.e. skills for leadership. We will develop our thesis in the later discussion that all types of leaders need political skill and the leaders who have or can incorporate it in their personality will most likely be able to develop a better understanding of organizational politics and as a result will be able to manage change effectively.

By and large the researchers developed their theories of leadership by focusing on one paradigm and ignoring the other. This approach can reveal the partial reality only. This paper concludes that for a holistic view one should consider all the dimension of this construct and should adopt an integrative approach i.e. the role of personality, situation, and skills in leadership. This integrative approach is more real and comprehensive. That’s why for this paper we argue that two constructs are of perennial importance for leadership i.e. political skill and organizational politics. Political skill is an interpersonal skill that can be innate or learned and organizational politics is the combination of both personality and situation. From the above discussion of leadership we can derive our first proposition.

Proposition 1. The Leadership theories that are developed by integrative approach (situation, disposition, and skills) are most likely to comprehend leadership concept.

Marketing of an idea, persuasion and allures are far better alchemists of social change than political compulsion, remembering that researchers like Zalezink (1970) and Mintzberg (1983) considered business organizations as social settings. In work settings it’s wise to get one’s job by influencing others and making allies. Leaders who are equipped with social and interpersonal skills are supposed to manage their activities effectively. So we propose our second proposition.

Proposition 2. The leadership theories that incorporate social and interpersonal skills are most likely to give a real and practical approach.

In the subsequent part we will discuss political skill and will also attempt to articulate that it is a different skill as compare to other interpersonal skills. Then we will give the details of organizational politics and finally it will be concluded that leaders equipped with political skill and knowledge of organizational politics are most likely to manage change more successfully and positively.

Interpersonal Control

Leaders in organizations are viewed as desirous of increasing their control; they can gain and exercise it if they apply their interpersonal skills properly particularly their political skill. They make decisions and consult other proposals and petitions. They motivate their team by giving incentives and sanctioning resources. They identify and share strategies that can solve organizational problems. They are determined to achieve the desired goals and for this they persuade or force others to follow a course of action. All these activities have to be performed in work setting and the scope of leadership also differs from that of most others activities. According to Keohane (2005) the issues that leaders
must address have broad implications, and a large number of human beings are affected. Kotter (1998) stresses that leadership in contrast to management is the process of motivating people to change. It has been suggested that by influencing the nature of the work environment and organizational culture, leaders can have an effect on employees’ attitude to work related change. The challenge then is to select and acquire a particular set of skills and actions that are prone to absorb change and resources in organizations (Amabile, 1998). Thus they require interpersonal and social skills.

Research in the areas of social capital, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, and knowledge management has revealed that interpersonal relationships are critical to one’s performance at work and career success (Ferris et al., 2000). Perrewe et al. (2000) proposed that the ability of an individual to form positive interpersonal relationships should leverage their ability to cope with stressful job demands. This ability gives leaders a sense of self-confidence and personal security by developing a deep understanding and control over events. Fredrickson (1998) accentuates that it enhances individuals’ psychological well-being, performance, and generates tangible benefits. It also recovers the bad experience of negative effectiveness. In this paper, this ability of the leaders is referred as political skill, which is discussed in the following part.

**Political Skill**

Over two decades ago, Pfeffer (1981) argued for a political perspective on organizations that introduced “political skill” as a critical competency for effectiveness in the ambiguous and often turbulent environments of political organizations. Mintzberg (1983, 1985) also coined the term “political skill” and suggested that organizations could be characterized as political arenas, and for survival and success in such work settings the possession of “political will and political skill” is required. Mintzberg made reference to political skill as the exercise of influence using negotiation, manipulation, and persuasion. However, Pfeffer and Mintzberg work was of basic nature and they did not contribute in the conceptual or empirical development of this construct. After their work we find a gap of almost fifteen years until Ferris et al. (1999) broke the ice and made an initial attempt to more fully conceptualize, establish the construct domain, and empirically assess political skill. They have further developed and validated the political skill inventory (Ferris et al., 2005). Therefore, building on the early work by Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983), and as well as the work of Ferris et al. (1999, 2005), the next section presents the definition and construct validity of political skill.

**Definition and Origin**

Political skill is characterized by social perceptiveness and the ability to adjust one’s behaviors to different and changing situational needs (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005) and 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 (Perrewe et al., 2004, p. 142, and Aheran et al., 2004, p. 311).
Although other dimensions of social skills like social intelligence, emotional intelligence, ego-resiliency, social self-efficacy, self monitoring and practical intelligence can influence political skill (Ferris, Perrewe’, Anthony, & Gilmore, 2000; Ferris, Perrewe’, & Douglas, 2002), but research has demonstrated that political skill is a distinct construct with respectable psychometric properties (Ferris et al., 1999, 2000, 2005; Perrewe´ et al., 2004, 2005).

Issues pertaining to the derivation of political skill are concerned with whether this construct reflects a skill, an ability, or a trait, and therefore whether it is a learned competency or innate. We conceptualize that leaders can be predisposed to political skill, but it can be shaped and developed through training. This view is consistent with contemporary integrative dispositional–situational approach which we have discussed throughout the paper.

**Construct Validity**

Basically political skill was designed to focus on interactions in work organizations; on the contrary we also see it as conceptually unique to other social effectiveness constructs typically characterized as more general competencies affecting social interactions in a broad array of everyday contexts (e.g., Ferris, Perrewe´, & Douglas, 2002). There is some natural overlap of the construct domains of political skill and some other social effectiveness measures. Therefore, it is expected that modest relationships would be found between political skill and particular personality characteristics that tend to focus on social interactions, as well as with some other social effectiveness measures e.g. understanding of organizational politics.

Ferris et al. (1999) argued that politically skilled individuals develop an intuitive savvy, and they reflect positive interpersonal effectiveness that might relate to other social effectiveness constructs, as well as to some personality characteristics. Ferris et al. (1999) reported that political skill was modestly related to self-monitoring ($r = .13$ and $.21, p < .01, in two samples), positive affectivity ($r = .36, p < .001$), extraversion ($r = .28, p < .01$), empathy ($r = .28, p < .01$), and conscientiousness ($r = .25, p < .01$). They also argued that politically skilled individuals enjoy a sense of personal security and self-confidence from prior experience in, and mastery over, their work environments and the individuals with whom they interact. Perrewe´ et al. (2004) found significant negative relationships between political skill and both cognitive anxiety ($r = –.30, p < .01$) and somatic anxiety ($r = –.23, p < .01$).

Such personal security and self-confidence may contribute to politically skilled individuals experiencing more control in organizational change process. Such individuals appear to be more resistant to the potentially dysfunctional conflicts and thus can deal with chaos and disturbance while initiating, leading, and promoting change. This would suggest an inverse relationship between political skill and problems of change.

Regarding discriminant validity, the main challenge is to demonstrate that political skill is not correlated with intelligence or cognitive ability. In psychology and the organizational sciences, cognitive ability has dominated the category of individual differences, regularly explaining substantial variance in personnel selection contexts and concerning other work outcomes. Research across several
samples has revealed that there is a zero correlation between political skill and cognitive ability, thus supporting its discriminant validity (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005).

Although there has been a proliferation of social effectiveness constructs in recent years, and there is the need to theoretically and empirically distinguish among them, it is perhaps most important to demonstrate the lines of demarcation between political skill and social skill, primarily because these two constructs sometimes have been used interchangeably and are suggested to be redundant because of similarity. However, in the research literature, scholars have made clear distinctions between social skill and political skill (Luthans, 2002; Peled, 2000). Peled argued that social skill refers to

the ease and comfort of communication between leaders and their employees, peers, superiors, and clients (p. 27).

Alternatively, Peled suggested that political skill refers to

the manager’s ability to manipulate his or her interpersonal relationships with employees, colleagues, clients, and supervisors to ensure the ultimate success of the project (p. 27).

Because both political skill and social skill have their roots in the early work on social intelligence there is bound to be some similarity in the two constructs, and perhaps reflected by modest correlations. However, we see these as two distinct constructs with different derivations and uniqueness.

With an ability to perceive others and the situation accurately, politically skilled people have an intuitive savvy and understanding of people and events in organizations (Ahearn et al., 2004). The tacit knowledge derived from such understanding helps to effectively regulate interpersonal interactions. Consequently, politically skilled individuals enjoy a sense of personal security and increased feelings of control (Ferris et al., 1999, 2005; Perrewé et al., 2004) over the process and outcomes of interpersonal interactions. Politically skilled individuals combine social astuteness with the capacity to adjust their behavior to different and changing situational demands in a manner that appears to be sincere, inspires support and trust, and effectively influences and controls the responses of others. Trust and transparency become more important when employee perceive hypocrisy in various change processes.

**Political Skill and Change in Organizations**

Organizations are neither uniform nor static. They evolve over time, and so it seems reasonable to posit that all work settings will exhibit continuous and incremental changes punctuated on occasions by more episodic and radical changes (Weick & Quinn, 1999) e.g. mergers and acquisitions represent major and sudden change. It would be problematic if employees will not follow the change. There is a single right answer to all managerial problems. Some options may appear better than others but outcomes invariably depend upon context, timing, and implementation.

Successful leadership is a process of continual adjustment to changing environment. The leaders’ need is to establish and develop distinctive skills and competencies like political skill and
organizational politics savvy through their personal analysis, and then match this very skill with best opportunities for change in the organization. Simultaneously they must be sensitive to the politicking and resistance from their subordinates.

Companies that manage change in their favor are run by leaders who have this skill, usually because of their role in establishing the organization culture favorable to change. They make some critical and some not-so-critical decisions in this regard e.g. real delegation of power and not only the lip service, and intimating with their workers respectively. The political skill orientation is a very important variable in influencing decisions than are the leaders with out this course. Political skill enables them to scan the environment, establish sensitive controls, and facilitate internal communication before and after change. They discuss organizational matters with middle and lower level managers and also down the road with employees. Understanding of organizational politics guides them the right situation and time for decentralization and delegation, and also sensitize on the hoarding of power. Traditions in the organization may impede any attempt at radical change, but leaders having this “stuff” can move the organization in the preferred direction.

Political skill reinforces individuals’ belief, at a given point in time, in their ability to act as a causal agent to effect change in the intended direction on their environment (Greenberger & Strasser, 1986) and achieve what they desire (Perrewe´ et al., 2004). Political skill makes interactions more predictable, reducing the pressures caused by uncertainty, and in turn, enhancing perceived control over events (Ferris et al., 1999). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that, when facing daunting challenges of change politically skilled people will find ways to solve the immediate problem or at least determine how to “get by” i.e., cope (Perrewe et al., 2005).

Politically skilled individuals not only are successful at regulating interpersonal interactions but also know exactly how to exert such influences in a manner that facilitates interpersonal relationships characterized by confidence, trust, and sincerity (Ferris, Hochwarter, Blass, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2002). Politically skilled people view interpersonal interactions as opportunities (vs. threats), facilitating the establishment of friendships, connections, and alliances, which in turn ensures a favorable social identity in their network (Perrewe´ et al., 2000) by the help of which they can manipulate the environment in their favor for desired change.

For example, politically skilled individuals may enjoy network centrality, enabling them to gain access to important information. Moreover, the confidence and trust placed in politically skilled individuals likely increase cooperation from others in the network. Therefore, in addition to contributing to a greater sense of perceived control, political skill, and the accompanying interpersonal influence, may enable individuals to gain actual control over events, thus helping individuals to cope with job demands fitting to organizational change.

Collectively, the literature suggests that political skill provides a unique type of control in work settings, that is, interpersonal control. With their social perceptiveness and the ability to productively use insights gained, politically skilled individuals are at a vantage point in controlling the outcomes of interpersonal interaction, enhancing their ability to cope with job demands. Through effective
regulation of interpersonal interactions, political skill may act as a coping resource, thereby attenuating the negative effects of change process. From the analysis of body of literature of political skill we can posit our third proposition i.e.

**Proposition 3.** The leaders who are predisposed with political skill or who can develop it later are most likely to manage change effectively in organizations.

Perrewe´ and her colleagues (2000) found that political skill served as an antidote to workplace stressors, its role for the negative influences of role conflict on strain (Perrewe´ et al., 2004), and it also takes away the bad effects in the role overload-strain relationship (Perrewe´ et al., 2005). Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, and Ferris (2004) found that moderate levels of political skills were associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and lower levels of job tension, they also conclude that in comparison to more moderate levels higher and lower levels of political skill were adversely related to these outcomes. In another important study by Ahrean et al. (2004) leader political skill explained a significant proportion of variance in team performance of casework team in a large state child welfare system. Although these all are important findings and explained the prediction power of leader’s political skill but more studies were needed to examine the effect of this skill on other organizational outcomes e.g. organizational change. We hope that this paper will fill this gap. This skill can produce more favorable results if it is combined with leader understanding of organizational politics.

One of the axiom of this study is that leaders having political skill can manage change in a more effective way if they can develop a better understanding of organizational politics, as it is also about the influence processes in organizations. These two concepts are very much related to each other in a sense that through political skill one can understand organizational politics and the other way is that by developing a better understanding of politics in organizations leaders can develop and brush up their political skill. The first step in this direction is that leaders should develop a true picture of organizational life.

People are the most important ingredient of the organizations. This is the human capital that gives a competitive edge to an organization in the presence of abundant capital and technological resources. Studies support this view that organizations are the functions of the different kinds of people; and not vice versa (Schneider, 1987).

When an individual joins an organization and becomes a part of the workplace community, he only does this to fulfill his self-interests. This supposition is presumably false that people enter in the jobs to serve the organization (Cheema, 2006). In fact the prime motive of joining an organization is to serve one’s own interests (Mayes & Allen, 1977; Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981). People come to work situations with many goals and preferences. These goals invoke conflict and competition among workers to utilize the scarce resources. This competition, in turn, affects the use of power and politics in organizations (Wilson, 1995). Some researchers have associated political activity in organizations with the distribution of resources or other advantages (Harvey & Mills, 1970; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974; Pfeffer, 1981 Wildavsky, 1964).
Consideration of the human factor involved should guide the formulation and implementation of the change process. The key to choosing the right approach to change is to keep in mind how organizations function. As a social system comprising of work, people, formal and informal systems, organizations are inherently resistant to change and designed to neutralize the impact of attempts at change. Leaders can play a critical role in selecting and planning appropriate change management approaches. They can do this job if they have organizational politics savvy by encompassing a real picture of the organizational life.

During the last two decades the concept of organizational politics has received an increased attention in management literature. This attention relied partly on the expectation of finding new answers to some old questions, such as what motivate or demotivate individuals at work and how can we explain variations in employees’ behavior and their performance in a better way. In the following part we will discuss organizational politics in some details and its relation with political skill and organizational change.

Organizational Politics

Michela and Burke (2000) argue that to change an organization, one must first understand the organization. Leaders’ organizational politics savvy will provide them opportunity to fully understand the work settings. In terms, organizational politics is built upon intra-organizational influence tactics used by organizational members to promote self-interests or organizational goals in different ways. It is usually associated with phenomenon such as power, struggles, and conflicts over the sources of power, influence, and planned and directed attempts to actualize warring interests in the workplace (Vigoda, 2003; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Ferris, Fedor, Chachere, & Pondy, 1989a). A politically oriented manager might use the performance evaluation system for self-promotion or show favoritism to a personal friend. According to this definition politics is generally perceived as dysfunctional (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Randall, Cropanzano, Borman, & Birjulin, 1999).

Therefore one can say that conflicts in workplace are almost inevitable and theories of organizational conflict are helpful in analyzing the possible consequences of organizational politics (Vigoda, 2000). This is the political skill of the astute managers that help them to resolve these conflicts. It also has the potential to enhance growth and stability and facilitate effective decision-making and effective management of organizational change.

From the literature it is evident that organizational politics has two connotations i.e. positive and negative and both will be considered here. The common perception is that politics in the workplace is a necessary evil, unfair and irrational and thus have impression of harming the organization and its members that led to definition of negative organizational politics (Drory & Beaty, 1991; Ferris & King, 1991). One can also define it as manipulation, achievement of goals in improper ways, and perceive it as unhealthy behavior (Gandz & Murray, 1980). Therefore, management
literature considered politics relating among stakeholders as illegitimate, informal and dysfunctional. On the other hand Ferris and King (1991) found that

- use of influence in the organization is positively related to the manager’s positive attitude toward his employees, that is, the more an employee uses influence in the organization, the better employee he is perceived to be and the more his performance is appreciated. Organizational politics is sometimes perceived as a legitimate fight response in times of crisis in the organization.

It is also considered as a positive process for decision-making and implementations. This is the particular domain of organizational politics where political skill of leaders can play a role for better performance of organizations (Cheema, 2006) which may also include leading change more effectively.

Available research on organizational politics have mainly considered it as an independent variable predicting personal and organizational outcomes such as satisfaction, organizational commitment, in-role performance, organizational citizenship behavior, job stress, and turnover etc. (e.g. Byrne, Kacmar, Stoner, & Howchwarter, 2005; Randall et al., 1999; Vigoda, 2002). Some of the research has tried to dig out the underlying situational factors that promote the political behavior among employees. These situational variables are ambiguous roles, policies, and discrimination for promotion and rewards. Personality has also been cited as a role player in organizational politics (Vredenburgh, & Maurer, 1984) but it’s Cheema (2006) who recently has tried to conceptualize the role of personality in organizational politics and tried to make a relationship of Big-Five personality dimensions with different categories of organizational politics.

In short, these attempts correlate organizational politics with personal struggles, conflicts, influential activities, political skill of leaders, inequity, unfairness, and effective management that result from the strong ambitions or aspirations of those who hold power in the workplace.

It is not wrong to say that based on the interactional and political skills and their better understanding of organizational politics, leaders have the ability to manage the change by reducing system uncertainty, friction and even by breaking existing political fiefdoms. They can also generate programmed conflicts, conflicts that raise different opinions regardless of the personal feeling of the employees, for decision making, decision-adoptation, policy implementation, and change management (Singh, 2003). Fry (2003) has examined leadership as motivation to change and concluded that, to motivate followers, leaders must get in touch with their core values and communicate them to subordinates through vision and personal actions. House and Shamir (1993) and Judge and Avolio (2000) have found that leaders who display behavioral components of inspirational motivation, intellectual simulation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration are able to align their followers’ values and norms and promote both personal and organizational change. Organizational politics is all about the influence process and is also one of the important domains of the leaders. We expect that its understanding will enhance their ability to accept and implement change because leaders having political skill and understanding of organizational politics will go beyond exchanging
contractual agreements for desired performance by engaging employees in the change process. From the preceding discussion we can infer that

**Proposition 4.** The leaders with political skill and better understanding of organizational politics might be able to manage change more effectively.

**A Model of Leaders’ Political Skill, Organizational Politics Understanding, and Organizational Change**

Drawing from the literature of leadership, political skill, organizational politics and change, a theoretical framework has emerged which explains how leader’ political skill and understanding of organizational politics would influence organizational change. The proposed relationship is illustrated in figure 1.
As shown in Fig 1, the leaders who have political skill and savvy of organizational politics would be better equipped to manage change in a more effective, smooth, and productive way. For this paper we have assumed leadership in its general influential role and have not differentiated among its different forms both dispositional i.e. transformational, transactional, and charismatic; and situational i.e. autocratic, democratic, bureaucratic, and laissez-faire. This model also explains that a leader can be predisposed to political skill or it can be developed later through training. Furthermore it throws light on different sources of politics in organizations which means that employees and leaders can engage in it because of their personal traits or due to work situations. A close relationship is also portrayed between leader’s political skill and understanding of organizational politics. The leaders with political skill can have a better understanding of organizational politics and organizational politics.
savvy can provide the right assessment of the situation and can make ground for the development and exercise of political skill. These two constructs support and comprehend each other and the leaders who can deploy them simultaneously would be able to manage organizational change effectively in favor of all the stakeholders of organization. Leaders of organizational change should be competent and trained in the process of transforming organizations if changes are to succeed. This model specifies that this competency can stem from leader political skill and his understanding of organizational politics.

**Conclusion**

Theory and research on Leadership, organizational politics and political skill have progressed considerably. Some of the researchers have also taken the political skill and different personal outcomes as a topic of inquiry, but no one has tried to state its role in organizational change. A thread of continuity through the existing literature is questioned and recognized i.e. leadership role in organizational change. The present paper contributes to understanding of leadership concept which has been the focus of research for several decades. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) have noted that

> It is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people. Leaders do not have to be great men or women by being intellectual geniuses or omniscient prophets to succeed, but they do need to have the right stuff: and this stuff is not equally present in all people (p. 58).

This paper indicates that political skill along with organizational politics savvy might represent a part of the “right stuff,” and propose that a leader equipped with this stuff will most likely be able to manage organizational change effectively. It also makes a close link between these two important dimensions of leaders i.e. organizational politics savvy and political skill.

Management scholars recognized the existence of the informal organization that comprised of spontaneous and discretionary choices (Peled, 2000). Pfeffer (1992) is of the view that power, influence, and politics are the certain part of organizational life. By ignoring these issues we may miss the opportunity to understand these critical social processes and may lose the chance to train managers to cope with them. Organizational politics has its ambivalence, but we can exploit its good aspects by developing its proper understanding and political skill among leaders, which can be used for decision making and implementation, to bring a good and positive change.

Zaleznik (1970) also supported this view that organizations are politically structured. Scarcity of the resources and competition over them become the bases of organizational politics and at the same time organizations provide opportunities for people to develop their career by exercising power and politics. Thus the leaders who have political skill in conjunction with organizational politics savvy can excel at a higher pace than leaders who do not have this “right stuff”. It also suggests that leaders can enjoy psychological and tangible benefits when they deploy them simultaneously to manage change in organizations. They can also yield the same benefits for employees and organizations as a result of positive change. our model infers that leaders need to lead in a positive manner, recognizing
that change is an emotive process and followers are need to be changed by exercising their political skill and organizational politics savvy.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the strengths of the theory and proposed model this paper is not without limitations. We have treated leadership, without any differentiation, in its general influential role. It may be well explored for a particular type of leadership e.g. transformational leader may be more appropriate for organizational change. At this point we can not look at it; if one can investigate; it will be a further step toward understanding leadership.

Political skill and organizational politics both root in social intelligence and social interactions, so they may overlap. However measuring these constructs by using exclusive scales may take away this constraint. For example political skill scale/inventory by Ferris et al. (1999, 2005) can be used and to measure one’s understanding of organizational politics, perceptions of organizational politics scale (POPS) by Kacmar and Ferris (1997) and Kacmar and Carlson (1999) can be a useful instrument.

As this is a theoretical paper so we are not sure about the effect size of leader’s political skill on his/her understanding of organizational politics and vice versa.

A large body of academic research provides strong evidence that national culture plays an important and enduring role in shaping the assumptions, beliefs, and values of individuals in the organizations. According to the most celebrated work of Hofstede (1984) on cultural differences and their effect on all the functions of organization, we assume that strength and size of leader’s political skill and his/her understanding of organizational politics will be different in individualistic and collective culture e.g. in USA and Asia. It is also a potential area for future research. For future research we also recommend if one can test our constructed theory and model empirically.

**Implications for Practice**

This article has attempted to define the role of leader’ political skill and organizational politics savvy in organizational change. The managerial applications of the proposed model are quite extensive. The more important is that organizations should employ those leaders who are predisposed with political skill and understanding of organizational politics at all managerial levels. Or the other way is to develop them among leaders by proper training as Ferris, Anthony, Kolodinsky, and Harvey (2002) have suggested some ways to develop political skill such as drama-based training, developmental simulations, and behavior modeling. This implication is more congruent for the organizations which are in the phase of drastic change e.g. mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, cultural, or technological change. Top and functional level leaders are responsible for smooth changes. They are desirous to bring it preemptively by assessing the environmental requirements or when facing them as challenges. As noted above that organizations are viewed as political arenas. Thus leaders need to have an interpersonal control over employees so that they can mould individuals and situations according to the desired change.
Another implication is for the promotion of leaders at higher ranks. Leaders equipped with political skill and organizational politics savvy might be promoted to the upper levels. These leaders can play the role of negotiators in business dealings with counterparties and also in resolving conflicts in their and organization favor. In the model, double arrow between political skill and understanding of organizational politics depicts a close relationship between them. Leaders with political skill can deal with the negative effects of organizational politics and can also make use of its positive effects in their own and organization interest. Organizational politics savvy can facilitate leaders to en-sharp or develop their political skill. If this relationship can be approved empirically it will be a great contribution to leadership and organization science.

References


Jung, Dong I., & Avolio, Bruce J., “Opening the black box: An experimental investigation of the mediating effects of trust and value congruence on transformational and transactional leadership,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21(8), (Dec 2000), 949–964.


