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The Utilization of Political Skill as Leverage in Sport Management Research

Pamela L. Perrewé and Gerald R. Ferris

Abstract

A major advancement in the political skill program of research was the development of a systematically developed and validated scale to measure political skill (i.e., referred to as the Political Skill Inventory), which reflected its four underlying dimensions of social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Also contributing to this expanded program of research was the publication of a comprehensive theoretical statement explaining the process dynamics and operation of the construct (Ferris et al., 2007), and also an applied book on political skill (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005), which discussed the implications for practice of this construct, and how political skill could be trained and developed. This work also provided a specific definition of political skill 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” (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127). This paper examines the utility of using the political skill construct in sport research.

Keywords: *political skill, sport research, influence*

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Political skill is a construct that was developed nearly 35 years ago, and was a term coined by both Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983), who are two prominent organizational scientists who were working independently at the time, developing political perspectives on organizations. Both scholars viewed work organizations as political contexts, where negotiation, persuasion, power, and politics played out on a regular basis, and individuals' skills at effectively engaging in such political processes were what they referred to as political skill. Unfortunately, because there was no scale at that time to measure political skill, empirical research on this construct was not activated until the late 1990s, when Ferris and his colleagues initiated a research program to develop a more complete understanding of political skill (Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005; Ferris et al., 2007). In the ensuing period of time, an active program of research has been conducted, demonstrating the roles political skill plays in organizations, and its importance to the field both theoretically and empirically (Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012; Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015).

A major advancement in the political skill program of research was the development of a systematically developed and validated scale to measure political skill (i.e., referred to as the Political Skill Inventory), which reflected its four underlying dimensions of social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Also contributing to this expanded program of research was the publication of a comprehensive theoretical statement explaining the process dynamics and operation of the construct (Ferris et al., 2007), and also an applied book on political skill (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005), which discussed the implications for practice of this construct, and how political skill could be trained/developed and selected for. This work also provided a specific definition of political skill 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" (Ferris, Treadway et al., 2005, p. 127).

The recent meta-analysis on political skill reported mainly on the direct effects of political skill on work outcomes, including positive relationships with job satisfaction, self-efficacy, organizational commitment, work performance, organizational citizenship behavior, career success, and personal reputation, and negative relationships with physiological strain (i.e., Munyon et al., 2015). However, there are some quite interesting relationships political skill has demonstrated where it has served as a moderator of key relationships. Specifically, political skill has been found to moderate influence tactics—work outcomes relationships, and the resources—work outcomes relationships. Those research areas are reviewed in the next sections.

Research on Political Skill in Organizations

Political Skill x Influence Tactics Interactive Effects on Others

Ferris et al. (2007) proposed that political skill will make influence tactics more effective, thus serving to moderate the relationships between influence tactics and work outcomes, by delivering and executing influence attempts in such a way that they are perceived by others in positive ways, which increases the effectiveness of the influence attempts. Treadway, Ferris, Duke, Adams, and Thatcher (2007) provided evidence that when subordinates demonstrated ingratiation behavior, it was more likely to be perceived and interpreted by supervisors as a manipulative influence attempt if they were low in political skill. Politically skilled subordinates were less likely to have their ingratiation behavior perceived as such (i.e., as manipulative and self-serving).

Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, and Shaw (2007) reported results demonstrating that subordinates high in political skill, and who utilized high levels of any of a number of influence tactics (i.e., exemplification, ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, or supplication), received more positive performance ratings from their supervisor than did subordinates lower in political skill. Finally, Kolodinsky, Treadway, and Ferris (2007) found political skill to moderate the positive relationship between rationality and supervisor perceptions of liking of subordinates and perceived similarity to subordinates, whereby increased use of rationality was related to increases in both perceived similarity and liking for individuals high in political skill. However, opposite results were obtained for individuals low in political skill (i.e., increased rationality was related to decreased similarity and liking).

Political Skill x Resources Interactive Effects on Others

Theory and research on political skill has argued that politically skilled individuals are capable of more effectively presenting and leveraging their available resources in ways that contribute to favorable work outcomes. Some recent research showed that past performance information can be leveraged by politically skilled individuals in ways that contribute to others' perceptions of individuals' increased power (Treadway et al., 2013) and reputation (Laird, Zboja, Martinez, & Ferris, 2013).

Two additional articles dealt with political skill of recruiters in the competitive process of recruiting athletes to Division I university sports programs. Magnusen, Mondello, Kim, and Ferris (2011) argued that securing top talent is perhaps the most important activity in which universities engage in the highly competitive process of recruiting athletes. Furthermore, they focus on the skills, competencies, and characteristics of the coaches who do the recruiting of high school athletes, in addition to the contextual information that can be leveraged by these recruiting coaches in order to more effectively 'sell' the university and athletics programs. Magnusen et al. argue that political skill of recruiters is key to their formulation

of a recruitment strategy involving the selection of situationally appropriate behaviors to demonstrate to recruits and present features of the context in ways that lead to recruitment effectiveness. In many ways, the Treadway, Adams et al. (2014) study serves as an empirical test of some of the notions presented by Magnusen et al., whereby they demonstrated that politically skilled college football coach/recruiters leveraged critical aspects of the organization's context (i.e., head football coach winning percentage) in ways that resulted in greater recruitment effectiveness (i.e., number and quality of high school recruits signed).

Some Directions for Future Research

Dimensions of Political Skill

Without a doubt, the most pressing need for future research on political skill is to look beyond the composite political skill construct effects, and examine the individual dimensions of political skill to better understand what is driving the obtained effects. The political skill construct is comprised of the four underlying dimensions of social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity, and research needs to investigate how these separate dimensions represent differential relationships with work outcomes, both as direct or main effects and as moderators. To date, very little published research has examined the separate dimensions of political skill. One exception is a study examining the role of political skill on compensation, promotions, career and life satisfaction, and perceived external job mobility (Todd, Harris, Harris, & Wheeler, 2009). These authors found that the dimension of networking ability seemed to explain the most variance in their outcome variables.

Future research also should examine not just how the separate dimensions operate individually, but also how they might interact with one another to influence outcomes, and also how they might work with and through one another in a mediated chain. For example, it might be the case that social astuteness and apparent sincerity contribute to increased networking ability, which, in turn, leads to greater interpersonal influence, which then leads to increased work performance and other outcomes. Thus, D1A athletic directors (ADs) who have social astuteness and apparent sincerity might be better at networking with other Athletic Directors, Conference Commissioners, etc. These networking relationships may lead to being privy to information such as how different schools and conferences handle important issues such as concussions with their student-athletes.

Leader Political Skill

In light of the requisite skill and competency sets of leaders, the investigation of political skill in leadership effectiveness is a logical one, scholars recently have discussed the importance of this research direction, and there has been increased interest in research on leadership and political skill (e.g., Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005; Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2012). A number of studies have been

conducted on the positive effects of leader political skill on follower outcomes and leadership effectiveness (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris et al., 2012). Political skill has been found to be associated with objective team performance (Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, 2004; Treadway, Douglas, Ellen, Summers, & Ferris, 2013) as well as leader effectiveness (Smith, Plowman, Duchon, & Quinn, 2009) even beyond the effects of other social effectiveness constructs (Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006).

In a comprehensive review of the leader political skill literature to date, Treadway et al. (2014) described the roles that leader political skill plays in leadership dynamics in organizations. One important issue that has been studied recently in this area is the identification of the mediating conditions that take place between leader political skill and leadership and follower effectiveness. We now have empirical support for the theoretical arguments that political skill affects leader performance by facilitating the effective selection and execution of situationally appropriate behaviors (Ferris et al., 2005).

Also, political skill has been argued to influence performance and effectiveness through the development of high-quality work relationships. Indeed, Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, and Ferris (2013) found that leader-member exchanges relationships mediated the relationship between leader political skill and leadership effectiveness, and Wei, Liu, Chen, and Wu (2010) reported that *guanxi* (i.e., high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships) mediated the relationship between subordinate political skill and subordinate career development experiences.

Leader Political Skill in Sport

Although research is making good strides in the organizational sciences literature, research on the role of political skill in sport is still lacking. The importance of leader political skill in sport should not be underestimated. Coaches who have political skill may be better at knowing which influence strategies are best, and knowing how to execute these influence strategies in order to attract recruits (Magnusen et al., 2011). Further, Treadway and colleagues (2014) demonstrated empirically that highly politically skilled football coaches were able to attract and secure the talents of more highly rated recruits than coaches with less political skill. Other research recently has examined the role of political skill in the recruitment process (Magnusen, Kim, & Perrewé, 2014; Magnusen, Kim, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2014). The applications of political skill to sports practitioners are endless.

Consider the reputational costs for Mark Emmert, president of the NCAA, when he attempted to push his agenda about the full cost of tuition onto schools throughout the nation. Instead of coming across genuine and trustworthy, many in the NCAA lost their respect and trust of Mr. Emmert because he did not “network” and consult with the representative schools, thus leaving his motives and intentions open to question. Although his ideas may have been well intentioned, he did not use his networking to fully include others affected by his decision. In

fact, many believe the splitting off of the five power conferences (i.e., ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, SEC and Pac-12) was largely due to a lack of trust with the NCAA and Mr. Emmert. Regardless of the fact that his vision for the full cost of tuition is becoming a reality, it comes with many costs to his reputation as President of the NCAA.

The political skill of the power five conference commissioners, ADs, and staff will influence the success of these conferences as they attempt to work together. Only time will tell if this split is beneficial to schools and student-athletes throughout the country, and much of the success will be due to how well key individuals interact and connect with one another. Thus, the political skill (i.e., social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and genuineness/sincerity) of these key individuals will become critical for success.

Future Research on Political Skill in Sport

We may speculate as to why political skill should be considered a requirement for work effectiveness in the sport industry as compared with other industries. Given the extreme societal veneration for athletic brands at most power five conferences, there are many consumers who are highly identified with a product (e.g., Duke Blue Devils' basketball). As such, extreme team identification occurs quite frequently. For example, millions of fans in the marketplace exclaiming, "It's MY team or "WE won," as well as sporting body tattoos of a favorite team or mascot, may drastically influence the manifestation of leader political skill. Thus, in this type of setting, a successful AD may need to be especially proficient at a particular element of political skill (e.g., networking) as compared to senior management at companies such as Boeing or John Deere. To date, researchers have not compared the efficacy of political skill dimensions as being differentially effective depending upon the industry.

Further, the decisions made by ADs are often affected by the presence of very powerful, and influential donors. Take the case of Phil Knight, co-founder and chairman of Nike, Inc., as he singlehandedly transformed the Oregon athletic department into a national discussion with his huge donations. Do ADs in situations like this need one dimension of political skill more than another to navigate their environment?

Social trends represent another significant factor in the world of sport. Think about recent issues like: domestic abuse in NFL, gay/lesbian issues in sport of late, "racial" activism in sport of late (e.g., the Orioles playing the first ever Major League Baseball game without any fans because of the riots in Baltimore), and many others. Can politically skilled general managers, head coaches, owners, etc. succeed through these turbulent waters better than those lacking political skill—we believe the answer is "yes."

Finally, National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Roger Goodell's political skill may be put to the test as he and the NFL decide just how to handle

the appeal by Tom Brady and the New England Patriots regarding the fine and four-game suspension for the Patriots quarterback. At stake here is not simply the substantive stance Goodell takes, but also there is the personal relationship he has with Patriots owner Robert Kraft, to whom he probably owes his job.

So, the issues surrounding political skill in sport need to be examined in future research, and such investigations will be able to shed further light on whether the domain of sport provides a unique context for how political skill dynamics play out, or whether political skill processes and outcomes generalize across position types and organizational contexts.

Conclusion

In summary, the application of political skill in sport is still in its infancy. Although political skill has been found to demonstrate effects upon numerous personal and work outcomes (e.g., work commitment, performance, career success, experienced stress, and personal reputation in organizations), much less is known about the role of political skill in sport. Although the application of political skill in coaching, administration, and recruiting is evident, more research is needed to fine tune the role of political skill in sport.

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