

Political skill, participatory decision-making, and organizational commitment

Geir Thompson¹, Robert Buch², & Bård Kuvaas¹

Author Note

¹BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway.

²Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Oslo, Norway.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Geir Thompson,
Department of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour, BI Norwegian Business School
Nydalsveien 37, 0484 Oslo, Norway. Telephone: +47 46 41 02 99. E-mail:
geir.thompson@bi.no

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Introduction

In the early 1980s, Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983) argued that organizations are inherently political arenas, where the acquisition and control of resources is paramount to the possession of power. Therefore, to be effective in political environments, organizational members need to possess political skill, defined as the exercise of influence through persuasion, manipulation, and negotiation. After this initial work, research on the concept of political skill laid dormant until 1999, when Ferris and his colleagues captured the essential nature of the construct. They defined 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. 291). According to Brouer et al., (2013), politically skilled organizational members combine four skills: (a) Social astuteness, which refers to the ability to interpret and understand the behavior of others and appreciate the potential of social interaction. (b) Interpersonal influence, the ability to adapt and calibrate behavior to elicit the desired responses. It reflects the capacity to effectively influence others by selecting tactics that match a particular situation. (c) Networking ability means identifying and developing strong, beneficial alliances and coalitions of people. (d) Apparent sincerity recognizes that politically skilled individuals appear to have high levels of integrity and be authentic, sincere and genuine. This aspect of political skill is important because individuals who appear sincere to others inspire trust and confidence since their actions are not interpreted as manipulative.

As defined above, politically skilled leaders effectively exercise influence tactics. They know which particular type to employ in various situations to ensure success (Ferris et al., 2005). Several tactical approaches are available, for example, integration, which refers to

behaviors designed to ensure likability by others (Stengel, 2000). Self-promotion is another influence tactic, designed to showcase competency and accomplishment (Jones, 1990). The tactic of assertiveness involves demanding, ordering, setting deadlines and checking up on others (Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson, 1980). Networking, positioning, and coalition-building are additional options (Ferris et al., 2005). Treadway et al. (2004) found that followers of politically skilled leaders felt supported by both their leader and their organization. However, much still remains to be learned about the influence tactics of politically skilled leaders.

One essential leadership activity is decision-making, and involving subordinates in the process has the capacity to inspire trust and confidence, promote credibility, help develop a favorable relationship with the leader, and enhance pride of participation in the organization (Yukl, 2010). In this respect, an intermediate process that has not yet been investigated in connection with political skill is subordinate participation in decision-making (PDM), where followers are involved in the decision-making process and where the objective is to gain their commitment to implementation efforts (Yukl, 2010).

In the current study we investigate the mediating role of PDM in the relationship between political skill and organizational commitment. We argue that politically skilled leaders understand that involving followers in the decision-making process increases subordinates' commitment to those decisions and to the organization (Yukl, 2010). Therefore, politically skilled leaders more extensively use PDM as an influence tactic, which should result in followers with higher organizational commitment.

The intended contribution of our study is twofold. First, as noted by Ewen et al. (2013, p. 517) "Although a growing body of research demonstrates that political skill is associated with leadership effectiveness, the field still lacks understanding about how political skill makes leaders more effective." In this respect, Ewen et al. (2013) contributed by showing that the relationship between supervisor-rated political skill and follower-rated leader effectiveness was

mediated by follower-rated transformational and transactional leadership. Building on this, our study aims to contribute to the political skill literature by investigating a specific mechanism through which political skill may relate to follower commitment. In so doing, we also answer the call for more research into the intermediate linkages between leader political skill and subordinate outcomes (for example, from Ahearn et al., 2004). Second, most studies on leader political skill have investigated follower *perceptions* of leader political skill. Investigating follower perceptions of leader political skill and relating it to other perceptions, attitudes, or self-reported behavior of followers, however, is subject to mono-method bias. To reduce this potential bias we have collected data on leader political skill and employee outcomes from different sources.

Theory and Hypotheses

Ferris and his associates (2005) developed a framework illustrating the dynamics of politically skilled individuals operating in organizational settings. Politically skilled individuals seem to have the ability to read people and situations well, and act accordingly to influence their environment by using influence tactics that facilitate goal accomplishment. We believe this action-orientation will propel leaders to use PDM to assure goal attainment. First, social astuteness, which refers to the ability to read and understand others, will help leaders assess whether their followers have the relevant information and can express concerns about adverse consequences of a proposed decision. Interpersonal influence, the ability to adapt and calibrate behavior to suit the situation, may also be useful when an important decision needs to be implemented. Politically skilled leaders would probably first involve followers in the decision process to gain commitment and support, and then put the decision into practice. Then networking ability, to develop strong, beneficial alliances and coalitions with others may be beneficial to increase social capital and implement decisions. Finally, leaders who employ

PDM need to be aware how it may be perceived by followers. If perceived to be manipulative, PDM will fail as an influence attempt. What distinguishes the skilled execution of PDM from perceived manipulation and failure is the political astuteness of the leader. Hence we suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Political skill is positively associated to PDM.

Organizational psychology research has traditionally viewed organizational commitment as an attitude characterizing the relationship between an employee and the organization. Mowday et al. (1979) defined organizational commitment (OC) as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization. This definition suggests organizational commitment is a multidimensional construct consisting of three principal dimensions (Mowday et al., 1979; Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1990): (a) affective or value commitment, a strong belief in and acceptance of organizational goals and values, (b) willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, and (c) attachment or intention to maintain membership in the organization. OC is more than passive loyalty. It represents an active relationship with the organization where individuals are willing to give something of themselves to help the organization to succeed, and is likely to have beneficial consequences for both employees and organizations. Studies have for instance found OC to be a key predictor of voluntary turnover (Mesu et al., 2015).

When politically skilled leaders involve their followers in decision processes, this may be interpreted as a sign that they are valued by their leader and are important members of the organization. We expect this would strengthen their affective or emotional attachment to the organization such that the strongly-committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in the organization. This seems to be consistent with McMillan and Chavis

(1986), who argued that when employees regard themselves as important members of an organization their commitment increases. This supports the study by Treadway and colleagues (2004), which demonstrated a link between leader political skill and follower commitment. In addition, Masterson and Stamper (2003) argued that PDM will strengthen the relational ties of employees within organizations. When followers participate in decision-making their work motivation and willingness to invest in the organization both increase. Furthermore, PDM is one of the most effective ways to foster employee involvement and feelings of mutual trust and self-confidence (e.g., Lawler, 1986). This may enhance their sense of belonging and thereby increase their willingness to remain in the organization because of an emotional attachment (Han et al., 2010). Hence, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Political skill is positively associated to OC via PDM.

 Figure 1: Conceptual model

Method

Sample and Settings

Participants in the present study were leaders and their followers in various business organizations in Norway. The leaders participated in a leadership training program arranged by the first author, which provided access to several medium- to large-sized business organizations. We were provided with each leader's and their followers' E-mail addresses and distributed questionnaires electronically using a web-based tool (Conformit). Each respondent was given a unique link to the questionnaires to respond to each item. We assured the

respondents of confidentiality and informed them that the data were being collected for strictly academic purposes. Furthermore, the participation was voluntary and no respondents were compensated for their participation in the study. To strengthen the internal validity of the results, only organizations from business settings were selected.

We obtained responses from 148 supervisors and 988 subordinates from top, middle, and operational levels in the organizations. Supervisors were the majority male (69.3 %), with an average age and education of 41.8 and 15.1 years, respectively. Subordinates were also predominately male (65.3%), with an average age and education of 42.9 and 13.9 years, respectively.

Instruments

Political skill was measured with an eighteen-item scale adapted from Ferris et al. (1999), (sample items: “It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do,” anchors: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Neutral, 5 = Slightly agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly agree. This instrument completed by the leaders was employed to measure individual ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act to enhance personal and/or organizational objectives. Prior research has demonstrated adequate reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .96) and validity (Treadway et al., 2004).

Subordinates in turn provided assessments of their own responses to work experiences. Their assessments included the *Organizational Commitment Questionnaire* measured with the nine-item version of the OCQ measure (Mowday et al., 1979). Sample item: “I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help the organization be successful,” anchors: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree somewhat, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Slightly agree, 6 = Agree somewhat, 7 = Strongly agree.

Organizational commitment was included in the survey to provide an index of employee assessment of his/her identification with, involvement in, and enjoyment of, membership in the organization. We used the short 9-item version of OC in accordance with the recommendations from Mathieu and Zajac (1990) in their meta-analysis, along with Tetrick and Farkas (1988), Meyer and Allen (1991), Morrow (1993), and McElroy et al. (1995). Prior research has supported the validity of this scale, and a study of 9 independent samples involving more than 2,500 respondents from different types of organizations found that the Cronbach's alpha for this scale ranged from .88 to .92 (Bearden and Netemeyer, 1999). *PDM* was measured by five items from Vecchio and Brazil (2007). Sample item: "My opinion is sought when a problem comes up that involves my work," anchors: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. The reported Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .81 in a study by Vecchio and Brazil (2007).

Control variables. To help rule out alternative explanations of the observed relationships between political skill and PDM and OC, we applied several exogenous variables as control variables. First, participation in decision-making may be influenced by the number of followers in each leader's group, such that increased span of supervision may limit the leader's ability to involve followers in decision-making processes. Therefore, we controlled for leader span of supervision, as well as leader education, since these may also influence the extent to which followers are allowed to participate in decision-making. In addition, to help eliminate spurious relationships when testing the hypothesized relationships, we controlled for leader age and leader gender. Such demographic variables may influence the development and use of leader political skill.

Translation and pilot test

As all instruments were originally developed in the English language, they were put through a translation-back translation conversion process to ensure equivalence of item meaning and to avoid the risk of misunderstanding or misconception (Brislin et al., 1973; Cavusgil and Das, 1997). In addition, pilot testing of the questionnaires with a focus group of five supervisors indicated the instruments were relevant in a for-profit setting, and did not detect any shortcomings in the design and administration of the questionnaire.

Results

The three scales completed by the respondents were subjected to confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) in accordance with Andersson and Gerbin's (1988) two-step approach. The results of CFA revealed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 [461] = 1075.96, p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.039; CFI = 0.94; NNFI/TLI = 0.94). According to Chin (1998, p. xiii) "Most of the loadings should be at least 0.60, and ideally at 0.70 or above, indicating that each measure is accounting for 50 percent or more of the variance of the underlying LV." In this respect, the mean standardized loading was .65. Accordingly, convergent validity was supported. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the independent and the dependent variables. The reliability for the multi-item scales was assessed by calculating the composite reliability for the measurement model (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). While composite reliability is similar to Cronbach's alpha, it additionally accounts for the possibility that the items may have different loadings and error variances. The composite reliability estimate should exceed 0.60 to be satisfactory (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). All the scales demonstrated high internal consistency, with composite reliability estimates ranging from 0.73 to 0.93, thus indicating a reliable measurement model. The coefficient estimates for the multi-item scales are listed on the primary diagonal of the intercorrelation matrix. As expected, political skill was significantly correlated with PDM ($r = .17, p < .01$), and PDM was correlated to OC ($r = .23, p < .01$).

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and intercorrelations

To test Hypothesis 1 we performed a structural equation model (SEM) analysis using MPlus. Using SEM is desirable to the causal steps approach of Baron and Kenny (1986) due to its estimation of everything at once rather than the assumption of independent equations (e.g., Zhao et al., 2010). In addition, the causal steps approach is among the lowest in power and fails to provide a quantification of the indirect effect itself (Fritz and MacKinnon, 2007). Unlike the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach, the SEM approach does not require an “effect to be mediated” (e.g. Zhao et al., 2010, p. 198). The SEM model we estimated provided a good fit with the data ($\chi^2 [581] = 1252.72, p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.034; CFI = 0.94; NNFI/TLI = 0.93). Figure 2 presents the results of the SEM analysis for outcomes and shows these relationships in context. Political skill as hypothesized (H1) was found to be positively related to PDM ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). In addition, PDM was positively related to OC ($\beta = .32, p < .001$). Furthermore we used the delta method procedure in Mplus (using the Sobel test) to test the indirect effects of political skill on organizational commitment via PDM. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, political skill indirectly predicted organizational commitment via PDM (standardized effect = .06, $p < .01$). The direct relationship between political skill and OC was not significant ($\beta = .03, n.s.$). This suggested “indirect only” (Zhao et al., 2010) or “full” mediation (Baron and Kenny, 1986). With respect to the control variables, we find it worth noting that the results revealed a negative relationship between leader span of supervision and PDM ($\beta = -.14, p < .05$), and a positive relationship between leader education and PDM ($\beta = .10, p < .05$).

Figure 2: SEM analysis

Discussion

One of the most important functions performed by leaders is making and implementing decisions. Leaders do this in various ways, such as seeking followers' opinions and making decisions together (Yukl, 2010). By involving subordinates in the process leaders are more likely to get decisions approved and implemented (Peters and Austin, 1985). However, in order to reap the potential benefits of PDM, a number of factors must be considered, such as follower willingness to share ideas and concerns before making a decision. The present study focuses on another such factor assumed to be of vital importance: the leader's political skill.

Results from our study support Hypothesis 1, which posits that leader political skill is positively associated to PDM. By involving followers in the decision-making processes, politically skilled leaders amplify commitment and support for implementation of decisions, and give subordinates a sense of ownership of the activities and the decision (Kouzes and Posner, 1987). In order to understand which dimensions of political skill are most important for favorable involvement of followers in decision-making, we conducted a post hoc SEM analysis using the four sub-dimensions of political skill (social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity) and PDM. The results of this analysis demonstrated that PDM was positively related to networking ability ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). It seems that politically skilled leaders' desire to encourage followers to participate in decision-making was amplified by their ability to build strong, beneficial alliances and coalitions, resulting in increased social capital and leverage and hence even greater influence. However, the SEM-analysis showed that PDM did not relate significantly to the remaining dimensions of political skill.

The present study found support for the second hypothesis, which states that political skill is positively associated to organizational commitment via PDM. When politically skilled leaders involve their followers in decision processes this may indicate to followers they are

valued by their leader, and we would expect this to strengthen their affective or emotional attachment to the organization. This finding complements prior research on the relationship between leader political skill and follower commitment (e.g., Treadway et al., 2004), by demonstrating an intermediate process through which leader political skill relates to follower commitment.

Limitations, Strengths, and Implications for Future Research

Some limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. First, ours is a cross-sectional study that lacks temporal information, including the consequences of observed decisions on organizational commitment. Longitudinal data may better allow for testing this relationship because PDM's influences on organizational commitment may require time to materialize. Rigorous experimental studies might also be more appropriate for studying the causal relationships between political skill, PDM, and organizational commitment. Second, common method variance should have little influence on the findings because the study used multisource data (supervisory self-report of political skill matched with follower rating of PDM and OC (Podsakoff et al., 2012)). However, PDM and OC were measured via self-reporting with its possibility of common-method bias. Hence an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to see whether the self-reported measures loaded on a single factor, thus indicating an extreme amount of common-method bias. The result of the test suggested that common-method variance did not account for the associations between the variables. Fourth, this research applied data from business settings; the results, therefore, are limited in their generalizability. It still remains to replicate this study in other contexts and in public organizations to determine whether the findings in our study hold in other situations.

Although our study found a positive association between political skill and PDM, it could still be argued that we overlooked situational moderators that may affect the exchange

process. Future research should therefore investigate whether inviting followers to participate in decision processes may depend on leader assessment of follower competence, such as task-relevant knowledge and experience, and follower willingness to share ideas and concerns before making a decision. Competent and motivated followers (high on both competence and willingness) are more likely to be included in decision-making by their leader because they have relevant information and can voice concerns about adverse consequences of a proposed decision. In contrast, when followers are low on competence and willingness it is more likely their leader will make decisions without their involvement. Because the relationship between political skill and PDM is situation dependent as described above, it is closely related to two critical dimensions of political skill. Assessing follower competence and willingness are consistent with the social astuteness dimension of the political skill concept, which refers to leaders' ability to observe followers and interpret their behavior. Furthermore, by involving followers in the decision process when they are competent and willing, leaders act in accordance with the interpersonal influence dimension, which refers to behavioral flexibility where leaders calibrate their behavior as required. Future research should investigate whether follower competence and commitment moderate the relationship between political skill and PDM.

Practical Implications

This study has examined the association between political skill, PDM and organizational commitment, with potentially important implications for practice. Our findings suggest that politically skilled leaders to a larger extent than other leaders invite followers to participate in decision-making in order to gain the commitment of the follower to support and implement decisions. PDM helps leaders to build strong, beneficial alliances and coalitions, resulting in social capital and leverage to further increase leader and organizational influence.

In order to reap these benefits, political skill must be practiced and honed. According to Ferris et al., (2005) for some leaders political skill may be a natural or intuitive trait. For others it feels uncomfortable and takes greater effort. Hence the development of political skill should be a key focus for leadership training. Previous research has demonstrated that political skill can be enhanced through development programs (e.g., Ferris et al., 2005), and Perrewé and Nilson, (2004) have outlined specific training methods. Of particular interest is the ability to identify and develop strong, beneficial alliances and coalitions. Through mentoring experiences leaders can learn how to take advantage of opportunities in their organization as well as advance their own careers. A coach or mentor can help leaders use political skill to secure an effective position at “the right place at the right time” to capitalize on opportunities. Establishing a mentoring relationship can introduce leaders into a vast network of relationship alliances to promote visibility and progression.

In conclusion, the present study found that leaders high in political skill encouraged their followers to participate in decision-making, one of the most important functions performed by leaders. Furthermore, inviting followers to participate in decision processes should strengthen subordinates’ affective or emotional attachment to the organization. Taken together, this investigation highlights the critically important mediating role of PDM in the linkages between leader political skill and organizational commitment. Hopefully these results will stimulate future research to investigate the relationship between leader characteristics and PDM as they affect important work outcomes.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and intercorrelations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Leader education	15.21	2.59						
Leader age	41.81	7.70	.02					
Leader gender	.31	.46	.07*	-.06				
Span of supervision	11.79	9.03	-.33**	-.14**	-.08*			
Political skill	5.44	.61	.07*	-.11**	.00	.11**	(.92)	
PDM	4.88	.99	.13**	.05	.10**	-.13**	.17**	(.73)
OC	5.44	1.08	-.06	-.04	-.07	-.06	.05	.23** (.93)

Note. $N = 988$. Reliability estimates on primary diagonal; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1: Conceptual model

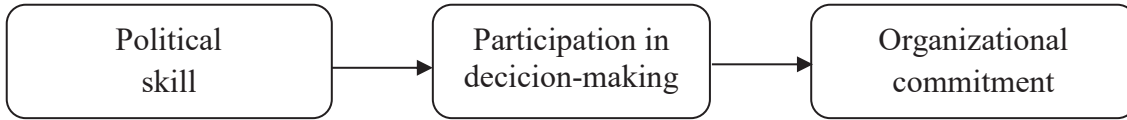
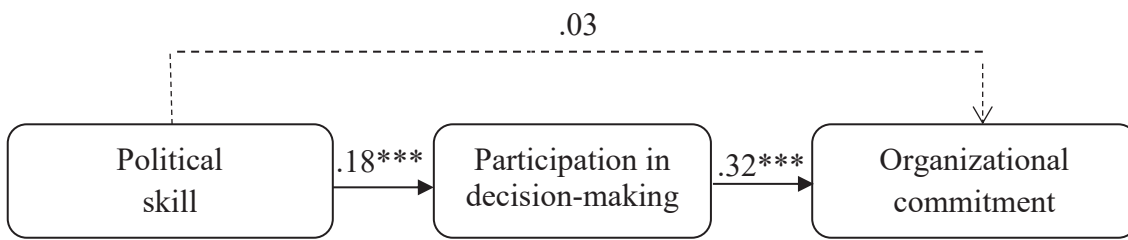


Figure 2: SEM analysis

$N = 988$. Fit indices: $\chi^2 [581] = 1252.72, p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.034; CFI = 0.94; NNFI/TLI = 0.93. To simplify the graphical presentation we do not depict the paths between the control variables and the outcomes.