

The Effect of Organizational Political Skills on Women's Career Progression in Kenya

Dr. Teresia Kavoo-Linge
Chandaria School of Business
United States International University
Africa

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which organizational political skills contribute as barriers to women employees' career progression in Kenya. The study was a cross-sectional survey carried out among women employees of the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) member organizations. Stratified random sampling was used to select a sample of 400 women employees from a population of 7,353. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and analysed using quantitative techniques. The analysis indicated that to a large extent organizational political skills were significant barriers to the career progression of women employees in Kenya. The study recommended that women employees should develop political skills and network with one another to sharpen these skills so that they can use them to enhance their career progression.

Keywords: Political Skills, Career Progression, Barriers and Organizational Politics

1.0 Introduction

Researches done on career have shown that there are many factors which contribute to career success. According to researchers, career success is about career progression. Career progression constitutes promotions and also how well any individual is doing in his or her career in terms of earnings (Ackah and Heaton, 2002). Most studies have placed emphasis on individual characteristics, mentoring, education and experience, and motivation among others with regard to women's career progression (Linge, 2009; McStravog 2006; Singh, Vinnicombe and Kumra 2006; Tharenou 1997; White, Cox and Cooper, 1994). Studies have not addressed the important aspect of political skills with regard to women's career progression and yet it is crucial.

Research done by several authors found that opportunity for career progression or promotion was associated with organizational politics (Gandz and Murray, 1980; Madison et al., 1980, Yukl and Falbe, 1990). Studies done by Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, and Mayes, (1980) found that promotion which is an aspect of career progression was one of the most political processes in organizations. Wayne and Liden (1995) state that individuals who become proficient at playing politics may realize greater job and career related rewards. Yukl and Falbe (1990) reiterate this observation when they state that effective use of political skills can enable one to achieve promotions and pay increment. Based on the fore discussion, it is reasonable to presume that employees who may not possess political skills may face a challenge in getting career rewards since the skills are key.

This study contributes to career research investigating the extent to which organizational political skills contribute as barriers to women employees' career progression in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

Although many women may disregard politics at the work place, their progression to higher positions is subject on their understanding how politics operate in their own organization (Vinnicombe, 1997). Organizational politics includes behaviors that occur on an informal basis in an organization and entail deliberate acts of influence that are intended to guard or enhance individuals' professional careers when conflicting courses of action are possible (Drory, 1993). According to Perrewe and Nelson (2004), in order to succeed and be effective in organizations, one must possess the political skill of being intuitive savvy concerning the specific behaviors to demonstrate in particular situations. The authors add that the style of execution to influence behaviors in organizations is a critical factor for career success and it represents a special type of social competency and astuteness referred to as political skill.

Political skill is the ability to understand others at work and use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that build up one's personal and organizational objectives (Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, and Ammeter 2004).

Politically skilled employees are distinguished as being socially astute, capable of influencing others, sincere in interactions, and thus are good at networking. Such employees are deeply aware of the social environment within which they operate and are capable of making accurate judgments regarding the social motives of others. That social awareness enables them to select the appropriate influence behaviors for a given situation and interaction since their influence attempts are more likely to be seen as genuine rather than driven by personal ambition. The politically skilled individuals are capable of building broad and strong networks which in return facilitate their attainment of personal goals and objectives (Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, Kacmar, Douglas, and Frink, 2005)

According to Madison et al., (1980) because politics is about power it is crucial for an employee to understand who has power in an organization and how those with power can impact one's career goal. In organizations, people engage in politics to progress their careers (Robbins, 2001). Research done by Madison et al., (1980) reported that politics was as equally or more instrumental than job performance in achieving promotions and increased earnings.

According to Robbins (2001), one can improve political adeptness in the organization by: framing one's arguments in terms of organizational goals, developing the right image, gaining control of organizational resources, avoiding tainted members and supporting one's boss. To frame one's arguments in terms of organizational goals an employee should match his or her career goals and plans consistently with the organizations future staffing needs (Ball, 1997). This is because the needs of an organization in many cases may come before the employee needs as far as the management may be concerned.

On the issue of developing the right image, Ball (1997) says one can do that by gaining attention for one's achievements and working together with employees who are seen as high performers. He adds that these are smart moves which get employees noticed and ready to react to the opportunities available. Such moves can assist one to progress up whatever organizational ladder exists- the route to conventional career success.

Robbins (2001) states that knowledge and expertise are important resources to control because they make an employee valuable to the organization and more likely to gain security, progression and enables one to gain receptive audience from others. An employee may be deemed as important in the organization because of his or her work ethic and skill set which could lead managers and colleagues to respect, trust and recognize the value that the employee brings to the company Madison et al., (1980).

To improve on one's image one should also develop powerful allies. Robbins (2001) states a politically skilled employee knows how to build working relationships with influential people. Such people can be supportive when an opportunity within an organization opened. Important allies include influential people who will speak well of the employee's achievements to the senior management and those in senior positions. By so doing, they help to create a positive image of the employee.

Research suggests that part of the necessary political skills include avoiding tainted members. Tainted members are the employees who have a reputation for being problem employees (Anthony, Kacmar and Perrewe, 2006). Such employees, will not want to follow procedure, or work rules, will refuse to do certain parts of their job because they do not like the tasks involved and are generally a poor performers and therefore bad employees (Sullivan, 1998). That type needs to be avoided because bad behavior can be contagious. Since employees who want to progress their careers want to project a positive image, they may not associate with tainted because the tainted have a negative image.

An employee who wishes to progress in his or her career should support his or her boss (Robbins, 2001). Bosses look for employees to accomplish things that will get the job done. This is mainly because the bosses want to look good in the opinion of their superiors. The more an employee fits into that strategy, the better. It is also important to be certain that the boss knows how well the employee is doing. The bosses will notice those who volunteer for extra work or produce stellar results on projects they are currently completing (Anthony et al., 1998). These are the employees the bosses are likely to recommend for rewards and promotion.

Another important aspect of political skill which is necessary for career progression is ingratiation. In this regard, several authors found a positive relationship between ingratiation and liking that was moderated by political skill such that ingratiation was related to supervisor liking for employees who were high in political skill (Shaughnessy-Treadway, Breland, and Brouer, 2011). Supervisor liking is related to better promotion ratings (Watkins and Smith, 2014).

From the foregoing discussion, it is reasonable to deduce that political skill enables employees to be more effective in their influence attempts which can lead to positive career outcomes like promotions. By presenting political skills as essential for career progression, research implies that lack of political skills could present employees with barriers to their career progression. It is not clear if this is the case for women employees in Kenya.

Contradicting the perspective that political skills can lead to promotion was research done by Fook, Wafa and Saufi (2003), when they found that in Malaysia value adding and value creation was the priority to promotions and pay increment. This is to say only real contribution which came from hard work could lead to promotion and /or increased earnings. This study tries to reconcile the findings on women employees' perception on the contribution of political skills as barriers to their career advancement in Kenya.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed the cross-sectional survey research design where data were collected at one time. The study involved Federation of Kenya (FKE) member organizations. The target population of study was the women employees whose population was 7,353. Stratified random sampling was applied to select a sample size of 400 respondents. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Career progression (promotion or increase in earnings) the dependent variable was measured with one item. The respondents were to give using yes and no responses with regard as to whether or not they had received promotion or an increase in earnings over the past period of three years. The independent variable political skills was measured using eleven (11) items ranging from understanding people in my organization well to getting people to like me. The measures involved Likert type of questions with responses ranging from 1 not a barrier to 5 a great barrier. Results were analyzed using SPSS tool. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The Chi squared (χ^2) was computed for inferential statistics.

4.0 Findings

Those who responded were 366 representing a response rate of 91.5% which could be attributed to the effectiveness of the drop and pick method in the data collection. The study examined the results on the components of career progression and political skills as barriers to women's career progression. The results are presented in the appendix. The findings showed that about 25% (91) of the respondents had experienced some career progression in way of promotion or increased earnings but 75% (275) had not received any promotion or increase in earnings over the last three years.

The key findings showed that among those who had progressed, a big proportion (45%) did not perceive the factor of understanding people in the organization as a barrier whereas the same factor was a great barrier (55.6%) to those who had not progressed. Chi-square test indicated that understanding people in the organization was a significant barrier to career progression ($\chi^2=63.242$; $d.f.= 4$; $P= 0.002(P<0.05)$). The factor of building relationships with influential people was reported not a barrier by 20.9% of those who had progressed but 40% of those not promoted reported it as a great barrier. It was confirmed to be a significant barrier to career progression of the women ($\chi^2=65.812$; $d.f.= 4$; $P=0.014(P<0.05)$). A total of 33% among those who had progressed did not find expertise a barrier however, 32.4% of those who had not progressed found that a barrier. Chi-square test showed that showing expertise was a significant barrier to career progression of women ($\chi^2=5.818$; $d.f.= 4$; $P=0.021(P<0.05)$). The majority who had not received a promotion perceived a great barrier on the intuition about how to present themselves to others (61.1%) as opposed to those who had been promoted (25.3) %. Lack of intuition presented a significant barrier to promotion ($\chi^2=53.811$; $d.f.= 4$; $P=0.000(P<0.05)$). Also, 27.5% of those who had not progressed reported that fostering a good image was not a barrier but 51% of those who had not progressed reported that it was a great barrier. Chi-square test showed that the factor was a significant barrier to women's career progression ($\chi^2= 39.211$; $d.f.= 4$; $P=0.0417 (P<0.05)$). Supporting the boss was not perceived as a barrier by the bigger proportion (46.2%) of those who had not progressed.

Of those who had been promoted 28.6% reported supporting their bosses not to be a barrier to their career progression. The factor was a significant barrier to career progression of women employees ($\chi^2=23.384$; $d.f.= 4$; $P= 0.000(P<0.05)$).

Factors like trying to show genuine interest in people, access to organizational resources, avoiding tainted members, framing self-interests in terms of organizational goals and getting people to like someone were not perceived as significant barriers to women's career progression.

5.0 Discussion and Recommendations

The findings showed that one of the main factors in political skills which presented significant barriers to the career progression of women included understanding people in the organization. Failure to understand people in the organization may lead to failure to influence people through interactions and networking it may signify lack of the political skill to enable the women to attain their personal goals of career progression. The politically skilled individuals are capable of building broad and strong networks which in return facilitate their attainment of personal goals and objectives (Ferris et al., 2007).

Building relationships with influential people was significant barrier to career progression of women employees. Robbins (2001) states a politically skilled employee knows how to build working relationships with influential people. Such people help to create a positive image of the employee. This could mean that the women employees who build relations with powerful people in the organization were likely to benefit from those relations in way of career progression whereas the reverse could be real. Expertise was another significant barrier to career progression of women employees. Lack of expertise implies that one may not have developed the skills, respect and trust deemed as a requisite to lead others (Madison et al., (1980). Supporting one's boss was crucial in attaining career progression. This could be achieved through volunteering for extra work or producing stellar results on projects (Anthony et al., 1998). This factor was a significant barrier to women employees' career progress. It is recommended that women employees overcome this barrier by volunteering in work related projects and produce good results which give them the much needed visibility for their career progression.

Based on these findings it is recommended that women employees who wish to progress in their careers should develop political skills. Such skills will prove to be important in their career progression.

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Appendix: Cross Tabulations and Chi squared (χ^2) of Women's Career Progression and Political Skills

Construct	R	NBA	WBA	NS	BA	GRBA	TOTAL
Understanding people in my organization well	Yes	41 45.1%	15 16.5%	5 5.5%	14 15.4%	16 17.6%	91 100%
	No	38 13.8%	16 5.8%	10 3.6%	58 21.1%	153 55.6%	275 100
$\chi^2=63.242; d.f.= 4; P= 0.002(P<0.05)$							
Building relationships with influential people	Yes	19 20.9%	26 28.6%	7 7.7%	24 26.4%	15 16.5%	91 100%
	No	12 4.4%	22 8.0%	7 2.4%	124 45.1%	110 40%	275 100%
$\chi^2=65.812; d.f.= 4; P=0.014(P<0.05)$							
Expertise	Yes	30 33%	36 39.6%	9 9.9%	9 9.9%	7 7.7%	91 100%
	No	47 17.1	97 35.3%	17 6.2%	25 9.1%	89 32.4%	275 100%
$\chi^2=5.818; d.f.= 4; P=0.021(P<0.05)$							
Try to show genuine interest in people	Yes	13 14.5%	26 28.6%	15 16.5%	14 15.4%	23 25.3%	91 100%
	No	11 4%	20 7.3%	13 4.7%	64 23.3%	167 60.7%	293 100%
$\chi^2=66.613; d.f.= 4; P=0.0614(P\geq 0.05)$							
Intuition about how to present myself to others	Yes	23 25.3%	25 27.5	6 6.6%	14 15.4%	23 25.3%	91 100%
	No	16 5.8%	30 10.9%	15 5.5%	46 16.7%	168 61.1%	292 100%
$\chi^2=53.811; d.f.= 4; P=0.000(P<0.05)$							
Framing self-interests in terms of organizational goals	Yes	9 9.9%	22 24.2%	19 20.9%	25 27.5%	16 17.6%	91 100%
	No	14 5.1%	12 4.4%	18 6.5%	113 41.1%	118 42.9%	275 100%
$\chi^2=60.635; d.f.= 4; P=0.076(P\geq 0.05)$							
Fostering a good image	Yes	25 27.5%	15 16.5%	8 8.8%	18 19.8%	25 12.3%	91 100%
	No	30 10.9%	19 6.9%	7 2.5%	74 20.2%	188 51.4%	275 100%
$\chi^2= 39.211; d.f.= 4; P=0.0417 (P<0.05)$							
Access to organizational resources	Yes	31 34.1%	21 23.1%	14 15.4%	12 13.2%	13 14.3%	91 100%
	No	102 37.1%	79 28.7%	21 7.6%	50 18.2%	23 8.4%	275 100%
$\chi^2=8.709; d.f.= 4; P= 0.069(P\geq 0.05)$							
Avoiding association with tainted members	Yes	39 42.9%	18 19.8%	13 14.3%	11 12.1%	10 11%	91 100%
	No	182 49.7%	119 32.5%	17 4.6%	31 8.5%	17 4.6%	275 100%
$\chi^2=43.791; d.f.= 4; P= 0.428(P<0.05)$							
Supporting my boss	Yes	26 28.6%	17 18.7%	8 8.8%	24 26.4%	16 17.6%	91 100%
	No	127 46.2%	67 24.4%	7 2.5%	57 20.7%	17 6.2%	275 100%
$\chi^2=23.384; d.f.= 4; P= 0.000(P<0.05)$							
Getting people to like me	Yes	18 19.8%	19 20.9%	7 7.7%	23 25.3%	24 26.4%	91 100%
	No	112 40.7%	80 29.1%	9 3.3%	50 18.2%	24 8.7%	275 100%
$\chi^2=43.791; d.f.= 4; P= 0.084(P\geq 0.05)$							