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Influence of ethical management on politics in performance appraisal: Development and validation of a causal model

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the ethical Management concept on perceptions of organizational politics in performance appraisal within the context of Malaysia's rapidly growing economy and its demand for effective human resource policies in the financial sector. Addressing the risks of workplace politics that can lead to performance errors and reputational harm, the research employed a quantitative approach, utilizing a questionnaire distributed to 274 officers and clerical staff selected through proportionate stratified random sampling in a Malaysian government financial institution in Kuala Lumpur. Exploratory factor analysis and data validation identified three dimensions of organizational politics in performance appraisal and six dimensions of the Ethical Management concept: work commitment, social obligation, justice, job satisfaction, creative work, and productivity. The findings revealed that work commitment, justice, job satisfaction, and creative work were significantly influenced by the perception of benefits, emphasizing their role in improving organizational outcomes. This study contributes to the development of a model linking the Ethical Management concept to organizational politics, offering insights for enhancing organizational performance through improved management practices.

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of Malaysia's financial system necessitates a sufficient supply of skilled human resources. Employees play a vital role in this sector, as the financial industry requires individuals capable of meeting the demands of the global financial market while supporting Malaysia's growth as an international financial hub. Employees, as key stakeholders in financial institutions, significantly influence the institution's reputation through their behavior and practices (Ali and Kasim, 2019). Furthermore, culture has a strong impact on individual behavior, despite the varying definitions of culture itself (Ellinas et al., 2017).

Performance management is crucial for establishing clear and shared work expectations, ensuring agreement on required support and resources, and providing a foundation for evaluating performance. It plays a significant role in fostering a culture that is ethical, fair, and focused on performance. This human resource management function is essential for ensuring employees meet their accountability obligations. A well-designed performance management process aligns business planning, resource allocation, work objectives, learning and development, achievement, recognition, evaluation, and reporting. Importantly, the performance management system must align with the principles of the financial system, avoiding the influence of organizational politics during performance evaluations (Maharani and Rahmawati, 2020).

Organizational politics, sometimes referred to as office politics (originally describing interactions among office workers but often applied more broadly), is defined as "the use of one's individual or assigned power within an organization to gain advantages beyond legitimate authority" (Parker et al., 1995). This study seeks to assess the presence of organizational politics in performance management. Furthermore, in ethical management, the concept of

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justice plays a critical role. The adoption of appropriate leadership styles can help reduce employees' perceptions of discrimination (Elsaman et al., 2024). Therefore, this research aims to explore the impact of the ethical management concept of justice on organizational politics in performance appraisal processes.

The concept of ethical management in Malaysia refers to a management approach that promotes ethics and morality in employee management, emphasizing values such as human dignity, loyalty, hard work, justice, and generosity (Ali and Kasim, 2019). Liu et al. (2007) identified nine management practices, including two key principles: the eighth principle, which involves leaders actively monitoring the performance of their subordinates, and the ninth principle, which emphasizes fairness and justice in leadership. Ethical management leadership (EMC) is based on mutual trust and establishes a psychological contract between leaders and their subordinates, ensuring guidance, protection, and equitable treatment. Consequently, EMC leadership focuses on fostering goodwill and minimizing discrimination among employees.

Ali and Kasim (2019) highlighted that EMC emphasizes social aspects in the workplace and responsibilities toward society, including fostering organizational citizenship. Basri et al. (2017) further noted that unity and sovereignty are fundamental to leaders' behavior. However, as previously mentioned, in the context of office politics, discrimination and the misuse of power are central issues that contribute to its existence.

Daud et al. (2023) conceptualized office politics as a solid error in company policies. It was indicated that politicking activities may create conflicts in an organization. The limited resources in an organization may change potential conflict into actual conflict. Conflicts are interactions between individuals, groups, or organizations that set opposing objectives or opposing means to obtain objectives and perceive other persons as potentially interfering with the achievement of their objectives. Conflicts are characterized by asymmetric information. Each side generally knows a great deal about the evidence and the arguments that support its position and much less about those that support the other side's position. Each side will tend to overestimate its chances of success and its ability to impose a solution on the other side and prevent such an attempt by an opponent. Conflict may result in better choices if it does not occur in a setting where people try to score points and beat one another. Hence, politicking exists when individuals struggle to get limited resources or acquire what they want.

Stress and social exchange perspectives help understand reactions to perceptions of organizational politics (Chang et al., 2009). This is due to political behavior being a fact in an organization and encompassing those activities that are not required as part of one's formal role. Factor analyses of data from an organizational climate survey performed by Parker et al. (1995) suggested that organizational politics is an essential dimension of peoples' perception of the work environment. Chang et al. (2009) maintained that perceptions of organizational politics had a stronger relationship with role conflict. The authors also revealed that perceptions of organizational politics have a strong, positive relationship with strain and turnover intention and solid and antagonistic relationships with job satisfaction and affective commitment. In particular, perceptions of organizational politics were associated with increased psychological strain, which was associated directly with reduced performance and indirectly with increased turnover intentions through reduced morale.

A study performed by Ikemefuna and Chidi (2012) has exhibited that in performance appraisal, leaders have tendencies to perform several biases, including the halo effect, error of central tendency, stereotype, and favoritism. They also found that fairness became the central intention among employees. Longenecker and Goff (1992) saw biases in performance appraisal as politics because these biases may evolve discrimination among employees in an organization. Employees are optimistic that their performance is being evaluated in justice by their immediate superiors. Hence, when they appraise their subordinates' performance, every superior must not manipulate power negatively and employ discrimination.

As Chang et al. (2009) maintained, perceptions of organizational politics indirectly affect turnover intentions and performance through more immediate outcomes, such as strain and morale. The research demonstrated that if the activities are perceived as political, for example, based on favoritism and self-interest, they may have extensive adverse effects on organization members. This finding has been supported by a study performed by Lee and Peccei (2011), which found that the level of employees' individual organizational citizenship behavior (OSBI) is low in the political environment. Employees will not trust the performance appraisal result if organizational politics become the main issue in an organization.

As many studies have shown, office politics may have a negative impact on employees, and this issue must be handled with care by management so that no conflict occurs in the organization. Ofoegbu et al. (2012) have found that organizational politics has a meaningful relationship with workplace friendship. In addition, EMC encourages ethics and morality, including in managing employees, and emphasizes human dignity, loyalty, hard work, justice, and generosity. Therefore, work ethics become a need to eliminate office politics in the performance appraisal process and, as a result, increase the perception of fairness and justice amongst employees.

In our previous study (Daud et al., 2023), we identified office politics as a factor that can damage employee-employer relationships and disrupt the harmony of the workplace environment. We also examined the dimensions of organizational politics, identifying them as a significant source of errors in

employee performance appraisals. Consequently, the primary objective of this study is to propose potential solutions to address these issues. Ethical dimensions are suggested as a promising approach to resolving this dilemma. Thus, the research objective can be summarized as follows:

- To conceptualize the influence of the Ethical management concept on politics in performance appraisal.
- To validate the causal model, the relationship between the two variables, EMC and performance appraisal, must be illustrated.

Based on a review of recent and existing literature, the research framework is developed to include six dimensions of the EMC and three dimensions of office politics (Fig. 1).

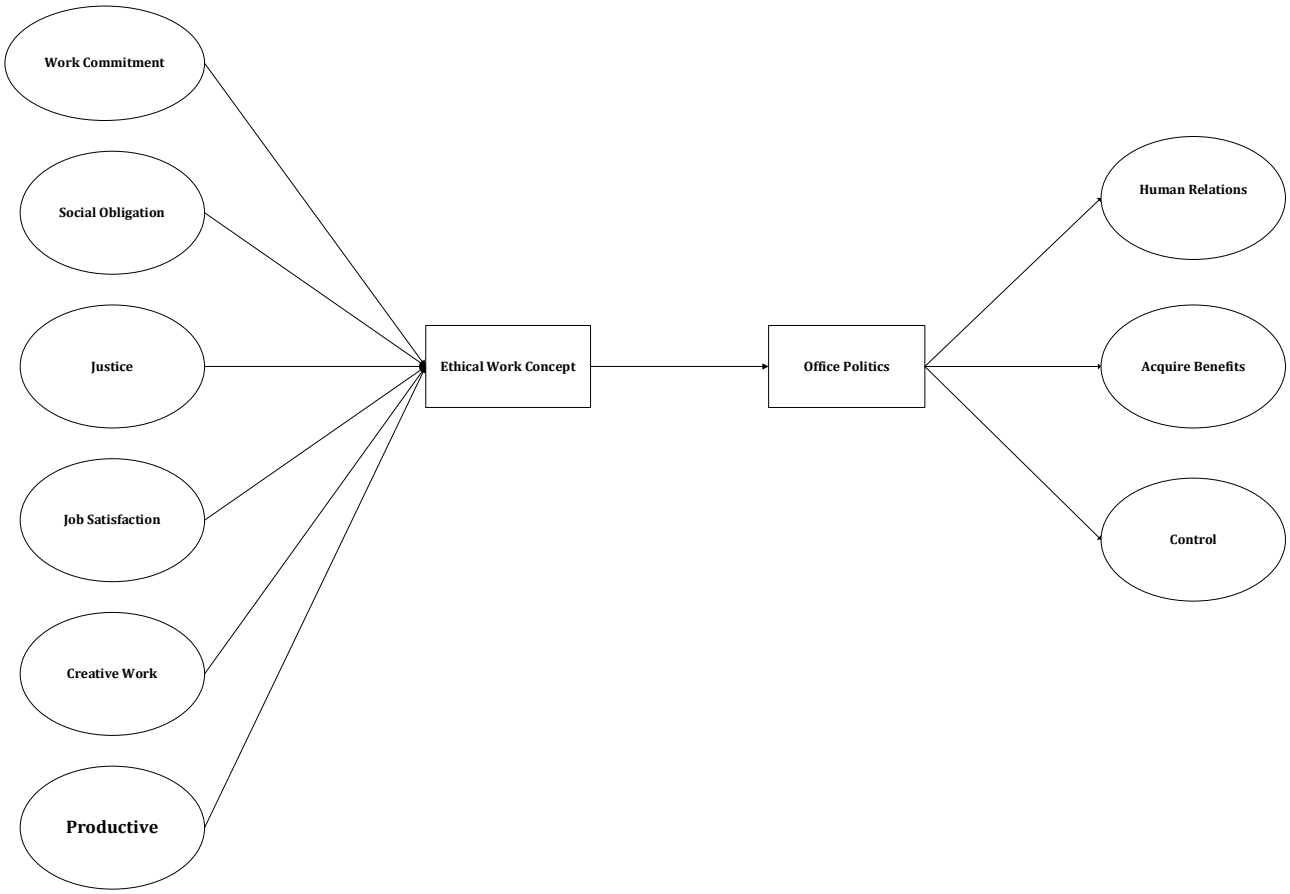

Fig. 1: The research conceptual flowchart

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research design

This study was quantitative research, and parametric tests were used to identify the relationship between independent and dependent variables. For this study, primary data was obtained through questionnaire distribution. In determining the study samples, the sampling frame was defined, and the stratification of samples was followed. Once the stratified samples have been determined, a random sampling procedure was employed to identify the respondents. Questionnaires were distributed to respondents to evaluate their perception of items used to measure each variable. The instruments involved in this study were adopted from various sources. A pilot study was conducted to examine the reliability of the questionnaires. The value of Cronbach Alpha (α) determined the reliability of each Item constructed in the questionnaire. Items in the questionnaire were clustered into appropriate dimensions in variables. The factor analysis was employed to justify items representing the dimensions or factors of each variable. The population of the study involved one of the Malaysian government financial sectors located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia headquarters officers, and administrative staff, and the overall population for this study was nine hundred potential respondents. By using the sampling determination suggested by Hair et al. (2010), the sample size for this study was established at the level of 274, while, in total, 271 answers were obtained and used in this work.

2.2. Population and sample

This study was conducted among administrative staff and officers at a Malaysian government link company. The population for this study is nine hundred. Using the sampling determination techniques suggested by Hair et al. (2010), the sample for this study is 274. This study has

employed disproportionate stratified random sampling. A total of 274 questionnaires were distributed, of which 271 were returned and deemed usable.

2.3. Research instrument

The research questionnaire employed 4-point Likert-type scales to represent respondents' agreement with each question. This scale is called a forced-choice scale. Recent studies have explored the impact of forced-choice formats on response biases. Kreitchmann et al. (2019) compared forced-choice formats with Likert scales and found that forced-choice formats can mitigate response biases such as social desirability and acquiescence. Similarly, Wetzel et al. (2020) noted that multidimensional forced-choice questionnaires are effective in controlling response biases, making them valuable in personnel selection contexts. These findings suggest that forced-choice formats can enhance the accuracy of self-report assessments by reducing common response biases.

To examine the type of office politics in performance appraisal, this study has employed the Questionnaire of Political Considerations in Performance Appraisal (QPCPA) constructed by Tziner et al. (1996). This instrument consists of twenty-five items with a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.97. Poon (2004) has utilized this instrument in her attempt to measure the effect of politics in performance appraisal on job satisfaction and turnover intention. She found that QPCPA is exceptionally reliable (Cronbach Alpha value scored more than 0.8).

The instrument used to measure the EMC was adopted from Ali (1988). The EMC scale consists of 46 items and has a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.89. In a study involving 117 managers in Saudi Arabia, Ali (1988) found that EMC emphasizes the importance of work as a means of fostering employee independence. Work is also viewed as a source of self-respect, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Furthermore, commitment and hard work are highlighted as key indicators of success and progress in a given task.

2.4. Factor analysis

Factor analysis is performed to identify the discriminant factors and convergent items (Hair et al., 2010) for QPCPA and EMC. The purpose of factor analysis is to summarize the information in a large number of variables into smaller factors. R-factor analysis is used in this research. R-factor analysis analyzes variables to identify the latent dimensions (Hair et al., 2010).

Before pursuing factor analysis, this study performed reliability and normality tests. In this study, the QPCPA instrument scored a Cronbach Alpha value of .780, while the EMC instrument scored 0.926, which is reliable, according to Meyers et al. (2016).

2.5. Factor identification

This study employs a latent root criterion to identify several factors. In this criterion, the researcher examines eigenvalues. According to Hair et al. (2010) and Meyers et al. (2016), factors with eigenvalues greater than one are considered significant. In addition, Hair et al. (2010) suggested it is common to consider a factor or combination of factors that account for 60% of the total variance as satisfactory.

In order to achieve a simpler and pragmatically more meaningful factor solution, this study has performed factor rotation. After determining discriminant factors and their convergent items, this study will perform a reliability test again. After the factor analysis process, Table 1 reveals the Cronbach Alpha (α) value for office politics in performance appraisal. The first factor for office politics in performance appraisal consists of nine items. Its Cronbach Alpha value was .595. After discarding Item QCPCA 22, the value increased to 760. This factor has been renamed as "Acquire Benefit." For factor two, this particular factor consists of 5 items. The Cronbach Alpha for this factor was .827. Because the items for this factor reflect the relationship between superiors and subordinates, this factor is called "Human Relations." Factor three consists of 3 items with a Cronbach Alpha value of .725. This factor is renamed as "Control." Hence, these three factors representing office politics in performance appraisal are reliable.

The rotated component matrix, as exhibited by Table 2, shows that there are six items that converged, including "One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities" and "A successful man is the one who meets deadlines at work." The Cronbach Alpha for this factor was .901, which is reliable. This factor is renamed as "Work Commitment." The second factor consists of five items: "Justice and generosity in the workplace are necessary conditions for society's welfare" and "Good work benefits both oneself and others," and its Cronbach Alpha value was .920. This factor is called "Social Obligation." The third factor, named "Religiosity," consists of five items, including "Laziness is a vice," and Money earned through gambling, selling intoxication, a manipulative monopoly, bribery, and the like are harmful to society." This factor scored a Cronbach Alpha value of .867. Factor four consists of three items: "A person can overcome difficulties in life and better himself by doing his job well," with a Cronbach Alpha value of .902. This factor is called "Job Satisfaction." The fifth factor scored a Cronbach Alpha value of .795. This factor consists of three items: "Creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment" and is renamed "Creative Work." The final factor extracted from Work Ethics is named "Productivity." This factor consists of two items: "More leisure time is bad for individuals and society" (Cronbach Alpha .776).

Table 1: Reliability test after factor analysis

Office politics in performance appraisal	Cronbach alpha after factor analysis
Factor 1 (acquire benefit)	.760
Factor 2 (human relation)	.827
Factor 3 (control)	.725

Table 2: Cronbach Alpha for ethical management concept

Ethical management concept	Cronbach alpha after factor analysis
Factor 1 (work commitment)	.901
Factor 2 (justice)	.920
Factor 3 (social obligation)	.867
Factor 4 (job satisfaction)	.902
Factor 5 (creative work)	.795
Factor 6 (productivity)	.776

2.6. Data analysis

2.6.1. The effect of ethical management concept on office politics in performance appraisal (acquire benefit)

During the case-wise analysis, one case was removed from the sample. The R^2 value represents the regression coefficient between the predicted and actual values of the dependent variable. Table 3 shows an R^2 value of 0.579, indicating that 57.90% of the variance in office politics in performance appraisal is explained by the combination of work commitment, social obligation, creative work, justice, productivity, and job satisfaction. Additionally, Table 3 reports an F-value of 6.153, which is significant at $\rho < 0.05$. This result demonstrates a meaningful relationship between the weighted linear combination of the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Table 3: Coefficients table for office politics in performance appraisal (acquire benefit)

	Dependent variable Usage (standardized beta)
Work commitment	-.568*
Social obligation	-.104
Justice	.341*
Job satisfaction	.357*
Creative work	.316*
Productivity	.078
F-value=F(6, 86)	6.153*
R^2	0.579

*: p<0.05; Dependent variable: Acquire benefit

The t-test and significance levels enable researchers to evaluate the unique contribution of each variable in predicting the dependent variable. As shown in Table 3, work commitment, justice, job satisfaction, and creative work were significant predictors of office politics in performance appraisal. The results indicate that work commitment negatively predicted office politics in performance appraisal, suggesting that higher work commitment is associated with lower levels of office politics. In contrast, other factors, including religiosity, job satisfaction, and creative work, demonstrated positive predictions, indicating their association with higher levels of office politics in performance appraisal.

2.6.2. The effect of ethical management concept on office politics in performance appraisal (human relation)

In the case-wise analysis, no cases were excluded from the sample. The R^2 value, representing the regression coefficient between the predicted and actual values of the dependent variable, is 0.473, as shown in Table 4. This indicates that 47.30% of the variance in office politics in performance appraisal is explained by the combination of work commitment, social obligation, creative work, religiosity, productivity, and job satisfaction. Furthermore, Table 4 reports an F-value of F(6, 87) = 5.286, which is significant at $\rho < 0.05$. This result demonstrates a significant relationship between the weighted linear combination of the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Table 4: Coefficients table for office politics in performance appraisal (human relation)

	Dependent variable Usage (standardized beta)
Work commitment	-.520*
Justice	.407*
Social obligation	-.183
Job satisfaction	.147
Creative work	-.185
Productivity	.097
F-value=F(7, 87)	5.286*
R^2	0.473

*: p<0.05; Dependent variable: Human relation

The t-test and significance levels enable researchers to evaluate the unique contribution of each variable in predicting the dependent variable. As shown in Table 4, work commitment and justice were significant predictors of office politics in performance appraisal. The findings reveal that work commitment negatively predicts office politics in performance appraisal, indicating that higher work commitment is associated with reduced office politics. In contrast, justice positively influences office politics in performance appraisal, suggesting a direct association between justice and the presence of office politics.

2.6.3. The effect of ethical management concept on office politics in performance appraisal (control)

In the case-wise analysis, 18 cases were excluded from the sample. The R^2 value, representing the regression coefficient between the predicted and actual values of the dependent variable, is 0.871, as shown in Table 5. This indicates that 87.10% of the variance in office politics in performance appraisal is explained by the combination of work commitment, social obligation, creative work, religiosity, productivity, and job satisfaction. Furthermore, Table 5 reports an F-value of F(6, 69) = 49.841, which is significant at $\rho < 0.05$. These results demonstrate a strong and meaningful relationship between the weighted linear combination of the independent variables and the dependent variable.

Table 5: Coefficients table for office politics in performance appraisal (control)

	Dependent variable Usage (standardized beta)
Work commitment	1.006*
Social obligation	.520*
Justice	.470*
Job satisfaction	-.631*
Creative work	-.300*
Productivity	-.181*
Integrating management Style	-.535*
F-value=F(6, 69)	49.841*
R^2	0.871

*: p<0.05; Dependent variable: Control

The t-test and significance levels enable researchers to evaluate the unique contribution of each variable in predicting the dependent variable. As shown in Table 5, all independent variables significantly predicted office politics in performance appraisal. The results indicate that justice, job satisfaction, creative work, and productivity negatively predicted office politics, suggesting that higher levels of these factors are associated with reduced office politics. Conversely, work commitment and social obligation positively predicted office politics, indicating a direct relationship with increased office politics in performance appraisal.

3. Discussion and conclusion

3.1. The effect of ethical management concept on acquiring benefit (politics in performance appraisal)

The regression analysis in this study exhibited that only work ethics, particularly work commitment, Justice, job satisfaction, and creative work, influenced benefits acquisition. Table 3 shows that only Work Commitment negatively influenced Acquire Benefits. As discussed previously, Acquire Benefit in Politics in Performance Appraisal portrays that supervisors will strive to enhance their employees' performance by manipulating their power and authority so that they can be seen as good leaders by top management. Ferris and Kacmar (1992) indicated that office politics can be seen in both negative and positive forms.

In Acquire Benefit, the supervisor's manipulation of power can be seen as a cheerful game of office politics because this situation is not only giving benefits to the supervisors (they can be seen as good leaders by top management) but also giving benefits to their subordinates (they can be rewarded due to showing good performance). Leaders always want to be looked at as a good leader. To achieve this objective, the leader will show the top management that his subordinates can execute their job excellently. Therefore, the leader will become a driven force for the subordinates to show their best effort in performing their job. Fairness and justice in managing performance appraisal may motivate subordinates to execute the job with good effort, which will increase subordinates' creativity (Daud et al., 2023). When a leader evaluates subordinates' performance fairly, it fosters positive employee-employer relationships and encourages creativity among subordinates. In such a scenario, subordinates are likely to feel more satisfied with their jobs. Consequently, when a leader seeks to derive benefits from the performance appraisal process—such as being perceived as an effective leader by management—subordinates may express their satisfaction with the leader through increased creativity (Daud et al., 2019).

3.2. The effect of ethical management concept on human relations (politics in performance appraisal)

Table 4 indicates that only work commitment and social obligation significantly influence human relations in the context of politics during performance appraisals. The items measuring human relations in performance appraisal politics reflect the behavior of an immediate superior who conducts appraisals with the intention of maintaining a positive reputation among subordinates. Specifically, the superior evaluates performance in a way that avoids giving low marks, aiming to preserve good relationships and be perceived favorably by subordinates.

As Ferris and Kacmar (1992) highlighted, one of the three dimensions of organizational or office politics is "get ahead to get along." This suggests that to gain subordinates' attention and compliance, a superior must build strong relationships with them and minimize the risk of retaliation. To achieve this, the superior may assign high or average marks to subordinates, even those who underperform. This approach is intended to maintain positive employer-employee relationships and promote harmony within the workplace.

3.3. The effect of ethical management concept on control (politics in performance appraisal)

The findings of this study indicate that all aspects of work ethics—such as work commitment, social obligation, justice, job satisfaction, creative work, and productivity—have a significant impact on control. These results are summarized in Table 5.

The control dimension in politics within performance appraisal refers to the evaluations conducted by a superior based on the performance demonstrated by employees over the course of the year. In this context, the superior may use the appraisal process as a tool to either motivate or pressure subordinates to perform at their best. However, biases can arise in this dimension, as the superior might provide favorable evaluations to employees they favor while assigning unfairly poor evaluations to those they dislike.

Performance evaluation serves as a mechanism to motivate employees to deliver satisfactory performance or to address poor performance

through the threat of disciplinary action, which can enhance employees' work commitment. Employees typically seek recognition from their superiors when they excel. Superiors are expected to acknowledge high performers by offering promotions, benefits, or rewards, such as excellent service awards or salary increments. Such recognition reflects the superior's social obligation toward their employees. Consequently, social obligation plays a significant role in influencing the control dimension of politics in performance appraisal.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the influence of the EMC, represented through six dimensions, on three significant forms of politics in performance appraisal: acquiring benefits, human relations, and control. Organizational politics in performance appraisal can manifest positively or negatively, depending on the leader's objectives. A leader may focus on appearing competent to top management, even if only a few subordinates achieve the desired performance, or may seek recognition based on the collective quality and productivity of all subordinates. Consequently, politics in performance appraisal can have both beneficial and detrimental effects.

In a positive approach to acquiring benefits, the leader aims to be recognized as an efficient leader while motivating all subordinates to perform their best to enhance departmental productivity. High-performing employees are rewarded with recognition and benefits, which increases their job satisfaction and creativity. This form of politics fosters justice, aligns with EMC principles, benefits both the leader and the subordinates and creates an equitable and just environment in the department.

Conversely, in a negative approach, the leader manipulates performance appraisal results to appear competent to top management. This often involves giving all subordinates similar evaluations, regardless of actual performance, a bias known as stereotyping. Such manipulation undermines justice and reduces the commitment of high-performing employees, who may feel demotivated when poor performers receive equal recognition.

Similarly, human relations, the second factor identified in this study, can take positive or negative forms in performance appraisal politics. Positively, a leader who actively monitors employees' performance, motivates them to excel, and addresses underperformance demonstrates a strong sense of social obligation toward subordinates. This approach boosts departmental productivity and allows employees to enjoy the benefits of their hard work, fostering mutual respect and satisfaction.

However, in its negative form, human relations politics involves the leader assigning uniform high scores to all employees to maintain the appearance of a high-performing department. While this strategy may enhance the leader's reputation, it discourages high-performing employees who perceive the process as unjust, as underperforming colleagues receive the same appraisal outcomes. This diminishes employee commitment and undermines trust in the appraisal system.

Thus, the Ethical Management Concept encourages leaders to emphasize fairness and justice in performance appraisals, mitigating the negative effects of politics and promoting a more equitable and productive workplace environment.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained, and participant confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The research posed no harm to participants.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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