THE INFLUENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS AND POWER ON TRAINING TRANSFER

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Abstract

Organizational politics and power have been regarded as critical factors affecting various organizational practices. Although many studies in HRD investigated what factors are influential in training transfer, organizational politics and power have largely been ignored. This study is, therefore, aimed at exploring how politics and power within organizations affect the aspect of training transfer. The findings of this study show that learners' relationship with supervisors who hold power, and the power derived from their own role status within the organization signal their capacity to transfer what they have been trained in. This study also reveals that organizational norms and values lead learners to control the aspect of transfer for themselves. Internalized in learners' minds, these norms and values reflecting managerial interests repressed transfer of training in a hidden way.

Introduction

In a performance-oriented human resource development (HRD) paradigm, HRD is viewed as an organizational effort that is ultimately geared toward performance improvement through learning (Swanson & Holton, 2001). For HRD practitioners, it is a paramount issue to demonstrate the linkage between training, one of the HRD interventions, and performance improvement either at the individual level or at the organizational level. Unless training can appropriately result in performance, it is likely to be perceived of little value. Accordingly, training transfer emerges as a crucial issue when performance really matters to the training sponsors (Holton & Baldwin, 2003).

In accordance with the importance of enhancing training transfer in practice, a good deal of research has been conducted to investigate significant factors affecting training transfer (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Holton, Bates, & Ruona, 2000; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992) and to suggest pertinent strategies to support the transfer process (Broad & Newstrom, 1992), especially focusing on transfer climate (Holton et al., 1997; Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993; Tracy, Tannenbaum, & Kavanaugh, 1995). However, although most research is committed to revealing what factors may affect transfer of training, there is little research that sheds light on the dynamic nature of the transfer process. We know only a little about how the complex of factors and processes works together to facilitate or inhibit training transfer (Bates, 2003). Among varied factors, organizational politics should be suggested as a critical factor that affects training transfer because politics often interferes with organizational processes such as decision making, promotion, and rewards (Vigoda, 2003). It seems to be relevant to regard transfer of training as an organizational process that is affected by organizational politics because it refers to application of gained skills, knowledge, and attitude on the job; it always occurs in organizational settings. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore and understand how organizational power and politics affect transfer of training.

Review of the Literature

For this study, the following areas of literature are addressed. First, as a theoretical framework, organizational politics and power are addressed. Given that organizational politics can be understood in terms of what people think of it rather than what it actually represents, politics in

organizations reflects organizational climate (Vigoda, 2003). In this regard, studies dealing with transfer climate as a type of organizational climate are overviewed.

Organizational Politics and Power

Politics is often regarded as a fact of life in organizations. The premise that every organization is composed of people who have varied task, career, and personal interests (Morgan, 1998) allows us to understand an organization as a political entity. "The idea of politics stems from the view that, where interests are divergent, society should provide a means of allowing individuals to reconcile their differences through consultation and negotiation" (p. 149). Pfeffer (1981) defines organizational politics as "those activities carried out by people to acquire, enhance, and use power and other resources to obtain their preferred outcomes in a situation where there is uncertainty or disagreement" (pp. 4-5). In this sense, the meaning of politics in an organization is conceptualized as the exercise of power to negotiate different interests among members while maintaining one's interests in certain organizational issues.

Hardy and Clegg (1996) present two different perspectives on organizational power: the functionalist perspective and the critical perspective. The functionalist perspective indicates that power is exercised during the decision-making arena as a part of a deliberative strategy to achieve intended outcomes, and it is also used to control access to the decision-making arena and hence to ensure compliance through decision (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). On the other hand, from the critical perspective, "power is conceptualized as domination, and actions taken to challenge it constituted resistance to domination" (Hardy & Clegg, 1996, p. 626). Critical theory asserts that the dominant group in an organization attempts to exercise power to manipulate discourses of an organization on behalf of itself. By doing so, it can keep on imposing its own interests on the dominated and reproducing its privileges over the dominated.

Transfer Climate

As noted, transfer climate has been regarded as a critical factor affecting training transfer. In general, organizational climate is seen as the shared pattern of meanings among organizational members about specific and salient organizational elements (Tracy, et al., 1995). It is usually conceptualized as individual perceptions of the organizational environment. Transfer climate is a type of organizational climate that involves certain training transfer. It encompasses individual's perceptions of supervisor support, opportunity to use, peer support, supervisor sanctions, and positive or negative personal outcomes resulting from application of training on the job (Holton et al., 1997). Transfer climate seems to be tied to the organizational politics in that transfer climate encompasses perceptions of peer and supervisory support as well as negative feedback or punishment (Holton et al., 1997; Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992).

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate how organizational politics and power are influential when training transfer occurs. Data for this study were collected by individual in-depth interviews with three employees of Korean companies. They recounted their experiences of attempting to apply what they had gained by participating in training programs offered by their host organizations. All the interviews were initially transcribed and coded in Korean. For data analysis, all codes were categorized through the constant comparative

method. The constant comparative method is an inductive method that involves the continuous comparison of incidents and interviewees' remarks, and then constructs categories and themes from the data (Merriam, 1998). These themes were viewed and examined through the lens of organizational politics and power. Emerging themes were translated into English, and then the translated themes were checked by a Korean-American who speaks both languages to ensure validity. Pseudonyms (Charlie, Jane, and Ted) were used for participants throughout the study.

Findings

Three substantive themes emerged in terms of organizational politics and power: transfer of training was encouraged by referent power; learners transferred what they had learned with their authority; and transfer of training was constrained by managerial interests that comprise dominant ideology of organizations.

Supervisor's Support as Referent Power

As the literature suggested, supervisor's support is perceived as a critical factor affecting positive training transfer. The findings of this study further explain that the positive impact of supervisor's supports is attributed to supervisor's role status, which holds power within the organization. One participant (Jane) stated that her supervisor's support encouraged her to apply what she had learned to assess her subordinate's attitudes at work. Attending the management development course, she was reminded that a good manager should be careful not to employ paternalism in determining the worth of one's work. She described an experience when she evaluated employees as an assistant manager keeping in mind what she learned.

Although it is ideal not to make any trouble or conflict among team members, you know, from our supervisor's viewpoint, he still encouraged my evaluation task. (…) He supported me to evaluate the subordinate without any physical emotional constraint. "It is your job. Don't even think about any reaction from them." Honestly, I was so embarrassed in assessing my subordinates' attitudes on the job because they would be so sorry about my evaluation. Of course I knew I must be objective, and I really tried to be, but they would blame me. They might perceive it was unfair, subjective. (…) It really helped me feel, what we call, safe with my task. He really was a type of person who trusted me and my work.

Jane's statements indicate that support from her supervisor who can control the attitudes of team members drove her not only to carry out evaluation in her own way but also to justify her evaluation results. It shows that support of organizational power allowed training transfer to be a legitimate practice. Supervisory support turned out to be referent power in that Jane had a desire to join, and wanted to maintain the relationship and support (French & Raven, 2001). In other words, since supervisors' power played a role of "reference group" as a form of support for use of learning, and consequently the impact of her transfer could be justified, she could feel she felt "safe" expressing power.

Authority with the Role Status

In addition to referent power of supervisors, participants also mentioned that the power attached to their own role status within the organizational structure affected the aspect of transfer climate perceived by organizational members. The perception of one's transfer climate, whether it is supportive or not, is associated with the degree of one's authority in the organization as authority, which is a legitimate power, is often derived from one's position and role (Morgan,

1998). Ted, who believes himself to be an underdog in power relations due to his lower position and role status, made the following observation about his organizational life:

Superiors in my team usually say the culture of our team was learning-supportive. I know why they speak like that, you know, because they have more authority in attempting to apply [what they learned] than I. Of course, superiors also should work within the range of organizational norms and rules, but it is obvious that they go through relatively more freedom [than I do] as long as our team performance does not grow worse.

Ted explained when transferring learning into the job, higher organizational members were less likely to be constrained than him because of their authority. As is often the case, environmental factors delimit the extent to which one's training can be transformed into performance on the job. In this situation, holding authority in an organization means people can apply what they intend by avoiding, and even controlling such environmental constraints. By the same token, those who do not have authority enough to overcome these constraints are unlikely to attain successful transfer.

Invisible Power of Managerial Interests

Organizational practices have been implemented on the basis of organizational norms, rules, and values. These organizational norms and values influenced transfer of learning, for the most part, in a hidden way. Charlie clearly addressed what he really was concerned about in transferring practice:

(…) in terms of globalization, our company has the criteria, like, to the extent which our work has been done in a systematic way, to the extent which our tasks have been formulated as a procedure, and so on. Since they assess whether our work is congruent with the global standards in reference to those criteria, I myself, deliberately made an effort to meet those criteria when I did.

Charlie carried out transfer of training while bearing organizational standards in mind. Organizational needs and values were internalized in his mind, and in turn, his transfer was directed by those internalized needs and values without any visible organizational surveillance mechanism. This finding highlights that managerial interests, which are a dominant part of organizational ideology are critical in shaping the aspects of training transfer. Yet, instead of imposing its privilege explicitly, managerial interests become criteria for self-monitoring one's transfer practice.

Conclusion

Considering the political nature of organizations is important for a better understanding of how transfer of training and learning take place in organizational settings. Based on the assumption that transfer of training is essentially a sociopolitical process, this study highlights how organizational politics and power support or hinder the transfer process. The findings indicate that varied types of organizational power were exercised to overcome the potential barriers in transfer of training. Referent power was delegated to learners and exercised to optimize the effective process of training transfer and, consequently, to guarantee the successful transformation of training results into performance. Learners' perception of being supported by supervisors or higher management often empowered them to avoid any anticipated problems that could stem from their applications of training on the job. In this regard, supervisory support,

which has been identified as one of the positive transfer climate factors in the existing literature (Holton et al., 1997; Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993; Tannenbaum & Yukl, 1992), is consistent with the meaning of organizational power of this study. In addition, due to the hierarchical structure of organizations, the authority that is signaled in reference to learners' roles or positions in organizations had an effect on encouraging transfer, even if it was not deliberately used.

This study also addresses how the managerial interests that dominate organizational ideology shape learners' transfer without any explicit manipulation. The aspect of power being exercised in this way seems to involve disciplinary power, a "type of power which is constantly exercised by means of surveillance" (Foucault, 1980, p. 104). Particularly in this study, disciplinary power is exercised through self-surveillance. Learners examined for themselves what they should apply, how they should utilize it, and why they should transfer learning to the job. There was no need for an external, coercive mechanism to force them to do so. Learners continuously watched themselves to see if they were on the right track in terms of organizational expectations and standards.

In sum, transfer of training and learning into job performance improvement involves sociopolitical concerns as well as technical concerns. For practitioners to ensure effective training transfer, it is necessary not only to develop pertinent strategies to support the transfer system but also to consider the sociopolitical relationships of learners within organizational settings.

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