

Power and Dependence in the Distribution of Training Opportunities

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of power as it affects the manager's role in the allocation of training resources and opportunities to subordinates. Managers control a range of material and non-material resources. The discretion of dispensation of such resources may be influenced by the extent to which the supervisor's rewards are dependent on subordinates' performance; the perceived future impact of training outcome on supervisor's position and the impact of perceived subordinate attraction on supervisor. In examining these aspects, an attempt is made to achieve four main objectives: to examine the concepts of power and dependence; determine the case for managerial power; establish the extent to which the supervisor-subordinate relationship affects the distribution of training opportunities and to generate propositions for future empirical study.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Emerging literature in human resource management are increasingly recognizing employee training and development as central components of the human resource management function (Keep,1990) and a source of competitive advantage for organizations (Brewster, 2000 and Perrewe et al, 1996). It is notable that while empirical researches have concentrated on examining the relationship between the amount of training provided by the employer to their employees and a range of independent variables related to employee demographics and organizational attributes (Smith and Dowling, 2001; Smith and Hayton, 1999 Shields, 1998; Shields and Price, 1999 and Booth and Snower, 1995), the general prescriptive literature has placed much emphasis on the process and techniques of training (Craig, 1976; Armstrong, 1999; and Erasmus and Van Dyk, 1999). As a result, more attention appears to have been directed towards either organizational related, individual related or process and technique related factors, but not at the more implicit and less obvious dyadic relationship between supervisors and subordinates. To address this limitation in the existing literature, this paper seeks to explore the impact of interpersonal forces on the distribution of training opportunities from a power and dependence perspective, thus extending the literature from the individual, organizational and process levels of analysis to the interpersonal level.

Power and dependence are concepts that are dealt with widely in the organizational behaviour and organizational theory literature, but generally avoided by management and especially human resource management writers, preferring to disguise them under terms such as authority, responsibility and empowerment (Hicks and Gullet, 1975). Interestingly,

although managers are reluctant to acknowledge the place of power both in individual motivation and in organizational and interpersonal relationships, evidence of its influence can easily be inferred from managerial behaviour and especially in their relationships with subordinate employees (Gioia and Longenecker, 1992; Kanter 1997 and Ragins, 1997).

This paper examines the use of power as it affects the managers role in the allocation of training resources and opportunities to subordinates. It is recognized that managers control a range of material and non-material resources. The discretion of dispensation of such resources may be influenced by several factors ranging from the organization's philosophy and policy, relative power of other departments to the manager's attitude and commitment to training. This article however, will be limited to a discussion of three aspects at the interpersonal level that are seen as moderating the relationship between managers and subordinates. These are:

- (i) Extent to which the supervisor's rewards are dependent on subordinates performance.
- (ii) Perceived future impact of training outcome on supervisor's position.
- (iii) Impact of perceived subordinate attraction on supervisor.

In examining these aspects, an attempt will be made to achieve four main objectives. Firstly, will be to examine the concepts of power and dependence, secondly, to determine the case for managerial power, thirdly, to establish the extent to which the supervisor-subordinate relationship affects the distribution of training opportunities and lastly to generate propositions for future empirical study.

2.0 THE NATURE OF POWER AND DEPENDENCE

Although power is a neglected variable in the study of organizational management (Hicks and Gullet 1975), it remains an important component for creating effective organizations (Handy 1985). A variety of perspectives have been used to define power. While the organizational perspective views power as a property of organizational structure, position and control over persons, information and resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, Pfeffer, 1992; Kanter, 1997), the individual perspective, describes it as the individual's ability or perceived ability to influence another (French & Raven, 1959, cited in Ragin, 1997). In contrast, however, the interpersonal perspective defines power as a dyadic and reciprocal process in interpersonal relationships (Ragins, 1997). These perspectives on power reflect organizational, individual and interpersonal levels of analysis all of which are interrelated. According to the interpersonal perspective, power relationships between individuals may be symmetrical, whereby both parties are equal or asymmetrical whereby one party dominates another as it has more power (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). As the interpersonal perspective is psychological oriented, it is most useful for understanding interdependence

in dyadic relationships and particularly in explaining the distribution of resources and opportunities in organizations by power holders.

Power has profound effect on the distribution of resources which are normally seen in the setting of organizational objectives such as deciding whose needs will be served, what activities to engage in and how they will be conducted. Hence the range of opportunities and resources open to an employee such as the tasks performed, pay, promotion, fairness, praise, recognition and training depend on the manager. Hicks & Gullet (1975), describe the manager-subordinate relationship as operating like an economic system. It can be a perfectly competitive market where each seller or buyer has limited power, or non-competitive where buyers and sellers have discretion over the price they will get or give for a good.

Power is practiced discretely (Kanter, 1997), although it is a critical element in effective managerial behaviour (Handy, 1985). In addition to position, power can come from the capacity to bring in resources that can be distributed as rewards, information or support to others (Pfeffer 1992). As such, people tend to be more responsive to those who look like they can get more for them from the organization (Kanter 1997), hence the tendency to comply with the wishes of another because it will result in positive effects thus creating dependency. However, while a manager's access to resources and information makes it possible to accomplish more and to pass on more resources and information to subordinates, it can also be abused. Power can be used discriminatively to achieve the superior's agenda which may include a desire to punish or reward a subordinate, desire to enhance subordinate loyalty or a desire to drive the subordinate out of the department or even the company. (Gioia & Longenecker, 1992).

Dependence is an important dimension of power that occurs when the resource controlled is important, scarce and lacking substitutes (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Concentration of the control of discretion over resources and the importance of the resource determines the degree of dependence. Robbins (1990) observes that dependence is inversely proportional to the sources of supply of a resource. Hence, for power that is derived from access to a resource to create dependence, there must be control of the resource and the resource must be desired by the recipient (Handy, 1985). Pfeffer (1992) defines dependence as the product of the importance of a given input or output and the extent to which it is relatively controlled by another party. A resource therefore that is not important cannot create a situation of dependence. Resources do not have to be material. They can consist of grants of status, belonging, admission to a select group, and recommendations for promotion, training, a favourable performance appraisal or pay rise. The basis for control of a resource is access, use and the ability to make rules to regulate their possession, allocation, use of the resources and the ability to enforce those regulations (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978).

2.1 Background to Managerial Power

The impetus for manager's increased involvement in the training and development of employees has been provided by the emergence of Human Resource Management (HRM) and its accompanying devolution of responsibility for personnel issues including training and development to line management (Storey, 1992). Line managers, traditionally perform functions which have direct responsibility for achieving the objectives of their organizations, while staff primarily exist to provide advice and services. The emphasis on people due to the asset-centeredness approach of human resource management associated with new organizational perspectives such as strategic integration, investments in human capital, total quality, commitment and management of culture has contributed to the growing trend towards enlightened managerialism, which Storey (1992) explains as an attempt by line managers to get involved in human resource matters in order to meet business objectives. Case studies by Storey (1992) reveal that line managers are becoming far more important in determining how human resources are used, thus implying a new role of championing human resource matters. As designers and drivers of this new approach, line managers are now required to be up front in briefing employees directly, carrying out performance appraisals and training, thus enhancing the role of line managers in the management of human resources.

Devolution of human resource functions has made line managers increasingly responsible for the total array of resources at their disposal including training opportunities (Armstrong, 1999). The non-procedural approach characteristic of human resource management operates directly through the actions of line managers witnessed in the realms of direct communication and involvement in matters affecting them and their performance (Keep, 1990). Devolution of human resource management refers to sharing of responsibility and increasing decision-making powers due to recent events such as downsizing, leanness, dismantling of bureaucracies and decentralization (Brewster, 1999). It is notable that the changes in organizational structures and management in the form of downsizing and decentralization occurred simultaneously with human resource management thus presenting line managers with tremendous new opportunities to entrench themselves and exercise increased power and influence. The exposure to new opportunities in shaping the management of human resource for line managers has therefore come from the dual forces of human resource management approach and devolution of management (Storey 1992).

The expanded and changing role of line managers has implications for human resource management functions such as recruitment, selection and training and development. The prescriptive literature on training and development indicates that line managers are held

responsible for the development of their subordinates and encouragement of self-development by facilitating time, reducing work load and giving relevant learning-enhancing assignments and experiences (Perrewe et al 1996 and Armstrong 1999). Storey (1992) reports that in an attempt to hold managers responsible for their subordinates development and training, some organizations make it a mandatory item in the performance appraisal system. From the foregoing it is increasingly becoming obvious that managers will continue to get more involved in human resource issues.

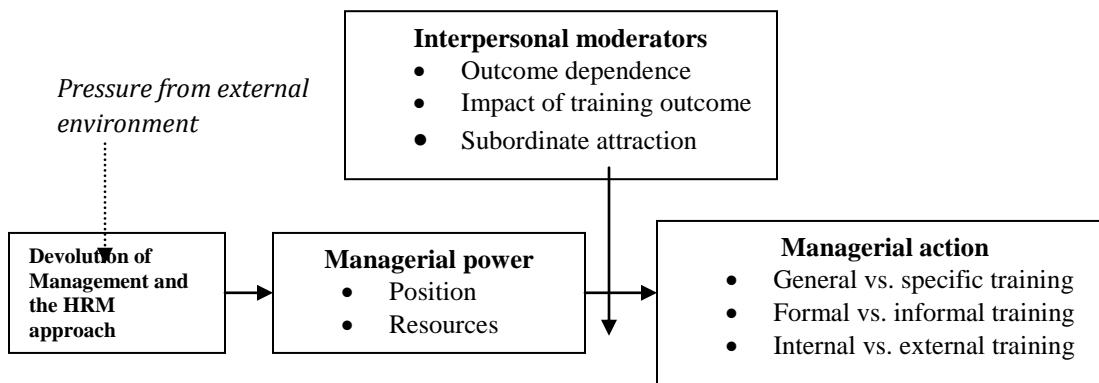
2.2. The Exercise of Managerial Power in Employee Training

Employees seek training and employers provide it to improve skills, knowledge and consequently enhance employee productivity and organizational performance. (Erasmus & Van Dyk 1999). From an employees' perspective, training is a source of pecuniary and non-pecuniary returns in the form of increased wages, horizontal or upward mobility, promotion, prestige, knowledge and skills. The bundle of skills and knowledge an employee accumulates through training and experience is like intellectual capital that differentiates that particular worker from others. (Brewster et al, 2000). Managers can support and facilitate their subordinates' efforts to acquire skills and knowledge by providing time, allocating financial resources, reducing workload, delegation, special assignments, participation and involvement in decision making and offering encouragement.

Literature from economics of training introduces another dimension, which differentiates between specific and general training. (Chapman, 1993; Booth and Snower, 1995). Specific training is training in skills and knowledge that are useful only in the sponsoring organization while general training is training in skills that have potential value to other firms in addition to the sponsoring firm (Becker, 1964). The general prescriptive literature also distinguishes between formal and informal training and external and internal training (Erasmus & Van Dyk, 1999). The type of training an individual undertakes has differential impact on their career, promotion, pay rise and mobility within the industry. The implication here is that managers have some discretion over the type of training an employee undertakes. By their very position in the management hierarchy, managers are expected to identify the training needs of their subordinates and either recommend them for training or train them informally in-company. With such latitude, it is possible that a manager may choose to encourage any type of training depending on a number of considerations at the organizational, individual or interpersonal levels. However, interpersonal forces which are psychologically derived such as the perceived impact of the training outcome in terms of promotion, visibility of the subordinate or future performance are important to managers when distributing training opportunities.

Figure 1 below depicts the power relationship that is oriented towards the micro forces operating in organizations among the various social actors. It is assumed that because of pressure from the external environment arising from change, organizations adopt strategies for survival that may include devolution and a human resource management approach. The result of such a paradigm shift is increased managerial power founded on the new roles and additional responsibilities including control of resources. Considering therefore that responsibility for training is part of this arrangement, it is expected that interpersonal factors associated with their dyadic relationship with subordinates will moderate the managerial action, which in this case is defined by the type of training provided.

The manager-subordinate relationship in the distribution of training opportunities



3.0 INTERPERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES.

Having examined the background and basis of managerial power, this section will now look at three factors derived from the perceptions of managers regarding employee training and development. The formal position and strategic location of supervisors confers control over resources and the ability to make specified decisions on the use of those resources. It is noted here that in the process of dispensing with training opportunities, supervisors, whether consciously or unconsciously consider several factors. At the interpersonal level the following three considerations are likely to play an important role in the distribution of training opportunities to subordinate employees.

i) Extent to which the supervisor's rewards are dependent on the subordinate's performance

If the organizational rewards for managers such as money, promotion, praise or bonus are dependent on their subordinates' performance, their behaviours, attitudes and commitment to employee training is likely to be affected. Ilgen et al (1981) discussed the concept of outcome dependence. Outcome dependence refers to a state in which an individual's perceived rewards are dependent on the performance of another. His findings showed that supervisors who are paid contingent upon subordinates performance were more helpful and did more to try to improve the performance of poorly performing subordinates by among other actions recommending training. Larson (1986) further examined the impact of outcome dependence on subordinate performance and proposed that supervisors who are dependent on their subordinates' performance tend to hold perceptions of them that are positively biased. Hence, in dealing with poor performers they tend to be helpful and less punitive than those who are less dependent upon their subordinates. It appears therefore that the extent to which the supervisor's rewards are dependent on the subordinates' performance has implications for employee training. Instead of supervisors taking punitive actions toward poor performers in their sections they may actively strive to enhance their performance by taking time to train, reducing workload, giving relevant special assignments, coaching and recommending them for training. Drawing on the above rationale, it is proposed that:

Proposition 1

Supervisors would support and facilitate the training of employees under conditions of high outcome dependence than under conditions of low outcome dependence.

ii) Perceived future impact of training outcomes on supervisor's position.

Training outcomes refer to the skills, knowledge, commitment to organization and work attitude that one acquires after a training experience, more specifically the new behaviours exhibited and likely rewards such as promotion, pay rise, recognition, titles and status. Finegold and Soskice (1988) found that poorly qualified managers perceive training as a threat to their authority rather than a means for improving productivity. This is true especially where line managers rather than top executives are responsible for training decisions. Further findings by Smith & Hayton (1999) have produced evidence suggesting that management attitudes towards training are fragmented along the management hierarchy. Hence, while the chief executives tend to be clear about the strategic importance of training, the same vision is not shared at the middle and junior management levels. Managers at the operational levels often prefer training that is short, sharp and focused and

since many of the decisions regarding the implementation of training are taken at this level, operational managers are thought to have a significant influence on the form that training takes. As a result, insecure managers are more likely to prefer informal training rather than formal training and general training rather than specific training to ensure that subordinates do not supercede them in any way. It is possible at this point to conclude that the perceived prospect of having better trained and relatively better-educated subordinates invokes feelings of insecurity and fear for the supervisor's position and authority. It is also possible to infer from this scenario that managers in organizations that have a policy of promoting from within on grounds of relevant skills and training may be threatening to a manager who in turn may respond by nominating employees for general, non-firm specific training. Alternatively, an organization without a clear and structured policy on promotion and a history of not promoting from within may not be threatening and managers may be indifferent to the type of training an employee undertakes. Hence, a lack of clear human resource management procedures on career progression and promotion and the prospect of better trained subordinates are more likely to cause feelings of insecurity among managers. Thus:

Proposition 2

Managers in organizations operating under clear HRM procedures are more likely to support the training efforts of their subordinates than those who are in organizations with poor human resource management policies

iii) Extent of subordinate attraction on supervisor.

Given that supervisors possess varying degrees of power over distribution of rewards and punishments, it would not be surprising to find some subordinates striving to enhance their likeableness to their supervisors in order to influence the supervisor's use of power K'obonyo (1996). Individuals are known to be attracted to those who control the resources and rewards they desire. Kanter (1997) for example, observes that powerful leaders are more likely to delegate, reward talent and build teams that place subordinates in significant positions. As such people tend to be more responsive to those who look like they can get more for them from the organization.

The idea of subordinate attraction is an aspect of the Vertical Dyad Linkage model (VDL). Vertical Dyad Linkage is a leadership approach that focuses on the exchange between leaders and followers in a hierarchical relationship – the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Luthans, 1992). This model posits that leaders treat individual subordinates differently. As such they develop dyadic two person relationships that affect the behaviour of both the leader and the subordinate. Attractiveness comes about when subordinates make themselves attractive by making the supervisor feel good, performing tasks to satisfaction and so on. It is thought that because of the perceived attractiveness of the subordinate, the supervisor in turn develops a liking for the subordinate, the effects of

which are reflected in the increase of rewards given by the supervisor. This behaviour is hinged on the premise that liking is reciprocated (K'Obonyo, 1996). Attraction therefore, may affect the interdependent relationship such that the more attractive the subordinate is to the supervisor, the higher the quality of the exchange relationship between them. Based on this model therefore, it is possible to deduce that subordinates who make themselves attractive by making the supervisor feel good are more likely to be rewarded with training opportunities. It is thus suggested that:

Proposition 3

Supervisors are more likely to pay more attention to the training needs of subordinates who are perceived as attractive than those who are perceived as less attractive.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the impact of interpersonal factors on managers' decisions regarding the distribution of training opportunities. It is acknowledged that the use of power, though discrete is pervasive in organizations. It is also noted that recent changes in organizational management which led to paradigm shifts from personnel management to human resource management and further to strategic human resource management and devolution of management have been instrumental in the increased acquisition and use of power by line managers.

Two key propositions made in this article have some implications for human resource management practice. The first implication is adoption of a policy that ties the manager's rewards to employee performance. Such a policy would encourage managers to put more effort in the training and development needs of their subordinates. Secondly, clear and precise human resource management procedures on career progression and promotion would reduce insecurity about position and authority among managers. The existence and enforcement of policies provides real and psychological confidence thus enabling managers to support the training of their subordinates without fear of losing their positions and authority. It can be concluded therefore that proper human resource management policies are necessary to check the possible misuse of power by managers.

In conclusion, by applying the concepts of power and dependence to dyadic relationships, this unique and complex relationship can be understood better. In addition, important insights into the micro processes affecting all types of dyadic relationships can be obtained. From these tentative conclusions therefore, it should be possible to develop and carry out an empirical study.

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