TOO MUCH OF AN INEVITABLE THING: CONTEXTUAL EFFECT OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS ON WORK TEAMS IN RUSSIA

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of "soft skills", namely political skill, in predicting team emergent states in low vs. high organizational politics environments. Based on the results obtained from 28 MNC work teams in Russia, we demonstrate that perception of organizational politics sets the context for team political skill enactment becoming an important moderator in team political skill and group cohesiveness, team trust, and team conflict relationship. Specifically, teams perceiving organizational politics to be high have a stronger negative relationship between team political skill and group conflict. At the same time, a curvilinear relationship between team political skill, team trust, team cohesion, and organizational politics was observed. The study addresses the multiple research calls to bring different levels of analysis into the investigation of organizational politics and political skill and provides contributions to both team research and to practitioners.

Key words:
teams, political skill, perceived organizational politics, group conflict, team trust, group cohesion, MNC, Russia

Too Much of an Inevitable Thing: Contextual Effect of Organizational Politics on Work Teams in Russia

Organizational politics is both inevitable and ubiquitous (Pfeffer, 1992). Across the globe, politicking attempts to influence those in power to provide rewards or to "protect the self-interests of the actor" (Kacmar & Carison, 1997: 657) get exerted on a regular basis, contributing to the organizational culture and trickling down to nearly every organizational outcome. Not surprisingly, researchers have developed a considerable interest in the antecedents and consequences of organizational politics (see Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012 for review). However, "most research on organizational politics has concentrated on the influence politics has on the individual in the organization or on the organization as a whole. It largely has overlooked the role organizational politics plays at the team level…" (Vigoda-Gadot & Vashdi, 2012:313). This is a serious omission, providing that we understand that (a) work teams do not exist in an organizational vacuum (Johns, 2006) and (b) each team represents a distinct entity, and frequently shares team level characteristics that are not a mere sum of individual traits or skills (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000).

Team researchers have been long encouraged the avoidance of looking at teams as unaffected by the context surrounding them (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). An important goal of this study is identifying organizational politics as an important constraint imposed on groups in organizations. Building on conceptual articles on contextualization (Johns, 2001; 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993), this study addresses an important gap in the extant research by providing examples of how political context may affect teams. Here, we are specifically interested in examining the role of "soft skills", namely political skill (a work context understanding of others applied to influencing their actions to advance one's own or organizational agenda), in predicting

team emergent states in a situation in which organizational politics is perceived as being high or low. Whereas most of the research on political skill has been completed at the individual level, this is among the first studies (with the exception of Ahearn et al., 2004; Lvina, Johns, & Vandenberghe, 2015; Lvina, Maher, & Harris, 2016) to investigate the benefits and constrains of political skill in a team setting.

Unlike organizational politics, defined as the perceived amount of self-serving attempts to influence those who can provide rewards that will help promote or protect the self-interests of the actor (Cropanzano, Kacmar, & Bozeman, 1995), political skill does not necessarily imply self-serving behavior and does not involve using organizationally unsanctioned means or pursuing unsanctioned ends. The perceptions individuals hold about politics in the organization influence their attitudes towards the company, supervisor and colleagues; they also affect their productivity, satisfaction and turnover intentions (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Previous research has demonstrated significant relationships of perception of organizational politics and impression management (Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004), and organizational politics and political skill onto employee performance (Kapoustis, Papalexandris, Nikolopoulos, Hochwarter, & Ferris 2011). Therefore, we develop a model that political activity in an organization is likely to influence both the benefits of political skills in teams and the team dynamics itself, affecting team emergent states of team cohesion, trust and conflict.

In addition to introducing the team level of analysis, the higher level of national culture has also to be considered in studying organizational politics and political skill. Lesie & Gelfand (2012: 412) maintain that: “Theory suggests that cultural differences are relevant for understanding organizational politics, yet organizational politics research largely has relied on Western samples and has yet to fully integrate culture into its theories and findings.” In this

study, we address this call and investigate such phenomena as perceptions of politics and political skill in a Multinational Corporation operating in the Russian Federation.

THEORY

Political Skill in Teams

Political skill can be understood as social effectiveness at work. It is defined 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, Treadway, et al., 2005: 127). Political skill consists of four dimensions: social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity. Taken together, they allow an individual to predict and manage a range of social and political situations at work (Ferris et al., 2012; Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015). Addressing recent calls on the need to study politics and political skill within groups/teams (e.g., Kimura, 2015; Munyon et al., 2015; Vigoda-Gadot & Vashdi, 2012), we build a model that incorporates organizational context, in particular, perception of organizational politics, as a moderator of team political skill and team emergent states relationship. Please see Figure 1 for the model depicting its moderating effect on team political skill and team cohesion, trust and conflict relationship.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Organizational politics as a contextual variable

This study focuses on the emergent states of team cohesion, trust and conflict. Previous research established the direct relationship between team political skill and team cohesion (Lvina et al., 2015), suggesting that keenly attuned to diverse needs and motivations of others, highly

politically skilled team members are capable of both diagnosing (social astuteness dimension) and managing (interpersonal influence dimension) difficult situations, resulting in an overall higher team task cohesion. Adept at developing and using diverse networks of people, they are also highly effective in building social cohesion. Through effective social interactions, politically skilled individuals can recognize the social abilities of other members of the team, creating favorable cognitive and affective trust appraisals (Lvina et al., 2016). The ability of politically skilled individuals to recognize the motives and needs of others, and use constructive interpersonal techniques, should help them keep their discussions headed in the right direction, and thus prevent conflicts. Furthermore, if conflict develops, interpersonal influence might be relevant in managing it, particularly as highly skilled team members are most capable of regulating their emotions. Therefore, this skill should enable teams to effectively deal with existing conflicts.

Previous studies of the contextual role of organizational politics demonstrated the relationship between our variables of interest, albeit at the individual level. For example, the perception of organizational politics and impression management were found to explain a significant amount of incremental variance in supervisor ratings of employee performance (Zivnuska et al., 2004), suggesting the importance of considering this moderator in the relationship between political skill and individual outcomes. Specifically, Zivnuska and colleagues (2004) found that when employees perceive their organization as relatively non-political, active impression management may provide employees with a competitive career advantage above and beyond that offered by objective job performance. In a similar vein, Kapoutisis et al.'s (2011) study found support for the hypothesis that highly politically skilled individuals enjoy better performance ratings when organizational politics was perceived to be

low. We maintain that organizational politics plays a key role in the relationship between political skill and to team emergent states and outcomes.

In highly political organizations, rewards are not necessarily tied to, or perceived to be related to, work performance (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). Arguably, politically skilled employees should benefit from this situation. Their ability to understand hidden motives and to successfully influence others would be very instrumental. However, we argue that teams will benefit from it only up to a certain level. Too much politicking would result in extremely high levels of uncertainty, which would provoke a hyper use of self-serving behavior while diminishing the team values. Intuitively, too much politicking would be particularly detrimental to employees' trust and group cohesion.

At the same time, in an organization low in politicking and high on individual meritocracy, the willingness to utilize political skill can be viewed as redundant effort. Furthermore, the group may act as a catalyst for "banning" the skill: being astute observers and high monitors, politically skilled team members will act in accordance with the environment which does not require much interpersonal influence. Thus, we predict the following curvilinear – inverted U shape – relationship: no politicking and too much of it weakens the relationship, while moderate politicking strengthens it by setting the optimal context to utilize and benefit from political skill.

Hypothesis 1. The relationship between team political skill and team cohesion will be stronger when employees perceive organizational politics as moderate, and weaker when organizational politics is perceived as high or low.

Hypothesis 2. The relationship between team political skill and team trust will be stronger when employees perceive organizational politics as moderate, and weaker when organizational politics is perceived as high or low.

We do not predict a curvilinear relationship for the interaction between team political skill and perception of organizational politicking in predicting team conflict. Rather, we expect that the higher politicking will require even stronger team political skill in order to attenuate team conflict. In a highly political organization, a hyper use of self-serving behavior would only strengthen an individual tendency to use political skill to control the situation. Thus, the overall higher level of political skill in a team will be even more beneficial for maintaining low conflict when perceptions of organizational politics are high.

Hypothesis 3. The negative relationship between team political skill and team conflict will be more negative when employees perceive organizational politics as high.

METHOD

Data and Sample

The sample was obtained from a large Russian-based multinational retail company. It is one of the largest retailers in the world, with almost 300 stores operating in over than 30 countries. The company specifically requested nondisclosure of its name, so we further refer to it as MNC. Participation was sought from personal contacts in this organization. A total of 156 employees working for 28 functional teams participated in the study, translating into a 68% response rate. Of a note, 8% of employees were not physically present at work during data collection, as they had their vacations and parental or sick leaves. Gender composition of the sample was 33% male and 67% female. The average age of participants was 29 years old. The company provided the demographic

data for the entire store, and we were able to compare the gender and age means of respondents and non-respondents. No significant differences were detected.

Teams consisted of three to sixteen members with a mode of 6 members per team. For the teams of three members participation of 2 respondents was required, and for the teams of four and five members participation of 3 respondents was required, otherwise the response rate cutoff was 60%. In general, they represented various departments, such as sales, logistics, customer service, cashiers, designers, furniture, and an in-store restaurant. These teams were required to perform both routine and project-based tasks. For example, a design team was responsible for supervising the arrangement of the on-the-floor merchandise on a daily basis while developing specific projects such as a seasonal store catalog. In addition, not only does the company directly refer to certain departments and working groups within departments as teams, but these groups are also assigned specific goals, and are required to cooperate to achieve them. Furthermore, they are incentivized as a group. Consequently, the HR department was able to identify each team and its leader and provided us with this information prior to data collection, which further justifies referring to these groups as work teams.

Measures

For all MNC respondents, measures were administered in Russian. A standard procedure of translating the measures and back-translating them into English to identify and correct misinterpreted items was employed. The primary instrument - the Political Skill Inventory – had been validated in the Russian language prior to this study (Lvina, Johns, & Bobrova, 2009). Furthermore, in a different study, the psychometric properties of the Political Skill Inventory were tested in a non-American context and the measurement equivalence was established for the scale in Russian (Lvina et al., 2011).

Team political skill was measured using the Political Skill Inventory by Ferris et al. (2005). The measure of political skill includes 18 statements. Participants indicated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale. An example item is: *I have developed a large network of colleagues and associates whom I can call on for support when I really need to get things done.* The PSI used in teams was revised accordingly whereby "in my team" was used in place of "at work", and "my team members" instead of "other". α = .87.

Group cohesion. Task and social cohesion were measured using 8 items from Chang and Bordia (2001). The subjects had to indicate their level of agreement with statements using a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (9) *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating more cohesive responses. Sample items include: *Everyone tries to help if members have problems* (task cohesion) and *Team members stick together outside of the team project* (social cohesion). The reversed items with low item-total correlation were deleted from the final measure. Task cohesion α = .77; Social cohesion α = .66.

Team trust. Trust in teammates was assessed using a 4-item scale adapted from Mayer and Davis (1999) and two items from Gillespie (2003). Items were modified to reflect teams as the intended referent. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. For example: *I would be comfortable giving this team a task or problem which was critical to me, even if I could not monitor its actions.* Only three items were used in the final measure as the following item was deleted: *I would be willing to let my team have complete control over my future at the company* and 2 reversed items with low item-total correlation. α = .71.

Group conflict. Conflict was measured using Jehn's (1995) scale for task, process and affective conflict. Each group member responded to items from the scale using a 7-point Likert-

scale. Sample questions are: *How much tension is there among your group members?* (relationship conflict); *How often do members of your team disagree who should do what? (process conflict) and How frequently are there conflicts about ideas in your team? (task conflict). Conflict scale α = .77.*

Perceptions of organizational politics were assessed using the "Going along to get ahead" subscale of the Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (Kacmar & Carlson, 1991; 1997). This subscale consisted of four items measured on a five-point Likert scale. A sample item is: *Favoritism, rather than merit, gets people ahead around here*. As per CFA results, one item demonstrated poor factor loadings and was deleted, resulting in α =.81. A one-factor model of *Perceptions of organizational politics* was tested. For the remained items the loadings were significant and ranged from .30 to .89. Chi-square = 10.9 (6); CFI = .951; RMSEA = .076, 90% C.I. .06, .099.

Differentiating team emergent states

To ensure that the team emergent states measures could be differentiated, we computed two CFA models: a 3-factor model (items loading on their respective constructs of team trust, conflict and cohesion) versus a single factor model (all items loading onto one factor). At the individual level, the 3-factor model yielded an appropriate fit: Chi-square = 302.83 (149); CFI = .942; AGFI = .696; SRMR = .071; RMSEA = .080, 90% C.I. .066, .110. The factors were allowed to correlate with each other, but they did not demonstrate an excessively high correlation (r = -.71 was the highest for team conflict and cohesion). In comparison, the one-factor model demonstrated a poor statistical fit: Chi-square = 1367.03 (170); CFI = .514; AGFI = .454; SRMR = .428; RMSEA = .486, 90% C.I. .430, .594. Furthermore, the fit of the 3-factor model was statistically significantly better than the 1-factor model based on the chi-square test of difference:

Δ Chi-square = 1064.2 (21). These results constitute good evidence that the team emergent states can be differentiated.

Aggregating individual variables to team level

The self-reported individual measures were aggregated to form a team score. Before aggregating to the team level, agreement among team members must be demonstrated. To do so, we first calculated the rwg, a within-team index of agreement (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984). To support aggregating the variables to the team level, we also calculated ICC(1) and ICC(k), the indexes representing within team and between team variance. Based on adequate numbers obtained for those criteria, we aggregated the individual variables to the team level. Indexes of agreement and reliability are reported below.

RESULTS

The hypotheses were tested with regression analysis in SPSS. In order to attenuate possible problems with multicolinearity, the independent variables and the mediators were centered prior to the test. Supplemental tests, such as CFAs, were completed in EQS. Descriptive statistics and team level correlations are provided in Table 1. Indexes of agreement and reliability are can be found in table 2.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted a stronger effect between team political skill and team emergent states when perception of organizational politics is moderate, but not when it is excessively high or very low. Thus, a squared term for perceived organizational politics multiplied by team political skill was introduced into each regression model. It was preceded by

controls and linear and squared term for perception of organizational politics. Lastly, the interaction terms of team political skill and perception of organizational politics, both linear and squared, were entered into the model. Hypothesis 1 was partially confirmed, as the moderating effect was demonstrated for task cohesion - team political skill relationship (β = .68, p < .05; Δ $R2$ = .11, F = 3.06, p < .05), but not for social cohesion (β = -.18, n.s.). Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed, supporting the curvilinear moderating effect of perceived organizational politics for the team trust - team political skill relationship (β = .84, p < .05; Δ $R2$ = .17, F = 2.83, p < .05). Hypothesis 3 was supported: The finding demonstrated a significant moderating effect of the linear interaction of team political skill and perceived politics onto team conflict (β = .78. p < .01; Δ $R2$ = .25, p < .05). See Figure 2 for detail. The overall results are summarized in table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Insert Figure 2 about here

Analysis of common method variance

With most ratings obtained from the same team members and at one and the same point in time, common method bias represents a serious issue in this study. In order to test for a possible effect of a common method bias, we followed Widaman (1985) and ran a series of hierarchically nested models. We tested a baseline model that specified the relationship between team political skill, and team emergent states. The number of teams was small, so we had to use parcels, rather than items, to ensure model convergence. The model yielded in an acceptable fit and adding a method factor with all variables loading onto the original baseline measurement did not improve the overall model. In addition, the factor loadings of the baseline model remained

significant even after the method effect was partialled out. In addition to this preliminary test, a post-hoc analysis based on a split sample technique was performed. Based on the combined results of the preliminary and post-hoc tests, we concluded that while we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of common method variance, there is enough evidence that the respondents were able to differentiate between the variables and the findings were not greatly affected by the self-report character of the data.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the research areas on work teams, as well as organizational politics. It sheds light on constraints imposed on groups by perceived organizational politics. Building on conceptual articles on contextualization (Johns, 2001; 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993), this study addresses an important gap in the extant research by providing examples of how context may playout at a higher level of analysis and affect work teams. Addressing several research calls, this is one of the first studies that focuses on team rather individual political skill, and explores influence of organizational politics onto groups, rather than individuals or organizations. In addition, the data was collected from a MNC in Russia adding to our understanding of the phenomena in a non-western setting.

In line with the hypothesized relationship, teams perceiving organizational politics to be high demonstrated a stronger negative relationship between team political skill and team conflict. Presumably, the ability of politically skilled individuals to recognize the motives and needs of others, and use constructive interaction techniques, enabled them to prevent potential conflicts and successfully manage existing ones in situations of high uncertainty and ignited emotions, typical of organizational politics. Based on this, we conclude that being politically skilled

becomes even more beneficial in a highly charged political context when a team needs to resolve or avoid conflict.

A curvilinear relationship was specified and found for organizational politics, and team political skill with team cohesion and team trust. Specifically, the results suggest that moderate politicking sets an optimal context to benefit from political skill in teams. The curvilinear, versus linear, relationship was hypothesized based on the intuition that too much politicking could result in extremely high levels of uncertainty, provoking a hyper use of self-serving behavior and diminishing the team values. At the same time, in an organization low in politicking, the willingness to utilize political skill can be viewed as redundant effort as soon as objective performance gets prioritized. An intriguing finding deserving future research is what makes teams perceive their organization as high or low on politicking. In our Russia-based sample, the coefficient of variation for perception of organizational politics was found to be 23%, quite an impressive difference considering that one and the same organization was assessed by the teams.

Limitations and Future Research

The relatively small sample size (159 individuals comprising 28 teams) potentially affected the findings by lowering the power to detect some relationships. Somewhat attenuating the severity of this problem, the results obtained from the MNC sample provided support for the hypotheses, albeit at the lower significance level. Of note, the hypothesis on team cohesion was considered to be partially supported as a mediation effect only for task cohesion. We had to test effects for social and task cohesion separately because, upon close examination, the types of cohesiveness were found to relate to team political skill in opposite ways. Presumably, for Russian respondents high social cohesion implied excessive politicking and low professionalism and was perceived as a negative phenomenon. To our best knowledge, there is no reference in

the literature regarding the dimensionality of the group cohesiveness construct in the Russian context. A separate validation is required to investigate whether this difference in the perception of social cohesion reflects some influence of the national or, possibly, organizational culture. Therefore, further attention to contextual variables, such as team autonomy, team interdependence and team and organization identity, as well as cross-cultural and longitudinal approaches is warranted in future research.

Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications which extend to team composition and team building, for both local and global teams. Based on the research findings, practitioners are recommended to select highly political team members to form teams operating in low and medium high organizational politics environment. In addition, they may choose to enhance the skill among the team members through training (Ferris et al., 2012). Furthermore, since teams' perception is their reality, managers are suggested to exert conscious attempts to influence this perception to avoid the higher levels of organizational politics. Finally, Leslie and Gelfand note: "Differences in the nature of organizational politics across country can cause major hurdles for expatriates navigating different political systems as well as for organizations engaged in multi-national mergers" (2012:412). Thus, practical insights can also apply to organizations and teams operating across the globe.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Group Level Correlations

	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Team political skill	5.43	0.61													
2 Team cohesion	6.34	0.65	.45*												
3 Team social cohesion	5.37	1.13	-0.26	0.38											
4 Team task cohesion	6.90	0.88	.62**	.83**	-0.18										
5 Team trust	5.48	0.80	.61**	.56**	-.45*	.85**									
6 Team conflict	2.80	0.64	-.60**	-0.33	.52**	-.65**	-.66**								
7 Perceived org. politics	2.64	0.59	-0.27	0.10	0.34	-0.18	-0.16	.514**							
8 Age	27.81	4.17	0.18	-0.18	-0.24	0.04	0.04	-0.14	-0.30						
9 Gender	0.46	0.41	0.19	0.26	0.06	0.17	0.18	-0.12	0.17	-.54**					
10 Work experience	77.39	48.99	0.34	0.20	-0.13	0.33	0.23	-0.36	-.39*	.85**	-0.14				
11 Org. Experience	23.59	8.29	-0.33	-0.34	0.00	-0.37	-0.32	0.34	0.29	0.27	-0.27	0.05			
12 Team experience	18.34	7.73	-0.30	-.48*	-0.33	-0.32	-0.18	0.13	0.17	0.28	-0.38	-0.08	.68**		
13 Work with current leader	11.45	8.01	-.52**	-.42*	-0.20	-0.29	-0.24	0.10	0.05	-0.02	-0.33	-0.32	.42*	.68**	
14 Team size	8.00	4.89	-0.17	-.62**	-0.23	-.50**	-.40*	0.18	-0.03	0.20	-0.26	-0.02	0.21	0.36	.41*

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$
$N = 28$; Gender was coded 1 for men and 0 for women; Work, company, team experience and tenure with current leader were measured in months.

Table 2
Indexes of Agreement and Reliability

Variable	# of items	rwg mean	rwg range	rwg median	ICC(1)	ICC(k)
Team political skill	18	-	-	-	.30	.68
Team task cohesion	4	.69	.64 - .94	.88	.37	.79
Team social cohesion	2	.90	.78 - .97	.93	.19	.54
Team conflict	11	.69	.59 - .79	.72	.22	.60
Team trust	3	-	-	-	.18	.59
Perceived organizational politics	3	.71	.59 -	.76	.18.	.68.

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis of Perception of Organizational Politics as a Moderator of Team Political Skill and Team Emergent States

Predictors	*β*	R^2	ΔR^2
(1) Team Trust			
Controls		.23	
Team political skill	-.10	.39	.16*
Perceived org. politics Perceived org. politics	.09	.39	.00
(squared)	.08	.43	.03
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics	-.09	.46	.03
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics (squared)	.84*	.63*	.17*
(2) Social Cohesion			
Controls		.29	
Team political skill	-.27	.42†	.13†
Perceived org. politics	.47	.54*	.12*
Perceived org. politics (squared)	-.24	.59†	.06
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics	.18	.62	.02
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics (squared)	-.18	.63	.01
(3) Task Cohesion			
Controls		.43	
Team political skill	-.14	.53†	.09†
Perceived org. politics	.05	.54	.02
Perceived org. politics (squared)	.18	.57	.04
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics	-.00	.59	.01
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics (squared)	.68*	.70*	.11*
(4) Team conflict			
Controls		.29	
Team political skill	-.68*	.47*	.17*
Perceived org. politics	-.23	.55†	.08*
Perceived org. politics (squared)	.34	.55	.01
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics	.78**	.80*	.25*
Team political skill X Perceived org. politics (squared)	-.09	.80	.00

† *p<.10*
**p<.05*
***p<.01.*

Note. N =28. Controls: age, gender, work experience, team and organizational tenure, experience with current leader, and team size.

Figure 1

Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Politics onto Team Political Skill – Team Emergent States

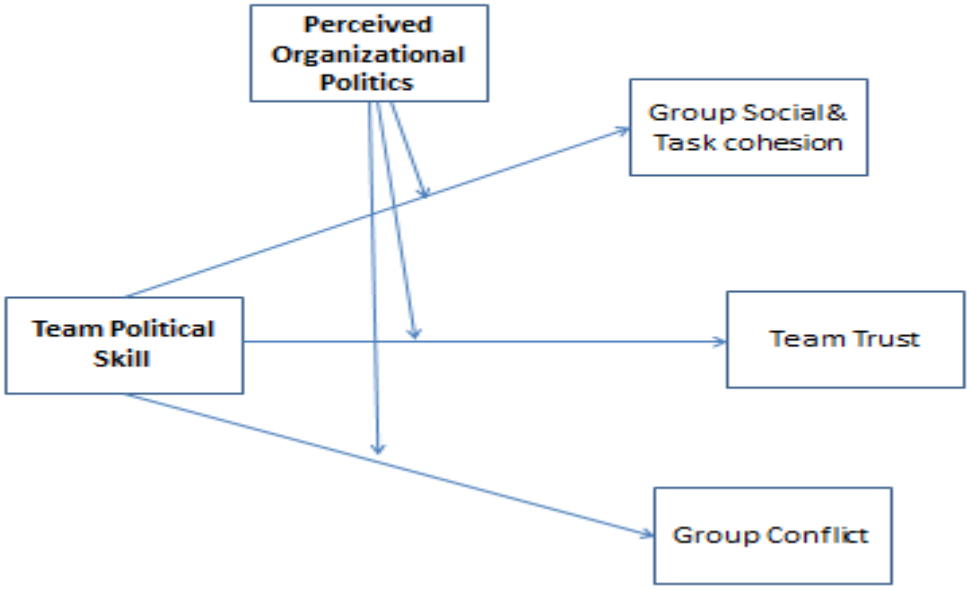
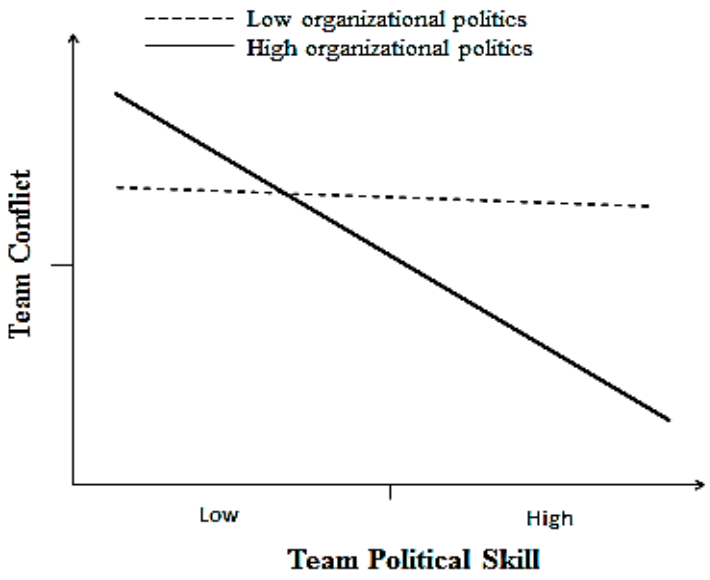


Figure 2

Interactive Effect of Team Political Skill and Perceptions of Organizational Politics on Team Conflict