

# ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS AND THEIR EFFECT ON WORKPLACE LEARNING

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the findings of the author's doctoral thesis of which results have identified a number of effects of political behaviour that hinder or support workplace learning. The work adds to knowledge since, whilst a small amount of literature exists regarding the relationship between organisational politics and learning, there is very little knowledge concerning the effect of micro-politics on workplace learning.

The case study took place at the University of Malta and evidence was gained from 35 participants who were undergoing some type of workplace learning, through participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The study employed a qualitative research design and research data was extracted from the fieldwork notes and interview transcriptions of the participants who related the effect of political behaviour they were having (if any) on their learning.

A methodology based on an inductivist approach was used to explore the participants' experiences, thoughts and opinions, since the study involved social processes and behaviours. Collected data which was transcribed and converted to text was analysed by using the N-VIVO Qualitative Data Analysis software.

The research clearly shows that interpersonal political behaviour may have an intense effect on the employees' learning, particularly informal learning. The effects can be inhibitive and distressing for some, and supportive and profitable for others, which effects were completely unknown before this research took place. In a minority of cases, workplace politics seemed to have had no effect on individual learning, as some respondents consciously chose to distance and isolate themselves from such behaviours.

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**Keywords:** Organisational Politics, Workplace Learning

## Introduction

There have been several developments in the academic literature on organisational politics in the last decade however the relationship between organisational politics and workplace learning is still understudied. Some writers have begun to address this issue. For example, according to Lawrence *et al* (2005) learning is successful when employees are adequately politically skilled. Such research, whilst being helpful in determining the skills required by employees, does not really tackle in detail the effect that political behaviour might have on the employees' learning.

The research addressed in this paper focuses mainly on the competitive interpersonal micro-politics of self-interested individuals, and what effect this might have on the employees' learning at the workplace. As such, the primary focus does not fall on macro-scale industrial politics or structural power struggles, though such issues are of course an important part of the context and are attended to where appropriate. There are debates concerning whether workplace politics are of benefit or an impediment to workplace learning but as yet there has been no authoritative answer to this. According to Meriac & Villanova

(in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), studies presented to date have paid more attention to the general perceptions of politics rather than observable political behaviours (2006: 17). Meriac & Villanova also suggest that more research is required to investigate the individual differences of employees and their behaviour in a political climate, specifically the interactions that take place (2006: 27).

Thus, the existing literature provides a somewhat superficial discussion of the relationship between organisational politics and learning, and therefore does not offer a systematic or detailed analysis of the actual effects of political behaviour on learning, and the purpose of this research was to begin to fill that gap.

### **The Study & the Methodology Used**

A number of questions were raised which informed the development of the main research instruments – a participant observation guide and a semi-structured interview guide. The study employed a qualitative research design and research data was extracted from the fieldwork notes and interview transcriptions of the participants who related the effect of political behaviour they were having (if any) on their learning. A methodology based on an inductivist approach was used to explore the participants' experiences, thoughts and opinions, since the study involved social processes and behaviours. Collected data which was transcribed and converted to text was analysed by using the N-VIVO Qualitative Data Analysis software.

The data collection process allowed for a detailed investigation of respondents' experiences of what they saw as political behaviour in the workplace, how they perceived that behaviour, how they reacted to it, and how those perceptions and reactions impacted on their workplace learning. On the basis of the findings, it can be concluded with some confidence that political behaviours and relationships within the workplace can and do have a variety of effects on the employees' workplace learning, which itself is mainly informal. It transpired that organisational politics may enhance as well as hinder the learning at the workplace, or may neither enhance nor hinder learning.

The political behaviours described by the respondents were categorised according to an analytical framework that was based on typologies of political behaviours and tactics provided by Mintzberg (1985), Allen *et al* (1979) and Lawrence *et al* (2005). Like all typologies, this framework is an imperfect tool in terms of faithfully representing all types of political behaviour, but it did provide a clear and, it is argued, valid tool for making sense of the data and delineating commonalities in the behaviours observed and described by respondents. The main themes pervading these behaviours were seen to be authority, power and rivalry. The most significant games and tactics identified include the 'Rival Camps Game', 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Insurgency Game' and 'Counterinsurgency Game'. While the respondents mostly described these tactics in terms of what other people in their workplace were doing, a few of the participants were engaging in some political behaviour themselves, in an attempt to get things done at their place of work, namely 'Reciprocity', 'Ingratiation' and 'Developing a Base of Support'.

### **The Kind of Learning Explored**

The majority of learning observed occurred informally mostly through experience and by receiving help from colleagues. This confirms existing evidence about the importance of informal learning, such as Yeo's (2008) suggestion that 80% of the learning occurs informally through self-directed learning, networking, coaching and mentoring (2008: 318). A few also learned in an unconscious way, through observation and by doing their own research. Most of the participants found it easy to learn their relevant tasks, despite the

political activity that affected their learning and some also found learning relatively easy *because of* the political activity.

The majority of the participants learned through receiving feedback from their superior or line manager except for a few: (i) Two participants did not appear to receive any feedback and this seemed at least in part due to a political tactic identified in their respective department, namely the 'Line vs. Staff'; (ii) One participant did not receive any feedback seemingly due to the lack of managerial skills of his superior; and (iii) Another participant had been in the department for a very short period of time and thus had not yet received any opportunity for feedback. The findings illustrate that there are a few employees who have found it difficult to learn due to the effects of political behaviours in their workplace. This echoes Mallon *et al's* (2005) implication that organisational politics can impede learning, thus making workplace learning an unnatural process for the employee (2005: 8).

The research presented in this study portrays an organisation where the journey from periphery to core proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) (if indeed it does happen) is fraught with the difficulties caused by political relations. However, those same relations and behaviours can promote learning in ways that were unanticipated by Lave and Wenger's communities of practice model, which lacks any detailed analysis of organisational politics and does not identify the ways in which relations and political behaviours may promote learning.

### **The Types of Political Behaviour Observed**

The data revealed that respondents experienced several political tactics and games in the workplace, namely those tactics similar to Mintzberg's (1985) 'Rival Camps Game', 'Insurgency Game', 'Counterinsurgency Game', 'Line vs. Staff', 'Alliance Game' and the 'Expertise Game', Allen *et al's* (1979) 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Reciprocity', 'Impression Management', 'Ingratiation' and 'Developing a Base of Support', and Lawrence *et al's* (2005) 'Episodic Power'. The most commonly experienced political tactics are Mintzberg's 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Insurgency Game', and Allen *et al's* 'Attacking or Blaming Others'. According to the observations, these exist in seven departments. Behaviours associated with Mintzberg's 'Counterinsurgency Game' were also observed in four departments. More than one political activity has been identified in some departments. In one instance no significant evidence of political behaviour was found in one department however, the participant described being affected by the political tactics of the central administration.

### **Causes of Organisational Politics**

While the causes of workplace political behaviour are of secondary concern to this study, they still merit attention as they may help us to understand *why* peoples' experiences and perceptions of political behaviours impact on learning and how they can be addressed, eliminated or harnessed to improve learning. Vredenburg & Shea-Van Fossen (2010) affirm that organisational politics may be encouraged by cultural circumstances and individual surroundings at the workplace (2010: 31). This resonates with the results of the research wherein part of the micro-political behaviour seemed to be occurring due to the structure of the organisation. The participants indicated a few reasons behind the political behaviour they encountered; the most common being *narcissism* (a term used by one of the respondents), which corresponds with Lubit's (2002) (in Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010) aspect of human nature that enhances organisational politics (2010: 35), *the new employee considered as a threat*, and *bureaucracy*. According to the participants, these three reasons generate the following behaviour and political games: 'Attacking or Blaming Others', 'Rival Camps Game', 'Insurgency Game' and 'Impression management'.

Participants also divulged a variety of emotional responses towards the political behaviour that affects their workplace learning, with the most common being ‘frustration’. Some have also shown an amount of antipathy towards the bureaucratic processes within the organisation and saw them as a hazard to their learning. Findings of this research indicate that politics arising out of bureaucratic issues had divergent effects on the learning of individuals, which range from demotivation and frustration to opportunities to learn about the internal systems of a tertiary education institution. This sensitivity towards politics is confirmed by Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005) who argue that employees are sensitive to decisions made in their organisation, that may be perceived as political and individuals may react emotionally in different ways (2005: 258). This also matches Rosen *et al*’s (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) illustration that different personalities may perceive politics more positively than others (2006: 47).

### **The Effect of Politics on Workplace Learning**

The study illustrates that behaviour that is perceived as political may have a variety of effects on workplace learning; it may have a supportive effect, which matches the affirmation of Vredenburg & Shea-Van Fossen (2010) that organisational politics can also be functional, and; it may have an inhibitive effect or no effect at all on the workplace learning of employees. This is contrary to Drory & Vigoda-Gadot’s (2010) affirmation that workplace learning is only likely to occur when there is low political behaviour in an organisation. All participants manage to learn and in the majority of cases, where a political behaviour was experienced, it had both a supportive and an inhibitive effect on their learning.

Moreover, from the study it transpired that any particular political behaviour may affect employees disparately and this conforms with Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller’s affirmation that what is considered politically negative in one culture may be considered otherwise in another (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 343). An example of this concerns two participants who encountered the same political behaviour of ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ and who perceive the same effect differently: one considers the attitude of nonchalance or relaxed approach towards learning as inhibitive whilst the other perceives this same attitude as supportive. Nevertheless, such differences may not be due to cultural variation; they could also be due to personality, identity or dispositional differences towards learning at the individual level (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). A few of the participants who were affected by this political behaviour did not necessarily experience this from within the department in which they are situated but from certain parts of the central administration with which they had some sort of liaison.

### **Political Behaviour Concerning Authority**

From the findings it transpired that experiences of political games concerning authority had an important effect on workplace learning, and prime among these were similar to Mintzberg’s (1985) ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ and ‘Insurgency Game’. The ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ seemed to be supporting the workplace learning of the participants by compelling them to consider the learning of tasks informally through experience and help from colleagues as a positive challenge and increasing their concentration. The findings confirm in part that according to Lawrence *et al* (2005), without such political behaviour organisations cannot learn (2005: 190). One participant in particular improved his concentration during the learning phase, as a result of the legitimate ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ adopted by his supervisor. This also supports the conclusions advanced by Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) wherein they say that political behaviour could be a useful part of organisational life (2010: 197). However, where this game is experienced, it can also inhibit the learning by instilling demotivation in other participants. Silverman

(2003) illustrates that lower level employees are often ready for greater autonomy and are eager to participate in decision-making related to their tasks (2003: 17). This was true in the case of some of the participants. During the research, one participant in particular commented that he wants to have more autonomy regarding his job but he is not granted the freedom to exercise his abilities to the full.

The ‘Insurgency Game’ is another game which, in this study, seems to support informal learning through experience by increasing confidence and making a participant look at things from various perspectives. Conversely, it can also generate frustration and anger towards learning, and learning is taking longer than necessary to be actuated. The study therefore identified both supportive and inhibitive effects in this regard. The findings suggest that insurgency games can be caused by a variety of factors such as; the *age gap*, the *individual likes to feel in control*, *a new employee is considered as a threat*, and *the presence of rigidity in job duties*. For example, respondents in more than one department claimed that supervisors were monitoring younger employees much more explicitly and closely than they did other employees. This lends some support to the contention that political behaviours may emerge partly as a product of age differences. However, the data do not allow any firm conclusions about this to be drawn, and it may be an issue for further study.

In one case, an employee found the workplace learning process arduous and difficult, mainly due to what he saw as behaviours that appeared to reflect the ‘Insurgency Game’ within his Faculty, especially with regards to decisions that had to be taken for the benefit of the faculty and the students. Conversely, the findings also promote the conclusion that behaviour perceived as political may be a driver for learning in that some managers respond by developing skills that enable them to work around political behaviour. This is in line with the suggestion of Butcher & Clarke (1999) wherein they propose that managers should be able to manage political behaviour and not simply avoid it, since management is also concerned with the resolution of opposing interests (1999: 12). This also raises the issue of individual differences meaning that some individuals may be predisposed to deal with politics in a confrontational way, while others may be predisposed to respond in a more conciliatory way. Their reaction is likely to depend in part on their previous experiences and how they have developed their managerial approach and coping strategies over time. This could possibly be an area for future research by investigating the causes & origins of these different dispositions.

For example, the employee mentioned above engaged in reconciliatory behaviour that was closely aligned to ‘Developing a Base of Support’ instead of using the ‘Counterinsurgency Game’ to manage his subordinates in a more confrontational way. He also seemed to engage in behaviours reflective of ‘Reciprocity’ in order to obtain the necessary resources from the central administration. Likewise another participant seemed to engage in ‘Reciprocity’ with the head of department by working more than her contracted hours in favour for a future academic post. Similarly, a different participant engaged in ‘Ingratiation’ in order to obtain the necessary resources from central administration. In this case the participant may have used (though it cannot be affirmed so) this behaviour in order to be seen positively in the eyes of the employees within the central administration, which conforms with the conclusions drawn by Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010), Poon (2003) and Sussman *et al* (2002) concerning the use of ‘Ingratiation’ as an influence technique.

### **Political Behaviour Concerning Power**

The findings illustrate that two particular political tactics specifically concerning power can have a key effect on the workplace learning of the participants. These include Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) ‘Episodic Power’ and Mintzberg’s (1985) ‘Expertise Game’. Experiencing political behaviour similar to ‘Episodic Power’ was seen to support the

informal learning of one participant in an administrative role by helping to increase her accuracy of numerical data related to her work, however when she felt that Episodic Power was being exercised by an academic colleague, it made her feel incapable and led her to question her competence during her learning phase. This is because she did not feel that the academic colleague allowed her to take decisions on his behalf, even in instances where her opinions may have been productive. According to Lawrence *et al* (2005) this perceived political tactic may benefit the organisation where a manipulated idea put forward is of benefit to the organisation, however it can also hinder workplace learning if it is inappropriately used (2005: 189). In the case of the above mentioned participant, the perception that this political tactic was being used did seem to inhibit her learning in a way but it also seemed to have resulted in some positive outcomes for her, by improving her standing with her colleagues. Another participant tried to stay detached from those members of staff engaging in ‘Episodic Power’ and thus, she seemed to have endured no effect on her informal learning.

On the other hand, the political behaviour similar to the ‘Expertise Game’ affected one participant in both a supportive and an inhibitive way. The participant felt that an Expertise Game was being played by his predecessor who tried to hoard information for himself because his leaving time was being prolonged by the management. On one side this experience enhanced the participant’s rapport with colleagues and subordinates whilst learning informally from them. On the other side of the continuum this political game appeared to promote a sense of frustration, stress, demotivation to learn, and he also considered leaving the job. This supports Ladebo’s (2006) and Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun’s (2005) proposition that organisational politics are a source of stress at the place of work. This employee in particular had found his informal learning greatly impeded due to what he saw as the stress-inducing ‘Expertise Game’ played by his predecessor. Silverman (2003) states that a predecessor is the best source of information about a new job, however, Silverman does not mention that in such situations the individual may actually be a hindrance to his successor’s learning if it is perceived that there is negative political behaviour such as the ‘Expertise Game’.

### **Political Behaviour Concerning Rivalry**

The findings show that a number of political games and tactics concerning rivalry had an effect on the workplace learning of the participants. These games and tactics are similar to Allen *et al*’s (1979) ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’, and Mintzberg’s (1985) ‘Rival Camps Game’ and ‘Line vs. Staff’. Behaviours associated with ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ seemed to affect the workplace learning in a supportive way wherein some employees who experienced it adopted a more relaxed approach towards learning (where the learning is formal on-the-job), others improved their knowledge and their political and organisational skills (where learning is informal both by experience and unconsciously), as well as increased their appreciation of learning at work. On the negative side this political tactic seemed to have the potential to instil carelessness towards formal learning and an attitude of nonchalance towards informal learning. Moreover, this political behaviour seemed to be reducing the pace of learning and instilling frustration and irritation in the participants’ attitude towards informal learning.

Almost all participants experienced considerable engagement with bureaucracy which led to perceptions of the ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’ political tactic, and consequently inhibited workplace learning by causing irritation, frustration, conflict and demotivation, whilst in terms of support, this political game developed a better understanding of the organisation. One participant in particular was shocked during the first few weeks of working at the University due to the highly bureaucratic system and the way in which she

perceived that people avoided responsibility. This respondent expressed the view that many employees of the University failed or refused to take responsibility for core tasks, and found this a frustrating experience.

Other participants appeared to have had no inhibitive effect on their workplace learning in respect of 'Attacking or Blaming Others' tactics. In fact, the findings illustrate that some experiences of this political behaviour occurred due to the structure of the organisation. This cause is anticipated by Buchanan (2008) wherein he states that politics may be caused by structural relationships within an organisation (2008: 54). Also, the root of some political behaviour, namely the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' political tactic, seemed to be at least in part associated with institutional or departmental underinvestment in appropriate office space and other resources. The limitation of resources such as lack of space is one of the causes illustrated by Curtis (2003), Latif *et al* (2011) and many others. The supportive thing about this political tactic as encountered by one participant is that the individual unconsciously learned to play political games more effectively i.e. by keeping a paper trail of correspondence. Whether such learning can be described as 'positive' or not is certainly debatable, but that is perhaps a debate for another time.

The 'Rival Camps' game was seen to affect the informal learning by experience in a supportive way by improving the employees' assertiveness and knowledge. However, this political game also seemed to inhibit this same type of learning by instilling an attitude of demotivation, irritation, hesitation and self-doubt towards learning in the employees. A few others did not seem to be affected by this political game.

Behaviours connected to the 'Line vs. Staff' rivalry game were also seen to support informal learning. For example, in one instance it appeared to support the learning by experience of one employee in a way that made him more meticulous in his work. However it also seems to have the potential to inhibit learning by instilling demotivation towards informal learning and an attitude of nonchalance towards both formal and informal learning. One participant in particular experienced such demotivation as a result of such behaviours that he eventually resigned from his job. This may be considered as an addition to the consequences of organisational politics outlined by Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun (2005) wherein they affirm that organisational politics may cause an individual to detach either physically or mentally from the workplace (2005: 260).

In general, it seems that rivalry behaviours of various kinds can significantly impede or undermine workplace learning, and this was particularly illustrated where rivalry games were played out between groups of employees in central administration, namely the 'Rival Camps Game' and 'Attacking or Blaming Others'. The findings reveal a high degree of rivalry between two particular types of staff: (i) those employed on an indefinite basis i.e. until retirement age, and (ii) those employed for a definite period. Staff in (i) above perceive that the employees who are employed for a definite period are treated much better and have higher wages. There is a perception that the first group of employees seem to not be taking full responsibility for their job and there also seems to be a misconception in this regard.

This indicates that there may be a lack of communication between the management and the subordinates and there are also conflicts, which, conforming to Jehn (1997), seem to be task-related conflicts that have changed to relationship conflicts. This rivalry also supports Albrecht's (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) portrayal that employees tend to reduce their dedication, put in less effort and engage in withdrawal behaviour when they feel that they cannot trust other employees and the procedures of the organisation (2006: 109). Similarly, another participant indicated that the formal on-the-job learning she was undergoing is very difficult due to the 'Attacking or Blaming Others' behaviour that she felt occurs at the central administration. This particular participant found the centralised system very time-wasting for

her learning and prefers to do the things herself or seek help from other departments instead of going directly to the central administration.

### **Implications for Theory**

This research has looked closely at the effect of organisational micro-politics on workplace learning of individuals and has systematically investigated the impact of particular political behaviours upon workplace learning activity. The study also delved into the reasons behind the actual political behaviour. According to Buchanan (2008) structural relationships within an organisation may also be the cause of political behaviour (2008: 54). Such seems to be the case at the setting where this study has been carried out, wherein political behaviour in part occurs due to the formation of job duties. There also seems to be a lack of communication between the management and the subordinates which leads to misconceptions and consequently particular political behaviour such as the ‘Rival Camps Game’ and ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’. The lack of performance measures, as also indicated by Gotsis & Kortezi (2010), Othman (2008) and Poon (2003), and other practices such as for example, talent management, are leading employees to become demotivated and engage in various political tactics such as ‘Insurgency Game’ and ‘Attacking or Blaming Others’. In Malta there has been no studies regarding the effect of politics on workplace learning and this research will contribute to discussions in this area of sociological examination.

This study has also made a novel contribution to the existing research on politics and learning since it identified the type of effects that particular political behaviours have on the learning of the individual at the place of work. The effects may be learning-supportive or learning-inhibitive and these effects were completely unknown before this research took place. Where political behaviour is learning-supportive it is meant that the political behaviour improves and boosts the learning of the individual. On the other hand when the political behaviour is learning-inhibitive it is meant that the political behaviour impedes, obstructs or even delays the learning of the employee. The study also identified that any one political tactic can have both a supportive and an inhibitive effect. Other political behaviour seemed to have no effect at all on some employees. Whether the political behaviour is learning-supportive and learning-inhibitive or has no effect at all highly depends on how the individual reacts to a particular political tactic in relation to his or her learning. Thus, one can say that the effect of politics on learning depends to some extent on the individual’s perception, character, disposition and state of mind.

### **Implications for Policy & Practice**

Undoubtedly, researchers who undertake a study in the organisation they are employed, do so because they feel the need to improve certain aspects of their organisation’s processes (Coghlan & Casey, 2001: 676). Both Allen *et al*’s political behaviour and Mintzberg’s political games were important for this study however, Mintzberg’s definitions of the games have been very influential in this research. Mintzberg has ‘illuminated’ the research in question with the thorough characterizations of the various political activities. While he is not deprived of critics, Mintzberg is extensively valued in the arena of management and organisational theory (Lemieux, 1998: 36). One would ask, why choose Mintzberg’s definitions of political activity? There are indeed other writers whose work on organisational politics is interesting and it is not intended to suggest that one should not investigate the work on organisational politics of other writers.

However, this research distinguishes Mintzberg’s work on organisational politics as a model of how one can apply the definitions of political activity, particularly because he is a well-respected organisational theorist in his own right (Lemieux, 1998: 58). Moreover, his definitions offer a firm basis in understanding and observing commonalities in political

activity since, according to Lemieux (1998), they establish part of a broad construction of the primary theories on organisations drawn from political (as well as other areas on organisational theory) literature up to the late 1980s and because they are determinedly ingrained in the ‘neo-functionalist sociological’ focal point (1998: 58). As noted above, while no typology of social behaviours can lay claim to totally perfect or comprehensive representation, the benefit of using Mintzberg’s typology of political behaviours (and also those used by Allen *et al*) is that it offers a clear framework for analysis and a useful heuristic tool for making sense of common themes in political behaviours.

On a general note, this research can contribute to discussions on policy making and the findings can be used to give advice on the benefit of implementing human resource best practices and how people react to different situations while they are learning. Some political behaviours seem to be beneficial for workplace learning, in certain circumstances and where individuals are positively predisposed towards political behaviours. Other universities might use this research as a guide to inform their understanding of how politics affect their employees’ workplace learning. One should bear in mind that politics may have an influence on an organisation and in certain organisations politics may govern, even if for a short span of time (Lemieux, 1998: 59). According to Mintzberg (in Lemieux, 1998), such organisations are best defined in terms of power, not structure, and by power which is applied in illegitimate ways and not by means of authority or capability (1998: 59). As such, managers should have knowledge of how workplace learning takes place. Additionally, they should also have knowledge on the various political behaviour that may be present in a university setting, in particular those political behaviours concerning authority, power and rivalry identified in this study. The specific politics–learning relationships concerning these three types of politics might be most pertinent to them. These should also preferably learn some political skills as sort of ‘survival skills’, since from the study it transpired that a few participants in a management/supervisory role engaged in political behaviour in order to get things done.

Managers could also carry out a survey based on the causes and effects, perhaps those included in this study, to be able to identify the political behaviour that is present in their organisation and control the learning-supportive effects that the political behaviour is having on the learning of their employees. With the survey, managers could also identify the political behaviour that has a learning-inhibitive effect on the individual and try to contest these by making the necessary changes for example in the work process or the people that are hindering learning due to their political activity, and take action accordingly. It is really a case by case situation. These findings will also be of interest to other type of organisations, wherein employees are engaged in workplace learning.

Last but not least, in this research the bureaucratic structure of the organisation seems to be partly at the root of some political issues. The motive why bureaucracy and consequently organisational politics embellish is that they are a normal evolving quality of an organisation structure. The present structure seems to be influencing the employees’ behaviour and thus is stimulating the enhancement of bureaucracy and political behaviour. Maybe the only way to overcome this dysfunction is to change the organisation’s structure. This may be done by carrying out a reengineering and a restructuring exercise of the processes, policies and HR practices (such as rewards and incentives) of the organisation.

### **Reflections on Professional Practice**

The previous section shows that this study urges some changes to the HR practices such as the importance of developing several skills and enhancing communication, conflict resolution, coaching and mentoring. Conflict in the workplace may be a natural mechanism in an organisation, however it can be extremely damaging to employees and especially

teamwork. If employees are managed in an incorrect way, factual and reasonable differences between them can rapidly become rampant (Aritzeta et al, 2005: 175). This may result in situations where teamwork collapses and the goals and objectives are susceptible, particularly in circumstances where the wrong tactics to conflict resolution are used (Aritzeta et al, 2005: 161). Conflicting objectives can rapidly change into individual aversions: Teamwork is disrupted and capacities are unexploited as employees will tend to isolate themselves from their tasks, and end up in a rancorous descending meander of pessimism and blaming (Aritzeta et al, 2005: 175). In such situations it is beneficial to use a positive tactic to conflict resolution, where a discussion is considerate and non-provocative, and the focus remains on the issues rather than on the individual employees (Koza & Dant, 2007: 291). As long as individuals listen attentively and analyse the actualities, disputes and potential resolutions appropriately, conflict will likely be resolved in a successful way.

As part of the HR practice, the practitioner is to understand the various ways of resolving conflicts that may be present in a situation, and perhaps should use one of Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) five styles of conflict resolution, namely the Collaborative style. This style is useful since it involves the conflict resolver trying to meet the needs of all the employees involved. The conflict resolvers that use the collaborative style can be very emphatic however they collaborate well and recognize that all employees are significant (Koza & Dant, 2007: 281). This style of conflict resolution is beneficial when the conflict resolver is required to combine a range of perspectives to acquire a paramount resolution (Koza & Dant, 2007: 281).

Communication is important for the conflict resolution process. One has to listen sensibly in order to understand why one group of employees are espousing their point (Moreno, 2010: 103). Moreover, one has to understand where the other employees are coming from before defending the position of the other group of employees. At this stage, communicating effectively by setting out facts and objectives to both groups is vital in order to adopt the best resolution. Speaking of effective communication - it has to be understood that communication is an important tool in an organisation since it creates a clear understanding of the policies of the organisation (Moreno, 2010: 100) and it assists in enhancing the productivity of the employees (Moreno, 2010: 102).

This study clearly illustrates that unblemished communication and transparency are important so that the employees can understand the policies and the job responsibilities of their peers who receive higher wages. This communication would offer a sense of direction to the employees since they would understand what their peers are required to achieve from their tasks. Perhaps, as part of its practices, an HR Department, in line with the other departments, should create an effective communication strategy to outline what the organisation does and what its key objectives are, especially the role of each group of employees. The manager concerned for the groups must communicate effectively with his or her subordinates in order to achieve the team goals with minimal conflicts (Koza & Dant, 2007: 282). In addition, monitoring, which is part of the manager's job, is not possible without effective communication, since communication assists in the monitoring process of the employees' behaviour - this aids the employees to communicate any work issues and grievances to their managers (Koza & Dant, 2007: 282; Moreno, 2010: 105). Therefore, one may say that, in part, communication helps in the monitoring role of management.

Linked with communication are the mentoring and coaching skills. Previously it has been noted that it is most important to implement coaching and mentoring skills, which, apart from the workplace learning, may also enhance the development of relations at the workplace. Coaching and mentoring are skills that empower the employees to realise their full potential since both use the same abilities and tactic: coaching is short term task-based and mentoring is a longer term relationship (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000: 30; Martin, 2006). In

the past coaching and mentoring were only earmarked for directors and executives however, today these are accessible to every individual as a personal improvement instrument (Martin, 2006). These skills are also interconnected with organisational change activities so as to assist employees to agree on and adjust to the changes that take place (Martin, 2006).

In the case of the University of Malta, perhaps those employees who 'hold a grudge' against their peers who receive higher wages, would benefit from the coaching and mentoring skills, since coaching and mentoring focus on the individual employee to enhance his or her morale, motivation and productivity. Several people in a management position have never learned how to be an effective mentor and coach. One of the tasks of the mentor is to encourage an open and two-way communication, which may include the sharing of difficult times employees go through, thus instilling a sense of trust in their superior (Martin, 2006).

One should not forget the jealousy that occurs between work colleagues, especially when one is getting more money than the other, an issue which at the University of Malta is urging employees to be involved in political behaviour. Research shows that monetary payments stimulate the brain equally like other amphetamines such as food and drugs - "nonbiological reinforcers, such as money....can elicit neural activation in the same dopaminergic reward circuitry with drug and food rewards" (Gal, 2012: 1023) – thus earning money feels good. According to Pessiglione *et al* (2007) and Barridge & Kringelbach (2008), the greater the pay, the more stimulated is the brain. Moreover, Barridge & Kringelbach (2008) suggest that the fragment of the brain that is enthused by money is dissimilar from the fragment of the brain that is roused by kindness and thus, individuals are not able to express contentment when their counterparts gain more money. Therefore, the group of employees at the University who are jealous of their peers who have higher wages need to be made aware that the latter may have a natural ability or talent, or are of superior intelligence. They might also be more competent in their line of work in view of their skills and qualifications.

Finally, pay satisfaction may be a significant factor to entice and retain individuals in an organisation (Weiner, 1980: 745). When employees are not contented with the incentive structure of the organisation, they tend to exhibit inadequate role behaviours such as withdrawal or absenteeism (Weiner, 1980: 746). Conceivably the management should ask the following question and seek ways to communicate the answers to the unsatisfied employees: What determines the employees' contentment with their remuneration? There exist two answers for this question: 'Pay Adequacy' and 'Pay Equity'. Pay Adequacy is the extent to which an employee's remuneration fulfills his or her pecuniary requirements (Dyer & Theriault, 1976: 603). On the other hand, Pay Equity is the extent to which an individual identifies that his or her remuneration is just in comparison to other groups of employees in the organisation (Dyer & Theriault, 1976: 597). These answers should be seriously taken into consideration by the management in line with some of the conflicts that exist with regards to the salary structures for different groups of employees.

Undoubtedly, one cannot expect a working atmosphere to be jealousy-free and there may be employees who incorrectly perceive the credentials required to go up the career ladder; however, jealousy can be kept at a minimum level if the perceptions are talked through. Some employees will move up the ladder and others who are less competent or less qualified will not – this will surely generate resentment, jealousy, and further adverse sentiments. Thacker (1998) suggests that over time, those individuals who realize that their perceptions are incorrect as to what fits and what is rewarded in the organisation will ultimately leave the organisation (1998: 51). However, by coaching and mentoring, resolving conflicts, and communicating effectively with employees, the working relations between the different groups of individuals may produce a more harmonious work environment.

### **Further research**

Further research may usefully contribute to this area by examining in a similar way the experiences of employees in other universities, or perhaps employees in a different type of organisation with other types of jobs. Key informants, who are not presently engaging in workplace learning, whilst included in informal discussions as part of the data collection process, played only a minor part in this study and only the perceptions and actions of those newly employed, promoted or transferred to another department played a major role. There is also the need to gain more understanding of the mediating effect that individual dispositions have on the relationship between politics and learning.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

The research design of this study took the form of a case study. It is often argued that one of the major limitations of a case study is its descriptive method, however according to Easton (2010), a significant opportunity that a case study has to offer is to understand a phenomenon in depth and comprehensively (2010: 119). Some argue that behaviour can only be described and not explained and the case study depends upon descriptive information provided by different employees (Easton, 2010: 124). Much of the information collected is retrospective data and reminiscences of past events, and is therefore subject to the problems related to memory. This may have left scope for important details to be left out. The case study involved only a single organisation and therefore may not be representative of a general group or population. Even though the case study presents rich data on the beliefs and experiences of a group of employees and can provide insights in unexplained frameworks, it does not examine the applicability to other contexts (Bell, 2005: 11; Darke *et al*, 1998; Easton, 2010: 126). By definition, case studies can make no assertion to be emblematic (Bryman, 2004: 51). There is no way of empirically knowing as to what extent the University studied is similar or different from other Universities. In addition, since the sample is particular, and the data is principally non-numerical, there are no means to ascertain the possibility that the data is representative of some larger population (Easton, 2010: 119). However, it is reasonably expected that much of what is described in this study may be found in other universities and therefore, it may be suggested that the research in question could support '*moderatum*' generalisations to other similar higher education institutions (Williams, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

The respective literatures on workplace learning and organisational politics are fairly well developed. However, the potential benefits to be gained from systematically combining these two fields of enquiry have been generally neglected until now. This is where this study has sought to make a contribution; in taking a systematic view of micro-political behaviours in organisations and attempting to illuminate the supportive and inhibitive effects that they can have on learning. Though the observations and the responses of the respondents are not to be viewed as established, objective facts, this study has identified issues which it is asserted add to the knowledge on the effect of politics on workplace learning. It is clear that political behaviour may have a profound effect on the employees' learning, particularly informal learning. These effects can be inhibitive and devastating for some, and supportive and fruitful for others. The study also identified that the organisation yields a lot of rivalry games due to its bureaucratic structure that seems to generate such political games concerning rivalry. One example of rivalry is occurring because one group of employees has the perception that the other group is treated and paid much better. In other cases, a small number of employees seem to have had no effect on their learning due to their choice to remain detached from the political manoeuvres. Probably a supplementary study of these

individuals would be interesting as these may divulge attributes regarding their capacity to remain immune to the political games and tactics.

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