

Use of Political Skills by Leaders to Establish Successful Organizational Change

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Abstract

This study examines how leaders' political skills affect employee commitment and job ambiguity during organizational change, particularly when leader-employee interaction time is limited. We found that interpersonal influence and networking ability consistently benefit employees, regardless of how often leaders interact with them. Apparent sincerity is effective when leaders maintain regular contact, while high levels of social astuteness can backfire, causing more job ambiguity and less commitment. The research underscores the importance of these political skills in supporting employees and ensuring successful organizational change, even when leaders have limited interaction time with their employees.

Keywords

leadership, political skills, organizational change, job ambiguity, change commitment

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Introduction

“As dealing with change becomes a regular activity, leading it becomes a skill to hone, an internal capacity to master.” (Snell, 2015).

Understanding how to make organizational change work is vital for organizations, especially considering that around 60% of organizational changes are estimated to fail (Beer & Nohria, 2000). At the heart of successful organizational change are an organization’s employees, especially the extent to which employees are committed to the change. This commitment reflects the extent to which employees are willing to embrace, engage with, and work towards the successful implementation of changes within the organization (Cunningham, 2006; Fugate, 2012; Khaw et al., 2023). Indeed, if employees are not committed to the change, why would they put in effort to help the organization make this change work? However, even when employees are committed to the change, organizational change is often accompanied with increased job ambiguity, meaning employees lack clarity regarding various aspects of one’s job (Tubre & Collins, 2000). That is, organizational change is often accompanied by a lack of clarity for employees in terms of what they should do and will do, making it difficult for those employees to work effectively and efficiently (cf. Tubre & Collins, 2000). For the success of organizational change, it is thus vital to not only maximize employees’ commitment to the change, but also to minimize their job ambiguity.

Enter the role of leaders! Leaders play a pivotal role in guiding their teams through organizational changes (Fugate, 2012) and navigating the change-related challenges described above. The success of these changes largely depends on the leaders’ ability to effectively manage and guide their teams through the uncertainties of transition. Traditional studies have focused on the impact of leadership styles (i.e., overarching categorizations of leaders’ behavioral patterns), providing insights that are valuable, yet often somewhat nebulous and equivocal, and therefore challenging to directly implement in real-world change management scenarios (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Knol et al., 2024). This study aims to facilitate more straightforward translation to practice by focusing on the use of political skills during times of organizational change. This focus on a more concrete aspect of leadership provides leaders with practical and actionable tools.

Political skills—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 et al., 2005, p. 127)—are essential for effective leadership to establish a shared vision,

especially during transformative periods within organizations. These skills involve the ability to effectively understand and influence others at work to advance both personal and organizational objectives. Academics have argued that leaders who are adept in using their political skills can navigate complex changes smoothly, aligning team members with the evolving goals of the organization (Ferris et al., 2007; Waggoner, 2020). By focusing on political skills, we answer the call by Oreg and Berson (2019) to focus on more specific aspects of leadership in studying organizational change, thereby generating more concrete and hands-on suggestions for practice to successfully navigate organizational change. In doing so, we demonstrate the relevance of political skills by extending the Meta-Theoretical Framework of Political Skill (Ferris et al., 2007) to the organizational change context, a crucial area that has been previously underexplored despite its significant potential.

Our study assesses how leaders' (use of their) political skills can facilitate change commitment and reduce job ambiguity among their employees – two important change-related outcomes. Moreover, as we realize that leaders have so much to deal with during organizational change, they might very well not have as much time as they would like to talk to their employees and set their minds at ease. Therefore, we also explore how the frequency of leader-employee interactions—whether sporadic or regular—affects these change-related outcomes. This gives us two key insights that are crucial for leaders operating in times of organizational change: (1) We will identify which specific political skills are most effective in boosting employees' commitment to organizational change and in minimizing their job ambiguity; and (2) We will learn which political skills retain their effectiveness even when leaders' interaction time with their employees is constrained.

Which Political Skills do Leaders Need?

To facilitate successful organizational change, understanding which political skills effectively enhance employee commitment while simultaneously reducing job ambiguity is crucial. We argue that *social astuteness* is a key skill. Socially astute leaders are “keen observers of their social environment, understanding not only the intricacies of their surroundings, but also the motivations of themselves and others” (Ferris et al., 2018, p. 491). They can understand the nuances of employee reactions and adeptly manage perceptions. In doing so, they can facilitate and maintain alignment with organizational goals, and enhance employee buy-in and support for new initiatives. Thereby, social astuteness can foster a belief in, and an understanding of, the vision behind the change (cf. Ferris et al., 2007; Waggoner, 2020). Another key skill is *interpersonal influence*, which encompasses persuading employees about the benefits of change, addressing their concerns, and mitigating resistance. This influence ensures that

the vision for change is not only understood but also embraced, facilitating smoother transitions (Ferris et al., 2007; Lewis-Duarte & Bligh, 2012; Liu et al., 2007; Waggoner, 2020). *Networking ability* complements these efforts by ensuring that crucial information and support are accessible across all levels of the organization. Leaders can form robust networks and leverage their connections to reinforce the change narrative and keep employees informed and engaged, which is vital for maintaining a cohesive and unified approach to the change process (Waggoner, 2020). Finally, *apparent sincerity* contributes to successful change as it builds and maintains trust. Whether truly sincere or not, leaders who are *perceived* as sincere are more likely to be trusted by their teams, reducing skepticism and enhancing the perceived integrity and legitimacy of the change efforts (Ferris et al., 2007; Jones, 1990). This trust is essential during times of change when uncertainties might otherwise lead to resistance. To sum up, each of these political skills can positively impact employees' change commitment by making them believe in the change vision and understand how to effectively work within the change context (Waggoner, 2020).

Moreover, these skills can help minimize job ambiguity by clearly communicating a vision that informs employees of what is expected of them and what their role entails. They thus help employees understand their responsibilities within the transformed organization (cf. MacKenzie et al., 2001). This clarity is crucial for operational effectiveness and employee satisfaction. While a degree of ambiguity can foster flexibility and creativity during the initial stages of change (Gioia et al., 2012), it becomes vital to solidify roles and expectations as the transformation progresses to limit any negative impacts on job performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000; Yun et al., 2007). Hence, the strategic application of political skills can potentially enhance employee commitment and reduce job ambiguity, thereby contributing to a more effective and smoother organizational transition. For an overview of these political skills and examples of their behavioral indicators and beneficial outcomes, see Table 1.

Strategic Interactions: Leading Change with Limited Time

In the complex and often fast-paced environments of organizational change, leaders frequently face constraints on their time, which can limit their ability to interact with their employees. Knowing which political skills work even when interaction time with employees is constrained, can help leaders to spend their limited time in an optimal manner. In other words, leaders need to know how their political skills and the frequency of their interactions with their employees can work together to handle change effectively.

While each political skill plays a unique role in managing the social dynamics essential for successful change management, leaders may not need to

Table 1. Overview of Political Skills.

Political skill	Definition	Examples of behavior	Examples of positive outcomes
Networking ability	The capability to effectively network and develop relationships that can provide useful information and opportunities and gain access to valuable assets one can use for achieving certain goals	1. Proactively reach out to new contacts within and outside the organization, such as attending industry conferences, joining professional associations, or participating in community events 2. After meeting someone new, follow up with a personalized message or a call to reinforce the connection and express interest in future collaboration 3. Participate in and/or organize networking events, both formal and informal, such as business luncheons, happy hours, and online webinars, to meet potential collaborators and partners 4. Schedule regular check-ins with key contacts through emails, phone calls, or meetings to stay updated on their projects, challenges, and opportunities 5. Identify key influencers within your industry or organization and find ways to connect and collaborate with them 6. Use platforms such as LinkedIn to connect with professionals in your field, share industry-related content, and engage with posts and updates from your network	Enhanced access to information, increased opportunities for collaboration, broader support base for your ideas and goals

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Political skill	Definition	Examples of behavior	Examples of positive outcomes
Social astuteness	The ability to observe others and accurately interpret their behavior, motives, and intentions, allowing for an effective navigation of social situations	1. Focus intently on what others are saying and/or doing (body language), without interrupting. Use nods, affirmations, paraphrasing, and pose open-ended questions to show understanding and encourage further communication allowing you to gather deeper insights 2. Observe interactions within groups to identify alliances, tensions, and power structures. Use this knowledge to navigate group situations effectively 3. Look for signs of discomfort or hesitation in others and address these concerns directly yet tactfully to build trust and openness 4. Establish a connection with others through shared interests, humor, or personal stories, making them feel comfortable and more likely to open up 5. Offer feedback in a way that is supportive and encouraging, focusing on specific behaviors and potential improvements rather than personal criticism 6. Pay attention to recurring behaviors or reactions in individuals and groups, using these patterns to predict future behaviors and deduct underlying motivations	Improved interpersonal relationships, better conflict management, more effective communication, better understanding of others' motives

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Political skill	Definition	Examples of behavior	Examples of positive outcomes
Interpersonal influence	The ability to persuade, influence, or impress others in a way that results in desired outcomes	1. Utilize persuasive language techniques, such as storytelling, metaphors, and analogies, to make your message more compelling and relatable 2. Exhibit confidence in your ideas and proposals through assertive body language, clear speech, and maintaining eye contact 3. Support your arguments with data, case studies, and real-life examples to enhance the persuasiveness of your message 4. Encourage desired behaviors and attitudes by providing positive feedback and recognition, reinforcing the behaviors you wish to see 5. Paint a vivid picture of the future that focusses on the benefits and positive outcomes of your ideas and initiatives and showcase how they align with the interests and goals of your audience	Greater leadership effectiveness, higher project success rates, more effective team management, support for your vision

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Political skill	Definition	Examples of behavior	Examples of positive outcomes
Apparent sincerity	The ability to appear sincere, honest, integer, genuine, and open in dealings with others, enabling one to present themselves without giving rise to others suspecting ulterior motives	1. Ensure that your actions align with your words consistently over time, keep your commitments and follow through on promises made to help build a reputation for honesty and reliability 2. Avoid ambiguous language and be clear in your communications to prevent misunderstandings and show respect for others' time and intelligence 3. Give constructive feedback that is honest but delivered with empathy and respect to help others see you as sincere and supportive 4. Occasionally share personal experiences and stories that illustrate your values and character to make you appear more genuine 5. Refrain from engaging in gossip or speaking negatively about your followers when other followers are present to appear more sincere 6. Strategically share relevant information openly and honestly and take responsibility for mistakes to foster credibility	Increased trustworthiness and credibility, stronger professional relationships, enhanced reputation

Note. Table developed based on the Meta-Theoretical Framework of Political Skill (Ferris et al., 2007).

demonstrate each skill consistently to be effective. For instance, leaders with strong networking abilities can leverage their networks to quickly mobilize resources, gain crucial support, and access timely information during times of change (cf. Waggoner, 2020). By effectively leveraging their networks, leaders can persuade employees of the change vision, potentially even with limited leader-employee interaction. On the other hand, for social astuteness and apparent sincerity to benefit change, leaders may need more interaction time with their employees to better understand and address employee concerns and to foster and maintain a sense of trustworthiness (cf. Ferris et al., 2007; Waggoner, 2020). Furthermore, regarding interpersonal influence we could argue that a single act of effective persuasion can be impactful, but also that sustaining influence may require ongoing interactions to reinforce leadership messages and maintain alignment with organizational goals.

So, although we do not yet know the optimal balance of exposure to each political skill for successful organizational change, it is reasonable to assume that this balance could make a difference. Keeping the practical restraints in mind, we deem the question of which political skills boost change commitment and minimize job ambiguity even when interaction time with employees is limited to be not only a matter of strategic leadership but also of practical necessity. Strategically leveraging these skills based on their optimal “dosage” could lead to more effective change management, ultimately supporting the organization’s stability and growth during potentially disruptive periods. We conducted a field study testing these expectations and determining the optimal timing of political skill deployment during times of change, as we explain in the following section.

Method

We recruited employees and their supervisors from a Dutch government agency that oversees helping citizens find a job. This agency was undergoing a major workplace change during which employees would be required to work more independently. That is, the organization introduced self-directed teams, which required the development of new skills and an increasing number of responsibilities that were delegated to the self-directed teams. In general, this agency was undergoing major changes in operational structure and employee job responsibilities, similar in scope and content to prevalent changes in non-governmental organizations and businesses.

Employees and their supervisors completed a survey at the time of announcing the change (T1) and employees completed another survey three months later (T2). From the 1727 invited employees, 850 employees completed the first survey, and 693 employees completed the second survey. Moreover, 123

from the 126 supervisors completed the survey. As compared to the average company tenure of the Dutch labor force, our sample had worked for about 5–6 years more for their current company. However, it should be noted that higher-than-average company tenure is normal within Dutch government agencies, likely due to the relatively favorable employment conditions (CBS, 2018). As higher tenure tends to go hand in hand with higher age, it comes as no surprise that, compared to the Dutch labor force, employees in our sample were, on average, about two years older. Similarly, our sample of supervisors was about five years older and relatively highly educated as compared to the Dutch labor force. This could be explained by the extensive experience and advanced skills required for supervisory roles, as well as the higher education levels necessary for effective leadership and decision-making.

We included validated and reliable measures for all four leader-rated political skills (T1; Ferris et al., 2005), employee-rated change commitment (T2; Klein et al., 2014), employee-rated job ambiguity (T2; Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994), and a single item for employee-rated frequency of contact with leader (T1). See Appendix 1 for an elaborate method section. See Table 2 for sample descriptives.

Results

Our statistical analyses revealed important differences around how leaders can best deploy each of the four political skills to help maximize their employees’

Table 2. Sample Descriptives.

Demographics	Mean (SD)	Percentage
Employees		
Age	44.32 (10.03)	
Tenure	13.93 (9.00)	
Gender – female		70.90
Gender – male		29.10
Education – non-university degree		22.00
Education – university degree		78.00
Supervisors		
Age	47.32 (8.99)	
Tenure	18.65 (9.14)	
Number of subordinates	16.50 (5.79)	
Gender – female		61.10
Gender – male		38.90
Education – non-university degree		11.20
Education – university degree		88.80

commitment to organizational change and minimize their job ambiguity. The most straightforward results emerged for *interpersonal influence* and *networking ability*. That is, employees of leaders who were stronger in interpersonal influence and networking ability were more committed to organizational change and experienced their jobs as less ambiguous. For the effectiveness of these two political skills, it did not matter how often leaders interacted with their employees; the stronger leaders were in these skills, the more positive the results for their employees.

The results were a bit more complicated for *apparent sincerity*, in that it was effective at maximizing change commitment and minimizing job ambiguity, but only at certain frequencies of leader contact. Specifically, we found that somewhat infrequent contact – at least once per month – was sufficient for leaders' apparent sincerity to make employees more committed to the organizational change. However, apparent sincerity was only effective at reducing job ambiguity when leaders were in very frequent contact with their employees (i.e., multiple times per day).

Finally, the most surprising results emerged concerning a leader's *social astuteness*. It was not the frequency of contact, but rather the leader's *level* of social astuteness that determined whether or not it was helpful for employees. Specifically, we found that being socially astute helped employees up to a certain point, making them more committed to change and less confused about their job. However, when a leader's social astuteness became too high, it made employees *less* committed to change and even *more* confused about their jobs. Specifically, we found that the tipping point lies at a mean value of 5.32 on a 7-point scale; in practical terms this means that for leaders who overall agreed with the social astuteness statements, their levels of social astuteness backfired. We discuss this unanticipated result below. See [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) for a visual representation of our results and see [Appendix 1](#) for a full explanation of our results.

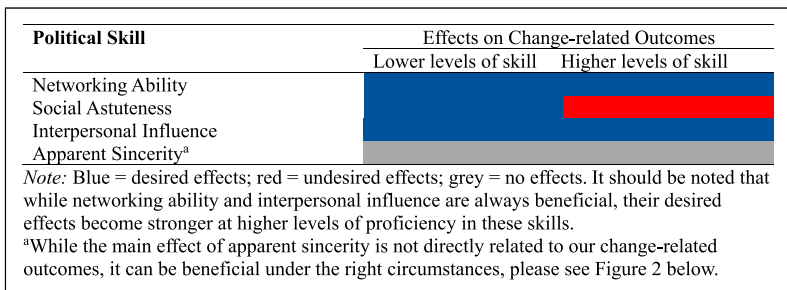


Figure 1. Visual Representation of Main Results.

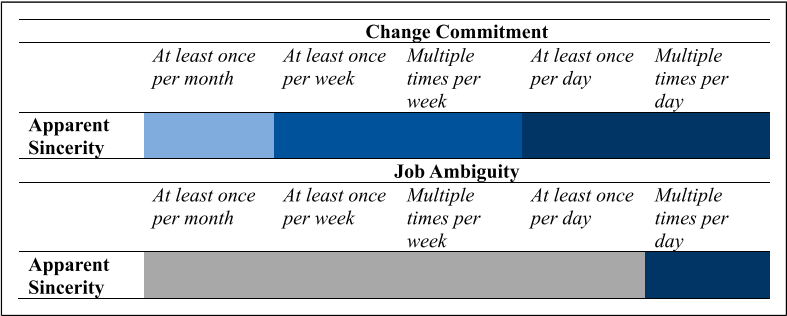


Figure 2. In-depth visual representation of frequency of contact modifying apparent sincerity results. Note: The darker the shade of blue, the stronger the desired effects; grey = no effects. The frequency indicators refer to the frequency of interactions between leaders and subordinates.

Discussion

Indeed, we found that interpersonal influence and networking ability are not only helpful at raising employee change commitment and reducing their job ambiguity, but they are beneficial regardless of how often leaders interact with their employees. A leader’s apparent sincerity, on the other hand, is only helpful when in regular contact with their employees. Finally, we found mixed results for leader social astuteness, in that it was generally helpful for change management, but when the leader was too socially astute—regardless of how often they interacted with their employees—it actually *decreased* change commitment and *increased* employee job ambiguity. Altogether, our results confirmed the importance of political skills for organizational change leadership and underscore the importance of extending the Meta-Theoretical Framework of Political Skill (Ferris et al., 2007) to the organizational change context. Specifically, the insights obtained from this study highlight the nuanced ways in which political skills operate within the context of organizational change, offering valuable implications for leadership development and change management strategies.

Among these findings, the results regarding social astuteness are particularly intriguing and warrant further exploration. The idea that particularly high levels of leader social astuteness could be detrimental to employees during periods of organizational change at first seems surprising. However, it is plausible that leaders who are especially skilled at taking the perspective of their employees and subsequently empathizing with them may be more likely to inadvertently validate those employees’ fears and concerns. That is, leaders

who deeply understand and consider employee worries regarding change might unknowingly reinforce those worries, perhaps by over-sympathizing with employees rather than redirecting employee attention to, and resolving their concerns about, the change. It is also plausible that particularly socially astute and empathetic managers could absorb some of those concerns and worries themselves. That is, highly socially astute leaders may become emotionally exhausted by exposure to their employees' worries, hindering efforts to motivate and support their employees (cf. Barsade, 2002). Collectively this suggests that socially astute leaders should exercise caution as they consider employee issues during organizational change, taking care to emphasize problem resolution alongside empathy. Based on the above assumptions, future research should examine the potential mediating role *active perspective taking* (i.e., an effortful and intentional process in which leaders attempts to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives of their employees; Parker et al., 2008), *positive attributions* (i.e., engaging in active perspective-taking helps leaders form attributions about their employees by imagining how they would feel, think, or act in the same situation, thus enabling leaders to better understand and validate their employees' concerns regarding the change; Davis et al., 1996), and *emotional exhaustion* (i.e., a state of emotional and physical depletion as experienced by the leader; Maslach, 1982) might play in explaining why particularly high levels of leader social astuteness might be detrimental in predicting employees' levels of change commitment and job ambiguity.

Given that periods of organizational change are generally volatile and demanding for leaders, it is helpful to know for practitioners that even when leaders have limited time to spend with followers, their interpersonal influence and networking abilities can nonetheless help employees cope with change. Our results suggest that these two political skills are the most universally helpful for change management, and their lack of dependence upon frequent employee contact may make them the most efficient to implement. As such, leader training might specifically prioritize these two political skills for maximum impact on change management (see also Table 1 for examples of behaviors leaders could engage in to boost their interpersonal influence and networking abilities). Apparent sincerity is more difficult to develop through training programs, but our results highlight its importance as well. Even truly honest leaders could feasibly be doubted by stressed and uncertain employees during exhausting periods of organizational change; hence, it is essential that leaders present themselves without inadvertently raising employee concerns of ulterior motives or dishonesty. Our findings suggest that regular contact, featuring sincere communication, between leaders and employees during organizational change is highly effective in helping employees cope during tumultuous times (see also Table 1 for examples of behaviors leaders could

engage in to boost their apparent sincerity). Future research might examine whether a few longer, deeper interactions might replace the relatively frequent contact that our research determined was necessary for apparent sincerity's effectiveness. Relatedly, future research should delve deeper into the medium of interaction, whether face-to-face or through digital channels such as email, videoconferencing, or text messages. According to Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), richer media channels like face-to-face communication and videoconferencing tend to have stronger effects on relationships and communication effectiveness. Given the increasing prevalence of digital interactions in the workplace, it is crucial to understand how these digital employee-leader interactions influence the dynamics of political skills and leadership communication.

Change commitment and job ambiguity collectively represent not only employees' capacity to work effectively toward change implementation, but also their mental state regarding the change. That is, employees who buy in to organizational change and clearly see their own role within it are more likely to cope productively with the change, reducing their stress and increasing their well-being (Ning & Jing, 2012). Since the dimensions of leader political skill help employees in different ways, the results of this research inform leaders as to the optimal patterns and 'dosages' for the greatest employee benefits. Similarly, organizations are advised to implement leader training of political skills in accordance with the advice outlined above.

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Data Availability statement

The data used in this manuscript can be found on The Open Science Framework using the following DOI: 10.17,605/OSF.IO/D6TQC.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Yannick Griep, Associate Professor at Radboud University, is an unparalleled expert in the dark arts of workplace negativity. When he's not meticulously analyzing the most creative forms of office gossip or the subtle nuances of passive-aggressive Post-it notes, he spends his time inventing new ways to make colleagues accidentally spill coffee on themselves. Rumor has it that he can predict an impending office meltdown with the accuracy of a seasoned meteorologist forecasting a hurricane. His life's work revolves around ensuring no good deed ever goes unpunished, and he's on a personal mission to uncover the secrets behind the perfect eye roll. In his spare time, Yannick enjoys rearranging office furniture to maximize discomfort and curating a museum of the world's most awkward email exchanges. His groundbreaking research has been featured in such esteemed journals as *The Journal of Passive Aggression* and *The International Review of Snark*.

Joyce Elena Schleu is an Assistant Professor at Radboud University, specializing in organizational psychology with a focus on leadership, motivation, and team dynamics. Her research explores the impact of leadership on employee mental health, the effectiveness of performance-based promotions, and the dynamics of effort gains in team

settings. Joyce's work often investigates the nuanced relationships between leadership and organizational outcomes, contributing to a deeper understanding of both positive and destructive leadership within various professional contexts.

G. James Lemoine is an Associate Professor of Organizations & Human Resources at the University at Buffalo (State University of New York). His research involves issues of ethics, leadership, creativity, and occasionally research methods. His work has been published in journals including the *Academy of Management Annals*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and *Personnel Psychology*.