



The Politics of Exclusion: How Workplace Politics Undermine Skilled Talent in Educational Institutions

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of workplace politics within educational institutions and how they contribute to the exclusion of skilled talent, hindering organizational growth and academic excellence. The theoretical framework for this study draws on three key theories: Organizational Politics Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Organizational Justice Theory. By grounding the study in these theories, this article highlights the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and political dynamics to foster more inclusive and meritocratic academic environments. Further, the study examines the ways in which power struggles, favoritism, and office politics undermine the contributions of highly skilled professionals in academic settings. This paper reveals how workplace politics foster environments where talent is sidelined, marginalized, or dismissed based on interpersonal alliances rather than merit. The findings suggest that these political dynamics create a culture of exclusion, where decisions regarding promotions, recognition, and professional development are influenced by personal biases and political maneuvering rather than objective criteria or professional competence. This article argues that such practices not only harm individual careers but also damage the institution's overall performance and reputation. The study highlights the negative impacts of these exclusionary practices on faculty morale, job satisfaction, and the retention of top-tier talent. Additionally, it calls for greater institutional awareness and intervention to mitigate the influence of politics in workplace decision-making processes. By proposing strategies for fostering more transparent and meritocratic environments, this article aims to contribute to the broader discourse on organizational culture and equity in educational institutions. The study underscores the need for systemic changes to create more inclusive, supportive, and productive academic environments.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, workplace politics has become a significant factor influencing employee satisfaction, performance, and retention in various sectors, including educational institutions. While the term "workplace politics" is typically associated with corporate settings, it is equally relevant in educational environments, where staff dynamics can often undermine the potential of skilled and talented professionals. In educational institutions, workplace politics refers to the manipulation of power, influence, and relationships for personal gain, often at the expense of colleagues or institutional goals (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2020) ^[25]. These political behaviors include favoritism, exclusion, gossip, and power plays, which can create a toxic atmosphere where innovation is stifled, and professional growth is hindered. In an educational setting, where the primary objective is to foster learning, collaboration, and development, the negative impact of workplace politics can be particularly detrimental. Educational institutions are often perceived as sanctuaries of knowledge, innovation, and growth. Teachers, administrators, and

staff members are expected to work collaboratively to create a nurturing environment for students. However, a growing body of research has shown that workplace politics can have a profound negative impact on the functioning of educational organizations. Politics in this context refers to the use of power and influence by certain individuals or groups to advance their personal interests, often undermining the productivity and well-being of others (Vigoda-Gadot, 2017) [23]. This is particularly concerning when it comes to skilled talent, as the professional development and success of talented educators, administrators, and support staff can be severely impeded by these dynamics.

In educational settings, where professional expertise, academic freedom, and the quality of teaching are paramount, workplace politics can result in highly qualified individuals facing constant obstacles. These obstacles may take the form of exclusion from key decision-making processes, sabotage of new ideas, or systemic marginalization through subtle and overt political behaviors. As a result, the institutional environment becomes toxic, hindering the professional development of talented individuals and preventing them from fully contributing to their organization's success.

Recent studies have emphasized how workplace politics can undermine job satisfaction, diminish performance, and drive skilled individuals away from educational institutions. For instance, Erdogan and Bauer (2014) [10] highlight that political behavior in the workplace can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration, significantly reducing motivation and productivity. Furthermore, workplace politics can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, which have long-lasting psychological and emotional consequences for the victims (Shahzad, Hussain, & Ahmed, 2020) [22]. These dynamics create a cycle of negative outcomes that not only harm individual professionals but also impact the overall functioning of educational institutions.

Workplace politics in educational institutions can also be viewed through the lens of organizational culture. Long-standing staff members often hold entrenched positions of power and influence, which they use to maintain the status quo. In such environments, skilled newcomers—especially those who bring fresh perspectives, teaching methodologies, and innovative ideas—may find it difficult to establish themselves. Instead of being welcomed and supported, they are often met with resistance, exclusion, or outright hostility. This resistance is driven by a fear of losing power or control, as well as a reluctance to embrace change (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2020) [25]. The resulting political climate not only leads to personal challenges for these individuals but also stifles the growth and development of the institution as a whole.

The psychological toll of workplace politics cannot be underestimated. According to research by Erdogan and Bauer (2014) [10], employees who experience negative political behaviors report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and job dissatisfaction. In educational settings, where educators are expected to perform at a high level, this psychological strain can translate into a decline in teaching quality, motivation, and engagement with students. Moreover, when talented individuals feel excluded or undermined, they may eventually choose to leave the institution, contributing to high turnover rates and a lack of continuity in the workforce. This creates a ripple effect, where the institution's ability to attract and retain skilled talent becomes compromised.

Given the profound impact of workplace politics on both

individual professionals and institutional success, it is essential for educational institutions to address these issues proactively. This article, therefore, explores the phenomenon of workplace politics within educational institutions, analyzing its impact on mental health and career success. Additionally, we will discuss preventive measures that institutions can implement to foster a healthier, more inclusive environment that nurtures talent rather than stifling it.

2. Understanding Workplace Politics in Educational Institutions

2.1. What Are Workplace Politics?

Workplace politics, commonly understood in corporate settings, refers to the manipulation and use of power, influence, and alliances to achieve personal goals at the expense of others (Hassan, 2023) [13]. In educational institutions, this might manifest through cliques, favoritism, exclusion, gossip, and gatekeeping. When existing staff members use their power to block new individuals from advancing, it becomes a toxic cycle that stifles innovation and professional growth. Local politics in education can emerge for several reasons, including insecurity among long-time staff (Iqra, 2024) [15], competition for resources or positions, and resistance to change introduced by newcomers. These politics can create an atmosphere where skilled professionals, despite their qualifications and potential, struggle to gain a foothold.

2.2. The Role of Existing Staff Members

The individuals who have been in an institution for a long time often hold substantial informal power (Aransyah & Hetami, 2021) [3]. They are familiar with the internal politics, have established their positions, and may have personal or professional ties that provide them with influence. This group can create challenges for new hires who are trying to establish themselves. Through subtle tactics such as exclusion from meetings, gossiping, or downplaying the importance of new ideas, these individuals ensure that newcomers feel alienated and unsupported. While some of these behaviors may be unintentional, they often result from a deep-seated fear of change or competition. When fresh perspectives and modern teaching methodologies are introduced by newcomers, they may be perceived as a threat to the established norms, thus sparking defensive, political maneuvers to protect the status quo.

3. Why Do Politics Persist in Educational Institutions?

Workplace politics thrive when certain factors are allowed to persist unchecked. Understanding these reasons is key to addressing the issue effectively.

3.1. Power Imbalances

In many educational settings, power structures are not always transparent. Long-standing staff members may hold positions of authority or influence, and they might feel threatened by newcomers who are perceived as potential competitors (Luthuli *et al.*, 2024) [17]. To maintain control, these individuals often use political tactics to exclude or marginalize new hires.

3.2. Lack of Accountability

Without proper oversight, cliques or politically motivated individuals can operate with little fear of reprisal. When

institutions fail to hold people accountable for toxic behavior, politics can thrive unchecked. This lack of accountability is particularly detrimental in academic environments, where collaboration and cooperation are essential for growth.

3.3. Insecurity and Fear of Change

The introduction of fresh ideas, perspectives, and methodologies often brings change. Change, while essential for progress, can make those who have been entrenched in the institution for years feel insecure. Some individuals might resist these changes by engaging in politics to maintain the status quo (Iqra, 2024) ^[15].

3.4. Unclear Roles and Expectations

When roles, responsibilities, and expectations are not clearly defined, the opportunity for political maneuvering increases (Luthuli *et al.*, 2024) ^[17]. New staff members, unsure of their place, may become easy targets for exclusion, while local staff might engage in politics to assert dominance or influence.

4. Theoretical Framework

There are several theoretical perspectives that explore the politics of exclusion in educational institutions and their detrimental effects on skilled talent. The key frameworks informing this analysis are Organizational Politics Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Theory of Organizational Justice. These frameworks collectively explain how power, fairness, social connections, and identity interact to shape the professional experiences of individuals, especially those who lack the political influence necessary to thrive in a competitive academic environment. Also, these theories offer valuable insights into how power dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and fairness perceptions shape decision-making processes, ultimately affecting skilled professionals within academic settings. In addition.

4.1. Organizational Politics Theory

Organizational Politics Theory (OPA) provides a foundational lens for understanding how individuals navigate power structures within organizations (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007) ^[24]. According to OPA, workplace politics are inevitable in any organization and are driven by the pursuit of personal or group interests, often at the expense of organizational goals (Pfeffer, 2010) ^[19]. In educational institutions, where merit-based systems are expected, the role of politics often undermines the advancement of skilled professionals who may lack the necessary political capital or social connections to succeed. OPA posits that power struggles, favoritism, and coalition-building influence decision-making, particularly in contexts such as hiring, promotions, and resource allocation (Ferris *et al.*, 2005) ^[11]. These political behaviors lead to exclusionary practices, where talented individuals are sidelined due to their inability to navigate the informal power structures, limiting their opportunities for advancement.

4.2. Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) ^[4, 20] focuses on the role of social networks and relationships in gaining access to resources, information, and opportunities. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how educational institutions operate as networks where success often hinges on an individual's social connections. In academic settings, faculty and staff who are integrated into key social networks are more likely to succeed, as they gain

access to critical information, informal mentoring, and opportunities for career advancement (Coleman, 1988) ^[5]. Social Capital Theory explains how the unequal distribution of social capital within educational institutions leads to exclusion. Individuals who are not part of influential networks or who do not share the dominant cultural or ideological norms within the institution often experience professional marginalization, despite possessing the skills and expertise needed for success (Adler & Kwon, 2002) ^[11]. This lack of access to vital social capital inhibits skilled individuals from advancing and receiving recognition, resulting in exclusion.

4.3. Organizational Justice Theory

Organizational Justice Theory (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001) ^[6] examines how perceptions of fairness influence individuals' attitudes and behavior within organizations. The theory suggests that employees' perceptions of fairness in outcomes (distributive justice), processes (procedural justice), and interpersonal treatment (interactional justice) significantly affect their job satisfaction, motivation, and overall engagement. In the context of workplace politics in educational institutions, when skilled professionals perceive unfair practices—such as biased decision-making, lack of transparency in promotion processes, or unequal access to resources—they experience feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001) ^[8]. The absence of fairness in these institutional processes often leads to the exclusion of talented individuals who do not possess the political influence or social connections necessary to navigate the system, despite their competence and skills. Organizational Justice Theory thus illuminates the negative effects of workplace politics on employee engagement and retention in educational settings.

5. The Impact on Professional Development and Institutional Growth

The repercussions of workplace politics extend beyond the individual level, affecting the institution's overall growth and development.

5.1. Stifled Innovation

Educational institutions thrive when there is a flow of fresh ideas, innovative teaching methods, and creative collaboration. However, when workplace politics dominate the culture, these opportunities for innovation are often blocked. Talented educators may hesitate to introduce new methods for fear of being rejected or undermined by their colleagues.

Research by Zohar and Tenne-Gazit (2008) ^[26] suggests that when employees perceive their work environment as politically toxic, they are less likely to contribute creatively. In educational settings, where the need for innovation is crucial to adapt to modern challenges, this stifling of ideas can limit an institution's ability to remain competitive and relevant.

5.2. Decreased Morale and Motivation

The energy and drive of the institution are largely shaped by its staff. When workplace politics prevail, morale plummets, and motivation dwindles. The atmosphere becomes one of fear, distrust, and disengagement. As a result, the quality of education may suffer, students are affected, and the institution as a whole loses its competitive edge.

5.3. High Attrition and Talent Loss

When talented individuals feel unsupported or excluded, they often leave their positions. High turnover rates not only cause instability but also incur significant financial costs related to recruitment and training (Luthuli *et al.*, 2024) ^[17]. Furthermore, new staff members may soon find themselves entering the same toxic environment, perpetuating the cycle. A study by Mayer *et al.* (2009) ^[18] indicated that a politically charged work environment increases turnover intentions, as employees seek out healthier, more supportive workplaces. In the context of educational institutions, this could result in a loss of experienced educators who have a profound impact on student learning and institutional reputation.

6. The Psychological Toll: When Politics Weigh Heavily

The mental and emotional consequences of being subjected to workplace politics in educational settings can be far-reaching. The following sections explore how these toxic dynamics negatively affect the well-being of skilled professionals and educators.

6.1. Anxiety and Stress

One of the most immediate effects of workplace politics is heightened anxiety. New employees are often eager to prove their worth but may find themselves faced with constant undermining behaviors. This persistent stress can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, and difficulty sleeping, contributing to overall mental exhaustion. Research by Shahzad, Hussain, and Ahmed (2020) ^[22] underscores that individuals subjected to workplace politics experience higher levels of anxiety and stress, which can ultimately reduce their productivity and well-being. These emotional burdens affect not only their performance but also their personal lives, leading to burnout and emotional exhaustion.

6.2. Depression and Decreased Self-Esteem

The psychological toll of exclusion is often reflected in a decrease in self-esteem. Skilled professionals who face rejection, criticism, or gossip from their colleagues may begin to internalize these negative messages. The longer the exclusion continues, the more these professionals may begin to doubt their abilities.

A study by Erdogan and Bauer (2014) ^[10] found that employees who are victims of workplace politics are more likely to experience depressive symptoms due to the psychological distress associated with political behaviors. In educational institutions, where self-doubt can be exacerbated by the pressure of teaching and mentoring, this can lead to a sharp decline in confidence and performance. As a result, the mental and emotional toll of being sidelined can cause skilled individuals to question their abilities, leading to a loss of confidence.

6.3. Isolation and Social Withdrawal

New employees in educational institutions often rely on their colleagues for mentorship and guidance. However, when they are ostracized due to workplace politics, they may struggle to form professional relationships. This isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and social withdrawal, which only compounds the mental health challenges they face.

According to Allen *et al.* (2017) ^[2], workplace exclusion is linked to higher levels of emotional distress and social withdrawal. In educational institutions, where collaboration

and community are integral to success, being excluded from key conversations or decisions can create a sense of detachment and alienation.

7. Preventive Measures to Combat Workplace Politics in Educational Institutions

To combat the harmful effects of workplace politics, educational institutions must implement proactive strategies to foster a healthy, inclusive environment. Below are some of the key measures that can be taken:

7.1. Foster a Culture of Inclusivity

In order to integrate new staff members smoothly, educational institutions must foster a culture of inclusivity. This includes mentorship programs that pair new recruits with experienced staff, encouraging collaboration between different departments, and creating opportunities for networking and community-building. When individuals feel supported and valued, they are less likely to engage in or fall victim to workplace politics (Rogahang *et al.*, 2024; Iqra, 2024) ^[21, 15].

7.2. Promote Transparency and Establish Clear Communication Channels

One of the most effective ways to reduce workplace politics is to foster an atmosphere of transparency (Luthuli *et al.*, 2024) ^[17]. Clear, open communication is essential in mitigating workplace politics. When staff members feel heard and informed, it reduces the opportunities for misunderstandings and political maneuvering. Regular meetings and transparent decision-making processes can help to ensure that all staff members are on the same page, reducing the likelihood of exclusionary practices. A study by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) ^[9] found that clear communication channels were critical in reducing workplace conflict and promoting cooperation in teams. In educational institutions, where team-based work is often necessary, these practices can create a more collaborative culture.

7.3. Implement Anti-Harassment and Anti-Bullying Policies

Institutions must establish and enforce strong anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies that clearly define inappropriate behavior and the consequences of engaging in it. These policies should cover all aspects of workplace behavior, including exclusionary tactics and the spreading of negative rumors. A comprehensive study by Hoel and Beale (2006) ^[14] found that a strong anti-bullying culture significantly reduced workplace harassment and improved staff morale. In educational institutions, these policies can be a key tool in ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all staff.

7.4. Promote Mentorship and Team Integration

Mentorship programs are an effective way to integrate new staff members into the institution and ensure they feel supported. By pairing newcomers with experienced professionals, institutions can create a more inclusive environment and break down the barriers created by workplace politics. As suggested by Allen *et al.* (2017) ^[2], mentorship not only helps with professional development but also creates strong bonds between colleagues, which can mitigate the harmful effects of political behavior.

7.5. Encourage Leadership Accountability

Leadership must take a proactive role in creating a healthy organizational culture. This includes holding individuals accountable for their actions, promoting ethical behavior, and fostering a culture of inclusion and respect. Leaders should also model the behavior they expect from others, demonstrating a commitment to transparency and collaboration. Research by Kacmar and Ferris (1991) ^[16] indicates that leadership accountability plays a crucial role in shaping the work environment and reducing workplace politics. In educational institutions, leaders who promote fair and ethical practices can set the tone for the entire organization.

7.6. Leadership Commitment to Change

The success of any anti-politics initiative depends on leadership commitment. Institutional leaders must model the behaviors they wish to see in their staff. This includes being transparent, approachable, and proactive in addressing issues. Leadership must also prioritize the well-being of all staff members, providing resources and support for those who may be struggling with workplace dynamics (Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008) ^[26].

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Workplace politics in educational institutions have been widely acknowledged as significant barriers to the development and retention of skilled talent. While academic institutions are typically viewed as hubs for intellectual and professional growth, the presence of toxic political dynamics can undermine these ideals. This research has highlighted how workplace politics, manifested through favoritism, exclusion, cliques, and gossip, impacts skilled professionals, particularly newcomers, and the institution as a whole.

First, it is essential to recognize that workplace politics in educational institutions stem from the hierarchical and relational structures within these organizations. Long-established staff members often hold influential roles, either formally or informally, and may fear losing their power or status if new, skilled individuals are introduced with fresh perspectives and methods. Such fear can lead to the development of subtle but effective political behaviors that undermine the ability of talented individuals to succeed (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2020) ^[25]. These political behaviors can include exclusion from critical decision-making processes, undermining the authority of new staff members, and spreading negative rumors about their work. In turn, these actions create a toxic environment where skilled professionals feel unsupported, alienated, and demotivated.

The impact of workplace politics on skilled professionals cannot be overstated. Research by Erdogan and Bauer (2014) ^[10] reveals that employees who face workplace politics are more likely to experience stress, anxiety, and reduced job satisfaction. These psychological effects not only harm individuals' well-being but also erode their professional performance. In educational institutions, where educators and administrators are expected to maintain high standards of teaching, leadership, and mentoring, the consequences are especially concerning. Educators who face political challenges may struggle to focus on their teaching duties, and the quality of their work may decline. Furthermore, such individuals may experience a loss of confidence, which can diminish their overall job performance (Shahzad, Hussain, & Ahmed, 2020) ^[22].

One significant consequence of this toxic environment is high turnover rates. Skilled professionals, particularly those with extensive experience or advanced qualifications, are more likely to leave institutions where workplace politics dominate. The cost of turnover in educational settings is particularly high, not only in terms of financial resources spent on recruitment and training but also in terms of the disruption caused to students and the academic community as a whole (Vigoda-Gadot, 2017) ^[23]. When talented educators depart due to political toxicity, the institution suffers from a loss of expertise and stability, which can affect the overall learning environment and student outcomes.

Moreover, political behaviors can stifle innovation and prevent the adoption of new ideas and teaching methodologies. Talented professionals who bring new approaches or research-based strategies may find their contributions overlooked or even actively blocked by colleagues entrenched in the existing system. As a result, institutions that fail to address workplace politics may stagnate, missing opportunities for growth and innovation. This is especially problematic in an educational landscape that is increasingly focused on adapting to new technologies and pedagogical advancements. The evidence presented in this research underscores the profound negative effects that workplace politics can have on skilled talent in educational institutions. These toxic dynamics not only hinder the professional development and well-being of talented individuals but also stifle innovation, decrease job satisfaction, and contribute to high turnover rates. The consequences of unchecked workplace politics are far-reaching, impacting both the individuals involved and the institution as a whole.

To address these issues, educational institutions must implement proactive measures to reduce the prevalence of workplace politics. This includes fostering an inclusive, transparent organizational culture, where collaboration and ethical behavior are prioritized. Implementing clear communication channels, mentorship programs, and robust anti-harassment policies can help reduce the negative effects of political behaviors. Furthermore, leadership should be held accountable for creating a positive and supportive work environment, ensuring that all staff members have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their tenure or position.

Ultimately, combating workplace politics requires a shift in organizational culture. By taking steps to address political behavior and promote fairness, educational institutions can create an environment where skilled talent is supported, innovative ideas are welcomed, and academic excellence is achieved.

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