

# *Appraisal Politics: Revisiting from Assessors' Perspective*

Amit Dhiman and Manjari Singh

## *Executive Summary*

Politics is a bane of administrative systems such as performance appraisals. It not only debilitates the system's credibility in the eyes of various stakeholders, but also adversely affects the employees' morale and the organizational effectiveness. While admitting that rooting it out completely is impossible, it is in the organizational interest that it is mitigated to a large extent. In case of performance appraisals, assessees and assessors, both try to influence the assessee's performance rating to advance self-interests. The former typically aims at higher ratings/rewards, and uses informal influence means such as upward connections, ingratiation, etc., to achieve it. The latter may use appraisals to fulfil their vested interests like building in-groups by rewarding certain favoured assessees, and projecting good departmental performance, by manipulating assessee's ratings (inflation or deflation). Some managers consider these actions legitimate because it helps them manage effectively. While these manipulations may fulfil the assessors' short-term goals, it hurts the organization in the long run by compromising performance culture, demoralizing genuine performers, discrediting pay for performance policies, etc.

This paper focuses on the assessors' perspective and conceptualizes their perceptions of politics in appraisals (PAPS). We argue that PAPS constitutes the assessors' perception about political behaviours of other stakeholders—reviewers, assessees, and fellow appraisers—and shapes their own perceptions. These perceptions will be influenced by certain contextual factors in which appraisals are conducted. We have focused on four such factors:

- ambiguity about policies, procedures, performance standards, criteria, etc.
- assessors' accountability with respect to appraisals
- assessors' and assessee's instrumentality linked to appraisal
- organizational support in terms of assessors' training to conduct better appraisals.

We argue that these are key variables closely related to many job and organizational characteristics, and thus are fair representation of the appraisal context. In relation to these antecedents, we propose that these reduce assessors' PAPS when:

- Appraisal process and system ambiguity is low.
- The assessors are accountable to a neutral authority for following appraisal procedures which enhance rating accuracy; on the other hand, assessors' outcome accountability accentuates politicking. Some of the procedures which enhance accuracy are frequent feedback, 360-degree feedback, assessee's involvement in the process, etc.
- The assessors are trained to conduct fair appraisals.
- The assessors' and the assessee's appraisal instrumentality directly affects PAPS as well as moderates the above relations.

It is further proposed that PAPS predict the assessors' intentions to pursue certain appraisal goals. It can be rating accuracy if political perceptions are low; and, it can be other political goals, if these perceptions are high. These intentions predict actual assessor actions. This paper contributes to appraisal literature and informs managers about mitigating appraisal politics. ♡

### KEY WORDS

Performance Appraisal  
Appraisal Politics  
Accountability  
Assessor-centric Model

**A**ccuracy in appraising employee performance is a major concern organizations face in their desire to improve their performance management systems. Any attempt to increase accuracy cannot ignore assessors, both from their ability and intention perspectives with respect to appraisals. DeCotiis and Petit (1978) proposed that performance appraisal accuracy is a function of: assessor's intention to appraise accurately, assessor's ability to evaluate assessee's job behaviour, and the rating standards. There exists great deal of research on improving assessor's ability and rating standards, but its impact on improving appraisal accuracy in practice has been dismal (Landy and Farr, 1980; Banks and Murphy, 1985; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995).

The research addressing the issue of assessor's ability mainly focuses on understanding and mitigating assessor's rating bias and errors like recency effect, primacy effect, and stereotyping. Research on rating standards constitutes efforts to enhance accuracy through improvement in scales, formats, criterion validity, etc.; it also enables assessors to conduct a more accurate appraisal. Although both fields of research have contributed enormously to improve the appraisal technology and process, more pertinent issues from the practice perspective remain neglected. The researcher's focus and the practitioner's expectations in this field have not matched. While the latter talks about top management commitment, communication between superior and subordinate, improvement in feedback skills, clarity of performance objectives; the former is concerned about rating accuracy, observation skills, better formats, etc. (Banks and Murphy, 1985). Moreover much of the above research is laboratory based, which ignores the appraisal context as well as the process, and hence misses out the important issues.

Landy and Farr (1980) brought the appraisal context and process in focus, and stressed on the need for bringing together various strands of appraisal research such as research on formats, scales, characteristics of assessee and assessor, etc. They suggested a performance appraisal process model which combined the following variables: position characteristics, organization characteristics, purpose of rating, rating instrument, assessee and assessor characteristics, administrative and cognitive processes of performance appraisal, and its outcome. Importantly, the administrative and cognitive processes suggested again focused on enhancing asses-

sors' ability to conduct a more accurate appraisal by reducing errors and biases, and by providing more accurate and comprehensive performance information.

Following Landy and Farr (1980), the next decade saw extensive research on cognitive processes involved in performance appraisal. Feldman (1981) outlined the following cognitive processes that an assessor undergoes while conducting appraisal: recognizing and attending to relevant performance information, storing and organizing information for later access, and recalling and integrating relevant information in an organized fashion while making assessment. Empirical evidence exists in support of these processes enhancing the appraisal accuracy. This research has also identified certain aids and administrative processes to facilitate the cognitive processes, e.g., diary keeping (DeNisi and Peters, 1996). Although cognitive research has helped in understanding the appraisal process, it did little to improve the process in practice because practitioners found it difficult to adopt these recommendations. Banks and Murphy (1985) cautioned the researchers about the growing gap between their focus of research and the practitioner's expectations, especially in view of the new cognitive process approach.

Relatively, research on administrative processes has lagged, though there is some direct or indirect evidence supporting positive effects of the following processes on accuracy: participation in goal setting, frequent appraisal and feedback, 360-degree appraisal, recourse mechanisms, etc. (Levy and Williams, 2004). For example, the 360-degree feedback system is becoming popular for increasing accuracy and for getting a comprehensive and balanced feedback about employee performance. Rai and Singh (2005) empirically proved that 360-degree feedback system improves employee performance significantly. However, appraisal by different assessors does not take care of inaccuracies introduced by each of these individual assessors in the appraisal report. These administrative processes also enhance, directly or indirectly, the assessor's ability to conduct more accurate appraisals.

While past research has focused on understanding and improving the assessor's ability (Harris, 1994; Landy and Farr, 1980), research on assessor's intention has been lacking (Harris, 1994; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). This paper intends to fulfil that gap by developing a testable model and propositions. Assessor's intentions or motivations are influenced by the context in which

appraisals are conducted (Levy and Williams, 2004). This has led to a focus on the influence of the organizational context on the appraisal process (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995; Harris, 1994; Judge and Ferris, 1993; Landy and Farr, 1980). This paper views the appraisal process from political organizational context.

### **APPRAISAL CONTEXT: MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS AND GOALS**

The appraisal process involves various stakeholders — assessors, assessees, reviewers, human resource departments, top management or the organization itself. These stakeholders pursue different goals from appraisal (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). While the assessee might be interested in higher ratings, the assessors might be interested in rewarding only those subordinates who are close to them. The assessors pursue the following goals through performance appraisal rating: task performance goals (motivate subordinates), interpersonal goals (maintain good relations with assessee), and personal goals (e.g., own or department's reputation) (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). The reviewer, usually the assessor's superior (and also their assessor), might be interested in following the appraisal process diligently. The fellow assessors might be interested in getting maximum rewards for their departments. The human resource department and the organization might be interested in the managers diligently following the appraisal procedure. These interests are often in conflict, and there needs to be a mechanism to resolve this conflict.

Pfeffer (1981) suggested politics as a means to resolve such conflict. He stated that "politics involved how differing preferences are resolved in conflicts over the allocation of scarce resources." Also, political activities are "attempt to influence decisions over critical issues that are not readily resolved through the introduction of new data and in which there are differing views" (Pfeffer, 1981). Thus, resolution of different preferences cannot be completely accomplished by means of objective data when the decision involves complexity and ambiguity. Appraisal provides a perfect situation where political solution will be applied.

### **ASSESSOR'S APPRAISAL GOALS AND INTENTIONS**

The assessors' intention in the context of performance appraisal is defined in terms of basic goals or objectives that the assessors aim to fulfil through appraisal and

which drive their behaviour. The assessor may consider the objective of accuracy to be of less importance than more self-serving and political goals or agenda (Murphy, *et al.*, 2004; Sims, Gioia, and Longenecker, 1987). Some of the goals, other than the accurate appraisal that superiors attempt to achieve through performance appraisal are: avoiding confrontation with subordinates, maintaining subordinate performance, avoiding written record of poor performances, hiding poor department performance, shocking subordinate to improve, sending a signal to the subordinate to leave the organization (Gioia and Longenecker, 1994; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). Assessors fulfil these goals by inflating or deflating the performance ratings while ignoring employee's actual performance. Some managers give higher ratings to their employees to project an image of overall good performance of the department. This may affect their own appraisal and rewards. The heads of powerful departments can also use it to showcase their power and garner maximum benefits for their team. The manager who heads the most critical department constituting employees who either possess critical skills or perform critical functions is able to play this power game most effectively.

Researchers have argued that appraisal errors or biases may be assessor's deliberate signals to the employees or may be adaptation to the conflicting demands of the process (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995; Murphy, *et al.*, 2004). Thus assessors may be motivated to manipulate the appraisal to get rewards for themselves, avoid negative consequences or create good impression in the eyes of superiors (Harris, 1994). These assessor behaviours have been termed as loyalty, sympathy, concern, conflict avoidance, deviance, and power seeking (Longenecker and Gioia, 2000) and represent assessor's political behaviour in the appraisal context.

One school of thought considers such manipulations to be justified in certain instances like avoiding ranking to maintain harmony within work-group, motivate assessee's to perform better in future (Murphy *et al.*, 2004), etc., and managers consider these manipulations to be their legitimate discretion (Longenecker and Gioia, 2000). Longenecker (1989) argued that whenever short-term ramifications of accurate ratings are negative for an assessor, temptations to manipulate ratings to lessen negative impact is strong. Although these manipulations of performance appraisal may fulfil the short-term goals of the assessor, it hurts the long-

term organizational goals. The negative consequences appear in the form of diminished ability to reward high performers, damaged trust between the assessor and the assessee, increased uncertainty and doubt among employees, potential legal and ethical issues, creation of more performance problems than solution, failure of pay for performance policy, and suspect data for promotion decisions (Longenecker and Gioia, 2000). It is in the interest of the organization that performance appraisal be used for accurately assessing the performance of its employees and for identification of the developmental needs rather than for any other uses mentioned above.

## APPRAISAL POLITICS

The assessor's appraisal manipulations discussed in the last section have been termed as "appraisal politics" and defined as "superior's deliberate manipulations of employee ratings to enhance or protect self or department interest" (Sims, Gioia and Longnecker, 1987). But because different stakeholders pursue different goals from appraisal, what constitutes politics and political behaviour depends on the eyes of the beholder and the context in which one is situated. The above definition seems to be proposed from the assessee's viewpoint only. The conceptualization of appraisal politics will differ from the assessors' and the assessee's perspectives. In the current paper, our discussion focuses on the assessors' perspective though the latter is equally important and thus requires separate treatment.

There is hardly any literature on the conceptualization of appraisal politics, although there are few descriptive studies on appraisal politics, mainly conducted by Longenecker and colleagues (Longenecker, 1989; Longenecker and Gioia, 1992, 2000; Sims, Gioia and Longnecker 1987). So we take support of organizational politics (OP) literature in conceptualizing appraisal politics. "Organizational politics involves those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes in a situation where there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices" (Pfeffer, 1981). Ferris, Fedor and King (1994) defined political behaviour as "management of shared meaning in such a way as to produce desired, self serving responses or outcomes." Tetlock (1985) identified three basic motives behind managerial political actions: enhancement of self and social image, and garnering the valued resources. Drory and Romm (1990) reviewed various OP definitions under different

streams and identified the following dimensions: levels – individual, group, and organization; situational characteristics – uncertainty and conflict; outcomes – self serving, against organization, resource distribution, and power attainment; means – influence, informal behaviour, and power tactics.

Based on the above discussion, we can give a working definition of appraisal politics from assessor's perspective. It is defined as constituting those superior's (reviewer's), fellow assessors', and own assessee's behaviours which are informal in nature, and aimed at manipulation or influence on appraisal ratings to achieve their self-serving ends at the cost of assessor's own appraisal goals and interests, and/or at the cost of organizational interests. It will also include the assessors' own political behaviours aimed at safeguarding their interests, of course, detrimental to organizational interests. All behaviours are not political and the emphasis is on deliberate attempts to control outcomes, thus omitting mindless or subconscious behaviours (Ferris and Judge, 1991). The above definition expands the existing conceptualization given by Sims, Gioia and Longnecker, (1987) because the latter represents only one component of the appraisal politics, i.e., assessor's political behaviour, but does not mention about other components – assessee's political behaviour or influence tactics aimed at getting favourable appraisals (Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson, 1980; Wayne and Ferris, 1990).

## Perception of Appraisal Politics

In this paper, the assessors' perception of appraisal politics (PAPS) is considered rather than actual political behaviour. Lewin (1936) suggested that people react to situations based upon their perception of reality instead of reality *per se*. Thus assessors' intentions towards appraisal usage will be influenced by their perception of appraisal usage in their organization. Consistent with our conceptualization of appraisal politics, these perceptions will be formed based on political behaviours of the assessor's superior, colleagues, and subordinates directed towards influencing appraisal ratings. Further, these perceptions will be influenced by application of pay and promotion policies, which are largely dependent on appraisals, inside the organization. This is in line with the conceptualization of the perception of organizational politics (POPS) which are formed on the basis of supervisory behaviour, co-worker behaviour, and organization policies and practices, particularly related to pay

and promotion decisions (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Kacmar and Ferris, 1991).

Based on the above discussion, the assessor's PAPS is defined as the assessor's perception about the political nature of appraisal rating decision, i.e., which promotes the self interests of the reviewer, co-appraisers, and assessees, at the cost of the assessor's appraisal interests (adapted from Vigoda and Cohen's, 2002 POPS definition).

### **Perception of Appraisal Politics and Assessor's Intention**

It is instructive to invoke the notion of actor and observer when trying to understand how one forms perceptions about the situation 'out there', and how subsequently one reacts to it (Ferris, Fedor and King 1994). James and James (1989) conceptualized that an observer forms perceptions about work environment based on a two-stage cognitive process. Firstly, the observer ascribes descriptive meaning to the environmental attributes such as technological complexity, centralization, physical conditions, etc., based on one's experiences and perceptions. Secondly, the observer cognitively values the situational descriptors in terms of basic values represented in the descriptor such as equity, autonomy, opportunity for gain, etc., (James and James, 1989). They further identified higher order general factor, representing evaluation of the overall climate as personally beneficial or detrimental to the psychological well-being of the observer. While discussing PAPS, we are not focussed on the generalized factor, but on the first two stages of cognitive appraisal of work situation. So we will identify those factors in the work or appraisal climate which are the key in valuation of climate as iniquitous or political. Assessor functions as an observer whose political valuation is based on assessment of actions of other players, and application of policies, as conceptualized in the last section.

Once the perceptions about appraisal climate are formed, the assessor functions in the actor's role based on those perceptions. Of course, the decision to aim rating accuracy or other political goals is based on the perceptions about the climate, or PAPS. The assessors' PAPS would affect their intentions regarding influencing the appraisal outcomes. If the assessors think that there is a high degree of appraisal politics in the organization, they feel justified about their decisions that compromise accuracy of evaluation. Thus it is proposed that,

Assessor's PAPS influences assessor's intentions to indulge in political manipulation of appraisals themselves, or influences their own goals from appraisals. These intentions affect the accuracy of appraisals.

### **ANTECEDENTS OF PERCEPTION OF APPRAISAL POLITICS**

Ferris and Judge (1991) and Ferris, Fedor and King (1994) identified the following key situational characteristics as antecedents of managerial political behaviour: ambiguity, accountability, and instrumentality of associated outcomes. We reason that since the assessors' PAPS will shape their political behaviour, the above antecedents will also influence PAPS. Or in other words, PAPS will mediate relation between the above antecedents and assessor's intentions. The political perceptions represent the assessor's valuation of the situational characteristics. The following section contains a detailed discussion about these antecedents and the perception of appraisal politics.

Since there does not exist prior empirical work on studying antecedents of PAPS, we have taken guidance from empirical research on POPS (Ferris, *et al.*, 1996; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Parker, Dipboye and Jackson, 1995; Valle and Perrew, 2000). It is justified because one component of POPS represents the politics involved in the pay and promotion decisions, which are dependent on appraisals. These studies found significant influence of variables representing organizational, job, and personal characteristics on POPS. Specifically, POPS is affected positively by the following situational characteristics: accountability (Ferris, *et al.*, 1997), ambiguity (Anderson, 1994), hierarchical level (Ferris, *et al.*, 1996), and centralization (Fedor, Ferris, Harrell-Cook and Russ, 1998; Ferris, *et al.*, 1996). And, it is affected negatively by the following situational characteristics: autonomy (Anderson, 1994), feedback (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992), formalization (Ferris, *et al.*, 1996), promotional opportunities (Ferris, *et al.*, 1996; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992), and relationship with supervisors (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992). These variables show consistent relationships over different studies, but there are others which are either inconsistent or insignificant (Kacmar and Baron, 1999). We argue that the majority of these variables are one way or the other represented by or are correlated with accountability, ambiguity, instrumentality, and top management support — the antecedents considered in

this paper. For the sake of parsimony and relevance from the assessor's perspective, these variables will significantly predict PAPS.

### **Ambiguity in Appraisals**

Ambiguity and uncertainty in the work environment are the key determinants of managerial political behaviour (Ferris and Judge, 1991). Ferris, *et al.*, (1994) argued that ambiguity is the increasing function of the number of different sets of outcomes possible in a given situation. PAPS is directly affected by the ambiguity about the appraisal guidelines and policies about: purpose, appraisal procedure, rating criteria and standards, outcomes for assessee and assessor, and appraisal-reward linkage. These also include performance management processes such as goal setting, assessee participation in different stages, feedback, performance appraisal, and monitoring/evaluation of the appraisal process. If the norms are not clear, managers, assessors, and reviewers, take this ambiguity as discretion (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995) and indulge in the political manipulations of the ratings. Similarly, it gives leeway to the assessees to manage the meaning of their performance by indulging in covert or overt upward influence tactics. This leads to the assessors, as observers, perceiving lesser control on safeguarding their own interests, legitimate or not, and hence having higher PAPS.

The effect of ambiguity is also evident from the research on POPS. The organizational characteristics like formalization reduce ambiguity and hence have negative effect on POPS. Similarly, the positive effect of hierarchical levels on POPS is due to the increased ambiguity of jobs at higher levels. Also, job characteristics such as autonomy and feedback, reduce ambiguity due to the availability of performance information and negatively affects perception of politics (Ferris, Russ and Fandt, 1989). Thus underlying many situational antecedents of POPS, ambiguity is the central factor affecting perceptions. Thus it is proposed that,

Well-defined and transparent appraisal guidelines, policies, and procedures including purpose, rating criteria, and standards, outcome for assessees and assessors, appraisal processes like goal setting, feedback, etc., will reduce assessors' PAPS.

### **Accountability in Appraisals**

Accountability is another important variable affecting political perceptions; and, organizational politics research shows an overall positive effect of accountability on

political perceptions (Fandt and Ferris, 1990; Ferris, *et al.*, 1997). It is a complex, multi-dimensional construct which has been neglected in the past research. We discuss the concept first.

### **Accountability in Decision-Making**

Given the neglected state of accountability research, Tetlock (1985) laid down the framework for studying it. He followed the political school, and based his conceptualization on the guiding metaphor of decision-makers as a politician whose primary goal is to maintain a positive regard of important constituencies to whom they are accountable. Tetlock assumes that accountability of conduct is a universal feature of natural decision environment, and people's goal is to gain approval and status in their social context. These core assumptions are related to the nature of real world decision settings and goals/motives that drive the decision-making process. Thus, "accountability is a critical rule and norm enforcement mechanism" (Tetlock, 1985). Schlenker, *et al.*, (1994) defined accountability as "being answerable to external audiences for performing up to certain prescribed standards thereby fulfilling obligations, duties, expectations, and other charges." Frink and Klimoski (1998) further stated that it is a 'felt' state, rather than just a rule or norm. Across different accountability situations, a common theme is the felt need for decision-makers to justify their judgments and decisions to others, who may also control the decision-makers' valuable rewards.

How people cope up with accountability depends upon accountability relationships, i.e., who is accountable to whom and under what ground rules (Tetlock, 1985; Simonson and Nye, 1992; Lerner and Tetlock, 1999). Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger (1989) found evidence of three cognitive strategies that people use for coping with accountability to others. People, who knew others' views and were unconstrained by the past commitments, relied on low effort "acceptability heuristics" by aligning their views with that of the others. People, who did not know others' views and were unconstrained by the past commitments, used "pre-emptive self criticism," did more analysis, and thought flexibly. People, who were committed to certain positions, used "retrospective rationality" by trying to justify their positions to the others. Clearly, the first and the last strategies are examples of political behaviours, and they may not lead to the best decisions possible for the organization.

Effect of accountability on political behaviour can also be understood from research on POPS. Accountabil-

ity enhances the perception of centralization or reduces the perception of job autonomy, because by being answerable to others, one cedes some control on their managerial discretion. And, both the characteristics have an effect on POPS, precisely due to the decision control issue (Ferris, *et al.*, 1989). Thus accountability is an important factor underlying job autonomy and centralization that shapes the manager's perception.

But then it does not mean that accountability is detrimental for organizational or managerial interests. On the contrary, it is an essential element of a successful administrative process. But, it works only under certain set of conditions. And, the above negative findings do not specify these conditions. Based on the past research, Lerner and Tetlock (1999) found that when a manager is held accountable more for the procedures than the outcomes, and for pre-decision rather than post-decision, and the views of the authority are an unknown pre-decision, then it improves quality of decision because the decision-maker adopts 'pre-emptive self criticism' involving more analysis, and not political behaviour like "acceptability heuristics." In fact, out of the three conditions, the first one subsumes the latter two; hence, we will focus on it.

### ***Procedural and Outcome Accountability***

Procedural accountability is in operation when "someone's judgments or decisions are monitored and valued according to the quality of procedure that a judge or a decision-maker uses in making a response, regardless of the quality of the outcome of that response" (Siegel-Jacobs and Yates, 1996). Under outcome accountability, "judgments or decisions quality are monitored and evaluated according to standards of decisions quality or its consequences and procedures used to decide are ignored" (Siegel-Jacobs and Yates, 1996).

Different scholars have explained the superior effects of procedural accountability over outcome accountability. Siegel-Jacobs and Yates (1996) argued that the former suggests a method to enhance the performance, whereas the latter might provide an incentive to produce a positively evaluated response, but no guidance to achieve the goal. Also, outcome accountability may induce stress, affecting decision quality if the outcome is uncertain; whereas procedural condition does not induce the same level of stress as one is answerable for a procedure that is relatively certain (Siegel-Jacobs and Yates, 1996). Another explanation is that procedural accountability induces controlled information process-

ing, whereas outcome accountability induces more automatic information processing (Chaiken, 1980; Brtek and Motowidlo, 2002). Procedural accountability encourages people to take more of the available information into account compared to outcome accountability (Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger, 1989). But it is useful only when the information is relevant to judgment as procedural accountability does not make decision-maker a better discriminator of information (Siegel-Jacobs and Yates, 1996). According to Chaiken (1980), high involvement (procedural accountability) condition led message recipients to employ systematic information processing, using more message cues rather than source cues. Low involvement (no accountability) condition involved heuristics-based information processing, where source cues (such as likeability) had strong influence compared to message cues.

Empirical research on accountability has shown support for positive impact of procedural accountability on decision quality compared to outcome accountability (Brtek and Motowidlo, 2002; Siegel-Jacobs and Yates, 1996; Simonson and Nye, 1992; Simonson and Staw, 1992). It raised interview validity in predicting subsequent job performance compared to outcome accountability (Brtek and Motowidlo, 2002), enhanced interrater judgmental accuracy of interviewee ratings (Rozelle and Baxter, 1981), improved consistency with which judgment policies are applied (Ashton, 1992), and lowered susceptibility to bias (Simonson and Nye, 1992). On the other hand, outcome accountability forced decisions in line with the expected views of constituencies (Adelberg and Baston, 1978), made decision-makers more politically motivated (Fandt and Ferris, 1990), less willing to compromise, heightened escalation of commitment, and affected quality of judgment negatively (Simonson and Staw, 1992). Clearly, outcome form encourages political behaviour, and we expect that it will have an accentuating effect on the political perceptions.

### ***Performance Appraisal and Accountability***

In case of appraisals, the assessor is accountable to multiple constituencies – reviewer, assessee, human resource department, etc., depending on the goals these stakeholders pursue, and on their potential to reward the assessor, either tangibly or intangibly. The stronger and more multiple are these accountabilities, more is the conflict, and the associated ambiguity for the assessor. All these make the assessors feel that they are less and less capable of fulfilling their own goals from appraisals, and may per-

ceive more appraisal politics. But if the accountability conditions are conducive, as discussed above, then accountability will have favourable effect on the assessors' perceptions and intentions.

Procedural accountability in the context of appraisal rating means, answerability for following a defined organizational procedure and norms related to appraisal. Some of the administrative procedures that have been found to have a positive effect on improving rating accuracy are: participative goal-setting, ongoing informal/formal feedback, and maintaining diary for noting down critical incidents (DeNisi and Peters, 1996). Participative goal-setting removes some ambiguity about the criteria and relevant measures help in assessing the performance more accurately. Ongoing feedback helps reduce the assessor's discomfort of sharing negative feedback with an assessee, and the tendency to inflate rating. Diary-keeping helps in reducing biases like recency and primacy effect. Procedural accountability accentuates formalization which, as argued earlier, reduces ambiguity and political perceptions. Outcome accountability, on the other hand, does not provide guidance to the specific processes, and hence enhances ambiguity and political perceptions.

The differential effect between procedural and outcome accountability can also be understood from the cognitive information processing model. While procedural accountability forces the assessor to carry out controlled cognitive processing that involves consciously monitored processes of attention, search, and stimulus detection (Feldman, 1981), outcome accountability more often involves the automatic cognitive processing. Automatic processing is more dependent on stereotypic categorization of an employee in the mind of the assessor without conscious monitoring (Feldman, 1981) and causes more inaccurate and biased appraisal. It encourages "retrospective rationality" or "acceptability heuristics," both political in nature. Controlled processing can be augmented by making the assessors accountable for the well-defined appraisal procedures.

There is scant research on the effect of accountability on appraisal decision (Curtis, Harvey and Ravden, 2005; Klimoski and Inks, 1990; Mero and Motowidlo, 1995). Klimoski and Inks (1990) found that accountability would be higher when the assessors expect a face-to-face feedback session with the assessee than an anonymous one or no feedback session. Also, the assessor's rating will be higher in the case of self-assessment

rating by the assessee being high than when there is no or low self-assessment rating. In their experiment, the assessors were held accountable only to the assessee and hence the assessors aligned their ratings to the assessee's expectations. This was termed as "acceptability heuristic" by Tetlock (1985). Mero and Motowidlo (1995), and Curtis, Harvey, and Ravden (2005) found that the assessors who were held accountable for their ratings rated more accurately than the assessors who were not held accountable.

But the above studies did not specify the nature of accountability. Brtek and Motowidlo (2002) argued that, procedural accountability might have been dominant in the Mero and Motowidlo experiment because it was found that compared to the subjects under pressure to achieve certain outcome, those who were accountable for accuracy exhibited more attentive behaviour like taking more notes, which might have led to more accurate assessment. Similarly, if an assessor feels more accountable to the assessee, he may be more motivated to fulfil other objectives than to appraise performance accurately, e.g., inflate ratings to maintain relationship, especially in case of poor performance (Klimoski and Inks, 1990). Distinction needs to be made in the performance appraisal context, and therefore it is important to test whether procedural accountability has more favourable effects than outcome accountability. Accountability to some neutral authority to whom the assessors need to justify their decision (e.g., superior or HR manager or audit team) for following well-defined policies and guidelines, will improve the quality of decision. In a typical appraisal system, superior of the assessor functions as a reviewer, and is expected to ensure adherence of appraisal procedural norms.

When the assessors are held accountable for the procedures by a relatively neutral authority, they perceive lesser scope of political manipulations by the fellow assessor because both are being held accountable for a common criteria (say, by common reviewer or the HR department). Also these procedures, e.g., ongoing feedback, 360-degree feedback, and diary-keeping, are such that they discourage politicking by the assessee as well. Also, when the assessors are held accountable for certain procedures, it is expected that their reviewers also follow those procedures themselves, attenuating the assessors' PAPS. The assessors themselves will not indulge in political manipulations. If they are held accountable for outcomes, they are driven more by what is acceptable



to the reviewer or the assessee, as well as by their own political agenda, etc. They expect similar behaviours from the fellow assessors competing with them for common resources. When the processes/procedures are not scrutinized, it becomes easier for the assessors to justify their own judgment and pursue their political agenda. Thus it is proposed that,

Accountability conditions affect assessors' PAPS. Assessors' accountability (for following procedures that leads to accurate appraisals) to an authority which is perceived to be relatively neutral (e.g., HR department) attenuates their PAPS. But, outcome accountability enhances it.

Accountability for the procedures of performance appraisal appears interesting as it brings to focus the practitioner's concerns mentioned by Banks and Murphy (1985).

### **Accountability and Ambiguity Interaction**

Fandt and Ferris (1990) found that accountability interacted with ambiguity to affect impression management behaviours. And, the political behaviour was higher when accountability was higher and ambiguity lower. It appears counterintuitive, because it is expected that political behaviour will be the highest when both the factors are higher. But, the above study did not specify the nature of the accountability in operation. In case of appraisal, we expect that if the procedures are not well-defined, then one cannot be held accountable for following such procedures. But, if the procedures are well-defined and the assessor is held accountable for the outcomes, something that is difficult to achieve, then the assessor is bound to develop political perceptions. Thus it is proposed that,

If procedural ambiguity is higher, then procedural or outcome accountability will cause higher assessor PAPS. But, if it is lower or procedures are well-defined, then procedural accountability will cause lower PAPS, but outcome accountability (for goal other than accuracy) will accentuate assessors' PAPS.

### **Appraisal Instrumentality**

When the assessee's appraisal stakes are higher, they are likely to try and influence their appraisals more (Ferris and Judge, 1991). To reiterate, the assessee stakes typically include salary raise and promotion decisions. The assessors also have a potent instrument to fulfil their

self-interests through appraisal manipulation. It is called managerial reward power (French and Raven, 1959). To repeat, the assessor's stakes linked with appraisal include rewarding loyal employees, projecting department power, placating powerful assessee, etc.

The instrumentality will be higher when ratings are used for administrative purpose, ratings-rewards relation is clear, and there are limited resources for rewards. Meta-analysis by Jawahar and Williams (1997) showed that appraisal used for administrative purpose is inflated in comparison to that used for developmental purposes. This clearly indicates the assessors' tendency to distort ratings when appraisal is used for administrative decisions. But this will really happen when the assessee and the assessors see a visible linkage between the ratings and the rewards like salary increments, promotions, etc. Also, when the resources are scarce, there is bound to be more competition for rewards, and more political behaviours from both the assessors and the assessee. This will occur when promotional opportunities are less, and budgets for salary are low, typically happening when organizations are not doing well. Thus when the assessors' and the assessee's instrumentality are higher, the assessor as an observer perceive more political manipulations/behaviours occurring. Therefore,

When the assessors perceive the assessors' and the assessee's appraisal instrumentality as higher, the assessors' PAPS will also be higher.

### **Top Management Support: Appraisal Training**

This is one variable which has been relatively neglected by the research on organizational politics, including the model presented by Ferris, Ross and Fandt (1989). Only Parker, Dipboye and Jackson (1995) tested its influence and found some support for its negative effect on PAPS. To adhere to our objective of parsimony, we propose appraisal training as the only aspect of top management support in the context of appraisals. When assessor receives organizational support in the form of training, especially training like frame of reference (FOR) which is meant to reduce biases and inconsistencies, it will have a negative effect on the assessors' PAPS.

### **ABILITY TO APPRAISE ACCURATELY**

As mentioned by DeCotiis and Petit (1978), another important factor affecting accuracy is the assessor's ability to appraise accurately. The ability of the assessor also

affects positively the assessor's intention to appraise accurately through its positive effect on self-efficacy of the assessor. The assessor's ability is affected both by knowledge of the appraisal norms, purpose, procedure, and outcomes as well as the organizational support in terms of training on appraisal, which has been shown to positively affect accuracy (Pulakos, 1984). Thus, a clearly stated purpose, a clearly stated appraisal procedure, an unambiguous and relevant rating criteria and standards, clearly stated implications of outcome for the assessee, and clearly stated implications of outcome for the assessor, would improve the assessor's ability to appraise accurately.

Also, more relevant the performance appraisal training is, more able the assessor will be to appraise accurately. FOR training is one form of training which has been found effective in the context of appraisal. It aims at establishing a common reference among the assessors as to what constitutes an effective appraisal by establishing the rating standards and showing the behavioural examples on various rating dimensions. It has been shown to improve appraisal accuracy. Athey and McIntyre (1987) empirically found that FOR training in comparison to training that is only 'information providing,' improved the retention of information given during training, improved the distance accuracy, and reduced the halo effect. In another study, McIntyre, Smith and Hassett (1984) found that FOR training improved the accuracy and reduced the halo effect as compared to the training on rating errors. Woehr (1994) found that the FOR-trained subjects not only produced more accurate performance appraisal, but also recalled more behaviour representing a wider variety in performance dimen-

sions. In all these studies, any kind of training was better in improving the assessor's accuracy than no training.

## ASSESSOR-CENTRIC MODEL OF APPRAISAL POLITICS

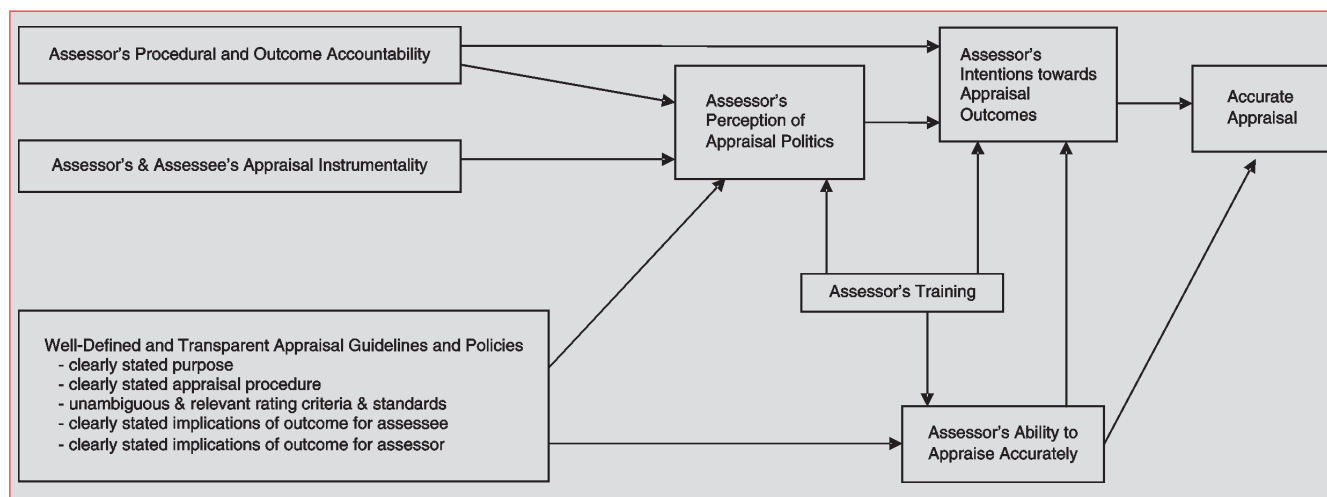
Based on the above discussion, a model is proposed as shown in Figure 1. The model takes its cues from the theory of reasoned action, which says that intention is the immediate predictor of actual behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). In the model, the assessor's intentions influence their rating behaviours and rating accuracy.

In the past, some models have been proposed in the context of performance appraisal (DeCotiis and Petit, 1978; Harris, 1994; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995), but this model differs from them in significant ways. The first departure is that it clearly delineates the accountability perspective (Tetlock, 1985) in the context of appraisals. The second difference is the conceptualization of the assessor's PAPS, and its effect on the assessor's intentions and behaviour. This paper focuses on the contemporary research agenda in performance appraisal (Levy and Williams, 2004) by studying the context in which appraisal occurs.

## ADDITIONAL VARIABLES

Though not mentioned in the model, the assessor's personality variables are the other assessor-related variables that affect the appraisal accuracy. Conscientiousness and agreeableness has been shown to predict rating leniency (Bernardin, *et al.*, 2000). The effect of mood in the recall of information and the accuracy of the appraisal has also been studied (Isen, 1987). The dependent variable considered in the model is rating

**Figure 1: Assessor-Centric Model of Appraisal Politics**



accuracy, which is the measure of actual performance of the assessee on the dimensions assessed. There are operational difficulties in measuring this variable especially in field tests. Another variable which can be used to assess the effectiveness of appraisal can be the reactions of both the assessor and the assessee, which can be operationalized by measuring satisfaction with the rating, justice perception, and acceptability of rating (Levy and Williams, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

In the last decade or so, researchers in performance appraisals field have called for considering the social context so as to resolve some of the vexing issues bothering both the researchers and the practitioners alike, e.g., assessor's appraisal intentions and accuracy (Ilgen, Barnes-Farrell, and McKellin, 1993). There has been some movement in this regard, as subsequent research has investigated the contextual factors and their effect on appraisal ratings. Some of these factors include appraisal purpose (Jawahar and Williams, 1997), assessee's upward influence tactics (Ferris *et al.*, 1994), relationship with supervisors (Fagenson, 1989), assessors' accountability (Curtis, Harvey and Ravden, 2005), etc. Then, there has been considerable research on appraisal from justice perspective – procedural and distributive both. This research body has identified important processes, e.g., participation, 360-degree feedback, which makes appraisal more fair, especially from the assessee's perspective, as well as accurate. Levy and Williams (2004) reviewed this research on appraisals in its social context, conducted over the last decade or so. They identified few interesting directions in which research needs to move to push the overall contextual research agenda further. One of the areas they identified as having neglected is the political perspective of appraisals. Associated and included in it is the research on accountability as applied to appraisals. These are interesting constructs because they affect the assessor's intentions or goals, a determinant of accuracy.

There have been few developments in appraisal politics (Longenecker, 1989; Longenecker and Gioia, 1992, 2000; Poon, 2004; Sims, Gioia and Longenecker, 1987) and accountability research (Curtis, Harvey and Ravden, 2005; Klimoski and Inks, 1990). But these developments have been largely descriptive in nature, and the conceptualization has also been piecemeal. Just to reemphasize, Sims, Gioia and Longenecker (1987) conceptu-

alized appraisal politics as constituting only the assessors' manipulation of ratings while ignoring the assessee's influence tactics. Then, probably, it is the first attempt to conceptualize PAPS from the assessor's perspective. Similarly, accountability research, as applied in appraisal, has failed to distinguish between its important types, i.e., procedural and outcome-based accountabilities, which has important implications for the assessor's behaviour. Our paper fulfils these gaps and opens up interesting research possibilities. To keep the conceptualization simple and focussed only on key variables of interest, we have ignored certain variables, e.g., the assessors' personality variables, some distal organizational factors, etc. But this simplicity does not in any way affect the lucidity and the perspective of the model as it focuses on the political view. An interesting direction could be to investigate the effects of procedural/outcome accountability on procedural/outcome justice perceptions in the context of appraisals. This will be a major contribution to the administrative and justice research. Research in the field of justice has already found interesting differences between procedural and distributive forms (Greenberg, 1986), and its implications for organizations. Investigating accountability and justice will provide leads about creating appropriate webs of accountability that can promote fair work environment. Our model also brings together the researchers' and the practitioners' concerns mentioned at the beginning. We have argued why appraisal accuracy, a preferred research agenda, is important, and how some of the processes, a concern of practitioners, can advance accuracy.

From the practitioners' perspective also, this paper provides interesting cues in the form of implications for appraisal policy-making and process design. For example, how can they ensure that procedural accountabilities are built into the system rather than just outcome accountabilities? Accountability is an essential feature of governance at workplace. In view of the recent large-scale corporate governance failures and frauds, appropriate forms of accountability mechanisms are essential. Probably organizations can relook these mechanisms from the procedural and outcome perspective. Thus, this paper has tried to advance the knowledge in understanding the complex appraisal process in a manner that can be appreciated both by the researchers and the practitioners. ♥♥

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**Amit Dhiman** is a student of Fellow Programme in Management in the Personnel and Industrial Relations Area at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. He had seven years of industrial work experience before joining this programme.  
e-mail: amitdhiman@iimahd.ernet.in

**Manjari Singh** is a Faculty in Personnel and Industrial Relations Area at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. Her academic and research interests include performance management and reward systems, human resource information systems, and human resource management in small and medium enterprises. She has published articles in several national and international journals.  
e-mail: manjari@iimahd.ernet.in