

# Workplace Aggression in Organizational Changing Processes

## The Mediation Role of Leader Political (soft and hard) Behavior

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### Abstract

One of the main trends in workplace aggression research is studying its antecedents. But the literature also reveals that some predictors remain understudied, like organizational change [1]. Additionally, possible mediators of this relationship were not investigated.

The main objective of this research is studying the mediating effect of the leader political behavior (soft and hard version) on the relationship between organizational change and workplace aggression.

Participants representing a wide variety of jobs across many organizations were surveyed. The measures used in this research are an Organizational Change Questionnaire climate of change, processes, and readiness [2], a Workplace Aggression Scale [e.g. 3, 4] and a Political Behavior Questionnaire [5].

The results of the study and its theoretical and practical implications will be presented and discussed.

### Literature review

#### Workplace Aggression

Workplace aggression is a significant issue facing organizations [1] and has drawn considerable public and academic attention. Workplace aggression can be defined as "efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work, or have worked, or the organizations in which they are presently, or were previously, employed" [1] and it has been found to have negative consequences on employee's attitudes, behaviors and well being. For example, in a recent multi foci meta-analysis, Hershcovis and Barling [6] found a powerful link between workplace aggression with emotional exhaustion, interpersonal and organizational deviance and job dissatisfaction. Similar results were found by Dionisi, Barling and Dupré [7]), when they reviewed the construct outcomes.

Despite the expanding body of knowledge and empirical research in this domain, according to Dupré and Barling [8] significant gaps still remain in the knowledge of this phenomenon. Advances have been made in understanding and delimiting the concept [e.g. 1, 6, 7, 8, 9] and the various forms of aggression at work [e.g., 10, 11, 12]. Some of the antecedents of workplace aggression have been studied, regarding the stressor of aggression and situation predictors [e.g. 6, 7, 9, 14, 15], attitudinal and behavioral outcomes [6, 7], as characteristics of the victim that make them more likely to become targets of aggression [e.g. 15, 16]. Nevertheless, there is still little research that

examines what predicts workplace aggression in specific organizational situations [7, 17], as well potential indirect relationship (i.e. moderator and mediator variables).

### **The predicting effect of climate of organizational change**

Although organizational change has often been referred as an important antecedent of workplace aggression only few studies have investigated its relationship [17]. There is already some evidence that change and climate of organizational change are an important cause of workplace aggression [1]. Organizational change can be defined as an intentional process in order to lead the organization from one state to a higher state [23]. Johns [24] pointed out that organizational change takes place in a specific context, that is, the climate of organizational change. Climate of organizational change is the climate perceived by employees during the change process, reflecting the individual interpretation of the change context and process [e.g. 25, 26]. According to Greenberg and Barling [11] by altering the organizational balance, change leads to high levels of insecurity and instability and is associated with aggressive acts at work. Baillien and De Witte [18] stated that the psychological process of experiencing change elicits negative attitudes because of its inherent bad connotation and its negative association with negative emotions.

We propose that this perception of the organizational change process and context may have an impact on individuals' behavior, more specifically on individual reactions that reveal aggression. Altogether, this suggests that workplace aggression is one of the results derived from the climate of change. Consistently to this discussion, we formulate our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 – Climate of organizational change influences the reported frequency of workplace aggression.

### **The mediator effect of leader political (soft and hard) behavior**

The literature review suggests that mediators and moderators that intervene in the relationships between workplace aggression and its antecedents are understudied topics [17]. While valuable in explaining how climate of organizational change may be related to aggression, the current study focuses on the mediating role of leadership (soft and hard) political behavior, assuming, in line with the literature, that individuals “undergoing organizational change are subject to numerous sources of stress (stressors)” (p. 352) and some of these stressors encourage aggression.

The academic interest in political leadership in organizations and more especially in leader political behavior has grown substantially in the last decade [e.g. 5, 27, 28, 29, 30]. According to Valle and Perrewé [30], leader political behaviors consist of those actions the leader undertakes in response to a perceived opportunity to influence a target and secure desired outcomes for one or more collective bodies he represents. Based on Kipnis et al. [31] groundbreaking research into influence tactics, Yukl and colleagues [e.g. 5, 32, 33] developed an extensive and refined taxonomy, like: rational persuasion, apprising, inspirational appeals, consultation, exchange, collaboration, personal appeals, ingratiation, pressure and legitimation which can be grouped into two different categories: hard and soft tactics. Hard tactics involve use of authority and position power, and they tend to be used in an impersonal and manipulative way. Pressure and legitimating tactics are clearly hard tactics, and many forms of coalition are hard, especially upward appeals to an agent's superior. Soft tactics involve use of personal power and power sharing. The soft tactics include ingratiation, consultation, inspirational appeals, and rational persuasion.

Studies conducted on leader political behavior are unanimous stating that there is an increase of the political weft in changing processes [e.g. 27, 28, 30], and have mixed opinions about its consequences, however negative and dysfunctional outcomes are more highlighted than positive results. Miller, Rutherford and Kolodinsky [26] concluded that political behavior potentiate key outcomes like job stress and turnover intentions, and has an inverse effect on job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship [e.g. 35, 36]. Frost [36], Gilmore [37] and Kacmar and Baron [38] found a close association between organizational politics, workplace deviance and retaliatory behavior. Spector and Fox [39] also sustain that power and politics may play a nontrivial role in workplace aggression.

With a prudent approach, Christiansen, Villanova and Mikulay [46] defended that despite the increased attention given to the link of organizational politics and work attitudes, it's important to understand which aspects and behaviors of the political process in organizations are related to negative attitudes, stating that might some political processes and behaviors have a more neutral or even beneficial effect.

Other investigations pointed the interactive and the mediator effect of leader political behavior. Miranda [16] concluded that in organizational change processes leader's political soft and hard behavior mediate the relation between leader's personal characteristics and followers' levels of organizational trust, organizational job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational cynicism. The soft version set a positive impact over job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational commitment, and the hard version set a strong impact over organizational cynicism. Cropanzano and Li [47] defended that perceived organizational politics have a mediated effect in organizational stress. Miller and Nichols [48] examined the mediating influence of perceptions of organizational politics in the relationship between the interactive effects of work locus of control and leader-member exchange on distributive justice. Breaux, Munyon, Hochwarter, and Ferris [49] concluded that accountability predicted lower levels of job satisfaction for those who perceived high levels of political behavior in organizations. Baillien and De White [50] found that experiencing organizational change is related to decreased social leadership.

Considering the theoretical and empirical evidences we suggest that:

Hypothesis 2a: Climate of organizational change influences leader's political soft behavior.

Hypothesis 2b: Climate of organizational change influences leader's political hard behavior.

Hypothesis 3a: Leader's political soft behavior influences the reported frequency workplace aggression.

Hypothesis 3b: Leader's political hard behavior influences the reported frequency workplace aggression.

Hypothesis 4: Leader's political (soft and hard) behavior mediates the relation between climate organizational change and workplace aggression.

## **Method**

### **Participants and procedure**

A cross-sectional survey was administered online to 132 employees in several organizations in the Lisbon area. The convenience sample used in this study comprises working adults, holding a variety of occupations. The subjects were informed that they were participating in a study examining several aspects regarding their job. Participation was voluntary and respondents were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. After explaining the purpose of the survey the investigators distributed

the questionnaire by their contacts network. Individuals were first asked to report the frequency of workplace aggression behaviors, then to mention the political behaviors and finally to report their perception about the climate of change.

Participants, 32.4% males and 64.7% females, age ranged from 19 and 62 years, with an average of 35.06 years ( $SD= 12.56$ ) and held different educational qualifications: 13.2% held a primary school, 8.8% complete the secondary school, 66.2% complete their graduation and 5,1% had a PhD. The organizational tenure was 7 years and 18.4% of the sample performs functions of leadership.

## Measures

The survey comprised a series of demographic items and self-reported measures of workplace aggression, hard and soft political behavior, and organizational change climate. To minimize the self-reported biases, participants were assured that the data would be anonymous and confidential. They were also instructed to answer the questions frankly and told that there were no right or wrong answers.

*Workplace aggression.* Vicente and D'Oliveira [e.g. 4, 44] twenty-five items instrument was used to measure workplace aggression ( $\alpha=.956$ ). The Workplace Aggression Scale (WAS) comprises five dimensions: hostility, non-interaction, gossip, depreciation and organizational deviance. The authors reported acceptable psychometric properties and validity for the WAS. A sample item is: "Spreading rumors about someone". Participants were asked to rate the frequency of a variety of behaviors in their workplace in general using a five-point response scale (1 =never to 5=always).

*Leader political behavior.* The assessment of political behavior was made using the twenty-five items Leader's Political Behaviors Scale [5]. A sample item is: "Promises to reward me if I act on your request". Ratings were made on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree".

*Organizational change climate.* Organizational change climate was measured using the "involvement in the change process" (7 items), participatory management (3 items), and "trust in leadership" (3 items), three dimensions of the Organizational Change Questionnaire-Climate of change, processes, and readiness developed by Bouckennooghe, Devos and Van den Broeck [2]. A sample item is "We are sufficiently informed of the progress of change". Each item was rated on a five-point response scale ranged from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree".

A final section of the questionnaire was concerned with demographic data. Items asked individuals to indicate their gender, age, qualifications, type of work contract (effective, fixed term, uncertain term and temporary), the duration of the daily work (full-time or part-time), organizational tenure, current position (leader or not leader), and current function that performs.

## Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics as well as the intercorrelations for all the variables. Organizational change climate was positively related to Political behavior soft and negatively related to Workplace aggression. Both associations are significant. However, Organizational change climate does not establish a significant association with Political behavior hard. Additionally, is notable a positive and significant association between Workplace aggression and Political behavior hard, in other words, the higher the levels of Political behavior hard the higher the workplace aggression.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations

Variables	M	SD	$\alpha$	2	3	4
1. Organizational change climate	38.00	13,50	.957	.060	.478**	-.541**
2. Political behavior (Hard)	23.74	5.99	.690		.360**	.174*
3. Political behavior (Soft)	48.06	9.94	.864			-.160
4. Workplace aggression	43.50	18.18	.959			

\*\* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The significance of the effect of Organizational change climate on the Workplace aggression, mediated by Political behaviour Hard and Soft through Structural Equation analysis.

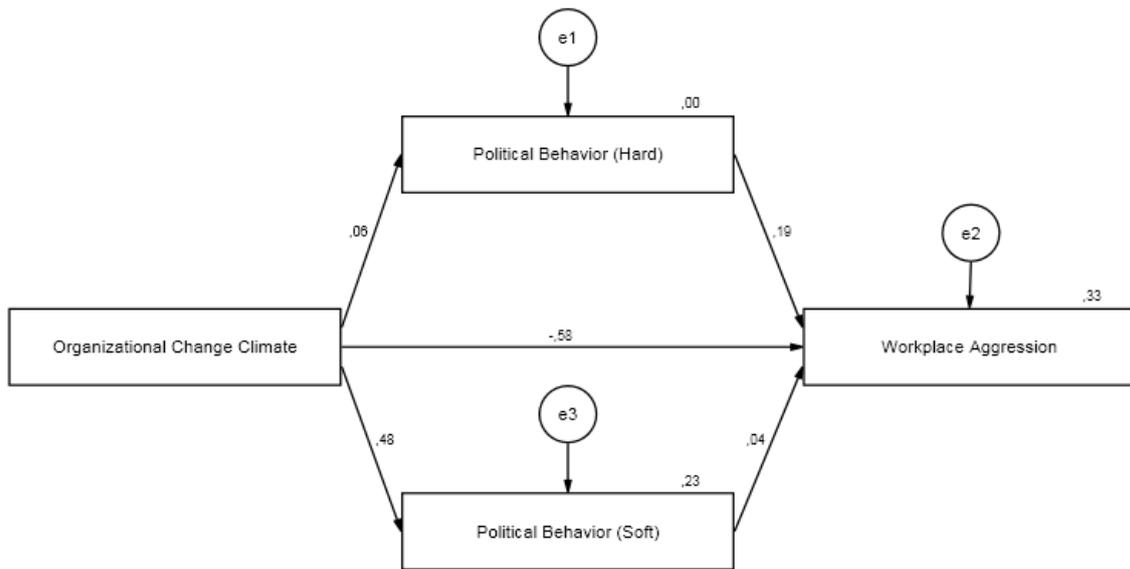


Figure 1. The mediated model

The analysis model has an explanatory capacity of 33.3% ( $R^2_{\text{adjusted}}=0.333$ ) of the variability of aggressiveness. The trajectories “Organizational change climate  $\rightarrow$  Workplace aggression” ( $\beta= -0.575$ ;  $Z= -7.173$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), “Organizational change climate  $\rightarrow$  Political behaviour soft” ( $\beta= 0.478$ ;  $Z= 6.328$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) and “Political behaviour hard  $\rightarrow$  Workplace aggression” ( $\beta= 0.193$ ;  $Z= 2.743$ ;  $p=0.006$ ) are statistically significant. The remaining trajectories are not significant, therefore is not possible to determine the mediator effect of the Political behavior variable on the relation established between Organizational change climate and Workplace aggression.

### Discussions and conclusions

This research focuses in an understudied phenomenon, the antecedents of workplace aggression, since the knowledge of this phenomenon still presents significant gaps. To our knowledge, this research is one of the first to examine the role of organizational change climate and soft and hard political behavior on workplace aggression. Using structural equation modeling we tried to validate a model where hard and soft political behavior acted as mediators on the relationship between organizational change and workplace aggression.

Supporting prior research and our hypothesis 1, the climate of organizational change was found to be positive and significantly associated with the frequency of workplace aggression. This finding is consistent with the literature [e.g. 1, 2, 17] that points organizational changes like downsizing, restructuring, or other types of changes act as triggers of workplace aggression.

Although leaders use organizational politics to get the work done by others efficiently and effectively [e.g. 5, 28, 29], some of their political behaviors may not be well accepted by their co-workers, as stated by Nahavandi and Malekzadeh [42], and empirically sustained by this research.

Our results suggest that political behavior and workplace aggression are connected, for we found a positive relationship between these variables, but only for leaders that employ hard political behaviors, in support of our hypothesis 3b. This was expected, due to the tough and even hostile nature of some of the tactics associated with hard political behaviors, like legitimacy and pressure, that may enhance not only some resistance in the employees, but also reactivity, negative responses or even retaliation towards the leaders that use these tactics. The leaders that use hard political behaviors can be portrayed as being at the core of workplace aggression, since these behaviors may trigger some form of aggressive behaviors on the employees. It is also possible that hard political behavior is perceived as providing a personal advantage, gain or benefit for the leader at the expense of employees, and therefore seen not only as subversive and destructive [43, 44], but also as leading to aggression at the workplace.

Our study takes one step further the findings of Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann and Birjulin[45], asserting that employees may evaluate hard political behaviors as something negative not only for the leader's intention of influencing its co-workers and causing negative consequences for them, but also because one of these negative outcomes is workplace aggression, that may trigger other negative outcomes, for the employees and the organization. Therefore, hard political tactics are not only less effective [5] but can also be disruptive for the organization, since they trigger workplace aggression.

Another finding is the positive relationship between the degree of the organizational climate of change and soft political behavior supporting our hypothesis 2a. As already stated by Jex [13], political behavior may occur in any organization, but it is more prevalent in organizations that have a great deal of uncertainty and scarce resources, as when they are undergoing change processes. These findings suggest that the likelihood of exhibiting soft political behavior increases with the increase of a climate of change. Therefore, the climate of change may lead to the emergence of these type of political behaviors, eventually as a form of leading the employees throughout the process of change towards the desirable goals, since soft political behaviors are organizationally more acceptable [30], and employees react more positively to soft than to hard political behaviors .

Contrary to our hypothesis, no significant relationship was found between soft political behavior and workplace aggression, not confirming our hypothesis 3a. This suggests that leaders that employ these political behaviors are not perceived as leading to this type of counterproductive behaviors by the employees. This study provides empirical evidence that is important to distinguish between hard and soft political behaviors, since they do not lead to the same consequences for the individuals and the organizations.

Although this type of tactics is regarded as having a more positive impact than hard political behavior [16], the leaders that employ these political behaviors are not

recognized in this study as having the necessary drive or strength to diminish workplace aggression and its nefarious effects in the organization.

We also explored the potential mediation effects of soft and hard political behavior on the relationship between the climate of organizational change and workplace aggression, but our results do not confirm this mediation effect neither our hypothesis 4.

### **Theoretical and managerial implications**

This research intended to provide new insights to the fields of organizational change, leader political behavior and workplace aggression. According to our results, workplace aggression seems to flourish in change environments and when leaders' use hard political behaviors. Differences were found between hard and soft political behaviors, proving that are necessary further studies to enlighten their implications in organizational settings. These findings have important implications for management, since the possible effects of change and political behaviors must be taken in account in order to successfully prevent and intervene in workplace aggression.

### **Limitations and future research directions**

Caution should be used when interpreting these results due to the limited sample size. Future research would benefit from using larger sample sizes.

Another limitation of the present study is that the same respondents were asked to rate both the climate of change, the leaders' political behaviors and workplace aggression. It can be assumed that employees that are subjected to workplace aggression may rate more negatively political behaviors and hence slightly affect the results. Since all data were gathered through self-reports and obtained in the same period of time, the results can also be affected by common method variance. In future research this can be avoided by using objective and not only subjective assessments of the organizational climate of change and by collecting data in different periods of time.

Other possible causal mechanisms of workplace aggression, as well as the strength of the links between the variables should be further analyzed by a longitudinal or experimental research, in order to be able to more clearly establish the dynamics of change, political behaviors and workplace aggression.

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