FAIRNESS AT WORK
WHAT WE KNOW & WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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The fairness of decisions and how we are treated matters to us greatly. Scientists have documented that our brains automatically evaluate fairness. When we experience fair treatment, we react with happiness and when we experience unfair treatment, we react with disgust. Brain scans of those experiencing unfairness look like the scans of those exposed to bad smells and tastes!

Being members of organizations gives us many opportunities to consider how fairly we are being treated. Organizational psychology researchers study perceptions of fairness at work related to employee selection, performance management, compensation and benefits, rewards, and other human resource areas. These perceptions of fairness impact many organizational results including job performance, trust, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, absenteeism, turnover, and more.

In LEAP: Master Your Superpowers, Soar to the Leading Edge, Marta Wilson writes, "Transformational leaders drive and enable quantifiable outcomes, including increased employee engagement, performance, and satisfaction. They understand employees' needs and help them feel understood and appreciated."[1] Fairness and perceptions of fairness are critical workplace factors that drive organizational results.

When I researched fairness for my organizational psychology Ph.D. dissertation, I learned two key truths that have guided me throughout my career:

1) Our perceptions of fairness are critical. We need to distinguish between what IS fair and what is PERCEIVED as fair. Both are critical. We can do things in the most objectively fair way, but if they are not perceived as fair, our results will suffer. We need to focus on our actions AND how they are perceived.

2) Process beats outcomes. Processes are as important as outcomes, or more so. The impact of how the process is perceived can be more important than the actual outcome. This is because people have an understanding that all outcomes can't always be fair. We all know that not everyone can get the job they are qualified for because there are other qualified people. However, the process can always be fair and thus the impact of how the process is perceived can be more important than the actual outcome.

Most leaders and managers strive to be fair and believe they are. But concerns about fairness in organizations are very common. To start to untangle that, let's look at the different ways fairness is perceived:

Outcome Fairness
Our perceptions of the fairness of outcomes such as promotions and awards are impacted by what we think we deserve. If I think I deserve a big pay raise, for example, I may perceive a small pay raise as evidence of unfairness. How can we help make sure pay raises and other personnel actions are perceived as fair? First, we need to provide accurate feedback to employees about their performance. When employees are not given honest feedback, problems of fairness crop up immediately, "I've never been told my performance is bad, but now I'm not being rewarded. That is unfair."

What makes this even more critical, and frankly tricky, is how perceptions of unfairness can spread. Just one leader not giving accurate feedback can impact the entire organization. If that leader's direct reports feel unfairly treated, they may tell their co-workers on other teams, and this instills

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uncertainty and concern about fairness in others. Thus, unfairness perceptions are often described as contagious. Researchers of organizations refer to a shared perception of fairness as the "justice climate" of an organization and note it is an independent predictor of individual perceptions of fairness.

Procedural/Process Fairness
Processes are used to determine outcomes, and perceptions regarding these processes impact overall experiences of fairness. Processes are perceived as fair when they are consistent, accurate, ethical, transparent, and lack bias. Employees perceive processes as fairer when they can participate, provide input and/or voice their opinions regarding the development and execution of the process.

In the Federal sector, the Office of Personnel Management has taken great care to prioritize fairness in all human resource guidelines. But as Marta Wilson said in her book for the federal workforce, Energized Enterprise, "If how you are doing things is perceived as unfair, then people don't even consider whether the outcome is unfair; they just assume it's unfair. Don't assume just because you are fair that it will be perceived that way."2

One tool to increase perceptions of fairness is organizational communication. Providing sufficient information and explanations is key. Transparency increases a sense of fairness.

Interactional Fairness
Finally, interactional fairness is when employees feel like they are being treated with sincerity, respect, honesty, dignity and caring. It is difficult to feel fairly treated when any of these interactional fairness elements are missing. In the words of Theodore Roosevelt, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Many managers are caring, but don't realize the importance of communicating their care and commitment to their employees. In addition, sometimes we have blind spots or areas of unintentional bias, based on our backgrounds and experiences. In-group/out-group dynamics are common as well as cliques of favored employees. Feedback from others and reflection can help us become more aware and increase our inclusiveness.

A reality for leaders is that their roles typically provide them more insight and knowledge of outcomes and how processes are developed and executed. When you are more knowledgeable it is it easier to feel confident that things are being done fairly. Taking an empathetic point of view, that others are trying to determine fairness without as much information, can guide our communication tone and increase perceptions of interactional fairness.

Where to Start
If we know or suspect employees in our organization have concerns about fairness, this is important and really needs everyone's attention. Reflecting on the following questions is a good place to start:

Outcome Fairness Reflections
- Do we fairly reward based on merit, including awards, new positions, raises, performance ratings, promotions, temporary assignments?
- Do we share as much information as possible on the criteria for personnel related decisions?
- Do all employees receive honest and timely performance feedback (including outside the formal performance review process)?

Procedural/Process Fairness Reflections
- Are our processes designed to treat everyone fairly? (e.g., consistent, accurate, ethical, transparent, and lacking bias)
- Do we communicate enough information so that employees know our processes are fair (e.g., documented procedures, how criteria were used, documenting that execution plans were followed)?
- Do we welcome or seek opinions and input on processes, to make them fairer?

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Interactional Fairness Reflections
- Is it a priority for all leaders to treat all employees with sincerity, respect, honesty, dignity and caring?
- We strive to be fair and believe we are fair, but are we really fair to ALL? Do we have any blind spots or areas of unintentional bias?
- Do we discuss our commitment to fairness with employees? How regularly?
- When we share information, are we checking the box, or do we have the intention to help employees understand what we have done and our intentions to be as fair as possible?

What Next

Leadership teams can come together and discuss these questions as a group. If any employee surveys provide feedback on fairness, leaders can review these results together. If you do not have this type of data, consider having an outside group conduct a survey or interviews to gather data about fairness from employees (if the issue is serious enough, employees may feel more comfortable dealing with an outside entity). If you want more information on how you personally are perceived, consider using a 360 Degree Feedback assessment to collect more information.

Finally, the easiest and possibly most important recommendation: talk more about your sincere intention to be fair. State it out loud as a value and commitment. Use those words when you describe any actions and processes that impact people. Just saying it out loud may lead to conversations. Conversations may change your behaviors and others. See where that takes you, your team, and your organization.

To Learn More, Contact:

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1. Wilson, M. (2019). *LEAP: Master Your Superpowers, Soar to the Leading Edge*. ForbesBooks.

2. Wilson, M. (2015). *Energized Enterprise: Leading Your Workforce to New Peaks of Performance in the Public Sector and Beyond.* Greenleaf Publishing

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