What's the Right Thing to Do? Organizational Justice

in a College Classroom

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Abstract: Organizational justice involves the study of people's perceptions of and reactions to fairness in organizations, and has been shown to relate to a host of important organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, turnover, employee engagement, and job performance. Organizational justice consists of four primary components. Distributive justice focuses on people's satisfaction with their share of valued organizational outcomes. Procedural justice refers to degrees of satisfaction with the means and processes by which valued organizational outcomes are allocated. Informational justice can be defined as the accuracy, amount and timeliness of information provided to organizational members to explain outcomes and procedures. Interpersonal justice can be defined as the degree of dignity, respect and professionalism accorded to all organizational members. In the present paper, the author, based on his experience consulting with Fortune 500 companies in the area of organizational justice, presents a simple framework through which organizational justice concepts can be extended to college teaching.

Key words: higher education, organizational justice, trust, distributive justice, procedural justice

1. Introduction

Imagine that a college student receives a failing grade in a course. The student tells a friend that the professor is being "unfair". Does the student have a legitimate claim? To answer this question, we would need to take a group of issues into consideration. For example, did the grade accurately reflect how the student performed in the course? Were the scores on tests and other assignments determined in an objective, unbiased manner and computed correctly? Did the professor treat the student with dignity and respect throughout the semester, both inside and outside class? Lastly, was the grading rubric clearly and thoroughly communicated and explained to the student? The answers to these questions are likely to have a considerable impact on how the student feels about the grade, the course, the professor and even the school as a whole. These perceptions, in turn, may have a profound effect on what the student actually does in response to the failing grade, ranging from quietly accepting it, airing their grievances via social media, confronting the professor, or even withdrawing from school altogether.

Although the above example is drawn from a student's point of view, it is relatively easy to see how these issues impact the working lives of college faculty members. For example, do you feel that your salary and other benefits equitably reflect your contributions to your institution? How is your job performance evaluated? Do your Chair, Dean and other institutional leaders treat you with individualized caring, dignity and respect? Have you

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been given information about how important institutional decisions were made in an accurate, complete and timely manner?   Matters such as these are relevant to organizational justice — the study of people's perceptions of — and their reactions to — fairness in organizations (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Justice, or fairness, is thought to exist when members of an organization receive the things that they believe they deserve based on their contributions.

2. Why Is Fairness Important?

Why should people and organizations care about the concept of organizational justice? The most powerful arguments can be distilled into the following three categories:

(1) *The Moral Argument:* This argument holds that people should strive to do the right thing as a worthwhile end unto itself, exclusive of any tangible organizational benefits. Here, the focus is on the moral imperative to treat people in a fair and just manner, without consideration for the instrumental positive impact such treatment may lead to.

(2) *The Performance Argument:* This argument holds that treating people unfairly adversely impacts their attitudes and behaviors, which in turn negatively impact their performance. Research in the organizational sciences has confirmed that perceptions of justice impact key organizational outcomes such as productivity, absences and turnover, accident rates and health costs, and theft from the organization (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). This particular argument may take on added importance in workplaces such as colleges and universities that are especially dependent on a fully engaged and committed workforce.

(3) *The Reputation Argument:* This argument holds that the public is growing increasingly aware of and intolerant of unethical behavior in organizations of all types. Individuals will seek to support socially responsible organizations, and will seek to punish irresponsible ones.

It is clear that fairness and justice should form the foundation of any working relationship between two people.   However, it is important to note that each of the above arguments is complicated by the fact that what constitutes "the right thing" is rarely straightforward. Ultimately, justice is a *perception* on the part of an individual, and these perceptions are impossible to fully manage and control. For example, different employee groups (e.g., employees and managers) often have radically different viewpoints about what constitutes a fair organizational decision. In one study, individuals were surveyed about how a lump sum of money should be allocated within the organization. Low-level employees indicated that the money should be divided *equally* across all employees, while managers said that the money should be distributed according to *departmental inputs and plans* (Lansberg, 1984).

Additionally, if there are significant differences in opinion on what constitutes fairness *between* employee groups, these differences likely pale in comparison with the differing opinions expressed *within* employee groups. The primary consequence of this complexity is that it is highly unlikely that someone can create a situation in which all parties enjoy the satisfaction of perceived organizational justice.

3. Four Components of Organizational Justice

Organizational justice is a multi-faceted concept that takes on a number of forms. The key forms are distributive justice, procedural justice, informational justice and inter-personal justice.

Distributive justice is the form of organizational justice that focuses on people's beliefs that they get their

fair share of valuable organizational outcomes (e.g., pay, promotions, learning opportunities, recognition, etc.). All of us want to be fairly compensated for the work that we do and recognized for our efforts and accomplishments. It is important to note that individuals make assessments of distributive justice not in isolation but in comparison to others. For example, employees in organizations often are given varying amounts of paid vacation. An employee with only two weeks of vacation may be jealous of a colleague who receives four weeks of vacation, particularly when both employees work equally hard. Because the perceived ratio of inputs to outcomes is not equal (in this example, the inputs are equal whereas the outcomes are not) perceptions of distributive injustice result. Equity theory (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003) tells us that the employee who feels slighted will consider a number of different responses to restore equity. For example, he or she may lower his or her inputs such as by arriving late for work, taking a longer lunch break, leaving work early, not working on the weekend and generally doing less work or inferior work. Conversely, the slighted employee may attempt to enhance his or her outcomes, such as by asking for a raise or more time off. These are all *behavioral* responses to violations of distributive justice — specific and well-defined actions that a person could take to restore equity. If the slighted employee is unable or unwilling to respond behaviorally, he or she may instead respond *cognitively*. In short, he or she will change the way he or she thinks about the situation. For example, he or she may rationalize that the colleague receiving the four weeks of vacation really is more qualified, more valuable, etc., and thus is more "deserving" of more organizational rewards.

When considering distributive justice, it is important to realize that there are a number of different definitions of what is "fair" with respect to the allocation of rewards. One definition is based on merit. In this formulation, the people that work the hardest or add the most value to the organization should get the greatest rewards. This is commonly known as the *merit norm*. Another definition is based on the notion of equality: every member of the organization gets the same share of rewards, regardless of effort or levels of contribution. This is commonly known as the *equality norm*. Finally, the definition of fairness as applied to distributive justice can be based on the *need norm*; people receive rewards in proportion to their needs (Gilliliand & Chan, 2001). It is important to note that the appropriateness and acceptance of these norms tends to vary by culture. In the United States, the merit norm is the most common foundation for defining fairness, whereas in other parts of the world that have a more collectivist culture (e.g., Scandinavia) the equality norm is more accepted.

Whereas distributive justice concerns itself with the fairness of the "ends" (i.e., did I get my fair share of the pie?), **procedural justice** considers the fairness of the "means" to those ends (i.e., was the process by which valued outcomes allocated fair?). Situations in which individuals feel that they have a "voice" in the making of decisions (as opposed to simply having those decisions imposed on them), rules are applied consistently, safeguards against bias are in place, and the information used in the decision is accurate are likely to promote a sense of procedural justice (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). *Although it is important to use fair procedures all of the time, it is especially important to do so when the distributive outcomes involved are unfavorable.* For example, a student who received a final course grade of "A" might be inclined to simply accept the grade and not overly concern themselves with how the professor arrived at that judgment. If, on the other hand, the grade was "F", the student would likely have a much more acute interest in how that grade was calculated, perhaps asking questions such as whether all assignments were counted, whether papers were graded fairly, whether any "extenuating circumstances" were taken into consideration, etc. This is known as the "fair process effect" (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), and research has shown that people are more apt to accept unfavorable outcomes when these we determined by through the use of fair procedures. *It is critical to understand that violations of procedural justice*

not only lead to people being disappointed with their outcomes (i.e. distributive justice) but can also compromise their faith in the entire organization.

Informational justice can be defined as the amount and quality of information provided to explain outcomes and procedures.   Sharing lots of accurate information helps individuals to perceive that decisions were made in a careful, thoughtful and unbiased manner. To promote perceptions of informational justice, the information provided to organizational members about important organizational decisions should be candid, complete, detailed, and correct and shared in a timely manner. The people impacted by the decision should also be given every opportunity to ask follow-up questions, ask for additional clarification, information, etc.

Interpersonal justice can be defined as the level of dignity, respect and professionalism accorded to all organizational members. Individuals who believe that they have been treated with a high degree of interpersonal justice tend to be good organizational citizens, going "above and beyond" to assist others even when they don't have to (Tatlah, Saeed & Iqbal, 2011).

The concepts of informational justice and interpersonal justice are closely related, and taken together are commonly referred to as *interactional justice*, which concerns itself with how decision-making procedures and outcomes are explained.

The following example may help to illustrate the importance of interactional justice. Suppose that you lose your job in a corporate downsizing. You are not likely to be pleased about this decision, and are likely to cycle through a range of negative emotions. However, suppose also that your manager approaches this potentially unpleasant situation with a high degree of interactional justice. That is, he or she explains to you exactly why the lay-off had to occur and does so in a highly professional manner, demonstrating sensitivity to and an understanding of your feelings and how the decision will impact you and your family. Your manager also provides you with a full opportunity to ask questions, share your feelings and perspectives, as opposed to merely rushing you out the door. While you still won't be happy about the decision and the resulting burdens it will place on you and your family, this "high interactional justice" approach should take at least some of the pain out of a less-than-ideal situation.

4. Extending Organizational Justice to the College Classroom

Given that I address the subject of organizational justice in many of the undergraduate management courses that I teach (e.g., Introduction to Human Resources, Organizational Behavior, and Leadership), and that this topic invariably leads to a rich and insightful class discussion, I often find myself wondering if and how this important concept could be extended to the work that I do with my students. Rodabaugh (1996) advanced the hypothesis that college student perception of fairness and justice related strongly to levels of satisfaction with the college experience, retention and academic achievement. In a 2002 study, Chory-Assad identified student perceptions of justice as key predictors of student motivation and learning. The further consideration of justice in the classroom may be especially timely in light of the data that continue to emerge showing that Millennials have low levels of trust in institutions and in those that lead them (Drake, 2014). For example, when a colleague and I recently asked 218 of our undergraduate students in business classes the General Social Survey "trust question", ("Generally speaking, most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful when dealing with people"), 81% of students surveyed endorsed the "low trust" option (Harris & Finning-Golden, 2014). This may be especially problematic given that the concepts of justice and trust are closely related, and may be of particular consequence when

working with student populations of color, first-generation or lower socioeconomic status. Students such as these make up an increasingly large share of today's college population.

If a faculty member is interested in incorporating the principles of organizational justice into his or her teaching, how might they proceed? Table 1 presents a framework that may provide a useful starting point. Remember, when a student evaluates the degree of organizational justice with which he or she has been treated, he or she is likely not to focus on the instructor's *intentions* but upon his or her *perception* of the instructor's actions.

Table 1   Suggestions for Incorporating Organizational Justice Principles in College Teaching

Teaching Practice	Type of Justice Addressed
Grade students fairly and in proportion to their actual class performance, clearly communicating to students how their grades will be determined. Any assessment instrument used should be clear, related directly to course content, and continually monitored and updated.	Distributive
Use a range of different types of assessments, being careful to not put an inordinate amount of weight on any single one. Some students prefer papers; some prefer tests, while others excel in areas such as class participation or oral presentations. Using multiple forms of assessment will yield a more accurate estimate of a student's "true" academic performance.	Distributive
Any type of assessment employed in the course, including exams, should be of an appropriate degree of difficulty for the course and the students who are taking it. For example, I once had a colleague that used the same set of multiple-choice exam questions in a 100-level course as she did in a 400-level course. Avoid practices such as this.	Distributive
When assigning grades, be aware of the institution's formal policies concerning grading, as well as any informal norms. Students that receive lower grades than peers in other courses for the equivalent amount of effort and performance may feel slighted.	Distributive
When grading group projects, take into account both individual and group effort and performance. If possible, let students form their own teams, as that generally increases student "buy-in" for group projects.	Distributive
Give students a genuine voice in course decisions, allowing them to ask questions and share their viewpoints.	Procedural
Be consistent and transparent about how course decisions are made, and be cautious regarding any changes that you make mid-course. The reasons behind any change that you do make should be clearly explained. Carefully consider potential student reactions to any proposed change, and if possible, have changes benefit your students (e.g., giving the students an opportunity to complete a bonus assignment that will improve their final course grade).	Procedural
The course work load should be appropriate and reasonable. Many different factors (e.g., employment, extracurricular activities, insufficient academic preparation, low levels of engagement and motivation, etc.) can cause students to judge a reasonable work load as too demanding, some workloads can in reality be too heavy. It is tempting to dismiss student complaints as mere grumbling, but there are times when these claims have legitimacy. Workload issues may be especially challenging in subject matter areas that evolve and expand rapidly, as instructors feel pressured to include everything they think is important. In such situations, instructors should review all course content, thinking carefully about what is truly critical to student mastery of a subject.	Procedural
When building a course, it is vital to consider student ability and background. A course intended for majors should be different than one that primarily fulfills a general educational requirement. A course typically taken by first-years should be designed differently than one taken by students who are further along in their academic journey. It may also be helpful to keep in mind that students who are in their first year of college (and perhaps even into their second year) are not only trying to master the specific subject matter of your course, but also more generalized "college success" skills, such as time management, reading for comprehension, writing, and study skills.	Procedural
Emphasize the importance of academic integrity, monitor it closely and have consequences in place for violations.	Procedural
Maintain congruence between what you *say* and what you *do*. For example, if you have a "no mobile devices" in class expectation, maintain consistency with this policy yourself. Ultimately, you want to model the behavior that you wish to see from your students.	Procedural
Follow through on any promises and meet deadlines (e.g., returning graded papers by the promised date). Fundamentally, if you say that you are going to do something, then make sure that you actually do it.	Procedural
Be responsive to students, and provide them with prompt, specific and actionable feedback on their class performance. For example, at the beginning of each semester, I pledge to my students that any email that they send me will be returned within 24 hours. On the rare occasions when I violate this policy, I apologize and clearly explain the circumstances behind the violation.	Procedural
Explain decisions thoroughly, and with accurate, timely information. Listen carefully to students, communicating to them that you are giving thoughtful consideration to their opinions and ideas. Doing so may be especially important when those ideas and opinions diverge from your own.	Interactional (Informational)
Make sure that you treat *all* students with dignity, respect and professionalism at all times, regardless of background and performance level. Give careful consideration to how you are treating each of your students, as even subtle biases and differences that you may be unaware of can have a profound impact on perceptions of fairness.	Interactional (Interpersonal)

In closing, I think that it is also important to be honest and self-reflective when it comes to the topic of organizational justice. I'm sure that most faculty members think of themselves as fair and typically do not intentionally treat their students in an unjust manner. However, in my pre-academic career as a management consultant to some of the largest companies in the world, I often observed that people (typically leaders and other

authority figures) thought that they were "better" at organizational justice than they really were, especially as judged by the people that worked for them. Within the area of organizational justice, perceptions are more consequential than any "objective" reality. Leaders also tended to put too much emphasis on distributive justice (i.e., the *ends*) and too little on procedural justice (i.e., the *means*). They wrongly believed that focusing primarily or exclusively on tangible outcomes (e.g., pay in a corporate setting, final grades in a college classroom) was more important than treating everyone with dignity, fairness, respect and transparency. This tendency was particularly pronounced among managers from or trained in the United States.

Another lesson about organizational justice that I learned in my pre-academic consulting career that may be extended to the college classroom is that leaders often struggle with organizational justice because of their all-too-human desire to avoid, delay or minimize unpleasant situations. When a professor has to deal with or deliver bad news (e.g., addressing a suspected academic integrity violation), it is natural for them to experience anxiety, fear, guilt and a number of other negative emotions. However, although emotionally taxing, it is critical to be more available and visible, not less, during these challenging situations.

Having a more finely-tuned understanding of what drives student perceptions of justice may lead to a more positive and productive learning environment for all.

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