

# How should organisations handle employee injustices?

*Employees are more inclined to challenge practices they see as unjust and therefore organisations will have to pursue justice as measured by reality as well as by perceptions. In order to do so, managers will need to know what employees perceive as unfair, how they respond to injustices and what the organisation needs to do to direct the perceived injustices into channels that will effectively manage and deal with the responses injustice engenders.*



There is no doubt that in today's competitive market place that the management of employees is one of the primary keys to organisational success. One of the challenges facing managers is creating a committed work force.

No organisation in today's competitive world can perform at peak levels unless each employee is committed to the organisation's objectives and works as an effective team member.

The benefits of having the best trained workers using the most advanced technology can be nullified by employees who do not want to use their energy and skills to the benefit of the organisation.

Without employee commitment, there can be no improvement in any area of business. Employees will simply treat their

work as a nine to five job without any burning desire to accomplish any more than is necessary to remain employed.

It does not take many uncommitted employees to prevent a business from prospering thereby ceding a big advantage to its competitors. It is not good enough anymore to have employees who come to work faithfully everyday.

Organisations need employees who are willing to go beyond the call of duty and engage in extra role behaviours. In return, managers will have to treat employees in a just and fair manner.

The fair treatment of employees is important for three reasons:

- ❖ to improve performance effectiveness,
- ❖ to enhance the sense of organisational commitment and
- ❖ to sustain individual dignity and humanness.

The experience of injustice is hurtful to individuals and harmful to organisations. Few benefit from unfairness, though many are harmed. In the face of this, organisations should reduce injustice by studying employee responses to injustices and prepare written guidelines, procedures and

policies to make decisions and engender fairness.

This article discusses employees' behaviour when they experience injustice and provides guidelines on what organisations can do to handle these responses and improve the perceived fairness of its practices.

Several years ago, Felstiner, Abel and Sarat described the sequence of activities followed by employees when they perceive an injustice as the "naming and blaming" process.

## *Naming*

Naming refers to the initial identification of a fair or unfair outcome, procedure or system. Suffice to say that if something has not been identified as unfair, then no action will be taken, even if extreme injustice exists.

Employees would consider an action, procedure or system unfair only if their attention is drawn to it. One means of perpetrating an injustice with impunity, therefore, is either to hide it or to direct employees' attention away from it.

For example, organisations may maintain strict secrecy about certain matters in order to protect policies from public scrutiny that might stimulate accusations of perceived injustice regarding such things as pay systems, budget allocations or affirmative action appointments.

The degree of perceived injustice is extremely important in determining how someone will respond to that injustice. Perceived injustice is often determined by assessing the degree of perceived discrepancy from the rule being applied.

According to Folger the degree of perceived injustice is at least partially determined by our ability to envision alternatives to the unjust condition. If no alternatives exist, employees will more readily accept the unjust condition.

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One way of limiting employees' sense of injustice would therefore include keeping them ignorant of alternatives. Many action groups in organisations have built their 'businesses' around their ability to help others identify and label perceived injustices such as discrimination, abuse, exploitation or unfair treatment.

Once identified, these groups also help to transform the perceived injustice into a grievance by clearly attributing blame.

#### Blaming

Although employees try to resolve problems without knowing their cause, usually they attempt to determine what or who is to blame for the injustice so that they can focus their efforts towards the source of the problem.

The process of allocating blame is thus a progression from determining cause to determining responsibility to determining blame. Without knowing who or what caused injustice, employees cannot decide blame.

Injustices can be attributed to any one of three distinct entities: the person, the procedure or the system. An outcome may be considered unfair because an unfair decision was made.

Similarly, the procedure determining the outcome or the system may have been unfair. In real life, it is often not clear which component is truly responsible for the injustice.

According to Crosby employees initially tend not to blame systems. According to him employees are unlikely to blame systems for two reasons:

- ❖ individuals do not have sufficient information to question the system and
- ❖ because most individuals do not wish to question the system anyway.

A second complication of attributing blame concerns the information employees use to form a judgment. The primary problem is to determine whether individuals or their environment are most to blame. In the context of judgments about injustices, established criteria exist for evaluating the fairness of a procedure and a system.

First, we can use information about the individual (intelligence, rationality and consistency) to make judgments about the probability that the individual's environment is to blame.

Second, we can use information about the environment to determine whether the individual is to blame. When an injustice occurs and the procedures and system seem to be fair, logic suggests that the person who produced the injustice is to blame.

Another complicating factor in attributing blame is that employees have very strong, prior beliefs about the likely sources of injustice. These prior beliefs vary as a function of social class, cultural background, socio-economic status and indi-

vidual personality.

An employee, for example, may believe that his supervisor is responsible for him not being promoted, but, in the meantime, the trade union demanded that a person from outside be appointed.

Finally, sometimes it is not possible to attribute blame because no real injustice has occurred. The more difficult it is to attribute blame, the more hostile, alienated and disaffected an employee may become.

According to Sheppard et al, the above principles of attributing blame hold the following implications for the organisation:

- ❖ the causes of injustice at any level may be diagnostic of potential injustice at other levels,
- ❖ if a procedure is fair then a person (often the supervisor) is likely to receive the blame,
- ❖ people will continue to blame that source (person) to which they usually attribute blame,
- ❖ although blame for injustice can be widely shared, it rarely is; employees tend to concentrate blame on a single, favourite source,
- ❖ employees tend not to blame systems and if they do, it will happen only after explanations of 'people' and 'procedures' have been proven to be inadequate.

Having determined the target of blame, an employee must make one more decision: how much responsibility and blame to attribute to the target. Employees base their judgment on three criteria:

- ❖ was the perceived injustice intentional,
- ❖ could the injustice and its consequences have been controlled and
- ❖ did the person provide any excuse or justification for his actions.

According to Bies and Shapiro, excuses and mitigating circumstances can be used to pre-empt blame for unjust acts. Supervisors can provide explanations for potentially unfair behaviour or procedures before they occur and thus mitigate employees' responses to the injustice.

Some of the most common explanations used by organisations to soften the impact of an injustice include:

- ❖ "We didn't really have any choice.
- ❖ "You would have made the same decision had you been in my shoes."
- ❖ "The policy on affirmative action appointments is very prescriptive."
- ❖ "The system wasn't designed to handle problems like this."
- ❖ "If we look at this problem from a different perspective, the decision is completely reasonable."

In lieu of an excuse, organisations can also provide an apology to justify injustices. An apology serves a purpose similar to an excuse, but takes a different form. An apology involves the acceptance of blame, the acknowledgement of wrong doing and the



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implication that the behavioural or procedural elements that caused the problem will not recur.

In other words, there is no need for a person to take action to fix the injustice since the organisation recognises the wrong doing, has learned from it and will make sure that it will never occur again.

### Acting on injustice

Having decided that someone or something is to blame for an injustice, an employee must next decide what, if anything, to do about it.

A number of factors influence the degree to which someone feels a need to act on an injustice. The two most important factors are the impact of the injustice and the level of concern for limiting future injustice.

#### The impact of the injustice

The need to punish the cause of an injustice is a direct function of both the perceived magnitude of the injustice itself and the degree to which one holds a particular person responsible for creating the injustice.

The perceived magnitude of injustice is a function of the level of discrepancy from the relevant standards of fairness held for behaviour in that situation and the level of discrepancy from the best envisioned alternative to the current situation.

If, for example, a manager uses his influence to ensure that a family member gets a promotion while other employees are not informed about the vacancy or afforded the opportunity to apply, unfairly treated employees will act on the injustice because:

- ❖ a gross injustice has occurred (magnitude of injustice),
- ❖ the manager can be held responsible for the injustice (person responsible),
- ❖ there was a clear deviation from procedures (discrepancy from standards).

#### Limiting future injustice

The second factor driving the need to respond is a function of the perceived prob-

ability that the injustice will persist into the future if left unattended. However, the decision to respond also depends on the probability that a person will be able to bring about changes.

There is no value in responding to injustices where there is no likelihood of perpetuation. Employees differ in their reasons for responding to injustices. Some are more retributive while others are more focused on deterrence and adopt 'an eye for an eye' approach when responding to injustices.

There is quite a large number of alternative courses of action employees could follow to deal with injustice. According to Sheppard et al employees generally deal with injustices in one of four ways.

Firstly, they can live with the injustice and continue as if nothing had happened.

Secondly, they can change their behaviour to remove the injustice. For example they can work less hard if their efforts are not equitably rewarded.

Thirdly, they can rationalise the injustice by renaming, removing or redefining it.

Lastly, employees can decide to resign or request a transfer in order to avoid confronting continued injustice.

Rusbult, Zembrodt and Gunn propose a two dimensional model of behavioural responses to dissatisfaction. According to them behaviours can be located along a dimension of positive (constructive) to negative (destructive) and active to passive.

Based on these two dimensions, four quadrants of behaviour, as illustrated in Figure 1, are identified.

Hirschman suggested another alternative response to injustice: voice. He argues that a primary factor determining whether exit or voice is chosen is the employee's degree of loyalty to the organisation. Highly loyal employees will be more likely either to rationalise and cope with the injustice or attempt to change the organisation and remove it.

Knowledge of the determinants of responses to injustice is necessary if managers are to develop functioning organisa-

tions.

Successful organisations are ones that not only minimise the number of incidents of perceived injustice, but that also create the mechanisms to direct the perceived injustices into channels that will effectively manage and deal with the responses injustice engenders.

With reference to Figure 1, organisations will benefit the most from employees who deal with injustices in an active and positive way.

Such employees will do something about the injustice in a constructive way such as bringing the injustice to the attention of management.

This will enable the organisation to review its practices and prevent future problems.

In addition, by giving employees the opportunity to raise their concerns by responding to their inputs and by providing them with explanations and feedback, the value of employees is recognised. This will lead to committed and loyal employees.

On the other hand, employees who respond to perceived injustices in a passive and negative way are harmful to the organisation.

These employees are dissatisfied with their circumstances, but do nothing to change it. Instead, they engage in withdrawal behaviour and make no attempt to contribute to the success of the organisation.

#### Factors influencing choice of action

When employees experience an injustice and have to choose what to do, they base their decision on two factors:

- ❖ the cost of a response and
- ❖ the benefits of a response.

The cost of a response could, for example, include the creation of conflict, victimisation, resentment, retaliation, loss of reputation, emotional costs of action, lost opportunities, a sense of failure, strained interpersonal relationships and so forth.

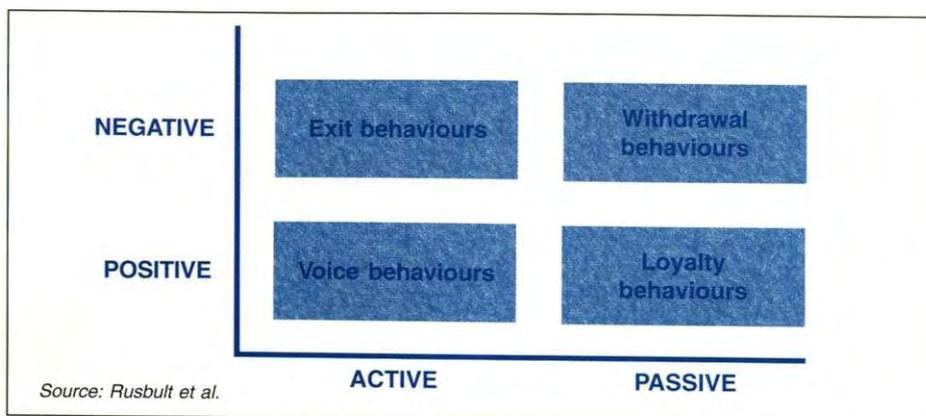
The benefits of a response could include the system, procedures and practices being reviewed or a decision being reversed. Obviously an employee will choose the alternative that maximises the value of the action.

Part of determining the benefits of a response is calculating the impact of that response and the probability that it can be successfully completed. According to Sheppard et al several aspects of the individual and the situation have an influence on the probable success of each course of action.

These include the degree to which:

- ❖ an employee feels that he has control over the factors necessary to take effective action,
- ❖ an employee believes his personality and values are consistent with a particular course of action,

Figure 1: Behavioural responses to dissatisfaction.



*Employees who experience an injustice tend to act irrationally and emotionally when no avenue is open to reducing the injustice, when the chosen course of action has not fully solved the injustice, when the feeling from the existing injustice is managed without taking the future into consideration and when the unfairly treated employee is too angry to react rationally*

- ❖ a clear route for action is available and visible,
- ❖ others agree with and support the employee's opinion about the existence of an injustice and how to proceed.

*Level of perceived control*

The degree to which one will actively respond is related to the level to which one feels one has any control over the cause of the injustice. A perceived lack of control comes from three main sources.

First, it is related to one's general sense of perceived efficacy. Some people feel that they can affect change or get things done more than others.

Second, perceived control is related to real and perceived power. If a person thinks he doesn't have the resources, information, status or support necessary to influence the cause of an injustice, he will not act to rectify the injustice.

Third, perceived control is related to the degree to which a person feels he understands the cause of the injustice.

*The predisposition of the unfairly treated employee*

The likelihood of actively responding to an injustice is also affected by qualities of the unfairly treated employee. Employees who feel they are generally competent are more likely to act than those who feel they are not competent.

Individual differences in the tendency to approach or avoid a situation also influence an employee's degree of active coping behaviour.

Employees who have an approach orientation actively strive to cope with their problem while employees who have an avoidance orientation tend to rationalise the problem away, deny it and denigrate themselves.

Furthermore, past feelings of injustice can accumulate to influence current action. Employees who have experienced persistent injustice from a particular source will be more likely to act on that injustice.

*Clear route for action*

One reason for an employee not acting on an injustice is that there is no obvious way to respond. Take for example the increasing number of complaints and grievances

lodged during the past few years.

Grievance procedures provide employees with information and the means to address any injustices and therefore employees are more likely to act on an injustice.

*Shared perceptions with others*

As indicated before, perceptions of justice are not an objective reality, but a social judgment and therefore employees are likely to seek confirmation of their opinions before deciding on a course of action.

When an employee discovers that others disagree with his opinion he will become less certain about his judgment and less likely to act on it.

**Handling employees' reactions to injustice**

Employees who experience an injustice tend to act irrationally and emotionally when no avenue is open to reducing the injustice, when the chosen course of action has not fully solved the injustice, when the feeling from the existing injustice is managed without taking the future into consideration and when the unfairly treated employee is too angry to react rationally.

These situations suggest that an organisation can do a number of things to channel reactions to injustice into forms that are less emotion driven and thus easier for the organisation to handle. Organisations should consider the following options to manage employees' feelings about perceived injustices.

*Eliminate gross injustices*

First, organisations should avoid engaging in gross injustices. Although it is not possible to eliminate all forms of injustice while too many criteria exist for determining justice, injustices that do exist should be reasonable in scale.

*Provide effective mechanisms*

Providing a controlled, accessible, responsive, non-retributive means of allowing employees to vent their ill will and receive some reasonable response from the organisation can serve to avoid more harmful emotional responses and reduce the perceived need for further action.

One of the mechanisms that organisa-



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Table 1: Attributes of effective voice systems.

tions can use to assure procedural fairness is to provide employees the opportunity to be heard in the organisation. This opportunity to express feelings and opinions is known as 'voice.'

*Allow employee voice*

According to Sheppard et al, voice serves two critical purposes in assuring procedural fairness: a preventive role and a remedial role.

Preventive voice is the process by which organisations create mechanisms that permit employees to express their views about policies, procedures or key decisions in organisational governance and management.

By providing opportunities for input by those influenced by a decision, organisations will likely be seen as more fair in the first instance. Remedial voice mechanisms offer individuals the opportunity to express concerns about a decision that has already been made.

This form of voice consists of efforts by employees to question organisational practices for the purposes of gaining more information about them, challenging them or attempting to change them.

Remedial voice serves a number of important functions. Its primary function is

to reduce the level of dissatisfaction and distress in the employee experiencing an injustice.

It also provides diagnostic feedback to the organisation by indicating that some policy or practice is not working. It thus serves to alert the organisation that some employees find a policy or practice unfair.

By identifying and notifying management of injustices, it enables the organisation to correct them or make changes as necessary. Voice does not, however, assure that such changes or corrections will be made.

Lastly, voice creates the opportunity for a new level of knowledge and understanding about the areas in which problems may be encountered in the future.

This information enables the manager to design and implement future policies and practices so that justice concerns will not be raised.

According to Gopinatha and Becker the most important functions of voice systems include:

- ❖ to assure employees' fair treatment,
- ❖ to provide a context in which unfair treatment can be appealed,
- ❖ to improve the effectiveness of the organisation,
- ❖ to sustain employee loyalty and com-

mitment.

The first two functions meet the dignity and humaneness goal, the third meets the performance effectiveness goal and the last meets the commitment goal. One can thus conclude that a voice system has a direct influence on the perceived fairness of an organisation.

However, for a voice system to function effectively it has to meet certain criteria. Without going into too much detail, the attributes of an effective voice system as identified by Sheppard et al, are listed in Table 1.

Organisational voice systems serve the purpose of channeling organisational dissatisfaction into acceptable forms and of responding to that dissatisfaction. Viewed from the individual perspective, they provide mechanisms for hearing employee concerns and complaints.

Viewed from the organisational perspective, they serve as vehicles for stimulating feedback and commentary while maintaining control over the challenges and threats to management or even to the organisation's existence.

In summary the changing nature of the employment relationship, employment equity legislation, a more diverse work force, organisational restructuring, less stable work roles and the impact of technology are all factors which combine to challenge the traditional way in which employees were treated in the work place.

Employees are more inclined to challenge practices they see as unjust and therefore organisations will have to pursue justice as measured by reality as well as by perceptions.

In order to do so, managers will need to know what employees perceive as unfair, how they respond to injustices and what the organisation needs to do to direct the perceived injustices into channels that will effectively manage and deal with the responses injustice engenders. •

*A list of reference is available from the editor.*

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