

WHY (IN)JUSTICE IN THE WORKPLACE MATTERS

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Key Points:

- People care not only about their own treatment, but also about how others are treated.
- (In)justice in the workplace can impact all employees, even those not directly affected.
- Utilizing fair decisions, procedures, and interpersonal treatment leads to positive outcomes not just for the person receiving the treatment, but also to others in the organization.
- Justice perceptions result in organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and performance.

A Positive Lens on Third-party Reactions to (In)justice

There are several reasons people care about justice. Traditionally, these have focused on self-interested explanations, such as a desire for economic gain, a need to feel a connection to and sense of belongingness with others, and a goal of reducing uncertainty. A more positive way to think about third-party reactions is to take a moral viewpoint. This approach suggests people respond to third-party reactions because the third party believes his or her reaction is appropriate and just. Indeed, one reason individuals care about the treatment of others is because they believe people deserve to be treated with respect and fairness. For instance, some individuals endorse justice rules even when it hurts their own economic self-interest.

Constructive Reactions

Individuals can respond to others' injustice with undesirable behaviors such as retaliation, punishment, reducing commitment with the transgressor or institution, abstaining from action, or increased perceptions of emotional labor. Constructive reactions to others' injustice are key aspects of the positive approach. Constructive reactions can take many forms:

Constructive Reactions to Injustice:

- Provide emotional support and compassion to an individual who was mistreated by listening, empathizing, directing the individual to a course of action, or exhibiting other supportive behaviors.
- Address the perpetrator by sticking up for the victim and coming up with a solution to aid the victim.

Constructive Reactions to Justice:

- Express gratitude to the authority figure who provided the fair treatment.

- "Pay it forward" by treating others in his/her social world in a similarly fair manner; research on virtuousness shows that when a third party sees another person treated justly, it can create positive emotions that foster pro-social, virtuous behavior.
- Engage in pro-social behaviors that help the authority figure and/or his or her organization.

Justice and Injustice

Exploring reactions to both others' injustice and others' just treatment is a critical way to take a positive approach. However, the majority of work on third-party reactions has focused on injustice. It is important to think about justice and injustice as distinct constructs, and to explore reactions to both because reactions to each differ.

Pathway 1: Others' Injustice

The first pathway in the model begins with others' injustice. Other's injustice can take many forms:

- A distributive injustice could occur when an individual receives an unfair outcome.
Example: A person who should certainly be promoted to a higher-level position is not.
- A procedural injustice could occur when the procedures used to make a decision are unfair.
Example: Suspending an employee for alleged wrongdoing and not allowing him or her to voice his/her side of the story first.
- An interactional injustice could occur when a person is not treated with dignity or respect or provided an adequate explanation for a decision.
Example: A coworker or supervisor belittles, makes fun of, and/or sexually harasses another employee or subordinate.

Theoretical Model to Third-party Reactions

In response to these types of injustices, employees are likely to have emotional reactions and experience two other-focused moral emotions: righteous anger and empathy.

- *Righteous anger* occurs when a perpetrator violates moral standards. The harm need not be personally experienced; one can also feel anger upon witnessing morally repulsive behavior aimed at a third party. Righteous anger can motivate third-party bystanders to take action in order to remedy injustices.
- *Empathy* is a shared emotional response between an observer and a stimulus person. Other-oriented empathy involves not only taking another's perspective, but also vicariously feeling the same emotions. An empathic response involves a focus on the person in need as opposed to one's own response to the situation. When someone is the victim of an injustice, it is likely that others will feel empathy toward that person because he or she is in a stressful and difficult situation.

The model posits that these two emotions — righteous anger and empathy — lead to constructive responses that benefit the victim. For example, righteous anger is associated with having concern for (and a desire to help) distressed others. Similarly, empathy promotes helping others in need and inhibits aggressive responses that harm others. Constructive behaviors relate to interactions with the victim (e.g., showing compassion, talking through the issue, helping develop a plan for moving forward), and interactions with the perpetrator (e.g., having a direct, honest, non-combative conversation with the perpetrator).

Pathway 2: Others' Justice

The second pathway in the model begins with others' justice. There are several behaviors that one could engage in to be considered fair:

- An employee who has performed well can be appropriately rewarded for his or her work even when the boss feels pressure from higher-ups to not provide bonuses (distributive justice).
- The boss is never biased and always tries to be ethical when making tough decisions, even when others in the organization may use less transparent and more deceptive means (procedural justice).
- A manager goes to great lengths to find out about each of his employees and demonstrates the respect he has for his whole team even when he is very busy (interactional justice).

In response to these types of just treatment, employees are likely to experience two positive moral emotions: gratitude and elevation. Gratitude is a feeling of thankfulness directed toward others that emerges through social exchanges between helpers and beneficiaries. Gratitude can also occur when a third party witnesses another being treated fairly. Elevation is a positive moral emotion that occurs when observing another who is virtuous or commendable. Feeling a sense of awe by watching a manager treat others fairly, even when it is not easy to do so, can promote elevation. These two positive moral emotions are predicted to result in pro-social behavior.

- Gratitude promotes pro-social acts and serves as moral reinforcement that stimulates helpful behavior.
- Elevation is associated with being pro-social.
- Feelings of gratitude and elevation that result from observing others' justice promote pro-social behavior not only towards the person who spurred the emotion; they also can spread in a "pay-it-forward" sense.

Practical Implications for Managers

One important implication for managers is that both others' injustice and justice can have an impact on employee reactions — even the reactions of those not directly affected. Research warns managers that if they treat an employee unfairly, it can have a negative effect on other employees. The ideas provided here suggest a positive way to view this process. Specifically, treating an employee fairly can lead to positive reactions by others in the organization that ultimately can improve the work environment, leading to better attitudes, citizen behavior, and performance. Thus, managers should be aware that utilizing fair decisions, procedures, and interpersonal treatment can lead to positive outcomes not just for the person receiving the treatment, but also for others in the organization.

Practical Implications for Employees

A useful implication for employees involves how to best respond to others' injustice. Typically, scholars have examined negative responses such as retaliation, punishment, withdrawal, and negative emotions. Given the types of responses many of us would have to witnessing a coworker being treated unfairly, this approach is reasonable. However, the model in this paper suggests employees should be aware of their emotional reactions and consider constructive ways of responding. Ultimately, harnessing one's righteous anger and/or empathy to provide compassionate

responses to the victim (as opposed to blaming the victim) and interacting with the perpetrator in a constructive way (as opposed to retaliating or withdrawing) will likely lead to the best outcome in the future.

Take Action

- Respond constructively when you encounter (in)justice at work.
- Provide emotional support and show compassion when your employees have witnessed injustice.
- Talk openly with the victim and affected employees, and help develop a plan for the future.
- Address the perpetrator by having a direct, honest, and non-combative conversation.
- Express and openly display your gratitude if someone has treated you fairly.
- Put yourself in your employees' shoes and show empathy.
- Think about justice and injustice as distinct constructs, since reactions to each differ. ■

This paper was summarized by Penelope Mallinckrodt (Ross MBA '13) based on Chapter 24 of Cameron and Spreitzer's (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (2012).



About the Author

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