Keep It Fair or Beware

By Fred Jewell and Tracy Reznik

When we perceive something as unfair, it becomes a major distraction. When we feel we're being treated unfairly—or even when someone we care about is being treated unfairly—it's difficult to focus. The good news is that when we're being treated fairly, we don't even notice it. Once things are fair, making things "more fair" doesn't make a difference—or even really make much sense.

Fairness in your organization is table stakes for an engaged workforce. When we experience fairness, we have the energy to focus on the other drivers of engagement and fulfillment.

So, what causes unfairness? When we perceive we must do something

> "ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT A MESSY, EMOTIONAL, AND DESTRUCTIVE DYNAMIC 'FAIRNESS' CAN BE, YOU CAN SEE WHY 'FAIR' IS A TREMENDOUSLY POWERFUL WORD THAT YOU NEED TO USE WITH CARE."

Chris Voss, former FBI hostage negotiator and coauthor of *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as If Your Life Depended on It*

that someone else doesn't have to do, or when someone gets something we think we should get, or when we're unreasonably treated differently than others when we should not be, unfairness kicks in. We become distracted, disengaged, and less productive if we perceive unfairness in workplace policies, promotions, school grades, comments by others, etc. This type of distraction can cause productivity to plummet, fast.

We may even be so distracted we no longer recognize or appreciate the reasons we maintain relationships with our coworkers, companies, schools, friends, or loved ones in the first place. When we get to that point,

In this fifth segment in a nine-part series, we look at the next section of the Jabian Engagement Framework: How fairness counts as table stakes for employee engagement.

Fairness is related to many other concepts, including equity, justice, and ethics. At Jabian, we see fairness and equity as nearly synonymous. We even considered equity as the name of this driver in our model, but because we can also use that term to talk about financial equity, we chose fairness to increase clarity.

Fairness and justice are related, but different. Fairness is emotional, something we can even observe in other animals (for a fun illustration of this concept, check out an excerpt of Frans de Waal's "Moral Behavior in Animals" TED Talk[1]). Fairness is an individual perception and a feeling. We can think of "justice" as "institutionalized fairness." Justice is based on defined rules built on values with a defined process for its administration.

Effective administration of justice doesn't necessarily ensure the perception of fairness in everyone involved, but maximizing the perception of fairness ought to be the goal. In fact, as an organization or a country evolves and changes, policies and laws must also evolve to ensure a sense of justice. Labor strikes, lawsuits, and protests are the result of unfairness that can be addressed through changes to our policies and laws.

Ethics, the study of right and wrong behavior, is rooted in philosophy and morality, and is more closely related to justice than fairness. When we said "maximizing the perception of fairness ought to be the goal" a moment ago, that was an opinion based on ethics.

the other drivers of engagement often can't help us get over the perceived lack of fairness we carry.

Fairness issues in the workplace usually result from an organizational change. We've observed that many leaders and organizations are blindsided by fairness issues. When you change anything within your organization, or your interactions with others, it's important to put yourself in your stakeholder's shoes. Look for how the change might be perceived as unfair in any way.

Anticipating how stakeholders will perceive a particular change from a fairness perspective allows us to use appropriate change management techniques, and other engagement levers, to acknowledge why some may perceive the change to be unfair. Then we can explain the rationale behind the change while we address the perception of unfairness.

In the workplace, organizations use rules and policies as levers to drive behavior (see "Exploring the Dynamics of Employee Engagement," Fall 2016 *The Jabian Journal*, for descriptions of engagement levers). Rules are put in place to provide consistency across the employee base. However, when an individual perceives those rules to be unfair, he or she will spend increased energy and thought-power on the inequity. Productivity decreases and overall engagement with the organization diminishes.

For example, consider gamification: What happens when organizations introduce games into the culture? Competitive employees often view gamification as a way to get ahead, learn something new, or gain exposure to new faces and executives within the company. The employees who are not as competitive, or motivated by the growth engagement driver, may not

view the games as something in which they want to participate.

Does this handicap them in terms of how they get ahead? If they perceive the games to give an unfair competitive advantage, employees may rebel and disengage from the game and from the organization entirely. We need to be sure our gamification strategy takes that risk into account.

As leaders, we have tools to ensure that fairness issues are minimized.

Take a broad view. Ensure that the stated purpose, goals, and strategies are fair for all stakeholders involved. Take a broad view of stakeholders; include the community and the environment along with employees, customers, and investors.

Balance resources. Provide the capacity and resources to perform roles equitably across the enterprise. While it's not possible to make this perfect,
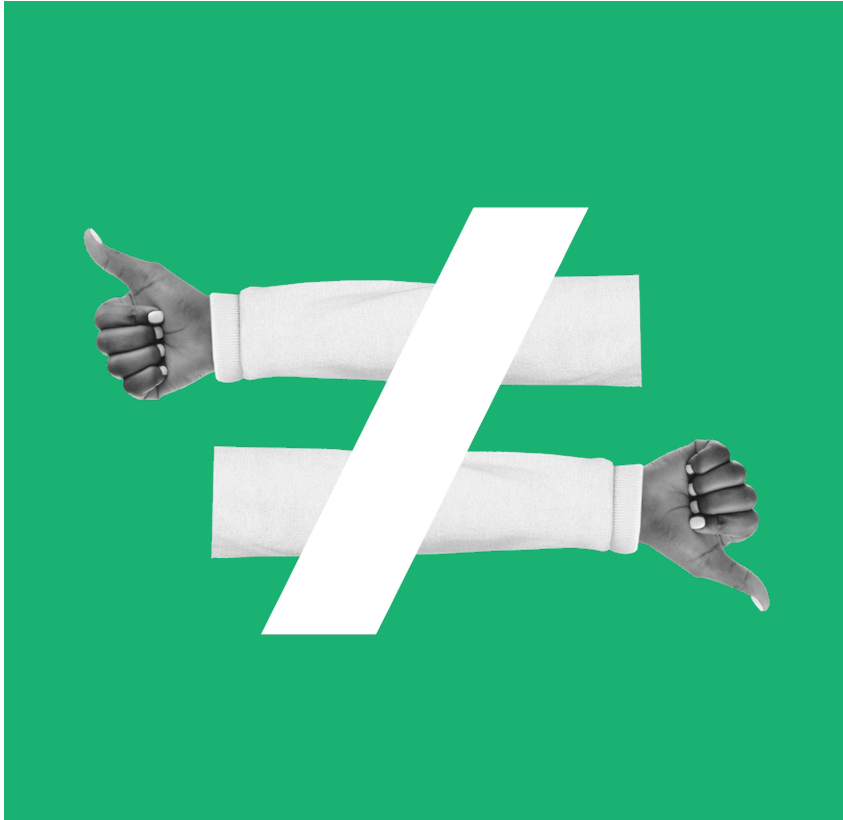
avoid overloading one function or group of employees at the expense of another.

Manage diversity. Hire for and manage to a diverse workforce. Create opportunities for everyone to share and communicate their ideas and suggestions to improve the organization.

Communicate. Especially one-on-one. Communicate fairly. Individual interactions are often the cause of fairness issues in the workplace. The more aware we become of how others perceive our actions, the more harmony we can bring to the workplace.

Conduct training. Create awareness of bias, generational behaviors, and other blind spots that can cause fairness disruption and discomfort.

Establish rules of the road. Put policies in place that maximize fairness across the enterprise and administer them in a way that ensures due process for anyone affected.

Leverage tech. Use technology to create opportunities for everyone to have a voice and raise issues, allowing you to react quickly to head off a fairness crisis.

Manage space. Design and use space within the workplace equitably. Avoid creating a situation of "haves and have-nots" by outfitting one building or floor with cool new space or furniture while others are stuck in old, outdated space.

Accommodate individuals. Be as accommodating as is practical to dietary restrictions, as an example, and workplace preferences. It can be difficult to accommodate every nuance, but making the effort to do your best will go a long way.

Measure performance fairly. Put metrics and objective criteria in place to evaluate performance and adjust appropriately. When someone isn't performing as expected, address it as quickly as possible. Transparency and visibility are key in making performance management fair.

Value transparency. Govern your organization as transparently and equitably as possible. Be clear about decisions, including why and how they were made. In the absence of information, people will make up their own stories to explain why things happen the way they do. As the leader, you can set the record straight from the beginning, before the rumor mill takes over.

Fairness is a challenging engagement driver to manage because the perception of fairness belongs to the individual alone. The good news is that by anticipating the reaction to change before it happens, and by having the discipline to quickly address any missed issues, we can keep our workforce focused, engaged, and fulfilled. A workforce that avoids spending time focused on fairness has the energy and ability to focus on the other drivers of engagement.

Our next article in this series will focus on the well-being driver, which addresses the physical and health-related aspects of engagement and fulfillment. ⚌

Fred Jewell
fred.jewell@jabian.com

Tracy Reznik
tracy.reznik@jabian.com

Source:
1 *Frans de Waal's "Moral Behavior in Animals" TED Talk, https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=meiU6TxysCg*