The missed promotion: An exercise demonstrating the importance of organizational justice

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Abstract:

Treating employees fairly produces many positive outcomes, but evidence suggests that managers' efforts to be fair are often unsuccessful because they emphasize the wrong aspects of justice. Managers tend to emphasize distributive justice, though employees may be most concerned with procedural and interactional justice. Organizational justice theory offers a framework for correcting this problem and assisting managers in their efforts to be fair. To this end, the authors describe the *Missed Promotion* exercise, a two-person role-play for introducing students to organizational justice theory. It provides a way to have students experience the importance of organizational justice, while teaching them about the three dimensions of justice and why managers often fail to be perceived as fair. Although the *Missed Promotion* exercise is simple enough to be completed in a single class session with students of any level, it reliably produces realistic responses and experiences, which allows for a useful discussion of the role of organizational justice in managerial fairness.

Article:

There are at least five reasons why it is important for managers to treat their employees fairly. The first is the moral and ethical duty to be fair, especially when dealing with those who have less power and a subordinate position (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; A. Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004). Second, fair treatment tends to promote similarly ethical behavior in those receiving it, so fair managers can contribute to making their entire organization more just (Weaver, 2004). Third, employees who are treated fairly have better morale, are more supportive of their managers, and feel greater organizational commitment (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & van Knippenberg, 2007). Fourth, treating employees fairly increases individual and organizational performance (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Koch & McGrath, 1998; Simons & Roberson, 2003). And finally, recent economic and legal concerns have made managerial fairness a topic of considerable public interest, subjecting managers to more external scrutiny than ever before (Brockner, 2009; Greenberg, 2009). For all these reasons, managers should be fair.

Unfortunately, evidence shows that many managers do not treat employees fairly (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). This absence of fairness suggests either a lack of desire or ability on the part of managers. In this article, we take it as given that the problem is lack of ability; we assume that most managers want to be fair but are having trouble doing so (see Greenberg, 1988). As such, fairness training is required (e.g., Skarlicki & Latham, 1996), and business education has an important role to play in this training (e.g., see www.unprme.org). With the aim of having the management education curriculum train managers for fairness, this article describes an exercise for teaching organizational justice theory to business students.

Organizational justice theory is important for managers because it is not sufficient for them to simply make fair decisions and policies. Managers also need their actions to be perceived as fair. From the perspective of employees, there is no difference between a truly unfair act and one that they only perceive as unfair; "the world as it is perceived is the world that is behaviorally important" (Robbins & Judge, 2007, p. 146). As such, managers who are fair but perceived as unfair will evoke the same poor responses from employees as will managers who are genuinely unfair. Managers need to behave in ways in which employees can recognize as fair.

Toward this end, we developed an in-class exercise that can be used to demonstrate and explain how employees judge fairness. Understanding fairness judgments will help managers know which issues they must address to be perceived as fair. The exercise provides an experiential method of exposing students to the theory and findings of organizational justice: specifically, the importance of justice perceptions in organizations, the three dimensions that constitute organizational justice, and how managers tend to emphasize the wrong dimensions of justice when dealing with employees. We begin by reviewing relevant portions of the literature on organizational justice as a background. This review is followed by an explanation of our pedagogical approach. We then provide instructions for using the exercise in class, a summary of typical student results from the exercise, and our suggestions for debriefing it.

Theoretical Background

Importance of Organizational Justice

The study of fairness in organizations has produced an extensive body of research about organizational justice, which primarily focuses on the antecedents and consequences of employees' perceptions of what is fair (for reviews, see Colquitt et al., 2001; Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005; van Knippenberg et al., 2007). In this context, the phrase *organizational justice* refers to "a personal evaluation about the ethical and moral standing of managerial conduct" (Cropanzano, et al., 2007, p. 35). Organizational justice is the employee's perception of whether or not an organization's agents have acted fairly (Greenberg, 2009; Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Employees' judgments of organizational justice are important. Perceptions of justice have been linked to many key individual and organizational outcomes. Employees who feel fairly treated enjoy greater job satisfaction and physical health, are more committed to and trusting of their organization, provide better work performance, and increase their citizenship behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Liden, Wayne, Kraimer, & Sparrowe, 2003). There is also

evidence that how people perceive themselves to be treated can be a source of organizational and competitive success (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999). Moreover, studies have shown that perceptions of injustice not only reduce positive outcomes but also increase retaliatory and vengeful behavior (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Lind, Greenberg, Scott, & Welchans, 2000; van Prooijen, van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2006). In sum, the empirical evidence suggests that it would be hard to overstate the importance of employees' justice perceptions.

Three Dimensions of Justice

In deciding whether an action is fair, employees consider three distinct dimensions of justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Ambrose & Schminke, 2007; Greenberg, 2009). Distributive justice refers to employee judgments about the fairness of outcomes, about the levels at which resources are distributed among parties (Adams, 1965). Procedural justice concerns employees' evaluations of the way in which decisions are made; that is, independent of whether an outcome is good or bad, employees examine whether the procedures used are fair (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Interactional justice involves employees' perceptions of the interpersonal treatment they receive (Bies & Moag, 1986) and has two subcomponents: informational justice, which is the perceived truthfulness and adequacy of explanations offered; and interpersonal justice, which concerns being treated with dignity and respect (Colquitt et al., 2001).

Individuals are typically attentive to all three dimensions of justice, but they do not necessarily give each dimension equal weight in their considerations (Greenberg, 1988). Among employees, it appears that procedural and interactional justice are more important than distributive justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). For example, empirical evidence shows that performance appraisals that include the opportunity for employees to express themselves lead to greater employee satisfaction, motivation to improve, and perceptions of fairness—even when the employees know that their comments have no effect on the final outcome (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998). Moreover, employee evaluations of the procedures used can influence their judgment about whether the outcomes are fair, such that perceptions of procedural justice may contribute to perceptions of distributive justice (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Folger, 1977; Greenberg, 1988; Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001). As well, recent evidence suggests that interactional justice may help make both poor outcomes and questionable procedures more acceptable to employees (Greenberg, 2006, 2009). In other words, employees will often accept a great range of outcomes if they believe that the procedures and treatment associated with them are fair (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Lind et al., 2000; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

Managers' Challenges With Fairness

Despite the fact that employees often consider distributive justice to be the least important dimension of fairness, managers tend to emphasize it more than procedural or interactional considerations when dealing with employees (Cropanzano et al., 2007). In one particularly illustrative survey of experienced managers (reported in Greenberg, 1988), most managers (81%) reported that announcing all pay raises and promotions was an important part of being fair to employees. In contrast, less than half (43%) mentioned the importance of explaining how pay and promotion decisions were made. These managers appeared to believe that employees were much more concerned with the outcome (distributive justice) than they were with the process of

determining and communicating that outcome (procedural and interactional justice). Consistent with the prevalence of this managerial challenge, Columbia Business School's Executive Education program has recently made procedural fairness a lead issue in their communications to emphasize its importance to managers (Columbia Business School, 2009). As these examples suggest, managers are apt to emphasize distributive justice at the expense of other dimensions.

Managers' tendency to stress outcomes over other considerations likely reflects the fact that managers are biased toward results by their nature and their work (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004). This emphasis on results causes managers to evaluate many situations in ways that differ from those used by nonmanagers. For example, research has demonstrated the tendency for employees' reports of managers' leadership style to differ from the manager's own (Borman, 1997; Whittington, Coker, Goodwin, Ickes, & Murray, 2009), the frequency with which managers report that they have provided a thorough performance evaluation while employees claim to have not received one at all (Cropanzano et al., 2007), and the extent of difference in how managers and their employees describe the managers' communication behavior (Schnake, Dumler, Cochran, & Barnett, 1990).

These differences between manager and employee perceptions are exacerbated by basic psychological processes that lead individuals to use different assumptions when judging their own behavior versus that of others (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Miller & Ratner, 1998). These processes can create an ironic, and frustrating, situation wherein employees want more emphasis on procedural justice, and managers recognize that if they were in the employees' situation they would also want to emphasize procedural justice, and yet managers, in their role as managers, continue to focus on distributive justice (also see Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). This managerial tendency to stress outcomes over process is compounded by the inclination for judgments of fairness to favor oneself (Messick & Sentis, 1979), particularly when assessing behavior (Liebrand, Messick, & Wolters, 1986; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985). In fact, the research evidence suggests that managers are apt to believe that they are being fair (Greenberg, 2009) and to attribute employee complaints about fairness to employees' selfish desire for better outcomes (Miller & Ratner, 1998).

Clearly, discrepancies between how managers and employees perceive the fairness of actions are a potential problem and serve to undermine managers' ability to be perceived as just. A manager implementing a policy may receive negative responses from employees, not because the policy is inherently unjust, but simply because the manager fails to pay enough attention to the procedures and interactions involved. If a manager ignores the dimensions of justice that are most important to employees, a decision that is genuinely fair may nonetheless evoke employee responses as if it were unfair (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Even fair policies will only be successfully implemented if presented to employees in a way that they perceive as fair. As a result, it is important for managers to remember that employees are likely to look at the same situation in a different way.

Pedagogical Background

Managers' Need for Organizational Justice Theory

As explained above, managers and employees tend to place more weight on different dimensions of justice when evaluating an action. Managers' failure to recognize this difference inhibits their ability to be perceived as fair. However, this problem is remediable. Foundational work in experimental psychology suggests that the manager–employee difference results primarily from differences in their roles and contexts (Lieberman, 1965). Subsequent work has supported this finding, showing that role-based power differences promote different perspectives on self and other (e.g., B. B. Caza, Tiedens, & Lee, 2010; Galinsky et al., 2006), which implies that changing the perspectives that managers use should help them close the fairness gap with employees.

Organizational justice theory offers a framework for making this perspective change. Evidence shows that training in organizational justice theory has a beneficial effect on managers' behavior (Greenberg, 2006; Skarlicki & Latham, 1996). Unfortunately, most practicing managers are not aware of organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 2009) and are therefore unable to act on its insights. We need a way to introduce managers to organizational justice theory (Simons & Roberson, 2003). At present, despite a body of well-established theory (Bauer et al., 2009), there are few classroom tools focused specifically on teaching managers about organizational justice theory.

In response to this need for a way to teach organizational justice theory, we developed the *Missed Promotion* exercise described in this article. It is a two-person role-play, with one person assuming the role of an employee who has just been passed over for a promotion. The other person takes the role of that employee's immediate supervisor as the two meet to discuss the promotion decision. The exercise can be used to introduce students to organizational justice theory, and particularly its organizational importance, its three dimensions, and the differences in which dimensions managers and employees tend to emphasize. In doing so, the role-play provides a concrete, personal experience of how the same managerial decision can be perceived as fair or unfair.

Rationale for Our Approach

In general, learning requires access to facts, access to frameworks for organizing the facts, and practice in retrieving and applying them (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This two-part need is what Dewey (1934) described as the balance between receiving and doing. Although we might have adopted a case-based approach to serve these ends, others have noted that case discussion tends to emphasize outcomes, at the expense of attention to the processes involved (Lund Dean & Fornaciari, 2002; Paglis, 2008). It would be ironic to emphasize outcomes when teaching managers that they place too much emphasis on outcomes. In addition, a more experiential approach provides a better environment for learning (Kayes, 2002; Seaman & Fellenz, 1989), by giving students the chance to think and act with the material under study (Fink, 2003; A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). For these reasons, we used a role-play design.

Role-playing requires students to actively engage with the material at hand and thus facilitates their learning (Armstrong & Mahmud, 2008; Lyons, 2008; McCarthy & Anderson, 2000), particularly when the role-playing experience is supported by structured debriefing (Dennehy,

Sims, & Collins, 1998; Nadkarni, 2003; Petranek, Corey, & Black, 1992). Role-playing also helps counteract students' post hoc bias and their potential belief that the idea of being fair is "just common sense" (Greenberg, 2009; Paglis, 2008; Priem & Rosenstein, 2000). Furthermore, the *Missed Promotion* exercise is explicitly improvisational, with both participants receiving a minimum of specific information. In contrast to more detailed exercises, which tend to have scripted outcomes and preferred solutions (e.g., Nkomo, Fottler, & McAfee, 2004; Stecher & Rosse, 2007), this activity is largely open-ended. This freedom increases student autonomy, which can benefit in-class motivation (Debnath, Tandon, & Pointer, 2007), and allows for more creativity from students (Moshavi, 2001).

Conducting the Exercise

The *Missed Promotion* exercise requires no advance preparation and takes less than an hour to complete. The only materials required are copies of the handouts in the Appendixes A, B, and C. Groups as large as 60 students have carried out the exercise in a single classroom; there is no need for breakout rooms or additional space.

Below, we describe how we use the exercise in an 80-minute class session with undergraduate students focusing specifically on teaching organizational justice theory. However, the exercise is flexible enough to be used in a variety of ways, and we discuss some potential extensions later in the article. The specific aims of the plan below are to enable students to

1. describe the importance of organizational justice;
2. distinguish between distributive, procedural, and interactional justice; and
3. explain how managers and employees emphasize different aspects of justice and how that influences perceptions of fairness.

We use the following seven stages to achieve these aims.

1. *Set up* (5 minutes). Announce the role-play exercise and assign students to pairs, with one person taking the role of "manager" and the other "employee." If there are an odd number of students, we form one group of three and have two of those students take the role of "comanager," as students usually find the manager role more challenging.
2. *Role preparation* (10 minutes). Give each student either the manager (Appendix A) or employee (Appendix B) scenario information sheet, as appropriate to their assigned role. These sheets give a brief description of the scenario. They also ask students a number of planning questions for the role-play. Students should complete these sheets individually and return them to the instructor.
3. *Organizational justice lecture* (15 minutes). Although no advance preparation is required to do the exercise, we typically give a reading assignment to be completed before class, one which covers the basics of organizational justice theory. Most organizational behavior textbooks have an appropriate section, and we have also had success using Cropanzano et al.'s (2007) article. Knowing that the students have the background provided by this reading, we give only a brief lecture of the key points from theory and findings. The lecture is structured in the same format as the Theoretical Background section earlier in this article, covering the definition of organizational justice, its

importance, its three dimensions, and the tendency for managers to overemphasize distributive justice. When we mention the three dimensions, we ask students to provide examples of each, as a way to make the abstract ideas more concrete and to gauge student understanding, but otherwise it is a traditional, instructor-led lecture.

4. *Role-play* (10 minutes). After the lecture, students are asked to role-play their meetings. They should be told that their meetings will last 10 minutes, to prevent some students ending their meetings almost immediately and others running too long. In addition, students should be informed that both participants are free to make up information as needed, so long as it is consistent with what is on their information sheet. We have found that whereas some students do so automatically, others require explicit permission.

5. *Individual reflection* (10 minutes). Signal the end of meeting and give every student a copy of the post-role-play reflection sheet (Appendix C). Students should be instructed to complete the questions individually, without discussing their answers. However, after giving the completed sheet to the instructor, they are free to talk quietly with their partner about how the meeting went. The instructor can use this time to begin reviewing the students' pre- and post-role-play sheets to identify particular students who may be useful to call on in the subsequent discussion (e.g., those with particularly strong reactions to the meeting and/or clear examples of the dimensions of organizational justice).

6. *Break* (5 minutes). The instructor may allow a brief break to have more time to review students' sheets and to let the students' discussions continue.

7. *Debriefing* (25 minutes). The purpose of this discussion is to review what happened in the students' meetings, in the terms of organizational justice theory, using their behaviors to demonstrate and reinforce the three learning objectives (Dennehy et al., 1998). The debriefing is educational, rather than developmental, in the sense that it examines the students' performance to explain outcome differences and then uses those explanations to make the connection between the role-play and potential future situations (Peters & Vissers, 2004). Since we have found that students reliably behave in specific ways during this role-play, debriefing can follow a relatively structured format. We describe typical outcomes below, and then detail our approach to the debriefing discussion.

Role-Play Outcomes

The role-play meetings consistently produce a range of success. In some cases, both manager and employee report that the meeting was fair and successful; in others, it is only the manager; for many, neither party considers the meeting successful. We have yet to encounter a role-play in which the employee was satisfied while the manager felt the meeting was unsuccessful. Managers typically focus on distributive justice issues in their pre-role-play planning, concentrating on what outcome they can offer to make up for the missed promotion and retain their employee. In contrast, employees are usually most concerned with understanding how the decision was made (procedural justice) and with how the manager handles the meeting (interactional justice).

As a concrete example, we offer a summary of typical results from a class of 54 business majors in their junior year. These students did the *Missed Promotion* as a part of a required course in organizational behavior. In this group, managers' rating of meeting fairness had a mean of 3.68 ($SD = 0.46$), with scores ranging from 2 to 4 on the 4-point scale. Employees reported a mean of

2.68 (*SD* = 0.98), with values ranging from 1 to 4. The mean difference in fairness ratings for each manager–employee pair was 0.99 on the 4-point scale (*SD* = 1.09), with values ranging from 0 (*no difference*) to the maximum possible 3 points (i.e., *no employees gave a higher fairness rating than their manager did*). The correlation between each pair's fairness ratings was only .24. These results show that there is only a weak relationship between how fair managers think they are being and how fair employees perceive them as being, which is consistent with the empirical evidence from real managers and employees. As well, perceptions of fairness are as important in the role-play as they are in the world of work: the correlation between employees' reported fairness and meeting satisfaction was .86, which is a large effect (Cohen, 1988) and underscores the importance of justice perceptions.

To further illustrate what instructors can expect from the exercise, Table 1 provides representative written responses from students who played managers and employees in meetings they judged as fair and unfair. The first quote in each cell is from the undergraduate class under discussion; the second quote is from a class of full-time traditional MBA students. What is striking about these quotes is the similarity between classes, and the reliable tendency for managers and employees to be concerned with different dimensions of justice. This consistency highlights the predictability of the results that the *Missed Promotion* exercise will produce, from all levels of students.

Table 1. Representative Responses From Managers and Employees

Student Role	Stated Goal for Meeting	Summary of Meeting	Explanation of Fairness Rating
Employee reporting low fairness	I would like to understand why someone else was picked for the promotion.	I asked why I did not get the promotion and she just rambled on in vague terms without explaining the process.	I was unable to get the information I wanted. She was unable to tell me why I did not get the promotion.
	I want to understand why I failed to get the promotion.	The result was that I, as a person who failed, think that there may have been bribing on the part of the chosen candidate and the committee.	Not fair. I still do not understand why I failed.
Manager reporting low fairness	I want Sam to stay with the company and continue to work hard.	Sam did not seem to take it too personally. He is staying with the company and only seemed a little upset.	The meeting was fair because Sam stayed with the company and he is a good employee we do not want to lose.
	I want to retain Sam. He is a valuable employee.	Sam wanted to know why he did not get the promotion. I explained that there were too many candidates but that he was a valuable employee and that there would be more promotions in the future. He seemed let down and the meeting ended with disappointment.	The meeting was somewhat unfair because he should have received something. He did not quit, but was disappointed.

Student Role	Stated Goal for Meeting	Summary of Meeting	Explanation of Fairness Rating
Employee reporting high fairness	I want to understand the reasons I was not promoted this time and how I can be promoted next time.	I asked why I was not promoted and he explained the reasons the other candidate was a better fit.	We came to a mutual understanding of the situation. I understand why I was not promoted this time and why I would be in the future.
	I want to find out how the decision was made and why I was not chosen for the promotion, as I was qualified.	I explained to the supervisor that I felt I was qualified for the position. He agreed but explained how others were more qualified.	It was fair because it was explained to me how he made his decision. I feel better knowing how he made his decision.
Manager reporting high fairness	I want Sam to understand it as nothing personal against him and give him the reasons for the committee's decision so he will stay on at the company.	I thought the meeting went well. Explained to Sam the decision process and I thought I did not hurt his feelings because I told him how valuable he is to us.	We both seemed satisfied at the end of the meeting.
	To get Sam to understand why he did not receive the promotion even though he was qualified. Giving Sam all the facts that came up with the promotion committee.	The meeting went well. Sam understood why he did not get the promotion and is going to strive to improve so he does receive the promotion the next time.	We reached a fair outcome based on the situation with minimal conflict.

Overall, as the sample data suggest, the role-playing managers and employees consistently reproduce the patterns found in empirical research, with managers emphasizing distributive justice and perceiving greater fairness, relative to employees. This pattern illustrates the pedagogical value of the exercise: Regardless of the ecological validity of what students actually say to each other in their meetings, their behavior and experience in the classroom are consistent with what has been observed in the field. As a result, the exercise gives them a relevant and informative experience of justice in organizations (Macintosh, Gentry, & Stoltman, 1993); the pattern of responses is accurate, even if the exact phrasing is not.

Debriefing Discussion

The results of the *Missed Promotion* exercise are predictable. Consistent with the example given above, a few meetings will turn out very well or very poorly; most will be mediocre. Almost all managers will perceive equal or greater fairness than their employees, and managers will have stressed outcomes where employees were more concerned with process and treatment. Given this discrepancy, we use the following approach to debrief the exercise, which is structured around the three learning objectives for the lesson and based on Dennehy et al.'s (1998) recommendation to use D. A. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle when debriefing an experiential exercise.

We begin by grouping students according to their role (e.g., all managers on the left side of the class). A volunteer from each group is asked to summarize their role information, so that everyone knows what their partner knew (see Appendix D for a list of debriefing questions). Managers are then asked what happened in their meetings and how they feel about the result, whether it was a success, and why. Their responses to these questions are generally positive, and

the most common explanation offered is that the meeting was successful because the employee did not quit and seems to be happy.

In contrast, when we then ask the employees the same series of questions, their responses show that they are not as happy as the managers believe. Furthermore, it becomes clear that the employees' unhappiness results from two related causes. The first is that employees wanted to learn how the promotion decision was made, and in most cases they did not. The second is that because they did not receive the information they wanted, they feel they were poorly treated, that their manager did not listen to them. We ask students to extrapolate from these results, to think about the motivational and performance implications of how the employees felt after this meeting, as a way of returning to the important outcomes that arise from organizational justice.

We then ask the managers if they were trying to be fair. They unanimously indicate that they were, and so we ask them what went wrong. Why is their fairness not being recognized by the employees? In most classes, this line of questioning leads the students to make the connection with course content and to explain that the problem was too much emphasis on distributive justice. On the rare occasions when this observation does not arise, we find that explicitly asking students to explain the discrepancy using the language of organizational justice is enough to help them see it. We also ask for concrete examples of behaviors demonstrating each dimension of justice. These examples allow us to review the distinctions among the three dimensions of justice and to begin generalizing the lesson from the exercise.

Next we ask the students to think about the goals they had for the meeting (on their planning sheet from Appendix A or B), and which dimension of justice was most evident in those goals. Managers will have primarily mentioned goals related to outcomes and distributive justice (e.g., retaining the employee, giving the employee something else in place of the missed promotion). In contrast, most employee goals will have focused on procedural justice (e.g., find out why I did not get the promotion, develop a plan to get the promotion next year). These differences underscore the managerial tendency to emphasize the wrong dimensions of justice and provide additional opportunities for students to discuss the three dimensions.

At this point, one or more of the students who played managers usually complain that they were "set up to fail" because we did not provide enough information about the promotion process. We acknowledge that they knew little about the process but point out that it is not uncommon for supervisors to implement and defend decisions that they receive from superiors with little knowledge about the process involved. Our experienced students regularly corroborate our claim, describing the exercise as similar to some of their own managerial experiences. The most frequent example given is of having to dismiss a list of employees that they had no role in choosing and using a standardized script to explain the decision. These managers did not know why a particular person was being dismissed, and legal concerns strictly limited what they were able to say in explanation (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2009).

However, regardless of the scenario's realism, the most important fact, and the one we draw student attention to, is that some of the role-play meetings were successful. Even with the lack of information, some managers held meetings that satisfied employees, which shows that it was possible to succeed. Having students contrast between satisfied and dissatisfied employees

reveals that managers perceived to have treated the employees well, to have listened to what the employees had to say, and who seem to have done their best to explain what happened get much better responses from employees.

We use the results of their comparison as the foundation for asking students what the right approach would be. If they found themselves in a similar situation, what should they do? If it is not possible to give the promotion, what would satisfy the employee? Student responses to these questions generally coincide with current views in the literature (e.g., Greenberg, 2009): explaining that the procedural fairness of a decision may make up for undesirable distributive outcomes and proper interactional treatment can even make up for questionable procedures. We point out that this fact is encouraging, because managers usually have the most control over how they interact with employees (Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009). If managers can remember not to overemphasize outcomes, they avoid increasing the likelihood of employees perceiving the results as unfair.

We end the discussion by asking students to generalize the lesson beyond this promotion example. We have them talk in small groups to think of other work situations where similar patterns could arise. If they have trouble, we prompt them with the example of selecting a project team. If serving on this project team is important for skill building and future promotions, then junior staff could, and perhaps should, be considered for membership. However, if the manager selecting the team is concerned about the quality of the team's output, there may be a strong incentive to avoid junior members. In this case, managers may overweight the outcome (who is on the team), whereas employees will be keenly interested in the process (how the team was selected).

Student Responses

We have used this exercise with 17 classes over the past 4 years, at four different institutions, with approximately 700 students, including undergraduates (both business majors and not), traditional MBA students, executive MBA students, and business certificate graduate students from nonbusiness disciplines. In all cases, the exercise promotes high levels of student engagement. Classes at all levels respond to the exercise with creativity and enthusiasm. On occasion, employees have quit their fictional role-play jobs, managers have fired employees, and managers have promised various incentives, including salary increases, new work assignments, and future promotions. Also, during the debriefing, many students with managerial experience have commented on how the experience was similar to the ones that they had previously.

The exercise always increases the energy level and conversation in the class. In the free time between completing the reflection sheets and the beginning of the debriefing, students usually form groups spontaneously with their neighbors to compare experiences. These qualitative observations are supported by data collected in the lead author's most recent use of the exercise. The 54 undergraduate students were invited to complete a voluntary survey providing feedback about the exercise. In all, 48 students returned the surveys. On a 5-point scale of agreement, their response to the statement that "This exercise was interesting and enjoyable" had an average score of 4.38. This exercise was also the one most frequently mentioned in the end-of-semester course evaluations. All indications are that the students engage this exercise.

With regard to student learning, a limitation of our article is that we can only draw inferential conclusions about how well the exercise achieves its learning outcomes. We have not run control classes for comparison; nor do we specifically test students' subsequent knowledge of organizational justice theory. Justice is one of many ideas covered in our organizational behavior classes, and our evaluation style allows students choice in which topics they are assessed on. We have no standardized justice question that all students respond to during a test.

However, students do report their belief that they have learned from the exercise. In 48 business majors' survey responses, the mean score for the item stating that "This exercise helped me to better understand the key ideas and concepts" was 4.12. To corroborate this score in that class, we used a modified version of the post-role-play reflection: After the standard questions (as in Appendix C), we included adapted items from the research scales measuring all dimensions of organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001). The scale allowed students to rate their meetings on all dimensions of justice.

The authors then coded each student's open-ended meeting summary for the dimensions of justice. If a particular dimension was mentioned in a positive light in the summary, that summary received a score of 1 for the dimension. The score was −1 for a mention of the lack of justice in that dimension, and 0 for no mention either way. Thus, each meeting summary had a score of 1, 0, or −1 for each dimension of justice (distributive, procedural, interpersonal). Correlating these summary scores with the students' own standardized scores on the justice items produced correlations ranging from .75 to .90. The strength of these correlations shows that students whose open-ended summary emphasized the presence (or absence) of a dimension of justice also tended to score their meeting as high (or low) on that dimension in the standardized questionnaire. Since the questionnaire items did not specifically name the dimension, but rather described behaviors associated with it, the high correlations suggest that students understand the dimensions and can accurately recognize them in real interactions.

Variations

The description given here uses the *Missed Promotion* exercise to teach the concepts of organizational justice theory as a stand-alone unit in a single class session. However, the design of the exercise provides great flexibility in how it is used and in the connections that can be made to other course content. With our undergraduate students, we most often use the exercise late in a full semester course on organizational behavior, so that topics such as ethics, motivation, and feedback have already been covered. We can thus draw on prior lessons to make connections between organizational justice and related concepts, such as the links between procedural justice and voice or motivation (see Cawley et al., 1998; Lind & Kulik, 2009). By comparison, with traditional MBA students, we have typically used this exercise as a way to introduce a discussion of managerial ethics: in the *Missed Promotion* class, we raise the issue of justice, and in the next class we return to the matter of seeming fair versus truly being fair and ethical (e.g., see Cameron & Caza, 2005; Stecher & Rosse, 2007). With executive MBA students, the exercise serves well as a way to launch a discussion of effective communication by examining their role-play conversations in detail and using that discussion to teach the principles of supportive communication and relational listening (see Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Whetten &

Cameron, 2007). On a related note, Tatum and Eberlin (2006) describe the links between justice theory and conflict management; developing these links could also be an effective next step following the *Missed Promotion*. As well, though we have not done so, we believe that this exercise could be used to introduce topics such as leadership, power, supervision, feedback, or work stress.

If more time is available for discussing organizational justice, there are also potentially useful extensions to the exercise.[1] One would be to adopt a discovery approach, by having the students role-play before any discussion of organizational justice theory. In this variation, the lecture would be placed at the end of the debriefing discussion or in the following class, giving the students a chance to independently reach the same conclusions as those in the research evidence. Another possibility is to include a second role-play. That is, after the debriefing discussion, the students could reform their pairs, reverse roles, and conduct the meeting a second time. The opportunity to play both roles would enrich their understanding of the exercise, and the post-debriefing meeting should be more successful in terms of fairness. Doing so would provide a behavioral model to go with the conceptual one emerging from the discussion.

Conclusion

The range of issues that can be linked to organizational justice underscores its importance. Managing fairly is important in many regards—personally, interpersonally, ethically, and operationally. Unfortunately, organizational pressures and psychological processes are likely to create barriers to managerial fairness. Even with the best of intentions and policies, managers are likely to overemphasize distributive justice at the expense of procedural and interactional justice, causing them to seem unfair.

However, evidence suggests that this problem can be corrected and that training managers in organizational justice theory is an effective way to do so. Although there are other exercises to teach justice concepts to students, these do not address the three distinct dimensions of organizational justice, nor do they emphasize the reliable tendency for different stakeholders to value some dimensions more than others. We have explained in this article why it is important to do so, and we have offered the *Missed Promotion* as a simple, but effective, exercise for teaching students the key components of organizational justice theory. Although one classroom exercise is not enough to address all the challenges of achieving fairness in modern organizations, it is an important step in that direction, and one which is both easily implemented and enjoyable. We hope that this exercise can be a part of the work needed to make organizational justice an ongoing operational concern in the workplace.

Appendix A

Scenario Information for Manager Role

You are a unit supervisor at Universidad Cable. Sam, one of your direct reports, has just sent you an e-mail requesting a meeting. You know that Sam was expecting a promotion and was denied that promotion yesterday. The promotion decision is what you are meeting about.

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[1] We are indebted to Gordon Meyer for suggesting these extensions.

Sam is a valuable employee, whom you definitely want to keep in your unit. To prepare for this meeting, you reviewed the minutes from the promotions committee meeting. There were six applicants for the position Sam wanted, and all six applicants were strong candidates. Sam was clearly qualified for the position, but the committee decided that one of the other applicants was a better choice.

You will be meeting with Sam in 10 minutes. To prepare, think about the issues involved in the meeting. There are four questions below. Please consider and write your answer to each of the questions in the space provided. Focus on the most important points in answering the questions.

1. Describe your goal for this meeting. What would make it successful?
2. What do you think Sam's goal for the meeting is?
3. How will you reach your goal? What approach will you use?
4. Describe any other issues or concerns you have about this meeting.

Appendix B

Scenario Information for Employee Role

You have been employed at Universidad Cable for 2 years. You will soon be meeting with your immediate supervisor, Chris. You sent an e-mail requesting this meeting, because you just found out that you did not receive a promotion you were expecting.

You were surprised and disappointed when you learned that you did not get the promotion. You are definitely qualified. Moreover, your unique combination of skills and experience would have made you very effective in the new position.

You will be meeting with Chris in 10 minutes. To prepare, think about the issues involved in the meeting. There are four questions below. Please consider and write your answer to each of the questions in the space provided. Focus on the most important points in answering the questions.

1. Describe your goal for this meeting. What would make it successful?
2. What do you think Chris's goal for the meeting is?
3. How will you reach your goal? What approach will you use?
4. Describe any other issues or concerns you have about this meeting.

Appendix C

Post Role-Play Reflection for all Roles

1. What was your role? MANAGER EMPLOYEE
2. Briefly summarize the meeting. What was the result?
3. Please rate your agreement with each statement below, and then give a brief explanation for your answer.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
This meeting was successful				
Why?				
We reached a fair result				
Why				
I feel satisfied with this meeting				
Why				
My partner feels satisfied with this meeting				
Why?				

Appendix D

Debriefing Questions

Managers, what did you know going into the meeting?

Employees, what did you know going into the meeting?

Managers, what happened in the meeting? How do you feel about the meeting overall? Was the meeting successful? Why?

Now employees, how do you feel about the meeting overall? Was it successful? Why?

What effects do you think those feelings of dissatisfaction have on employees' motivation and work? If this meeting had been a part of your actual job, how would it affect your work?

Are employee perceptions of organizational justice important? Why?

Managers, were you trying to be fair?

So what went wrong? Why aren't you coming across as fair?

Can you restate that in terms of the organization justice theory we've learned?

Please give a specific example of how a manager might discuss distributive justice.

How would he or she behave differently if the focus was on procedural justice? Interactional justice?

Did any managers address procedural issues? How? What did they say or do?

How about interactional justice? What did that look like?

What were your goals for this meeting? What did you plan to do?

Which dimensions of justice are most important in each goal?

Do you see how you came into the meeting with different expectations?

Can you explain this difference based on what you read for class?

But still, some of the meetings were successful. Why? What made those work?

So what's the lesson? If you had this meeting again, what would you do differently? If it is not possible to give the promotion, what else would satisfy the employee? Why?

Where else could this lesson apply? What work situations can you think of that might have similar dynamics?

Acknowledgments

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