



Tear Sheet Topic: Promoting Fairness on the Job

Leaders of health care organizations strongly influence the ethical environment and culture, which in turn influence employee behavior. Without proactive ethical leadership, ethical culture problems prevail despite the best intentions.

Ethical Leadership is one of the three core functions, along with Preventive Ethics and Ethics Consultation, of IntegratedEthics®. Together, these functions provide health care leaders with the practical tools and training they need to foster an ethical environment and culture that will make it easier for employees to “do the right thing.”

The IntegratedEthics model of Ethical Leadership is organized around four compass points that are strongly associated with ethical culture:

1. Demonstrate that ethics is a priority.
2. Communicate clear expectations for ethical practice.
3. Practice ethical decision making.
4. Support your local ethics program.

The Role of Procedural Justice in an Ethical Organization

A key finding of the IntegratedEthics Staff Survey is that when employees perceive that they are being treated fairly, they are also more likely to perceive that they work in an ethical environment and culture.

Procedural Justice and its Benefits

In the workplace context, “procedural justice” occurs when staff perceives that the processes used to make decisions within an organization are fair. This includes applying and enforcing policies and procedures in an accurate, consistent, and equitable manner. It means treating staff affected by a decision with respect, dignity, and concern, and listening to the perspectives raised by all parties. Procedurally just practices can be applied, for example, to eliciting employee input, resolving disputes, and allocating resources. A growing body of research indicates, in fact, that if all parties are able to voice their perspectives, they are more likely to look favorably on the organization, even if the final decision or action is not in their favor.¹

Why should organizations embrace procedural justice? Because of the “fair process effect.” When employees believe they work for a fair, ethical organization, they tend to trust their supervisors, remain committed to their jobs and organization, comply with leadership decisions, and engage in fewer retaliatory behaviors, such as theft.² Health care studies have even found an association between the

practice of procedural justice and positive patient outcomes.³

Further, establishing just processes for making decisions and following up on employee concerns (including ethical concerns) demonstrates the organization’s commitment to maintaining an ethical workplace. Employees who trust that decisions are fair and that their problems will be handled fairly are more likely to share concerns so that management can address and possibly prevent or minimize potential systemic issues. According to a recent Ethics Resource Center report,⁴ a fair process for institutional decision making and dispute resolution involves:

- Neutral and unbiased investigators
- Clear explanation of procedures
- Consistent application of rules
- Consideration of issues raised by all parties
- Gathering of appropriate evidence
- Factually based decisions
- Fair and respectful treatment of complainants, including caring for the complainant’s needs and concerns

When such a process was followed, employees were likely to report that they were satisfied even if they did not agree with the outcome of the investigation —

Continued on next page



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Continued from previous page

and that they would be willing to report other problems in the future.

Leaders Can Be Trained in Procedural Justice

Fortunately, leaders and managers can be trained to be fair. The *Handbook of Organizational Justice* discusses how to design effective leadership trainings for applying procedurally just practices to real-life management situations — and how to motivate leaders to take the training.⁵ Trainings, for instance, can emphasize that perceptions of fairness are linked to trust in supervisors, job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, compliance with decisions, and employee retention. Leadership behaviors, therefore, can have a direct impact on organizational outcomes.

Because most leaders probably do not perceive that they are unfair, procedural justice training can help leaders to understand how perceptions of fairness are formed by employees and, hence, can enhance leaders' ability to act in ways that are perceived as fair by others. For instance, employees are more apt to think decisions are fair if they believe their opinions have been taken into account, and if leaders explain the logic underlying the decisions. Thus, training can also help leaders frame “bad news” in ways that are perceived by employees as fair.

Leadership training can also provide other skills for practicing fairness in real-life settings. For example, if some employees have perceived that they belong to an “out group,” the leader can begin sitting with these people — instead of the leader's usual associates — at lunch.

Also, leaders should endeavor to maintain their “new” leadership style by engaging in activities such as support groups where leaders can discuss with each other how to stay “on track” with applying fairness principles in day-to-day situations.

Procedural Justice and Integrated Ethics

NCEHC has recently incorporated more procedural justice concepts into tools and materials for the IE program, and we are reviewing and disseminating resources for training leaders. Likewise, we encourage you to consider ways in which you might engage leaders at all levels of your organization to apply procedural justice concepts so that your organizational processes are more fair and, by extension, enhance your facility's overall ethical environment and culture.

Notes

1. Ethics Resource Center Fellows Program, Encouraging Employee Reporting Through Procedural Justice. n.d. <http://www.ethics.org/resource/encouraging-employee-reporting-through-procedural-justice>
2. Virtanen, M., et al. Organizational justice in primary care health centers and glycemic control in patients with type 2 diabetes. *Med Care*. 2012; 50(10): 829-30.
3. Skarlicki, D.P. and Latham, G.P. How Can Training Be Used to Foster Organizational Justice? In J. Greenberg and J.A. Colquitt, eds. *Handbook of Organizational Justice*. New York: Psychology Press, 2005, pp. 499-522.



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