

# Executive Book Summary

## *Organizational justice: The search for fairness in the workplace*

**Professor Keith Walker**

Compiled by Michael Rohatynsky

**Organizational justice: The search for fairness in the workplace. (1992). Blair H. Sheppard, Roy J. Lewicki, & John W. Minton. New York: Macmillan**

The authors of this book take a view of organizational justice that is based on the position that “the *essence of fairness (justice) is perceptual*” (p. 9). Although they place some importance on what occurs objectively, they argue that the nub of the disputes over justice or fairness, they use the terms interchangeably, is the way people have “*perceived, or felt*” (p. 9) an injustice.

Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton state that the primary thrust of their book is to propose a “theory of the psychology of organizational justice” (p. 2) that will be useful for improving human relations management and improving organizational life in general. Primarily their audience is the “interested, thoughtful manager”, but they have also considered the more academic reader.

*Organizational Justice* is a book about how issues of fairness are viewed by both employees and employers in the areas of compensation and other rewards, voicing concerns, and the management of competing interests. These form the core of what the authors call distributive justice, procedural justice, and systemic justice.

### About the authors

Blair H. Sheppard is a professor of management at The Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. His specialty areas include trust, intra- and inter-firm relations, and justice conflict.

Roy J. Lewicki teaches in the Management and Human Resources Department of The Fisher College of Business at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio,

John W. Minton at the time of the book’s publication was a teacher at The Fuqua School of Business.



*Two Principles of  
Justice:  
Balance  
And  
Correctness*

### The authors state:

- \* “Justice matters when actions or decisions by people within organizations potentially benefit or harm the interests of some individuals or groups in a differential manner” (p. ix).
- \* “We have attempted to create an intellectual treatise on the theme of justice in organization” (p. xii).

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## Justice: an overview

Areas of organizational activity in which there are competing interests:

- ⇒ Making policies and rules;
- ⇒ Applying policies and rules;
- ⇒ Interpreting policies and rules.

Justice issues arise when one or more interests “receive more favourable attention” (p. ix) than other interests.

**Distributive or outcome justice** generally refers to structures in which rewards, compensation, and perks for example, are distributed within an organization. Were these things distributed fairly?

**Procedural justice** is connected to the concept of “voice systems” (p. 2), or the structures and processes of how employees make their views known to each other and to their managers. How are employees heard?

**Systemic justice** refers to the manner in which the interests of individuals and groups within the organizations are managed. How are decisions arrived at? Who make the decisions? Is the workplace democratic?

“For perceived fairness to exist, then, the evaluated situation must pass tests at three levels: the level of the outcome itself, the procedure that generated and implemented that outcome, and the system within which the outcome and procedure was embedded” (p.14).

We can “live with an ‘acceptable’ level of injustice in our organizations” (p.30).

When decisions are made for example, on the issue of pay raises, employees may ask themselves, are the pay raises fair in light or other raises given in similar circumstance? This comparison is done on the basis of “the first principle of justice...a judgment of *balance*” (p. 10). Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton use the model of a simple balance scale to conceptualize this primary element of justice.

The second principle of justice is correctness. When an employee assesses a management-decision for example, she may ask herself: is this decision consistent with the policies and rules of the organization. In other words is the

decision “right” (p.11)? The employee may be evaluating the thoroughness and accuracy of a job evaluation for example.

Emphasis is placed, as has been noted before, on how justice or fairness is viewed and felt by individuals or groups. When an individual assesses a decision or action, it is on the basis of how balanced and correct the decision or action is for her.

## Goals of justice

The three goals of justice are:

- ⇒ “Performance effectiveness” (p. 18): especially our own success or our work unit’s success;
- ⇒ “Sense of community” (p. 18): how we identify with our work unit or organization;
- ⇒ “Individual dignity and humaneness” or “personal worth” (p. 18): dignity.

The authors argue that the actions and deci-

sions that are taken by the organization should strive to meet these goals. In order to judge whether the goal has been reached within a specific type of justice, distributive, procedural, or systemic, the writers have established standards of justice.

When we look at these standards, Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton remind us that tensions exist between and amongst the standards, as a fair decision according to one standard may, be felt as unfair according to a second standard



## Standards of justice

Outcome Justice		
Goals	Balance	Correctness
Performance	Equity	Internal Consistency
Community	Equality	Law or Policy
Dignity	Need	Station in life
Procedural Justice		
Performance	Checks and balances	Neutral
Community	Balance of power	Consistent with procedures
Dignity	Balance of inputs	Standing
Systemic Justice		
Performance	Control of abuse	Responsive to change
Community	Inclusion	Stability
Dignity	Opportunity	Legitimizes and sustains "real" interests



*If we have jazz  
"standards",  
then why not  
justice stan-  
dards?*

**"Who decides  
what interests  
exist and  
which ones are  
legitimate"  
(p. 33)?**

The table is an amalgamation of the tables shown in the book on pages 20, 31, and 39. Let's took a moment to consider how this table may apply to our own working lives as teachers and administrators. All of us live with a collective agreement which outline a process to hear and redress grievances. If you take this process and measure it against the standards of justice listed in the procedural justice part of the table, would it be a procedure that meets the criteria for balance and correctness?

Questions that arise from doing this exercise may motivate the reader to take a look at the relevant sections of the book. The discussion that takes place may be of benefit.

## Responding to injustice

The authors use the example of a Sunday school teacher named Diane to illustrate how we might respond to a perceived and/or real act or decision of injustice. The story begins with Diane, a capable, energetic Sunday school teacher who is dismissed from her job for reasons that are not all clear to her.

One of the important points of this chapter is how individuals or groups of individuals go about "naming and blaming" (p. 44) the injustice and the person or persons responsible for it. Diane, with the support of her husband, friends, and allies goes through an emotional and rational process of putting the injustice into

feelings and words. However, the next part of the story is also significant. This is the part where Diane gives voice to her grievance and seeks to redress it. This act is called "claiming" (p. 48). In the end she chooses a course of action that is personally balanced and correct.



***"I can't be part of any  
hate campaign. I've got to  
get this behind me...I'll  
never lose my ability to  
do that [teach]..." (p. 74)***

## Acting on injustice

Four main responses to injustice:

- \* Live with the injustice;
- \* Act in order to remove the injustice;
- \* Rationalize the injustice;
- \* Leave the site of the injustice.

The writers categorize each of these behaviours as being active/negative, active/positive, passive/negative, and passive/positive. For example, acting in order to correct the unfairness is an active/positive behaviour.

Furthermore, each of the responses can be viewed from an individual or group perspective.

“Successful organizations are ones that not only minimize 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 injustices engenders” (p. 79).

## Case Study

The book recognizes that each of the responses carries costs, both negative and positive. Imagine for a moment, that you are having difficulty working with a supervisor who treats you unfairly from time to time. You decide to ask for a transfer to another school. You have left the scene and that’s a relief, but the supervisor is still in her/his position. What are the costs/benefits of this action to you? The organization?

## Employee voice systems

Two roles for giving voice to employees:

1. Preventive: “...soliciting opinions and suggestions about an organization’s policies and practices before an injustice occurs” (p.139);
2. Remedial: “...takes the form of appeals to organizational policies and practices after injustice has occurred” (p. 139).

An organization that has structures and procedures in place that encourage employees to express their concerns, articulate their grievances, and let off steam is one that is striving for balance in its decision-making process.

Examples of voice systems:

- ◆ Employee-employer committees;
- ◆ Grievance procedures;
- ◆ Ombudsman.



*“Simply permitting expression—and creating the vehicle to facilitate such expression—increases perceived fairness.” (p.141)*

## Evaluation by Michael Rohatynsky

The primary purpose of this book is to work out a theory of fairness in the workplace, a theory that would be of use to “interested, thoughtful managers” (p. xi) in their day-to-day operations. As noted in this summary, the authors emphasize the individual’s perception of injustice and the individual’s response to injustice. Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton extensively cover the subject of “voice systems” (p. 2) and their place in addressing and resolving issues of workplace justice.

One of the strong features of the book is its use of real life examples and fictionalized cases to highlight how individuals and groups of individuals use standards of justice when they assess the actions of organizations, both public and private. Although such standards as dignity, inclusion, and checks and balances are not always consciously held, they form part of an individual’s perceptions of an injustice.

Another prominent and well-developed element of *Organizational Justice* is the discussion on justice being an interplay of balance and correctness. Along with the discourse on three kinds of justice: distributive, procedural, and systemic, the authors have done a commendable job in elaborating a theory of fairness in the workplace.

Two points of contention with Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton are noted here. First, in chapter three, “Acting on Injustice”, the writers have created a few algebraic formulas designed to express how individuals respond to injustice. In other parts of the text, the authors made use of tables and figures to illustrate their points. My suggestion is that a table or figure would have been more helpful to show how an action taken to correct an injustice will have costs associated with it. The pictorial representation would have made a more visually impressive mark on the reader’s attention.

Second, the authors write that people act both emotively and rationally in response to perceived unfairness. I think we also react in this way to just acts or decisions. In the writers’ view, individuals respond emotionally in order to relieve the level of tension that is created when standards of justice are violated. Perhaps, as Paulo Freire explains, it is a love for our fellow citizens that will be the sustaining emotion in our struggles against injustices. Emotions are not simply stress or tension releases but the oxygen supply that is needed when we fight for fairness. Certainly, emotions such as hatred can blind us in our drive to redress wrongs and we must be on guard to minimize the destructive potential of these more negative feelings.

“Perhaps the greatest limitation of this book is that it was written by three white Anglo-Saxon males....All we can do is acknowledge our limitations and suggest that we tried to be fair. We hope that our readers agree” (p. 206). The reviewer recognizes that the authors have worked toward fairness in the treatment of the subject. *Organizational Justice* makes a marked contribution to the discussion of justice in the workplace, an ethical principle worth fighting for.