

Fair Process: Engagement, Explanation, Expectation Clarity

People care about the decisions you make, but they care even more about the process you used along the way...

...Employees will commit to a manager's decision—even one they disagree with—if they believe that the process the manager used to make the decision was fair. p.127

Fair process does not set out to achieve harmony or to win people's support through compromises that accommodate every individual's opinions, needs, or interests. While fair process gives every idea a chance, the merit of the ideas—and not consensus—is what drives the decision making. Nor is fair process the same as democracy in the workplace. Achieving fair process does not mean that managers forfeit their prerogative to make decisions and establish policies and procedures. Fair process pursues the best ideas whether they are put forth by one or many. p. 132

The Three Principles of Fair Process

In all the diverse management contexts we have studied, we have asked people to identify the bedrock elements of fair process. And whether we were working with senior executives or shop floor employees, the same three mutually reinforcing principles consistently emerged: engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity.

Engagement means involving individuals in the decisions that affect them by asking for their input and allowing them to refute the merits of one another's ideas and assumptions. Engagement communicates management's respect for individuals and their ideas. Encouraging refutation sharpens everyone's thinking and builds collective wisdom. Engagement results in better decisions by management and greater commitment from all involved in executing those decisions.

Explanation means that everyone involved and affected should understand why final decisions are made as they are. An explanation of the thinking that underlies decisions makes people confident that managers have considered their opinions and have made those decisions impartially in the overall interests of the company. An explanation allows employees to trust managers' intentions even if their own ideas have been rejected. It also serves as a powerful feedback loop that enhances learning.

Expectation Clarity requires that once a decision is made, managers state clearly the new rules of the game. Although the expectations may be demanding, employees should know up front by what standards they will be judged and the penalties for failure. What are the new targets and milestones? Who is responsible for what? To achieve fair process, it matters less what the new rules and policies are and more that they are clearly understood. When people clearly understand what is expected of them, political jockeying and favoritism are minimized and they can focus on the job at hand. p. 132.

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