

Exposing the Cracks: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Organizational Justice in the Intelligence Community

Dr. Chloe Wilson

Through their actions, supervisors have the ability to influence how employees feel valued and supported at work. How supervisors communicate information, enforce policies, endorse assistance, and treat personnel can cause employees to contemplate the equity in decisionmaking and the conduct of the organization.

Just as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 forced the Intelligence Community to recognize the critical need for integration, the COVID-19 pandemic is another catastrophic event that should prompt self-reflection within the IC. While the pandemic has produced new diverse challenges for organizations to counter, it has simultaneously exacerbated already existing and overlooked issues within the IC. One of the existing issues is the division between supervisors who embrace and those who neglect fostering a culture of organizational justice. Organizational justice is defined as “people’s *perceptions* of fairness in organizations along with their associated behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions” (Greenberg, 2011, 271). Although organizational justice is not a new term in organizational psychology or intelligence literature (see Reed, 2019, for a review), the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about new circumstances that have heightened perceptions of injustice for employees.

Through their actions, supervisors have the ability to influence how employees feel valued and supported at work. How supervisors communicate information, enforce policies, endorse assistance, and treat personnel can cause employees to contemplate the equity in decisionmaking and the conduct of the organization. Research has highlighted the impact of

organizational justice on workplace outcomes such as employee health, burnout, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (e.g., Colquitt, et al., 2001). Although perceptions of organizational justice are influenced by everyday decisions and conversations, supervisors’ behaviors have been found to be more consequential during difficult times, such as a global pandemic (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Daniels, et al., 2022).

Organizational Justice

Perceptions of organizational justice affected clandestine activities and missions from our nation’s beginning. Benedict Arnold, the first known American spy, was a loyal American asset prior to and during the the Revolutionary War (*Evolution of Espionage in America*, 2022). However, he was frequently overlooked for advancement and honors. After another general claimed responsibility for one of Arnold’s successes at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, Arnold grew disgruntled and defected to the British. Throughout the history of the intelligence services, many insiders have set aside their loyalty to the nation and engaged in espionage because they felt discontented and undervalued. Leadership plays a vital role in preventing and deterring insiders off the Critical Pathway for Insider Threat (CPIT) through

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Dimensions of Organizational Justice

- **Distributive Justice:** The perception that outcomes and resources are distributed to employees fairly.
- **Procedural Justice:** The perception that procedures and policies used to determine outcomes are fair.
- **Informational Justice:** The perception that explanations improve perceived fairness through understanding.
- **Interpersonal Justice:** The perception that individuals are treated fairly through dignity and respect.

implementing organizational justice principles in their actions (Shaw and Sellers, 2015).

Organizational justice refers to an individual's tolerance for observed fairness. Whether or not the outcome or decision *is* fair is less important than whether employees *perceive* it to be fair. The construct stems from the literature on psychological contracts, which describes the expectation of a reciprocal obligation between the individual and the organization (Rousseau, 1989). As a basic example, an employee expects that in return for productivity, the organization will provide financial compensation. However, this relationship extends beyond work for pay; employees expect their individual contributions, such as loyalty, civility, and time, will be exchanged for organizational incentives, such as career development, job security, and recognition (Rousseau, 1989).

When employees feel their organization or its organizational agents (e.g., supervisors, coworkers) have treated them unfairly, a breach in the psychological contract occurs and strains the relationship between employees and the organization. Examples of injustice can be seen throughout many areas of the workplace, such as perceived

discrimination in promotion decisions, favoritism toward one or a group of individuals, or pay differences for the same work.

Researchers have categorized organizational justice into four dimensions based upon the source of inequity: distributive justice, procedural justice, informational justice, and interpersonal justice.

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice describes the perception that rewards and benefits are *distributed* to employees fairly (Adams, 1965; Greenberg, 1982; 1986). It involves three considerations. First, individuals determine fairness by comparing what they invest into and consequently receive from a relationship, which forms an input/output ratio. For instance, when two individuals both contribute equally to a project, they expect to be equally recognized.

Second, distributive justice is dynamic, in that individuals compare their input/output ratios to different referents. Individuals can compare themselves to a past decision that was made (a temporal referent), to coworkers (a social referent), or toward their idealized expectations (an internalized referent; Adams, 1965). And finally, individuals have

different sensitivity to equity in distribution. Individuals can prefer to be under-benefited, over-benefited, or equity-sensitive (prefer balance). Individuals experience distress and perceive unfairness when their personal preference is not upheld (Huseman, et al., 1987). Thus, distributive justice will not be experienced the same for everyone, as it depends on their referent and sensitivity to equity for that particular decision.

Procedural Justice

Alternatively, procedural justice refers to the perception that the *procedures* used to determine outcomes are fair (Leventhal, 1980; Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry, 1980). Individuals perceive the fairness of a process independent of the outcome that is received. If the process is perceived as fair, then individuals are more willing to tolerate negative outcomes (i.e., not being chosen for an opportunity).

Ultimately, the focus is on how decisions are made, rather than what decisions are made (Leventhal, 1980). For example, supervisors who use a standardized procedure to determine who receives travel funding would be perceived as having higher procedural justice by their subordinates than a supervisor who selects a subordinate based on favoritism. Based on their research of how to maximize perceptions of fairness, Leventhal, et al., (1980) developed six principles of procedural justice: procedures that are consistently applied, free from bias, accurate, able to be corrected, ethical, and leverage employee participation are the best predictors of increasing procedural justice. Further, Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) found that when procedural justice was high, employees responded less negatively to perceptions of

low distributive justice. Thus, when employees perceived that a procedure was fair, it mitigated the negative reactions to the undesirable outcome that was distributed.

Interactional Justice

Informational and interpersonal justice refer to the perception that individuals are *treated* in a respectful manner when decisions are being communicated, often referred to in a single term as interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986). Formal procedures tend to matter less to individuals than how the individual feels treated when rewards are distributed or procedures are implemented (Bies, 2005; Fassina, Jones, and Uggerslev, 2008; Greenberg, 2006).

Informational Justice

Informational justice highlights the importance of explanations in decisionmaking and promotes providing rationale when communicating both positive and negative news (Bies, 2005; Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt and Shaw, 2005; Greenberg, 1993).

Providing adequate and complete information surrounding the decisionmaking process can increase an individual's understanding of the circumstance and buffer against negative reactions. One of the biggest stressors for employees during a crisis is ambiguity and uncertainty; by providing employees transparency with regular updates and feedback, supervisors can ease an individual's anxiety through communication.

Interpersonal Justice

Finally, interpersonal justice highlights the need for compassion during communication of decisions (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1990; 1993). Supervisors can demonstrate respect when communicating with

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subordinates through nonverbal and verbal means. By engaging in eye contact, having awareness of one's posture and using encouraging gestures, supervisors can demonstrate that they are actively listening and giving the individual their undivided attention (Greenberg, 1993). Similarly, supervisors who express concern and empathy can demonstrate that they care about their employees' wellbeing by acknowledging their circumstances.

Justice Considerations

Supervisors who use any, or a combination, of the four components of organizational justice can drastically change an individual's reaction to negative news. Studies have shown not only changes in self-reported perceptions of fairness but also physiological differences. For example, in one study of organizational layoffs, employees whose supervisors were trained in interactional justice had decreased negative reactions and insomnia symptoms in a four-week period following a pay-cut than employees whose supervisors were not trained in interactional justice (Greenberg, 2006).

It is also important to note that individuals respond differently to fair and unfair treatment (Colquitt et al., 2015; Gilliland, 2008). When an individual receives a beneficial outcome (e.g., pay bonus), they tend to perceive the entire situation positively, regardless of how the outcome was decided or communicated. Whereas, when those same outcomes are viewed as unfavorable (e.g., pay cut),

individuals tend to have intensified negative reactions to the situation and require increased need for explanations of the process and rationale. In other words, the reaction to perceptions of *unfairness* are magnified in comparison to perceptions of fairness (Gilliland, 2008).

This rationale explains why perceived injustice is a core determinant of workplace deviance (Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Berry, Ones, and Sackett, 2007; Fox, Spector, and Miles, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). Therefore, while it is important to always demonstrate the justice principles in decisionmaking, the need is intensified when individuals do not receive the outcome they expected or desired.

Organizational Justice and Insider Threat

Organizational justice is a cause for concern for the IC, as employee disgruntlement has been highlighted as a leading factor of insider threats (e.g., Claycomb and Huth, 2013; Shaw, Fischer, and Rose, 2009; Willison and Warkentin, 2009). In one study assessing the series of events that occurred before engaging in insider threat, 17 percent of the cases showed evidence of disgruntlement leading up to their transfer of classified information (Claycomb and Huth, 2013). Further, research has highlighted that workplace disgruntlement and employee dissatisfaction were identified as the two key underlying causes of deviance in the workplace and organizational

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crime (Greitzer et al., 2010; Moore, Cappelli and Trzeciak, 2008).

Insiders engage in deviant behavior as a way of restoring the balance of fairness, taking revenge for perceived injustices they experienced (Moore, Cappelli, and Trzeciak, 2008). For example, many case studies highlight that workplace deviance is often preceded by negative experiences, such as a poor performance review, dispute with coworkers, or unfavorable relocation. Researchers at the US Secret Service and Carnegie Mellon (2005) found that of the 49 cases of insider sabotage in their sample, 88 percent of the perpetrators held a “work-related grievance” before the act of sabotage.

Employees interpret perceptions of unfairness as a representation of how the organization values them (Eisenberger, et. al, 1986). Feeling unrecognized, unappreciated, or undervalued decreases employees’ perceived organizational support. Extensive research has examined the consequences of decreased perceptions of organizational support for key business outcomes (e.g., Kurtessis, et al., 2017; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Feeling undervalued by one’s organization can incite the desire to ‘get back at’ the organization through counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs; Furnham and Siegel, 2011; Greitzer, et al., 2010; Shaw, Fischer, and Rose, 2009). CWBs can range from minor disruptions of work productivity such as coming in late, gossiping, and slowing down one’s pace of work, to more egregious acts of physical

sabotage of systems, violence toward coworkers, and engaging in espionage (Robinson and Bennett, 1995).

Although organizational injustice often serves as an aggravating factor to insider threat, supervisors who demonstrate organizational justice in their actions can also serve as a protective factor in times of stress. Shaw and Fischer (2005) noted that most of the insider threats in their study could have been prevented by timely and effective action to address the anger, pain, anxiety, or psychological impairment of perpetrators who exhibited signs of vulnerability and risk well in advance of their crime. Additionally, within the *Critical Path to Insider Threat*, Shaw and Sellers (2015) describe how insiders often experience a major change in their life (e.g., death of a loved one, divorce, organizational relocation or restructuring) that in combination with poor management facilitated an insider farther down the path.

Therefore, in reflecting on the variety of workplace changes that have been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions for perceptions of unfairness have only increased. It is crucial for supervisors to foster a culture of organizational justice in order to increase perceptions of fairness and manage negative reactions before individuals propel down the pathway to problematic behavior.

Both the government and private sector have fallen victim to problematic behavior like employee retaliation. While selection and screening

precautions can help filter out bad actors, individuals who were once trustworthy employees can experience a triggering event at work that impacts their loyalty (Shaw and Sellers, 2015). Thus, ensuring that supervisors understand and implement organizational justice principles are paramount in deterring insider threats.

Exemplars of the Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Organizational Justice

Beyond the obvious devastation, anxiety, and ambiguity surrounding COVID-19, the pandemic has caused many workplaces, including in the IC, to significantly change the way work is conducted, such as working through resource and personnel shortages, virtual environments, and strained communication channels. Researchers have discussed how employees have dealt with these conditions while experiencing work-family issues, discrimination against Asian-Americans, safety concerns, economic stressors, and reminders of death at work (e.g., Sinclair, et al., 2020). Experts have discussed the numerous occupational health consequences that have resulted from these circumstances, and organizational justice is no exception. Workers experienced new circumstances that have called into question the fairness of procedures and treatment of employees furthering the divide between supervisors who exhibit the principles of organizational justice over those who do not.

Vignettes

To demonstrate the divide, the author conducted informal interviews with employees from different

departments within the IC. The participants volunteered to participate in phone calls with the author during which they were asked to describe their work experiences during the pandemic. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes each. The following vignettes were developed based on a combination of the narratives that were provided by the participants to highlight examples of the presence, and absence, of organizational justice during the pandemic. They are intended for educational purposes only. No single vignette represents any one interviewee or experience. All names, affiliations, and identifying information have been removed to protect privacy of the interviewees.

Vignette 1: Distribution of Outcomes

Harry works as an analyst at a government agency. Some of his work is classified, however, on a day-to-day basis he works with open-source analysis tools. After the declaration of the state of emergency all employees at Harry's organization received a workforce notice that they should consider the safety concerns of coming into the office and should telework by all means necessary. However, moments later, Harry received an email from his direct supervisor stating that his team would not be following the same procedure as the rest of the organization, and his team must continue to come into the office.

As the weeks went by, Harry noticed that his team was the only team within his department who came in every day. Questioning this, Harry asked his boss why their team was the

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only one in the office. His supervisor laughed and said "I don't trust you to stay focused at home with your kids running around! There are too many distractions, there is no way our team will produce sound, quality work remotely."

After his conversation with his supervisor, Harry began getting frustrated every morning as he walked into work. He couldn't figure out how it was fair that teams within the same department, who conducted the same type of work, and used the same skillset were expected (and trusted) to work differently. Harry was already concerned about his safety coming to work and exposing his family, so why were other teams allowed to work from home while his team had to come into the office to work on tasks that were unclassified? Harry thought to himself, "I am using all open-source tools anyway, what difference does it make if I did this at home?" It didn't seem fair.

With the high infection rate and uncertainty in virus transmission, many workplaces closed down their office spaces and transitioned their employees to work remotely. While some positions and organizations lend themselves more easily to telework opportunities, others were limited due to security concerns or the nature of the work (e.g., physical requirements, equipment needs, and classified materials). The Office of Personnel Management (2021) reported that 50 percent of federal employees were considered eligible for telework in 2020.

However, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2022), the use of telework varied based on agencies' missions and the portability of their work, resulting in differences in utilization of the policy, with some organizations expressly forbidding the use of telework. In the 2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, 4 percent of employees said they were prohibited from teleworking even though their job would allow for it. These variations were not always perceived as fair by employees.

Differences in telework eligibility could be seen within the same industry, organization, and even in offices within the same organization. Employees who were told they were ineligible to telework questioned the rationale and decisionmaking more than in previous years. One employee compared the security concerns of working in the IC with the security concerns of a multibillion-dollar technology industry (i.e., an external organization referent). She said employees who work at places such as Apple, "... protect billion-dollar proprietary information and they have security measures in place to allow them to work from home despite the security risk."

By comparing her position to industry with (perceived) similar circumstances, the employee was perceiving an imbalance in the input/output ratio. She perceived this as unjust, as her workplace could not provide the same opportunities despite having seemingly similar restrictions. Other

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employees expressed frustration even when comparing themselves with other federal employees (i.e., an internal organizational referent). Employees at some agencies were told by leadership that the government was incapable of supporting flexible work arrangements in general, but those employees were aware of colleagues across the executive branch who were permitted to work from home and in some instances are able to continue working from home.

Other employees reported frustration from the mixed messaging regarding telework eligibility. As seen in Vignette 1, one employee reported receiving an email from leadership stating that employees should telework by all means necessary so long as mission allowed, but his supervisor did not allow employees to telework because the supervisor did not trust employees to work without direct supervision. If your supervisor did not trust you to work without being in eyesight, would you feel betrayed? Other employees reported that their supervisors prohibited them from teleworking due to their faulty beliefs about teleworking (e.g., employees do not perform optimally when at home) and not supporting the concept due to the mentality of “if I [supervisor] have to come in, everyone else should too” creating a negative cyclical atmosphere.

Evidence of distributive justice can be seen as Harry contemplates the differences between his team’s work and the rest of the department. Despite both teams having similar

“inputs” (e.g., similar work loads and skillset), their “outputs” differed (e.g., ability/inability to telework). The vignette demonstrates how fairness is not always perceived the same way. It is likely that Harry may have initially perceived that his inability to telework was fair, if he had compared himself to industry, rationalizing that his work in the IC was classified and unlikely to be able to be adapted to work remotely. However, Harry compared his input/output ratio to his colleagues in his department. It was this comparison that caused him to perceive the telework decision as unfair and experience frustration, questioning why he was treated differently than others with similar work roles.

It is important to note that not all supervisors were unsupportive in the distribution of benefits to overcome the pandemic’s hardships. Other employees reported feeling increased appreciation for their supervisors during the initial months of 2020. Many employees described how their supervisors encouraged maximum flexibility in work hours and advocated for accommodations to a “new work schedule.” Some employees had to share a workspace with others in their household, sharing technology and bandwidth, and others had the additional burden of working while assisting with virtual learning for their children.

Instead of enforcing the traditional 9–5 shift, some supervisors encouraged employees to work the hours that fit with their availability. Employees were able to work a few

hours in the early morning, afternoon, and late evening with multiple hour breaks in between, as long as work was completed by the end of the day. Supervisor support was perceived as fair because employees were still contributing and working the same hours, just at different times of the day, balancing the input/output ratio. The discrepancy between supervisors who supported employees as they learned to adapt to the new way of work, compared to the supervisors who refused to endorse any form of flexibility, demonstrated the wavering trust that was exchanged between supervisors and employees.

Vignette 2: Consistency of Procedures

During the middle of her workday, Paula began to exhibit some cold-like symptoms. After considering the onset of her symptoms and her recent attendance at a busy movie theater, she conscientiously left work early to visit a COVID-19 testing clinic. Later that afternoon, she received her results and found out she tested positive for COVID-19. To prepare for required quarantine, Paula called her workforce’s COVID-19 response team to report her case. The representative notified her that she would not be allowed to enter agency buildings until she quarantined for 10 days and was symptom-free for at least 24 hours. The representative also told her that because she was exhibiting symptoms, she would be required to take sick-leave to cover her days out of the office. Paula experienced nasal congestion, reported feeling groggy, and had a slight cough for the first four days of quarantine but was relieved to feel much better a few days later.

On her first day back to the office, Paula attended a meeting with her federal partners which included employees from other agencies. At the beginning of the meeting, the group engaged in small talk, during which Paula spoke about her recent quarantine and concern over her limited remaining sick days. After explaining her circumstance to a work friend, she was surprised to find out that other agencies did not require employees to use their own personal sick leave on COVID-19–related days out of the office. Those employees were provided other leave allowances to accommodate for their time out of the office due to the pandemic. Paula was confused as everyone in the room worked for the government. “Why do I have to use my sick leave and you don’t? How is it fair that agencies are using different procedures?” Paula felt disrespected. She couldn’t make sense of the difference in guidance across agencies. It didn’t seem fair.

Over the course of the pandemic, workplace guidance on safety requirements fluctuated with the evolving conditions (e.g., transmission and local caseloads). To further complicate the circumstances, authorities (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the White House, local governments) were not always aligned. As a result, agencies had to do their best to meet a variety of (and at certain times, conflicting) requirements to ensure the wellbeing of their workforce.

Across different teams and agencies, employees noticed differences in enforcement of mask wearing (e.g., what type of mask, when it had to be worn), testing requirements, parental leave flexibilities, telework eligibility, health accommodations,

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travel restrictions, quarantine and leave requirements (e.g., different leave could be taken depending on whether employee was in quarantine due to exposure vs. quarantining because they were ill). In the midst of many workplace changes, employees reported frustration at the differing requirements among agencies.

Comparing the procedures and policies from the early months of the pandemic, it is evident that key tenets of Leventhal’s (1980) procedural justice principles were violated. Policies were not consistently applied across work teams or the government as a whole, were open to supervisor interpretations (increasing likelihood of bias and inaccurate interpretation), and rarely included employee participation.

In the early months of the pandemic, government agencies had to be agile and adapt to accommodate their workforces while meeting imposed restrictions. While noble in their intentions, the inconsistent and unclear execution of the various health policies caused a disruption in procedural justice. One employee reported that initially their organization allowed employees with preexisting conditions or who were immunocompromised to receive administrative leave. This process did not require any documentation; employees could report that they had a condition and were automatically exempt from coming into the office.

Although this provided a great sense of relief to many individuals

in need of accommodation, some employees felt that their office’s laid back approach allowed some individuals to take advantage of the system. As a result, “there was inequity among us ... [Some] coworkers saw an opportunity to stay home and they jumped for it. It was like the lazy people were rewarded with time off and hard workers were given more work [to compensate for understaffing].” Employees were having to work on tasks outside of their work role to cover for individuals who did not come in. Without procedural guidelines from leadership on how to obtain the accommodation, employees perceived unfairness in its application and developed distrust of coworkers.

Vignette 2 demonstrates another example of a breach in the procedural justice principles. This vignette describes how the procedures used to determine outcomes were inconsistently applied for employees across the federal government. While Paula had to use her own personal time (sick leave) to comply with her organization’s quarantine policy, other agencies allowed employees to take administrative leave without using their accrued leave. Multiple employees reported feeling that this discrepancy was unfair. This was further complicated when agencies had different quarantine policies when individuals reported being symptomatic and asymptomatic; symptomatic personnel were required to take sick leave, but asymptomatic personnel were able to take administrative

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leave. Two of the principles of procedural justice were overlooked within this context, ethicality of the content of decisions and consistency across decisions.

Another employee mentioned perceptions of unfairness regarding parental leave. To accommodate the disruptions in schooling and childcare caused by the pandemic, some agencies provided employees a specific amount of excused absence hours each week to care for young children. This assistance was intended to help working parents meet the needs of their family's schedule when childcare was limited. Even though this employee appreciated the organizational support from top leadership, she did not receive the same support from her supervisor. She was unable to use the leave time because her supervisor was unwilling to discuss the benefit with her despite being granted permissions, as her supervisor was not welcoming in conversations regarding utilizing the benefits.

This scenario demonstrates the inconsistent use of policy within an organization due to the supervisor belief that the employee was unlikely to use the leave for its intended purpose. While the agency made the effort to serve employees' needs, the impact of these efforts can be diminished if supervisors fail to support or implement them.

Additionally, vaccine requirements further complicated the inconsistency throughout the IC. As COVID-19 vaccines became readily available, agencies began

administering the vaccine on-site. Perceptions of unfairness developed from employees working at various buildings outside of an organization's headquarters. Unfairness was perceived through favoritism of one location and the sense that employee participation (in having a voice) was not considered.

As discussions of vaccine mandates began, differences in requirements were also discussed. Initially, the military was one of the first organizations to mandate the vaccine. However, the requirements were complicated for agencies that employ military and civilian employees. While the military-affiliated employees were required to receive the vaccine, the civilian employees were not, despite working alongside each other.

In September 2021, when the president issued Executive Order 14043 mandating vaccines for all government employees, the procedures for attestation differed throughout the federal government. While some agencies relied on the honor system, some required a signature of consent and others required a copy of the vaccine card as evidence of compliance. The inconsistent requirements throughout the IC caused employees to question why their agency was conducting business differently, signifying an underlying message of distrust.

Vignette 3: Transparency with Information

During the initial months of the pandemic, Marco's agency sent all employees home to telework. Marco's supervisor hosted a team meeting to discuss weekly updates that the organization's leadership were providing, new protocols that would be implemented, and what to expect in the coming weeks. During the meetings, Marco's boss would inform team members of the different ways they could work during the week such as flexible hours, which days were quietest in the office if they needed to come in and other resources that employee assistance programs had distributed. Marco always felt like he knew what was going on despite working from home and felt just as connected to his team members as he had before.

After meeting with a colleague over Skype, Marco realized that not every team was hosting these weekly meetings. Marco's colleague mentioned that he was feeling really isolated from work lately; he felt abandoned as Marco had not heard from his supervisor in months. The colleague felt frustrated not knowing what was going on and felt disrespected that no one cared to check in on him. Marco's colleague asked if Marco would forward these supervisor updates so he did not feel so isolated. He said, "the pandemic is hard on us all, we should be treated as one team." It doesn't seem fair.

Research has shown that supervisor support can mitigate employee uncertainty, reducing long-term emotional exhaustion for employees (Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn, 2021). This was especially important during the early

months of the pandemic, when there was so much ambiguity surrounding COVID-19 transmission, symptoms, and safety requirements. In addition to keeping up with the novelty of the pandemic, employees were also expected to quickly adjust to work-from-home schedules, new technology, and requirements. During this time, many employees found support through supervisors who communicated information regularly.

Informational justice describes the importance of explaining decisions and providing context when communicating decisions. As seen in Vignette 3, supervisors who shared information eased their employees' sense of isolation. With regular and consistent updates from supervisors, employees felt they were "in the know" as they were aware their organization was actively working on solutions to various challenges and felt included in the process.

Not all supervisors were able or willing to provide regular updates to employees. Other employees reported feeling "in the dark" regarding team needs and workplace updates. These employees felt isolated and forgotten about, developing a sense of unfairness from a lack of attention, information, and awareness. As this was fairly common, employees reported having a chain of information sharing, where one supportive supervisor would update their team on information they had gained over the week, and members of those meetings would relay information to other coworkers who were not getting regular updates from leadership to supplement the information sharing.

Informational justice was also demonstrated during town hall

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sessions and through workforce notices. Leadership updated the workforce on pressing issues affecting employees and allowed employees to ask questions. Town hall meetings are a great opportunity to increase perceptions of informational justice because they allow leadership to explain why procedures are in place, provide rationale for recent decisions, or present the status of upcoming changes. Employees may not be satisfied with the procedures or decisions, but with adequate explanation and rationale employees are more likely to understand why restrictions are in place.

Without justification for decisions, employees are left to assume the purpose and intent behind regulations and policy on their own. One employee described how their supervisor frequently asked them when they were returning to work. This employee felt they were being unfairly asked to come into the office and risk exposure to COVID-19 without knowing the necessity for working in the office or about the building's health and safety procedures. The employee reported feeling frustrated and did not understand why they were being pressured into the office when they were unaware of an immediate need that would require their physical presence. If the employee's supervisor had explained the reasoning behind the urgency, such as, "there is a growing backlog of work that needs to be addressed that we are unable to access remotely," in combination with an explanation of health and safety protocols that were in place, then the employee may have been

more likely to understand the urgency to return to the office.

The circumstances described above may have been heightened during the initial months of the pandemic in comparison to present times, however, the underlying message still applies. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of information sharing and the impact it has on perceptions of inclusion. Whether employees are physically present or behind a screen, informational justice promotes equity through awareness and understanding.

Vignette 4: Interpersonal Communication of Respect

Shayla has had a lot to worry about over the course of the pandemic. She has three small children who are not eligible for the vaccine yet, and she has underlying health conditions that increase her vulnerability to catching the virus. Shayla has had to juggle her family and personal concerns, while also managing a full-time job. At one point, her children's school closed down for one week, the next week she tested positive, and then her children tested positive the following week. Despite all this, Shayla managed to work her regular 8-hour day via telework.

Upon returning to the office, Shayla stopped by her supervisor's desk to check in. Despite Shayla standing at the door, her supervisor didn't bother to turn around, and instead barked, "What?" without making eye contact. Shayla was a little taken aback by the supervisor's

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tone of voice and abruptness. While Shayla tried to request project and team updates, her supervisor dismissed her interest and said “I’m glad to hear you care about work again. You have been out for so long!” Shayla tried to shrug it off and mentioned that she has been working, despite not being physically present in the office. Her supervisor made some additional snide comments such as, “you are never in your office anymore, are you ever working?” Shayla felt disrespected by her supervisor’s behavior; the treatment toward her didn’t seem fair.

During the pandemic, many supervisors did not acknowledge the additional hardships their employees were facing, ultimately ignoring many challenges employees had to face. Employees were expected to perform at their regular pace while balancing professional and personal responsibilities, all while being cognizant of a deadly virus that was infecting the world. Even the most engaged and organized employees struggled with adjusting to working during the pandemic. During the initial months of working from home, employees faced new technical challenges, alternative communications methods with team members, workspace limitations, as well as juggling childcare and eldercare, and reducing exposure risk for those going into the office.

A factor that distinguished supportive supervisors was the time and consideration they took for their employees. Empathy is having intentional understanding of another’s circumstance, rather than experiencing that employee’s emotion. Supervisors can benefit from understanding why

an employee may be feeling a certain way, struggling in their current circumstance, or perceiving unfairness.

A supervisor does not have to agree or endorse the employee’s perspective, but taking the time to understand the employee’s point of view can greatly alter the conversation. The employee feels heard. Supervisors who tried to understand the additional hardships their employees were experiencing were able to be flexible in their requests while still getting the outcomes they needed. These supervisors demonstrated interpersonal justice through sincerity, respect, and compassion in their communication.

This was not the case in Vignette 4; Shayla’s supervisor communicated many signs of disrespect through his verbal and nonverbal messaging. Shayla’s supervisor did not make any attempt to understand why Shayla had to work from home nor did he consider any additional obstacles she may have had to face.

At the beginning of the pandemic, many services that help working parents were taken away (e.g., schools were shut down, daycare centers were closed). Supervisors who did not seek to understand why employees needed additional time off or required flexible work schedules did not take into consideration the additional changes employees had to balance outside of work. In our interviews, employees reported feeling disregarded as they read workforce notices; the general message that was communicated was, “Please take care of yourself, we care about you, but you have to come back now.” Employees felt as though their

leadership was not considering their current experience.

Other examples of interpersonal justice could be seen from supervisors who intentionally excluded or belittled employees who participated in telework, who chose to wear masks, or used accommodation services. Some of the employees reported that supervisors did not take their requests seriously. While some health issues do not present themselves in an obvious manner (e.g., mental health), it is important that supervisors honor and respect the employee seeking assistance. One employee reported that when he had to leave work early to attend a doctor’s appointment, he overheard his supervisor saying, “there he goes again, he has to go use his ‘accommodations’ at the doctor.” Although supervisors do not have to share the same beliefs (e.g., as with mask wearing) or personally understand an employee’s personal matters, being respectful and trusting employees can mitigate perceptions of unfairness.

Some employees reported feeling the parental stigma for the first time during the pandemic. Despite employees working a full-time job with children at home for years prior, during the pandemic some supervisors were discriminatory toward employees who had to work around childcare. One employee utilized her telework privileges while her children’s school was closed. Despite being online and engaged in work projects throughout the day, she felt the additional pressure to prove she was online and working. She was accessible by phone, email, and video calls, yet she was still told by her supervisor that she was inaccessible and difficult to work with. She felt

she was going above and beyond to be helpful to the team but was treated unfairly by her supervisor. Other employees had similar experiences; employees reported feeling resistance from their supervisors during meetings and seeing body language communicating disrespect for the employee's input and heard comments such as, "well you wouldn't know; you weren't here when that decision was made."

Another illustration of how an employee perceived unfair treatment was during a discussion over mask wearing. This employee had young, unvaccinated children at home and was very cautious about exposing his family as he was going into the office every day. Other individuals in the office were not wearing masks, social distancing, or engaging in any observable safety precautions. The employee confided in his boss, expressing his concerns, and asked for assistance in reminding the office of the mask policy and safety strategies. From the employee's perspective, the supervisor rolled his eyes, turned back to his computer, and responded, "I don't want to have to do anything with this, who cares if they don't follow the policy?" From the verbal response and nonverbal cues in their interaction, the employee could tell it was not a priority for the supervisor, despite the employee's concerns. This employee felt disrespected and unsupported.

Interpersonal justice can be influential in the supervisor-employee relationship. By seeking to understand the employee's perspective, supervisors can be equipped to understand employee's needs and work toward a common goal that satisfies both parties. For example, demanding

Engaging in behaviors that promote organizational justice can be challenging. It is an oversimplification to say that when a supervisor is presented with a specific type of problem, they should engage in a specific justice principle; life is rarely that simple.

a deadline by close of business may seem reasonable to a supervisor, but the employee may be working nontraditional hours. By attempting to understand the employee's circumstance or communicating what each party needs, the two could come together to reach a time that accommodates everyone, and perceptions of interpersonal justice would be increased.

Practical Considerations

The vignettes present four examples of the Organizational Justice dimensions that IC employees experienced while working during a global pandemic. Although the vignettes were presented by each dimension separately, it is important to note that the dimensions do not occur in isolation. Even though the source of unfairness is what distinguishes one dimension from another conceptually, workplace events do not occur with such clear boundaries. Often, when individuals perceive that unfairness has occurred, multiple components can be identified within the situation. For example, in Vignette 1, where the distribution of telework was perceived as unfair, evidence of procedural injustice was also observed in the lack of consistency of protocols while evidence of interpersonal injustice was seen through Harry's boss belittling his ability to work from home.

While these vignettes discuss specific issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the world is beginning to adjust to a new normal, there are

still important implications to consider in the future. Supervisors serve as the front-line defense of employee reactions to workplace changes. When supervisors consider how perceptions of fairness are developed and perceived, they can act as protective factors in reducing employee disgruntlement. Practical applications can be extracted from understanding experiences from an employee's perspective in the vignettes and developing strategies to better address the circumstances.

Challenges Engaging in Justice

Engaging in behavior that promotes organizational justice can be challenging. It is an oversimplification to say that when supervisors are presented with specific types of problems, they should engage in a specific justice principle; life is rarely that simple. The supervisor's personality, leadership style, and the context of the situation will influence what skills will be effective for each circumstance. For example, an introverted supervisor who forces nonverbal communication techniques that are uncharacteristic of their personality to promote interpersonal justice would come across as disingenuous. There are many strategies to promote each of the justice principles; supervisors have the ability to pick-and-choose from a variety of approaches in ways that feel most natural to them and the situation. Therefore, it is imperative that supervisors understand the multitude of approaches to promoting justice in the workplace to remain

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flexible and agile across various situations.

On the other hand, not all circumstances provide supervisors with complete control over a situation, limiting their perceived ability to promote fairness. When considering the pandemic, legal regulations and organizational policy dictated some supervisor's actions. In these circumstances, a supervisor may have felt limited in their ability to employ distributive and procedural justice principles. These are moments when engaging in interpersonal and informational justice can be most effective and rewarding. By understanding how individuals perceive distributive and procedural justice, supervisors can use the dimensions to provide talking points or context in how they communicate and treat employees. Studies have shown the powerful impact that interpersonal and informational justice can have when supervisors feel as though their hands are tied (Greenberg, 2006).

Additionally, supervisors must go beyond developing fair procedures and ensure they are modeling and enforcing those procedures. The adage "actions speak louder than words" relays how a supervisor's enforcement of policies can promote increased fairness over simply documenting a fair process. In certain circumstances, supervisors may not follow policy, but they may have to rely on informational and interpersonal justice tactics to promote fairness through their communication of why a process has changed for a particular event or group of employees. Thus, supervisors must engage in the policies

themselves or otherwise acknowledge and provide a rationale for why a circumstance is unique.

Many factors can complicate a supervisor's ability to engage in the justice principles, however, one advantage is that organizational justice theory covers multiple domains and thus provides multiple avenues to achieve a culture of fairness. The only mistake would be to not consider any of the principles at all.

Conclusion

In response to the devastating events of 9/11, the IC shifted its priorities to focus on enhancing collaboration and information sharing. Now, as we reflect on the three years of a global pandemic, we should adapt and learn from our experiences. Although it is not yet known what the impact of the pandemic is going to be or has been on insider threats in the IC, industry has reported a significant increase in insider cases over the past two years (e.g., Cybersecurity Insiders, 2021; Gips and Trzeciak, 2022; Ponemon Institute, 2022). One study reported that employees are 85 percent more likely to leak files today than they were before COVID-19 (Code42, 2021). The findings from industry, in combination with the anecdotes from employees' experiences, are concerning. If employees are more likely to leak than during prior times, supervisors are more important than ever in ensuring organizational justice for their employees.

Encouraging and enabling supervisors to promote cultures of organizational justice will improve how

employees feel valued and supported at work. Through increased awareness and understanding of the impact that organizational justice can have on employee intentions for harm and retaliation, we can strengthen our insider-threat toolkit. Information campaigns, supervisor training, and empowering supervisors to apply these principles in practice can advance the IC to a more just and respectful workplace.

Supervisors throughout the IC who understand the importance and implications of organizational justice principles have the ability to deter, detect, and mitigate perceptions of unfairness before they develop into insider threat concerns. Increasing awareness of the importance of organizational justice and the unintentional messaging that can be interpreted when resources are distributed, procedures are followed, and decisions are communicated can affect an employee's reactions. Perceptions of unfairness are often accompanied by strong negative reactions and motivations for retaliation.

Prior research has revealed that coworkers and supervisors were often aware of an insider's grievances with injustice and noted instances of deviance prior to discovery of an individual's behavior (Claycomb and Huth, 2013; Greitzer, Kangas, Noonan, and Dalton, 2010). Training supervisors in justice perceptions can serve as a protective factor against insider threat. Conversely, without understanding and purposeful action, intentional and unintentional supervisor actions can lead an employee to engage in retaliatory behavior.

Supervisors must recognize the influence they have on employee

perceptions and their ability to prevent future insider-threat attacks while strengthening relationships with employees (Reed, 2019).

Understanding the factors that can influence an individual's sense of justice can provide opportunities to change the course of action and

ultimately, the integrity of national security.



The author: Dr. Chloe Wilson is a research psychologist in the Behavioral Analysis Research Group for the National Counterintelligence and Security Center within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. She is an industrial-organizational psychologist specializing in occupational health psychology.

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