



Life Might Not be Fair, but Our Organizations Should Be

By Jan Johnson and Jeff Leitner

Jeff: You don't need to know or care about football to notice there's something odd about the National Football League. You can see it if you turn on a game and watch who's stalking the sidelines in a sweater or a sports coat. You can see it on the news if you catch who's addressing the media. Chances are very good — just over 90% — that the head coach will be white.

If we weren't talking about the NFL, this wouldn't be a problem. About 10% of head coaches are black in a country where about 13% of the population is black. That's not too bad, especially when you consider that African-Americans only comprise 3% of executives across all other organizations in all other industries.

But we are talking about the NFL, where 70% of the workforce is black. That means that no matter what the NFL says, it's not fair. Its best employees, no matter how smart, talented, and hardworking they are, stand virtually no chance of being promoted to the top job.

That's the kind of problem that makes it impossible to build social cohesion — which is a key to everything your organization cares about, including productivity, performance, motivation, engagement, learning, and dealing with stress. So if you're not inclined to solve a problem like this just because it's the right thing to do, then do it because it will greatly enhance your organization's odds of success.



The first of four critical dimensions of social cohesion Jan and I will talk about in this series is fairness, which means that an organization believes that its leadership is evenhanded. Fairness has four key attributes:

- Equal opportunity: Are you really giving everybody the same chance to succeed or are you just saying you are?
- Impartial treatment: Are you rewarding and punishing the same things for everyone or are you playing favorites?
- Consistency: Are you predictable or all over the place? Fairness is one of those qualities that has to be universal to exist at all. In other words, you can't be fair if you're only fair 90% of the time.
- Transparent decision-making: Do employees know why you're doing what you're doing or is it mystery to them?

Let me clarify something about fairness. It doesn't mean that every employee is treated identically. That makes no sense. Every employee is differently equipped, prepared, qualified, and committed. But every employee should have the opportunity to do the most with what they have.

Employees are perceptive. If you're not fair, they'll know it. They probably won't tell you because, well, you're not fair and it will come back to haunt them. But they'll tell each other what's really going on through unwritten rules about how to succeed in your organization — rules like these:

- Inappropriate jokes are OK if the boss does it.
- Don't upset the old boys club.
- If you have kids, you get weekends off.
- Be sure to invite women and minorities to client meetings.

Unwritten rules like those are a giant flashing sign that your organization has problems, specifically problems with being fair to its employees. Problems like that will not only disincentivize your employees but they will sully your reputation in the marketplace — probably worse than any other non-felonious problem you can have.

In organizational management, there's only one strategy to increase fairness: do everything you can to be fair. The unwritten rules will give you the roadmap. Wherever there's an unwritten rule in your organization that suggests you treat some people — men, women, old-timers, newcomers, anybody — better than others, you should stop doing that. The hard part is discovering our unconscious bias; the easy part is what to do about our unconscious bias: just stop acting on it.

You don't need to make a broad, organization-wide proclamation. You don't need to put it on your website or stencil it on the walls of your office, fairness at workplace. Given that there are unwritten rules that suggest you're not fair, no one will believe you anyway.

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Once you're fair consistently, the same informal network that said you weren't fair before will deliver the word that you are now.

Jan: Like unwritten rules, environmental cues are more powerful than written rules and can reinforce behaviors that increase social cohesion. We believe what we see and experience more than what we hear and read.

I'm a big advocate of activity-based planning. It's about the “we” and helps us design spaces that support the full range of functional and behavioral activities — which differ from team to team. Accounting and software development are very different and with an activity-based approach, they can have exactly what they need.

Activity-based planning to build social cohesion is better than both the one-size-fit-all approach which requires people to adjust to space, rather than space adapting to its users — and the status-based approach, which reinforces entitlement and ultimately decreases social cohesion.

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