Fairness in Peer Evaluations: Ensuring Organizational Justice in the Classroom

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In an effort to promote teamwork, instructors have embraced the use of team-based assignments. Peer evaluations are often utilized to achieve fairness when grading these assignments. However, to ensure organizational justice, the peer evaluation process must demonstrate distributive, procedural and interactional justice. This paper recommends steps that instructors can take to achieve organizational justice when utilizing peer evaluations including stating the rules for outcome allocation up front, providing students with training on the evaluation process, assuring all parties that they will be treated with respect and dignity, and ensuring the reasons for the peer ratings are clearly, truthfully and adequately explained.

INTRODUCTION

Within every societal context individuals are both decision makers and subject to the decisions made by others. As a decision maker one must make every effort to ensure that decisions are objective and not subject to arbitrary or capricious factors. Decisions must be perceived by those subject to them to be reasonable and fair. The notion of fairness or organizational justice has gained importance as it has been linked to critical success factors such as commitment, citizenship, job satisfaction and performance (Patrick, 2012). Greenberg (1990b, p. 400) described the organizational justice literature as "…attempts to describe and explain the role of fairness as a consideration in the workplace". DeConinck and Johnson (2009) recognize the subjective interpretation of this construct in their description of organizational justice as "…employees' perceived fairness in the workplace" (p. 334). Gillespie and Parry (2006) state that simply because a particular workplace practice is defined as legal, it does not mean that it will be perceived as fair by those impacted by it. They add that while it is clear that legality is determined judicially, it is also evident that fairness is based on a subjective, individual interpretation (p. 535).

However the concept of organizational justice exists well beyond the workplace. University professors strive to ensure that there is justice in the classroom by implementing policies and procedures that will promote equity and fairness. But what the professor may see as an equitable solution may not be viewed as such by the students in the classroom. This is particularly evident in the grading process. In an effort to promote teamwork skills, many business schools in particular, have embraced the use of teams to meet instructional goals. Bowes-Sperry, Kidder, Foley and Chelte (2005) identify a perceived lack of fairness or sense of justice surrounding team projects as a significant barrier to their effectiveness in the learning process. In an attempt to instill a level of fairness into the evaluation of team assignments, many professors utilize peer evaluations of team members as one element in assigning student grades. This

paper will examine the use of student peer evaluations in relation to the four-factor view of justice (Colquitt, 2001) to determine if justice is being served in the classroom.

ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of rewards or outcomes that individuals receive within the organization (Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). It evolved from Adams (1965) work on equity theory. Adams stated that individuals were less concerned with their absolute outcomes than they were with their relative rewards in order to determine fairness. Adams proposed that individuals calculate the ratio of their work inputs (education, skills, experience) to their outputs (salary, benefits, promotions) and then compare that ratio to a comparison other. If the ratios are perceived to be inequitable then the individual is likely to perceive a level of unfairness or injustice.

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the process and methods used to distribute outcomes (Moorman, 1991). Thibaut and Walker (1975) introduced the concept of procedural justice in relation to legal proceedings. They found that dispute resolution occurs in two stages: a process stage and a decision stage. According to Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng (2001, p. 426), their research "…suggested that disputants were willing to give up control in the decision stage as long as they retained control in the process stage". The procedure was viewed as more fair by the participants if they perceived that they had process control (e.g. input into the arguments that were presented). This is referred to as the "fair process effect" or "voice" effect (Colquitt et al., 2001, p. 426). However it was Leventhal (1980) who is credited with applying this concept in the organizational setting. He and his colleagues (Leventhal, Karuzu & Fry, 1980) introduced six criteria which procedures should satisfy in order to be evaluated as fair. These are outlined by Folger and Greenberg (1985, p. 146):

1. Consistency rule – allocation procedures should be consistent across persons and over time
2. Bias suppression rule – personal self-interest in the allocation process should be prevented
3. Accuracy rule – decisions must be based on accurate information
4. Correctability rule – opportunities must exist to enable decisions to be modified
5. Representativeness rule – the allocation process must represent the concerns of all recipients
6. Ethicality rule – allocations must be based on prevailing moral and ethical standards

Interactional Justice

Bies and Moag (1986) introduced the concept of interactional justice which examines the social side of justice (Jawahar, 2007). It is defined as the quality of interpersonal treatment that individuals receive when organizational policies and procedures are implemented (Colquitt et al., 2001; Jawahar, 2007; Nurse, 2005). Bies and Moag (1986) identified four criteria used in assessing the quality of interpersonal treatment including truthfulness (authority figure does not engage in deception), justification (explaining the basis for decisions), respect (being polite) and propriety (avoiding improper or prejudicial statements) (Colquitt, 2001; DeConnick & Johnson, 2009). Jawahar (2007) states that Bies and Moag perceived that there were in fact two elements impacting perceptions of interactional justice. The first suggests that the underlying reasons for any decision must be clear, truthful and adequately explained, and the second suggests that those implementing the decision treat those impacted by it with dignity and respect. Greenberg (1990a) suggested that the first dimension reflected explanations and the second sensitivity, and he designated them as informational justice (reflecting truthfulness and justification) and interpersonal justice (reflecting respect and propriety) (Greenberg, 1993). Subsequent research, including Colquitt's study in 2001 confirms that these two dimensions have independent effects on the individual's perception of justice.

MULTISOURCE FEEDBACK

More and more modern businesses are structuring their organizations in order to utilize teamwork to manage the flow of work (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Brutus & Donia, 2010). As a result, the use of multisource or 360 degree feedback systems has become more widespread (Atkins & Wood, 2002; Conway & Huffcutt, 1997; Paswan & Gollakota, 2004). Gillespie and Parry (2006) report that approximately 10 percent of organizations use multisource feedback in some capacity and Conway, Lombardo and Sanders (2001) state that nearly all of Fortune 500 firms use 360 degree feedback for both individual development and administrative functions. Ward (as cited in Morgan, Cannan, & Cullinane, 2005) defines 360-degree feedback as "the systematic collection and feedback of performance data on an individual or group, derived from a number of the stakeholders in their performance…the data is then fed back to the participant, in a way that is intended to result in acceptance of the information and the formulation of a development plan" (p. 664). Gillespie and Parry (2006) suggest that feedback from multiple constituencies assists the recipient of that feedback to improve performance. By collecting data from multiple sources or stakeholders, a more complete picture of employees' performance is developed thereby reducing the likelihood of unfair or unjust outcomes (Sillup & Klimberg, 2010). If the inclusion of 360-degree feedback results in perceptions of higher reliability, credibility and lower deficiency (by including multiple perspectives instead of just one), it may in turn improve perceptions of fairness (Rynes, Gerhart, & Parks, 2005). However the quantity of data collected from multiple sources in and of itself does not produce quality, accurate data. It is essential that those providing the feedback, whether peers, customers, or subordinates, are adequately trained to understand the performance standards, the performance measures, common perception errors, and the appraisal process in general, to ensure that the feedback is meaningful and useful. This analysis will focus on the role peer feedback (one component of multi-source feedback) plays in ensuring justice (or the perception of it) in students' grades on team projects.

PEER ASSESSMENTS ON STUDENT TEAMS

In order to prepare students to meet the needs of organizations, universities and colleges are increasingly utilizing team projects in the classroom (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Friedman, Cox, & Maher, 2008). It seems particularly relevant for business schools to organize students into teams to complete projects, analyze cases or develop presentations (Brutus & Donia, 2010). It is expected that teamwork will enhance the development of skills and knowledge particularly relevant to the real world, provide an excellent forum for experiential learning, promote collaborative learning and also allow professors to manage and instruct larger class sizes (Fellenz, 2006, p. 570). However, with the increased use of student teams the evaluation of student performance presents a new challenge to professors (Malone, 2011). One solution adopted by college professors is the inclusion of peer feedback tools which are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive assessment of both the work of student teams as a whole, and the contributions of individual team members (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000).

However, even while the benefits of team-based learning are lauded, it remains a fact that many students have a very negative perception of team assignments (Brooks & Ammons, 2003). Complaints of free-riders (also known as social loafers) within the team are among the most common concerns (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Fellenz, 2006; Friedman et al., 2008). Bowes-Sperry et al. (2005) indicate that there is a perceived lack of fairness or justice surrounding team projects, including aspects such as grades, evaluative feedback, and distribution of workload. Social loafing is more likely when teams are evaluated using traditional methods (the professor providing one overall evaluation of the team effort) as individual contributions are not identified (Fellenz, 2006; Ghorpade & Lackritz, 2001). Bowes-Sperry et al., (2005) support this supposition stating that as the percentage of the grade determined by peer evaluation decreases, the rate of social loafing would be expected to increase. However utilizing peer evaluations can instill individual accountability and encourage all team members to contribute their fair share of the work (Bowes-Sperry et al., 2005; Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Friedman et al., 2008).

Topping (1998) found that peer assessment has a positive impact of student achievement and is also a reliable and valid assessment method. At the same time however, Topping (1998) also stressed that students must recognize that they are accountable for the feedback that they provide to their peers and must accept responsibility for it. These will be important factors in students' perceptions of the fairness of peer evaluations. Peer evaluation is a form of student voice (Bowes-Sperry et al., 2005), which is recognized as an important element in establishing procedural justice.

Collecting feedback from multiple sources is only worthwhile if each group is contributing a unique perspective to the evaluation process. In other words, if we are simply collecting more data from the same point of view we are not adding value to the evaluation process (Hannay, 2012, p. 63). Conway et al. (2001) determined that peer ratings do provide incremental validity over the evaluation of the supervisor providing support for the proposition that peers and supervisors (and by logical extension student-peers and professors) contribute unique information to the evaluation.

APPLICATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE TO PEER EVALUATIONS

In order for a peer evaluation system in the classroom to be judged as fair and promoting organizational justice, it must demonstrate distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice. This section of the paper will recommend steps that can be taken to promote justice in the peer review process in the classroom.

Application of Distributive Justice

Greenberg (1990b) indicated that people may be sensitive to several different norms of distributive justice. Colquitt et al. (2001) stated that while Adams' (1965) research on equity theory advocated the use of the equity rule to determine fairness, other rules for allocating outcomes, such as equality or need, may also be applied. For example, Greenberg (1990b) indicates that social harmony is promoted by equal reward allocations while performance is maximized by reward allocations based on equity (in other words, distributed based on relative performance). Colquitt et al. (2001) purport that differing contexts, organizational goals, and different personal motives can determine which allocation rule the individual will follow. With respect to peer evaluations, this would lead one to expect that, for example, if the rater must justify high or low ratings to the individual being evaluated or to another party, the rater would be more likely to rely on equity in allocating outcomes. However if the team must continue to work together in the future, it is possible that raters would rely more on equality to distribute outcomes in an effort to promote goodwill in the team. If there is a team member in great need of a high grade in order to successfully complete the course, it is possible that team members would rely upon need when distributing outcomes. Therefore, as individuals are sensitive to different norms of distributive justice and have preferences for using these different norms, (Greenberg, 1993), the professor must clearly state the rule that students must follow when distributing their evaluations.

While all of the allocation standards seek to achieve distributive justice, if each student uses a different standard when allocating outcomes (in this case grades), it is unlikely that just outcomes will be achieved. Personal experience informs this research that many student teams distribute grades equally rather than equitably. In order to ensure consistency and to encourage students to achieve their maximum performance level (while minimizing the impact of social loafing), the professor must stress the need to utilize the equity rule when distributing grades. By requiring a justification of the scores assigned with detailed comments, it is more likely that the students will follow the equity rule and distribute ratings based on performance rather than need, likeability, or the desire for group harmony.

Application of Procedural Justice

One essential element used to establish procedural justice is the use of voice (Bowes-Sperry et al., 2005). Further, Bowes-Sperry et al. (2005) provide research to support the premise that when people receive unfavorable outcomes, they perceive the allocation as fairer when they are allowed voice or input into the decision than when they are not. They conclude therefore, that peer evaluation is a form of

student voice. Allowing students input into the process that will eventually determine their grades on a project should increase perceptions of fairness.

As previously discussed, Folger and Greenberg (1985) summarized six procedural rules introduced by Leventhal (1980) and Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry (1980) against which organizational procedures should be evaluated to determine fairness. The first three rules include consistency, bias suppression, and accuracy. Ensuring that peer evaluations conform to these standards will require professors to provide students with training on how to conduct an effective, fair and meaningful performance review. Just as we would expect managers to be trained on how to conduct performance evaluations of their employees, so would we expect students to need similar training. Vasset, Marnbur, and Furunes (2010) state that training in evaluation procedures can be considered a form of procedural justice in and of itself.

It is essential to make students aware of their own potential biases and common rater errors. Students, just like evaluators in any other organizational setting, must be trained to minimize discriminatory comments or ratings (Gillespie & Parry, 2006). Students, just like those engaging in performance evaluations in any organization, must be provided with a detailed evaluation form that clearly lays out the performance standards against which they will assess their teammates along with behavioral anchors that provide guidelines for those evaluations. They must be trained on how to interpret those performance standards and behavioral anchors so that they apply them consistently. The evaluation form should only reflect items that students would reasonably be expected to observe during the course of the team project. As much as possible they should focus on concrete behaviors to avoid opinions and subjective evaluations. Bowes-Sperry et al. (2005) state that team leaders (in this case, professors) can foster a more favorable justice climate by providing preparation and training on conducting peer evaluations.

Leventhal (1980) and Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry (1980) identify three remaining procedural rules that must be considered when evaluating procedural fairness. The correctability rule implies that if students do not agree with their peer evaluations they should have a means to appeal. Logically, it would appear that the appeal would be in the hands of the professor. Requiring students to provide detailed narratives along with their numeric grades (as discussed in the distributive justice section) provides the professor with a basis for the decision. The professor could then request a rebuttal from the student who is appealing, and also compare the grade and the narrative to those provided by other team members. If it appears that perhaps a personal grudge is being played out in the peer evaluation it would be up to the professor to make the final decision.

Leventhal's criteria also require an assessment of the representativeness of the procedure. This means that the professor must ensure that the opinions of various groups affected by the decision are taken into account (Colquitt et al., 2001). Including a self-evaluation along with the peer evaluation allows the student to have input into the ultimate grading decision. Ensuring that all team members contribute to the peer evaluation process is also necessary.

The last of the Leventhal criteria includes an assessment of ethicality, meaning that the decision must conform to moral and ethical standards. Allowing the team members who are most intimately acquainted with the work being produced to have input into the evaluation process seems to have both a moral and ethical imperative. Performance should be evaluated by those who have access to observe it. However, if team members are not provided with effective, comprehensive training on how to conduct a fair, equitable and meaningful evaluation, both the morality and ethicality of doing so may be in question. Ultimately, however Colquitt et al. (2001) state that research by Lind and Tyler (1988) and Thibault & Walker (1975) indicates that people judge procedures as being fairer when they result in fair or favorable outcomes. Therefore ensuring distributive justice in the peer evaluation process may be an essential step in establishing a perception of procedural justice.

Application of Interpersonal Justice

Colquitt et al. (2001) state that interpersonal justice reflects the degree to which people are treated with politeness, dignity and respect. Greenberg (1993) suggests that interpersonal justice can even alter reactions to decision outcomes, as being treated with respect can make people feel better about outcomes that are less favorable to them. In other words, the way in which information, whether negative or

positive, is conveyed to others can impact their perceptions of fairness and justice. In most cases, peer feedback is provided to professors who then deliver it to students. They may choose to provide the actual narrative directly to the student, or they may, in the interest of interpersonal justice, take the time to summarize the comments from the other students in a way that preserves the student's sense of dignity (if the reviews are less than favorable) but still conveys the need to improve. Specific behavioral feedback, eliminating subjective comments, will likely be perceived more favorably and lead to a greater likelihood that students will act upon that feedback to improve future performance.

Another issue to be considered when assessing interpersonal justice in the peer feedback process is the matter of anonymity. Gillespie and Parry (2006) state that "Rater anonymity is a common feature of multisource feedback processes with quantitative results reported at the group level" (p. 539). This is common practice in student team evaluations. Students receive aggregated ratings and thus individual ratings are anonymous. Gillespie and Parry (2006) express concern that this lack of accountability could transform the peer evaluation process into a "roasting session" (p. 539). However, if the professor takes the time to package the narratives in a way that focuses on the task at hand, the assigned objectives, and task-related behaviors, these concerns may be minimized. It will likely not be in the interest of justice to assign student names to comments as this may pit one student against another and fail to serve its purpose of developing student skills, abilities, and competencies.

Application of Informational Justice

Jawahar (2007) states that informational justice requires that the reasons for underlying resource allocation decisions are clearly, truthfully and adequately explained. Colquitt (2001) further states that the decisions must be justified, which includes explaining the basis for the decisions, and they must be truthful, meaning that those delivering the information must be seen as candid and not engaging in deception. Team members must therefore be viewed as legitimate sources of information, and any feedback that they provide must be detailed and clearly address the issues at hand. Any peer feedback evaluations that are submitted without adequate explanations should be discarded if they fail to justify the ratings provided. If the professor ultimately delivers the peer feedback results to the students he or she must take care to convey enough detail so that students understand why their teammates made the decisions that they did. If the professor does not provide an adequate explanation he or she may appear to be holding back vital information and thus lose credibility with the students.

CONCLUSION

Evidence suggests that business schools are increasingly utilizing student project teams within their curricula in order to better prepare students for the workplace which is more frequently adopting team-based structures to control the flow of work. In order to more fully assess student contributions within the team, and in an attempt to avoid social loafing by team members, professors are adding a peer evaluation component to the assessment process. However, as with any evaluation technique, it is important that it delivers a fair, accurate and just assessment. This paper suggests that peer assessments can meet the standards for distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice. However, the professor must take the time to prepare students to effectively provide feedback. Students must be educated regarding the standard they should use when allocating rewards, they must be trained on how to conduct evaluations, particularly in the areas of performance dimensions and expectations, and the professor must take the time to review all student feedback to ensure that it is meaningful, accurate and delivered with an element of respect. If peer feedback does not satisfy the standards of organizational justice then any decisions based on it will not likely be accepted by the students. Efforts must be made early in the project lifespan to provide students with the training and awareness that they need in order to provide their team members with meaningful feedback that will enhance the learning experience and student performance in the classroom and beyond.

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