

Ways To Tell If Your Workplace Is Fair

Instead of rolling your eyes when a colleague whines "It's not fair," put these tips for fair treatment into action at work.

By Gwen Moran

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Being a fair boss may be exhausting, and may even leave you grumpy the next day, but the upside can be worth it.

Bruce Weinstein, Ph.D., the Ethics Guy and author of *Ethical Intelligence: Five Principles for Untangling Your Toughest Problems at Work and Beyond*, says that fair bosses have more engaged and loyal employees who spread the good word about their companies.

He points to a recent report on *CBS Sunday Morning* that found over the past 15 years, companies on *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" list delivered nearly twice the annualized returns than those of the general market.

"It seems to be an inherent component to being human to recognize when we're being treated fairly, and to complain when we're not being treated fairly," Weinstein says. Does your workplace play fair? Here are some fundamental elements of fairness.

1. Common Rules

Fair workplaces make their expectations and evaluation criteria known, says Michael J. Kuhar, Ph.D., a senior faculty fellow at Emory University's Center for Ethics in Atlanta, Georgia and author of *The Art and Ethics of Being a Good Colleague*.

The following are made clear to employees, while company leadership adheres to them:

- Criteria for performance reviews
- Promotions, raises, or bonuses
- Disciplinary action
- Qualification for various benefits

"Underlying the feeling of fairness has to be some trust, and I think transparency is the key in building trust among employees," Kuhar says.

2. Equal Footing

Fair companies treat “like cases alike and unlike cases unlike,” Weinstein says. Employees with similar skills, abilities, and circumstances should be treated uniformly, if possible.

However, if an employee needs accommodation for a good reason, then that should be taken into consideration. For example, if an employee with a disability requires more time to get to the office because of that disability, it’s likely more fair to make an accommodation for the employee than to dole out discipline for something he or she can’t control, Weinstein says. You have to look at it on a case-by-case basis, he adds.

3. Voice

Fair companies give employees at every stage an equal chance to be heard--whether it’s allowing them to share great ideas or to air grievances, Kuhar says. Fair companies have systems for employees to address or appeal situations or decisions they feel are not fair.

4. Credit

Kuhar says that fair workplaces give employees credit for their ideas. He says it’s part of collegial ethics, which proposes that if workers support one another, then the workplace as a whole is better.

When employees are recognized for their ideas and contributions, they’re more motivated to participate in a meaningful way, he says. If employees find that they aren’t given the credit due for their work or, worse, someone else takes credit, it can have a demoralizing effect on the team, he says.

5. Champions

Whether they’re mentors or good managers, fair workplaces have senior leaders in place who help show others the ropes, correct mistakes appropriately, and work on making the workplace fairer, Kuhar says. If fairness isn’t a value prioritized at the top, it’s going to be tough to cultivate it throughout the culture.

6. Care

Weinstein says that fair companies genuinely care about their employees’ well-being. They show it in a variety of ways, including paying them appropriate wages, helping them balance the demands of their jobs with their lives, and maintaining safe workplaces.

When employees feel like their well-being matters to the company, they’re more likely to feel like they’re treated fairly, he adds.

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Gwen Moran writes about business, money and assorted other topics for leading publications and web sites. She was named a Small Business Influencer Awards Top 100 Champion in 2012 and is the co-author of The Complete Idiot's Guide to Business Plans (Alpha, 2010). She is currently creating Biziversity.com, an information resource for micro-businesses, from her office near the Jersey shore--the beautiful place, not the horrible television show. Find her on Twitter @gwenmoran.