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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE/COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
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EXERCISE/EXERCICE NEW HORIZONS

ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE IN THE CANADIAN FORCES

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. . . [T]he Officer-NCM leadership team is responsible for . . . treating people fairly . . . and building morale and commitment to serve.¹

Introduction

Through the course of a two-year assignment with the Directorate of Military Careers at National Defence Headquarters, the author of this paper became acquainted with the cases of a number of military members who believed that they had been unfairly treated and had submitted formal requests for redress of grievance to their chain of command. Only a minority of those individuals had been satisfied by the decision rendered by the authority competent to judge their case; the majority was disappointed with the unfavourable, or absence of, response, and became increasingly frustrated with the perceived injustices that appeared to underlie the grievance system.

The Canadian Forces/Department of National Defence (CF/DND) Ombudsman reinforced these impressions in his annual report for 2003-2004:

Members continue to report that they are experiencing significant delays in getting responses to their grievances and are growing increasingly frustrated . . . Many state that they have lost faith in the system's ability to provide effective, timely and fair redress. Much scepticism over the ability to fix the system still remains and many wonder whether the current efforts will be sufficient to turn the system around or if it is permanently broken.²

Displeasure with the grievance system is but a subset of the wider issue of organizational justice in the CF/DND (*i.e.*, the underlying philosophy with which their members and employees are treated). Again, a significant proportion of the defence team

¹ Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, "Leadership in the CF," http://www.cda-acd.forces.gc.ca/CFLI/engraph/Leadership/doctrine/ch4_e.asp#2; Internet; accessed 31 May 2005.

² Office of the CF/DND Ombudsman, "Annual Report 2003-2004: Systemic Delays in the Redress of Grievance System," http://www.ombudsman.forces.gc.ca/reports/annual/2003-2004_e.asp#Grievance; Internet; accessed 31 May 2004.

judges the institution quite harshly. For example, the Conditions of Service Questionnaire administered to over 500 military members and civilian employees in 1996 showed that slightly less than 50 per cent of those surveyed “believed that CF/DND was not fair in its dealings with its employees.” More specifically, it was thought that the organization should apply greater effort to the application of its own regulations, implying that it failed to do so in an acceptable manner.³ In addition, the 2003 Defence Ethics Survey revealed, “organizational fairness [was] the most important ethical climate issue to resolve, based on the size of the gap between the way things are and the way they should be.”⁴

It is obvious that justice (in the sense of fair treatment, rather than in the more narrow, legalistic sense) is important to the members of an organization. Yet, the following questions remain: why is it important, and what is its impact on the effectiveness of that organization?

This paper will answer those questions from both the theoretical and practical perspectives. Opening with an examination of organizational justice theory itself and its related concepts, it will argue that in order that the CF/DND retain the trained personnel in which it has invested time and money and attract recruits of quality, it must devote greater efforts to the principles of organizational justice. Discussion will conclude with a series of practical recommendations as to the means of improving both the substance and appearance of organizational justice in the CF/DND.

³ Department of National Defence, *Baseline Assessment of Ethical Values in DND Phase II Report. Measuring Ethical Values in the Department of National Defence: Results of the 1999 Research Sponsor Research Report 00-1* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2000), 34.

⁴ Sanela Dursun, “Individual Values and Ethical Climate: An Empirical Study of Canadian Forces” (conference paper, 2004), 7

Conceptual Definitions

Organizational justice is a nebulous concept for which no succinct, comprehensive definition has been developed. It is best described by discussing its components: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Each component has an important role to play in determining individual perceptions of organizational justice, and the relative importance of each varies with every individual and every situation.

Distributive justice has been the best studied of all the components, and refers to how an individual compares his⁵ input to output ratio on the job to those of his fellow employees. Example inputs are the physical, intellectual and emotional efforts expended at work; outputs are tangible rewards as salary, pay increases, performance awards and promotion as well as such less-tangible rewards as praise from supervisors, esteem from peers and subordinates, and education and training opportunities. Richard Koopman offers a mathematically-based illustration of distributive justice: if John's input to output ratio is 1:1, and Jane's is 1:2, then it is likely that John will feel that the principle of distributive justice is not being applied correctly. He will probably reduce his input, seek greater rewards, or leave the organization for another where he perceives the principle is better applied.⁶

⁵ Throughout this paper the use of the male pronoun should be interpreted to include females, and is used only for the sake of brevity.

⁶ Richard Koopman Jr, "The Relationship between Perceived Organizational Justice and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors: A Review of the Literature" (master's project, University of Wisconsin Stout, 2003), 1.

People view distributive justice through the lenses of equity, equality and need. Equity reflects the idea that reward is dependent upon contribution (*e.g.*, all other things being equal, a person who works full-time should be rewarded more than a person who works part-time). Equality differs from equity, in that rewards should be evenly distributed with no reference to the characteristics or qualities of each individual, most commonly sex, race or religion. The equality rule is rarely purely applied in practice, and rewards are usually allocated in accordance with a primary factor, such as job knowledge or skill, and then allocated equally. An example of equality would be the hiring of one male and one female (both equally qualified) to fill two empty supervisor positions. Lastly, the need rule holds that relative poverty should determine the distribution of rewards (*e.g.*, a employee who is a single mother merits a salary increase more than a childless employee in a dual-income household).⁷

The second component is procedural justice. As may be gleaned from its name, it concerns the policies, procedures, regulations, processes and practices established by organizations to take decisions regarding the allocation of rewards and punishments. To be considered procedurally just, decisions must be made in accordance with the applicable policies, consistent across a range of similar cases, using all relevant and accurate information. In addition, there must be a mechanism for review or appeal such that the decision may be amended or reversed.⁸

As the last component, interactional justice describes the quality with which people are dealt with during communication with supervisors. An atmosphere of candid,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

yet tactful exchanges between supervisors and employees characterizes an interactionally just organization.⁹

Organizational Justice and Organizational Citizenship

With the background to discussion now established, we will now proceed to examine how perceptions of organizational justice affect individual and institutional performance. In general terms, people who feel fairly treated by the organization for which they work perform better, are more productive, and tend to remain within the institution. The reverse is also true, inasmuch as employees who believe themselves to be subject to unfair treatment demonstrate less job satisfaction and are more prone to behaviours that have a negative impact on workplace effectiveness.¹⁰ These propositions will be studied in greater detail below.

In order that an institution be effective and efficient, members of that institution are required to demonstrate three different behaviours: they must be recruited into and be retained within the organization; they must execute their assigned tasks in accordance with established procedures (contractual behaviours); and they must display behaviours known as organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB).¹¹

OCB are defined as “discretionary behaviours on the part of the worker, which are neither expected nor required, and therefore cannot be formally rewarded or punished for

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Maureen L. Ambrose, Russell S. Cropanzano, and Marshall Schminke, “The Effect of Organizational Structure on Perceptions of Procedural Fairness,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 85, no. 2: 294.

¹¹ Janet P. Near, Dennis W. Organ, and C. Ann Smith, “Organizational Citizenship Behaviour: Its Nature and Antecedents,” in *Fundamentals of Organizational Behaviour, Volume 4*, ed. Cary L. Cooper, 165-180 (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 165.

the presence or lack of, by the organization.”¹² They contrast with contractual behaviours, which are governed by the explicit policies and procedures of an institution. Try as it might, it is impossible for any organization to predict all those behaviours that may be required of its employees at all times and in all circumstances in order that the institution be effective.¹³ This is especially true in the military environment, where uncertainty and the “fog of war” are the norm. Indeed, the mission command philosophy is utterly dependent upon discretionary behaviours on the part of subordinates, who are expected to exercise their initiative in accordance with broad direction issued by their commander to accomplish the task assigned to the group as a whole. OCB are acknowledged to belong to five categories of behaviours: altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, sportsmanship and civic virtue.¹⁴

Altruism is direct or indirect assistance to a colleague who is experiencing a work-related problem. Benefits of this behaviour include increased worker productivity, and reduced supervisor workload (in that he does not need to provide the assistance himself). Courtesy includes actions such as consultation and advance notices of planned activities that either avert or mitigate anticipated problems. Punctuality and adherence to rules and regulations comprise the category of conscientiousness. Sportsmanship refers to forbearance of minor inconveniences or discomfort without complaint. Civic virtue

¹² Koopman, “The Relationship between Perceived Organizational Justice . . .”, 4.

¹³ Ronald J. Deluga, “The Relationship Between Trust in the Supervisor and Subordinate Organizational Citizenship Behaviour,” *Military Psychology* 7, no. 1: 1.

¹⁴ Near, et al, “Organizational Citizenship Behaviour . . .”, 165.

implies a participation in the political and social life of the institution and remaining informed about critical developments.¹⁵

OCB have a positive influence on institutions and on their employees and are essential to the smooth functioning of any organization. Employees who display those behaviours exhibit greater dedication and lower turnover rates and are more productive (in terms of both quantity and quality) than those employees who did not.¹⁶ In addition, despite the fact that OCB do not form part of the contractual obligation of an employee to an organization, they may be the most important factor for supervisors in their evaluation of subordinate's performance (more important even than productivity).¹⁷

Research indicates a positive correlation between perceptions of organizational justice and the presence of high rates of OCB. This association may be due to the fact that employees who feel that they are treated fairly also believe that they are valued by their organizations. This, in turn, elicits reciprocal OCB.¹⁸

Organizational Justice and Trust

Trust has long been recognized as essential to military success: subordinates must trust their leaders to be professionally competent and to deliberate and act in accordance with ethical principles. Leaders must trust their subordinates to do that which is asked of

¹⁵ Koopman, "The Relationship between Perceived Organizational Justice . . .", 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ Deluga, "The Relationship Between Trust . . .", 2.

¹⁸ Gerald L. Blakely, Robert H. Moorman, and Brian P. Niehoff, "Does Perceived Organizational Support Mediate the Relationship Between Procedural Justice and Organizational Citizenship Behaviour?" *Academy of Management Journal* 41, no. 3: 351.

them, and to act appropriately to accomplish the assigned mission. Units imbued with vertical and lateral trust are capable of success even in the face of extreme adversity.¹⁹

It has been determined that employee perception of organizational justice has a strong positive correlation with interpersonal trust. In turn, high levels of trust are tied to increased commitment to the institution and employee retention. Curiously, it has also been found that high levels of interpersonal trust give rise to correspondingly strong positive beliefs about organizational justice. This has been attributed to a “halo effect”, whereby the characteristic demonstrated by either the individual or the institution is attributed to the other; in this case, trust in the supervisor elicits the feeling that the organization is just, and *vice versa*.²⁰ In short, these two characteristics appear to contribute to each other.

A member of an organization establishes and maintains a trusting relationship with his supervisor when the supervisor displays a number of key traits. These include availability to subordinates when needed, competence, consistency of decisions, an ability to keep sensitive issues confidential to an appropriate level, fairness, integrity, loyalty (to his superiors, peers and subordinates), openness to new and different ideas, and promise fulfillment.²¹

Interactional Justice

The reader will recall that perceptions about interactional justice are based upon employee beliefs about the “sincerity, respectfulness, and consistency of persons in

¹⁹ Deluga, “The Relationship Between Trust . . .”, 13.

²⁰ Dursun, “Individual Values and Ethical Climate . . .”, 9.

²¹ Deluga, “The Relationship Between Trust . . .”, 4-5.

authority.”²² Research indicates that perceived breaches of interactional justice principles are more important to employees than are breaches of distributive or procedural principles. This is not to say that the latter are unimportant but it would appear that, in many cases, a sympathetic and sincere supervisor might be able to mitigate a negative message conveyed to a subordinate. By means of illustration, the dissatisfaction experienced by an employee who receives a distasteful work assignment (poor distributive justice) and believes that the process for selecting him for the task was unfair (poor procedural justice), may feel that he was dealt with in a respectful and empathetic manner by the supervisor who assigned the task to him (interactional justice) and, therefore, may not choose to dispute the assignment.²³

Equal Opportunity

Employment equity is often maligned in military circles due to the misapprehension that it is designed as a form of reverse discrimination. Surprisingly, surveys of military personnel reveal that perceptions of discrimination based on sex, race or religion have a negative impact on perceptions of organizational justice and, therefore on the sense of attachment that individuals have to the military institution. These feelings are common to all sub-groups in the organization, regardless of whether an individual belongs to a sub-group that suffers from or benefits from the discrimination. Not only is this lack of esteem aimed at the organization as a whole, but it is translated in some degree to the primary group, as well.²⁴

²² Karl Aquino, Murray Bradfield, and Margaret U. Lewis, “Justice Constructs, Negative Affectivity, and Employee Deviance: A Proposed Model and Empirical Test,” *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 20, no. 7: 1076.

²³ Koopman, “The Relationship between Perceived Organizational Justice . . .”, 6.

Ethics And Perception

The ethical framework from which an individual approaches an issue of organizational justice has been found to be an important factor in that individual's perceptions of fairness. Formalists tend to assess ethical problems from the point of view of process (i.e., if an ethical issue is considered in a logical fashion, then the correct decision will result); utilitarians tend to focus on outcomes (i.e., the correct solution is the one that brings the greatest good to the greatest number of people). As may be expected, formalists consider the procedural component of organizational justice to be more important than the distributive and utilitarians believe that the distributive component should outweigh the procedural.²⁵

Difficulties may arise when a supervisor and a subordinate possess differing ethical frameworks. Professors Ambrose, Noel and Schminke express this problem, which may give rise to friction between supervisor and subordinate, as follows:

A strongly formalist, weakly utilitarian supervisor may be most concerned about the process by which he makes decisions. A strongly utilitarian, weakly formalist subordinate may not notice this effort at procedural fairness. Thus, a gap may exist between the supervisor's beliefs about the fairness of his actions and the subordinate's fairness perceptions.²⁶

Recommendations

Based upon the theoretical discussion of organizational justice conducted above, and noting that the CF/DND population believes that improvements can and should be

²⁴ Simon A. Bartle, Mickey R. Dansby, Dan Landis, and Robert M. McIntyre, "The Effects of Equal Opportunity Fairness on Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, and Perceived Work Group Efficacy," *Military Psychology* 14, no. 4: 311.

²⁵ Maureen L. Ambrose, Terry W. Noel, and Marshall Schminke, "The Effect of Ethical Frameworks on Perceptions of Organizational Justice," *Academy of Management Journal* 40, no. 5: 1201-1202.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1202.

made in this domain, it is now possible to formulate concrete recommendations for the CF/DND to enhance the perception of fairness in the institution.

Professors Ambrose, Cropanzano and Schminke have established that employees determine the justice of workplace policies and procedures using six general rules, and it would appear that they are applicable to the CF/DND context:

1. Consistency - Are rules consistently applied in the same way under the same conditions?
2. Accuracy - Is the fact finding surrounding the application of rules thorough and appropriate?
3. Bias - Is the application of rules free of bias?
4. Correctibility - Is it possible to change an error or decision?
5. Representativeness - Do workers get a chance to be represented in the process?
6. Ethical - Is the procedure morally and ethically appropriate?²⁷

A positive response to all six questions will guarantee a perception of organizational justice.

The rules concerning correctibility and representativeness both relate to the concept of “voice”, which is defined as the ability to provide input to a decision process. It has been shown that allowing employees a voice results in a greater level of acceptance of unfavourable decisions and organizational goals and a more positive reaction to performance evaluations.²⁸ Therefore, the CF/DND should actively seek the opinions of a cross-section of ranks and trades when developing personnel policies, and ensure that an effective and time-sensitive appeals process be incorporated into those policies.

Ambrose, Cropanzano and Schminke have discovered that institutions with many hierarchical layers are seen by their members to be less responsive to the expression of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

dissatisfaction and less effective at promoting organizational justice than those with a relatively flat reporting structure.²⁹ Ideally, flattening the military chain of command would promote perceptions of organizational justice but this may be difficult to accomplish. It may be more achievable to effect this in dealing with formal complaints or requests for redress of grievance.

Complementary to this readjustment of the complaints hierarchy is centralization of decision-making authority. While a wide range of inputs should be sought during the policy development stage, centralization of decision-making would promote consistency, which in turn would encourage perceptions of organizational fairness, especially procedural fairness.³⁰

Another contributor to consistent decision-making is formalization (*i.e.*, the recording of regulations and procedures in written form). Extensive formalization reduces the discretion that authorities have in interpreting policy and, in theory mitigates potential human bias in a system.³¹ However, bearing in mind that bureaucracies tend to become rules-bound and inflexible, formalization must be balanced with the need, on the part of leaders, to exercise good judgment. Needless to say, this is difficult to achieve in a large institution, but policy makers should incorporate an appropriate level of flexibility into the regulations they develop to allow competent authorities to apply common sense, within the limits of good governance and sound financial management, to each and every case.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

With respect to fostering leadership behaviours that encourage trust and, by extension OCB, little formal training exists in the CF/DND to develop those traits. Officer and non-commissioned officer leadership courses should include as part of their curricula an introduction to organizational justice theory and how it contributes to the operational effectiveness of small units and of the CF/DND as a whole, and instruction on the behaviours the supervisors and leaders should exhibit to promote trust between them and their subordinates.³²

Finally, in order that potential conflicts between supervisors and subordinates may be avoided, officers and non-commissioned officers should be educated in formalist and utilitarian ethical frameworks. This will give CF/DND leaders the tools required to tailor their organizational justice approach to individual subordinates and to particular situations.

Organizational Justice and Generation Y

Major Jeff Tasseron, in his Canadian Military Journal article entitled, “Military Manning and the Revolution in Social Affairs” scrutinized the demographic character and of the so-called “Generation Y” (i.e., those persons born in the late 1980s and 1990s who will comprise Canada’s recruiting base for the immediate future). He portrayed this group as showing:

. . . increased rejection of order, pursuit of happiness to the detriment of duty, de-emphasis of social and family connections, and diminished concern over financial and future outlook . . . [as well as] a certain cynicism and generally untrusting nature.³³

³² Deluga, “The Relationship Between Trust . . .”, 13.

³³ Major Jeff Tasseron, “Military Manning and the Revolution in Social Affairs,” *Canadian Military Journal* 2, no. 3: 57.

One may glean from this description that Generation Y displays a greater tendency to utilitarianism than formalism. Accordingly, the distributive and interactional components of organizational justice may require more emphasis, at the expense of the procedural component as the current ranks of the CF/DND become thinner and are replaced by the 20-somethings of today.

Counterpoint

It may be argued that the notion of organizational justice is irrelevant in the military environment; that soldiers, sailors and aircrew perform their duties in accordance with prescribed norms devised for the good of the institution and not for the actualization of its members. If that is the case, why need we be concerned with perceptions of justice and injustice?

One need only recall instances of unfairness suffered personally, or by others with whom one has served, and remember the decreased motivation and attachment to the organization that one felt as a result of that unfortunate situation. It has been amply demonstrated above that individuals who believe that an institution values its members, treats them with consideration and respect, and applies the principles of organizational justice when problems arise are more liable to participate fully in the organization and go “above and beyond the call of duty”. This can only serve to promote the effectiveness of the unit in which that individual serves and, indirectly, to the effectiveness of the institution as a whole.

Conclusion

The author’s personal experience and empirical evidence indicate that a significant proportion of the CF/DND population believes that it does not treat its

members fairly; departmental documents assert that greater efforts should be devoted to narrowing the gap between the unacceptable *status quo* and the desired end state for perceptions of organizational justice.

Organizational justice is made up of three components: distributive justice (the allocation of rewards to members of an institution); procedural justice (the process by which decisions are taken to allocate rewards); and interactional justice (the character of the relationship between supervisors and subordinates).

Perceptions of organizational justice contribute to employees' levels of performance, productivity and propensity to remain a part of the institution. Positive feelings about fair treatment bring about increased levels of contractual performance; negative feelings (*i.e.*, a belief that the organization is inherently unfair) engender decreased levels of contractual performance. These correlations also hold true for the display of OCB, which are discretionary behaviours on the part of employees but are nonetheless absolutely essential to the effectiveness of the organization. Similarly, high levels of trust exhibited between supervisors and subordinates are elicited by affirmative sentiments about the quality of organizational justice. The reverse also holds true, inasmuch as high levels of interpersonal trust bring about positive perceptions of institutional fairness.

Interactional justice may be the most important component of organizational justice. Surveyed employees indicate that breaches of interactional justice principles are considered to be more serious than breaches to either distributive or procedural justice. Conversely, a supervisor skilled in the application of interactional justice may mitigate

employee dissatisfaction regarding unfavourable decisions taken from either a distributive or procedural perspective.

Policies or practices that discriminate against individuals based on their sex, race or religion also have a negative impact on employee opinions about organizational justice, and decrease attachment to the primary work group and to the institution as a whole.

A person's ethical framework, whether formalist or utilitarian, is an important factor in determining which organizational justice component (either procedural or distributive respectively) that person will deem more important. A failure on the part of a supervisor to take into account the ethical framework of his subordinates may be a source of conflict, in that each side considers a different component to be of greater significance than the other.

Discussion closed with a series of practical recommendations for the amelioration of perceptions of organizational justice in the CF/DND. It was proposed that greater voice be given to members of the defence team in the formulation of policy and in appealing unfavourable decisions; that the chain of command should be flattened when dealing with formal complaints; that decision-making authority become more centralized and policies more formalized with a view to promoting consistency; and that organizational justice principles and application, as well as ethical frameworks for organizational justice, become a part of officer and non-commissioned officer leadership training.

Finally, it was determined that the improvement of perceptions regarding organizational justice merited as much attention by the leadership of the CF/DND in the

future, given the changing character of the recruiting base, as it does now. The effectiveness of our force in crisis, as well as in peace, depends upon it.

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