

Treating People Fairly: The Feeling that Underlies the Trends



Beth A. Livingston¹

Abstract

The phenomena of “Quiet Quitting” and the “Great Resignation” reflect feelings of underappreciation and a lack of a respect at work. These are indicators of interpersonal injustice in the workplace, which can be ameliorated via the promotion of inclusive, safe, and supportive work climates. Individual employees and managers can engage in specific actions to promote feelings of interpersonal fairness at work in order to mitigate against these negative workplace trends.

Keywords

workplace fairness, respect at work, climates, psychological safety, inclusion

It has been a tumultuous few years in the world of work. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was followed by 2021’s “Great Resignation” and by concerns about #QuietQuitting in 2022. Surveys by Pew found that the majority of workers who quit in 2021 cited low pay, few opportunities for advancement and feeling disrespected as major reasons why they left.¹ Some have recognized that while COVID-19 was a catalyst for some of these voluntary quits, in many ways it highlighted an ongoing trend.² In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Fuller and Kerr² noted that employees are ... “reconsidering their work-life balance and care roles; they’re making localized switches among industries, or reshuffling, rather than exiting the labor market entirely; and, because of pandemic-related fears, they’re demonstrating a reluctance to return to in-person jobs.”

These same concerns fed into the societal conversation around “Quiet Quitting” in 2022. Quiet Quitting refers to the limited commitment of employees to complete tasks above and beyond their job descriptions³ and has also been characterized by Gallup as a decrease in job engagement.⁴ Like the Great Resignation, Quiet Quitting is likely related to feelings of underappreciation at work.⁵ The large cultural shock of COVID-19 in the years prior to these trends being recognized may have served as a catalyst for many employees, inspiring them to rethink how they expect to be treated by their employers and how organizational climates affect their well-being.

In this paper, I discuss how principles of organizational justice⁶ were made salient during COVID-19, and how both the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting are related to these assessments. I will then discuss how organizational climates around inclusivity,⁷ psychological safety,⁸ and family supportive climates (eg, family supportive supervision;⁹) underlie these trends and can mitigate them. Finally, I will conclude with specific evidence-based steps that organizations can take to promote climates that support interpersonal justice and well-being among employees.

Fairness Includes Respect

Being treated with respect at work (or the lack thereof) has been identified as an underlying reason for both the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting. What does it mean to be respected at work? Often, organizations think about fairness when it comes to rewards, or the terms of conditions of employment. Concerns about equity often compare expected rewards (or outputs) between employees, in line with traditional tenets of equity theory.^{10,11} But a more complete approach to understanding fairness at work expands on a historical examination of equality of rewards at work.

Organizational justice refers to employees’ sense of the moral propriety of how they are treated¹² and is seen to “define the very essence of individuals’ relationship to employers” (12, pg. 34). Organizational justice integrates tenets from equity theory in its discussion of distributive justice, including both procedural justice and interpersonal components of procedural justice.^{6,13} Distributive justice is the fairness of ends—or outcomes¹³—including fairness in rewards, pay, or resources. Procedural justice is the fairness of the means used to achieve those ends,^{6,13} including the specific organizational procedures and processes used to allot rewards or disseminate pay and benefits.

Bies and Moag¹⁴ identified *interactional justice* as a third component, which referred to feelings of fairness around the interactions of one’s supervisors while procedures were being enforced.¹⁵ This “third wave” of organizational justice,¹⁶ followed distributive and procedural justice in the canon of organizational justice as a holistic construct. Colquitt¹⁷ built upon this to demonstrate that interactional justice is comprised of two sub-components: interpersonal justice—not only if procedures are transparent and fair, but if people are treated equally and

¹The Healthier Workforce Center of the Midwest, Tippie College of Business, University of Iowa, USA

respectfully—and what he called “informational justice”; or whether people have equal access to information. It is telling that a critical item in the scale assessing interpersonal justice is: “To what extent does your organization treat people with respect?”. It is the component of interpersonal justice that I will discuss in this paper, particularly as it relates to work and well-being outcomes.

Interpersonal Justice and Work and Well-Being Outcomes

Overall perceptions of justice at work have been shown to be related to health and wellbeing outcomes^{18,19} and workplace outcomes,²⁰ and the component of interpersonal justice is no different. Interpersonal justice can lead to employees having a better relationship with their organization and engaging in organizational citizenship behaviors that elevate and enhance the organization,^{21,22} like being attentive at work, not missing work, and engaging in behaviors that praise the organization.

Interpersonal injustice is particularly salient for employees. Perceptions that one has been treated unfairly interpersonally are related to counterproductive work behaviors like putting little effort into work and treating coworkers rudely,²³ and research has suggested that disrespect seeds disrespect at work, resulting in toxic cycle of injustice and incivility. Conversely, engaging in interpersonally just behaviors are replenishing to one’s personal resources,²⁴ meaning that respect breeds respect. The more mindful a leader is to the treatment of their employees, the more likely they are to engage in interpersonally just behaviors, which reduces employee stress.²⁵ The role of interpersonal justice in employee experiences at work cannot be overstated.

And, because interpersonal justice is one component of organizational justice that is within a supervisor’s control, it becomes even more important to get it right. If an employee experiences distributive injustice, for instance, in that their salary is less than a coworker’s salary, it may be less likely to be attributed to a specific supervisor compared to being blamed on the organization overall. But when a supervisor acts disrespectfully to their subordinate, it may be seen differently. The interpersonal component of organizational justice is thus particularly critical to enhancing employee well-being and reducing withdrawal and turnover from work.²⁶

Interpersonal Justice and Climates at Work

This desire for interpersonal justice is likely a key reason why we have seen heightened turnover (ie, “the Great Resignation”) and people withdrawing from doing extra work in their companies (ie, “Quiet Quitting”). It also underpins much of the discussion around the type of climate that an employee experiences in their workplace. The climates that employees experience in their workplace are comprised of input from their work group, team, or department and are co-created by both people in the group and the supervisor that manages the group.²⁷ An interpersonally just workplace can be promoted via various types of supportive work climates.

Inclusive Climates

Inclusive climates are those that eliminate identity-related bias stemming from interpersonal and relational connections with coworkers and managers.⁷ In an inclusive climate, identities are not related to organizational resources, there are opportunities for

everyone to establish connections across their differences, and people’s voices are respected and requested in relation to organizational policy and practice. Nishii⁷ and others have shown that these types of climates are associated with reduced bias and reduced group conflict, which can mean less turnover among diverse groups in the workplace. The role of the leader here is particularly important, as diverse groups are not automatically more inclusive. A leader who promotes inclusive climates can make them more likely to emerge.²⁸

Psychological Safety Climates can explain why interpersonal justice thrives in an inclusive climate. Psychological safety climate refers to shared perceptions that the team will not punish or reject someone for speaking up.⁸ This type of climate is important for promoting interpersonal justice because, at its core, it is about respect and trust. It also underlies much of Nishii’s⁷ conception of an inclusive climate as one that allows people to speak up without fear of reprisal. A psychologically safe climate can promote performance²⁹ and creativity³⁰ in a group, and thus is important for its own sake—but also serves as an important tool for organizations looking to avoid some of the pitfalls discussed above.

Shared Sisterhood Safe Climates

Recent work by Opie and Livingston^{31,32} has demonstrated the importance of interpersonal connection in promoting equity and fairness at work across race and gender. Shared Sisterhood is a philosophy to promote racial and gender equity at work that focuses on building authentic connections across differences that involves introspection and connection to create change. Authentic connections may indeed be the missing link that explains why members of marginalized groups perceive greater injustice, even when their workplaces have inclusive climates.³³ Shared Sisterhood Safe climates build on the idea of psychological safety and include role modeling of dig and bridge (the critical Shared Sisterhood practices) by managers. They also include structural reforms around the promotion of authentic connections among coworkers. The desire to change a climate is not enough—you need managerial role-modeling and incentives from the organization itself to create change.

Family Friendly Climates

The autonomy to set boundaries and control boundaries between work and home and around the types of tasks employees are required to do (eg, [34,35](#)) fosters a sense of trust and demonstrates respect. Managers who enact family-supportive behaviors promote these feelings.⁹ When companies grant their employees autonomy over the ways in which they do their work and manage their non-work responsibilities, it demonstrates trust and fosters a reciprocation via increased commitment.^{36,37} Autonomy is a core job characteristic³⁸ that promotes motivation and job satisfaction, and when considered in relation to work and family related responsibilities, it serves an important function to communicate trust and respect to workers.

Promoting employee well-being, then, is not just about traditional wellness programs or focusing on formal policies and procedures, but identifying the mechanisms that result in the outcomes of decreased turnover and increased commitment, such interpersonal justice, and working on broader changes that can increase those feelings among employees. Importantly, focusing on interpersonally just workplaces, and the different specific types of work climates that support this type of fairness, refocuses us on changing and improving work conditions

for all workers. It is thus not about the type of work an employee does, but the type of workplace they are in. This helps shift the conversation from changing work requirements (eg, can manufacturing workers work remotely?) to improving the ways in which their workplaces respect them regardless of work requirements.

Creating Fair Climates at Work

How can you support interpersonal fairness initiatives in the workplace? Each of the above climates at work may promote interpersonal fairness, and there are a number of steps that individual managers and wellness leaders who are trying to enact change can consider.

- a. **Recognize your power.** What power do you have in any particular work context to promote respect and fairness? Everyone has power related to their position in the workplace, as well as their relations with others, to create change. Are you a manager? A team leader? Do you have more tenure than your colleagues? Perhaps you have a better relationship with a manager that affords you greater opportunities to ask questions or promote the group's interests? When trying to create a climate of interpersonal justice, everyone plays a role. Informal leadership positions come with role-modeling opportunities as well and can be an opportunity to start crafting climates focused on interpersonal justice.
- b. **Ask good questions.** Employees and managers can use questions to gather information about what a team needs to feel like they are being treated fairly. When asking questions of coworkers and colleagues to understand their experiences, be careful to not ask questions that imply the answer you are looking for or demonstrate that there is a "correct" answer (or that an incorrect one could result in reprisals). Be open to answers that disconfirm your priors. And, if you have not created a psychologically safe culture (yet), then you should set up methods for feedback that will help you to identify the most pressing problems to solve without employees feeling a risk of backlash.
- c. **Beyond the Golden Rule.** Often, we think about the "golden rule" which suggests that you should treat people as they would want to be treated. But because interpersonal justice is about fairness and respect, it may be more apropos to think not about yourself, but about how others want—and need—to be treated. Transformational leaders, for instance, spend time individually considering the needs of their followers to make sure that they feel heard and respected.³⁹ We know that these types of actions can promote commitment^{40,41} and can contribute to feelings of interpersonal justice.
- d. **Connect authentically.** Connecting with others in real, authentic ways, is key to promote feelings of trust and respect. Finding ways to enhance and engage in high-quality connections at work can promote feelings of respect and trust. High quality connections are "micro-bits of interrelating at work" that are positive and can contribute to a relationship over time.^{42,43} Interactions that are positive and fulfilling and energizing can help enhance the workplace context and promote feelings of fairness. They can also serve as a foundation for further development of deeper relationships that promote respect.

- e. **Recognize contextual factors.** Manager awareness of the contextual factors that could interfere with policies focused on interpersonal justice is a critical step toward creating climates where people are trusted and respected at work. For instance, the shift to remote work in response to COVID is an example of a contextual factor that may worsen or improve climates around interpersonal justice. When considering implementation of shared sisterhood safe climates, for instance, the desire to connect authentically with others may be affected by a dearth of face-to-face interactions. This may mean that managers and organizations need to establish structures and opportunities to center these sorts of interpersonal connections and to highlight interpersonal fairness in the form of trust and respect. Likewise, the current staffing shortages among many professions and firms may exacerbate interpersonal injustice if workloads are shifted among coworkers in ways that do not facilitate trust and respect. If people are expected to or coerced into taking on additional responsibilities, companies should be aware of the long-term negative effects on well-being and commitment that could occur due to perceptions of injustice.

The shifting norms around work during COVID-19 have made interpersonal justice increasingly salient for workers, as evidenced by the popular attention paid to things like the "Great Resignation" and "Quiet Quitting". Refocusing attention on the underlying mechanisms affecting worker wellbeing and commitment will help workplaces to actually improve the worklives of their employees and reduce the likelihood of employee turnover and withdrawal.

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