

Can a boss be fair?

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Often a taboo subject, fairness is one of the expectations that has come up most often in my explorations over the last 25 years. To the question: “What makes a good boss, what do you expect from him or her?”, the need for fairness is always mentioned. Fairness, justice, equity are the terms most often used.

The fact is that we all very much resent injustice, especially if it affects us personally. If we feel we are being unfairly treated, we tend to react. Something is triggered deep inside us, we feel acutely uncomfortable. Even the other primates have a keen sense of fairness. This is demonstrated by a very revealing experiment: YouTube: “monkeys reject unequal pay¹”

Definition

Fairness is a moral principle of social life, based on recognition of and respect for the rights of others, which may stem from natural law (**equity**) or positive law (man-made laws). Justice is also the power to act to ensure that these rights are recognized and respected (hence the expression “to do justice”). Fairness is therefore the consistent quality of rendering to each person what is due to him or her in keeping with the principles of natural justice; impartiality.

During my lectures, training courses and workshops, or when I tackle the subject of fairness with senior company managers (boards of directors, management) and with employees, I always ask them if a boss can be fair.

After a moment's indecision, three categories tend to emerge:

1. those who fairly quickly and spontaneously answer “YES”, around 5%;
2. those who, on reflection, say “a boss **MUST** be fair”, around 10%;
3. and, finally, the majority, who say “NO”, around 85%.

Here are my answers and the thoughts I want to share with you:

When we go home in the evening, we need to be able **to look at ourselves in the mirror** and say that we have done our best in following our conscience. But perhaps we didn't have all the information we needed, or something escaped us, and we took an unfair decision where one or more people were concerned. If this is the case, I can/should apologize. I'm human like everyone else. The truth is, we can but do our best. This is my answer to those who say that a person **MUST** be fair.

Those who say “no” realize that a further dimension is involved: individual perception. The fact is, it is all a question of **perception**.

What is fair for me, as I see it, is not necessarily so for another person.

If you want to check this out, ask a number of people what “fairness” means for them. You will find that they all mention different aspects. Of course, some aspects will be similar, but there will also be differences.

So it is better not to ask the question: “Was I fair?”, but rather: “**Was I perceived to be fair?**” The key to what makes a good boss therefore lies in this question.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOtIN4pNArk>

If you bear in mind the nine dimension of a good boss (see the 8-minute video at www.lp3leadership.com), you will see which dimensions directly influence people's perception of fairness. These dimensions are presented in a number of my earlier articles.

First of all, your values and the example you set. When these two factors are in harmony, you can be said to have "integrity", which lays the basis for trust. Secondly, your being present will enhance your authenticity and, finally, your ability to communicate (transparency, sincerity) will enable people to follow your arguments. As a result, your decisions will not be challenged. Maybe your employees will not fully understand them but, as they trust you, they will not call your decisions into question. BINGO, you have done your job. If your decisions and actions are called into question, you will have to spend a lot of time and energy explaining, arguing, correcting and justifying yourself. This may lead to your losing legitimacy, or even respect.

Provide a clear framework

Establishing a clear framework is also very important where fairness is concerned. It is vital to have laid down rules, standards and principles of conduct that give people the guidance they need.

For example, if I am driving on the motorway at 160 kph and am caught on a traffic camera, I may well be irritated, but I know I have broken a rule and that I have to pay up. The rule is clear and so are the consequences.

These principles are equally valid in private life, for example in bringing up your children. It is important to lay down clear rules and the related consequences, and communicate them as and when appropriate.

Where rules are concerned, it is important not to make exceptions, except in documented and well-justified circumstances. Any deviation will undermine your credibility and the credibility of the system.

So, employees expect their managers to demonstrate fairness. They must reward and correct their employees as fairly as possible. If a person is perceived to be fair, his or her decisions will not be constantly called into question.

Self-reflection

- When do you feel you are being treated fairly?
- How do you react to injustice?
- How do you make sure you are perceived to be a fair manager?
- Can you "look at yourself in the mirror" in the evening after work?

Quotation

"Anyone who treats two people equally treats one of them wrong."
(Viktor Frankl, 1905-1997)

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