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Preface

Conventional wisdom posits that our reactions to events and decisions depend on the outcomes we receive, or what happens, and the processes associated with those outcomes, or how things happen. As implied by the expression, “It’s not only what you say, but also how you say it,” we generally react positively when our outcomes are favorable and when the process accompanying the outcome is fair. In this book, I suggest that conventional wisdom underplays the complexity of how we are affected by what happens and how things happen. More often than not, the effects of outcomes and processes cannot be considered in isolation of one another; the effects of what you say depend on how you say it.

This book examines how the favorability of outcomes interacts with the fairness of the process to influence what people think, feel, and do. Among the questions considered are why such interaction effects are theoretically and practically important, when they are more versus less likely to happen, why they happen, and how they happen. To be sure, this is hardly the first scholarly treatment of the interactive relationship between outcome favorability and process fairness. Initial research was conducted by Robert Folger and his colleagues (e.g., Folger, Rosenfield, & Robinson, 1983), and Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) reviewed many studies that showed evidence of an interactive relationship between outcome favorability and process fairness. One way to describe the interaction effect is that people’s tendencies to respond better when their outcomes are more favorable is reduced when process fairness is high rather than low.

Research conducted and theory developed since 1996 have taught us a great deal about the “process–outcome” interaction. For one thing, it has been shown to take different forms. Many studies continue to find that high process fairness reduces the effect of outcome favorability on employees’ attitudes and behaviors relative to when process fairness is low. However, other studies have found that high process fairness heightens the effect of outcome favorability relative to when process fairness is low. This book takes the Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996)
review article as its point of departure and essentially asks the following questions: What have we learned since then about the interactive relationships between outcomes and processes? Just as important, why should organizational scholars and practitioners care? Not only does the book provide a contemporary look at the burgeoning area of organizational justice, but also it forges numerous connections between organizational justice and other prominent literatures in organizational and social psychology, such as trust, social identity, attribution theory, regulatory focus theory, and cross-cultural differences in people’s beliefs and behaviors, to name a few.

Whereas there is a host of excellent books on organizational justice, relatively few provide a unifying, research-based lens through which to view a great deal of recent work in the area. Two of the seminal scholarly books on procedural justice were those of Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Lind and Tyler (1988). In both instances, the authors took a hard-nosed, research-based approach; this book does likewise. I try to demonstrate that much of the interesting work in the justice arena may be organized around the interactive relationships between outcome favorability and process fairness. Whereas Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Lind and Tyler (1988) argued for the importance of process fairness over and above the effects of outcome favorability, my thesis is not that process fairness influences people “over and above” outcomes, but rather that process fairness needs to be considered in conjunction with outcome favorability; that is, process fairness may be more versus less consequential, depending on people’s outcomes.

My intended audience consists of scholars and sophisticated laypeople with an interest in theory and research in the broad arena of microorganizational behavior, with particular emphasis on organizational justice as well as related literatures in social psychology. The book describes a great deal of empirical research but tries to do so in a reader-friendly way. For instance, little mathematical sophistication is required to understand the research evidence presented.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

The first chapter locates the interactive relationship between outcome favorability and process fairness within the broader literature in organizational justice and offers a host of reasons why the interactive relationship is theoretically and practically important. As suggested, the process–outcome interaction takes two rather different empirical forms. High process fairness may reduce the impact of outcome favorability on people’s beliefs and behaviors, relative to when process fairness is low, or it may heighten the effect of outcome favorability. Chapters 2 and 3 describe many noteworthy empirical and conceptual advances pertaining to the former interactive relationship, whereas Chapter 4 does so for the latter. Chapter 5 is designed to integrate the two interactive
relationships by delineating when and why one rather than the other is more likely to emerge.

Chapter 6 locates both interaction effects in broader conceptual spaces. As well replicated as the effects are, they are part of a broader constellation of factors that drive people's beliefs and behaviors. By connecting the interaction effects to the “bigger picture,” I hope to broaden their reach and to shed light on matters of conceptual importance outside the confines of the organizational justice literature. Finally, whereas I suggest early on that the process–outcome interactions have applied significance, and allude to this point throughout, Chapter 7 explicitly considers the practical implications of the interactive relationships between outcome favorability and process fairness.

As much as we have learned about the process–outcome interactions and their implications, there is still much more that we need to know. Accordingly, I have sprinkled recommendations for further research throughout all of the chapters. I hope that at least some of my specific suggestions are pursued. More generally, I hope that this book inspires justice scholars to embark on their own programs of research and find them to be as enjoyable as this one has been, and continues to be, for me.

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I also benefitted greatly from the feedback of the many gifted scholars who offered insightful comments on previous drafts of the manuscript: Corinne Bendersky, Ramona Bobocel, Steve Blader, Art Brief, Jared Curhan, Adam Grant, Larry Heuer, Rebecca Levine, Roy Lewicki, Joshua Margolis, Andy Molinsky, Michael Morris, Jochen Reb, Deborah Rupp, Kelly See, and Kees Van den Bos. To all of you, a heartfelt thanks.
CHAPTER 7

Practical Applications

INTRODUCTION

Whereas the preceding chapters emphasized the conceptual and empirical importance of the interactive relationships between process fairness and outcome favorability, this chapter deals with their practical implications. In particular, I consider how theory and research may be brought to bear on matters about which practitioners are likely to care. Of course, how we academics can best make connections with practitioners is a long-standing question of considerable complexity and significance. In recent years, writers such as Malcolm Gladwell (the author of *Blink*), Daniel Goleman (the author of *Working With Emotional Intelligence*), and James Surowiecki (the author of *The Wisdom of Crowds*) have been able to distill the essence of well-conceived but somewhat technical theory and research into works that are accessible to the more general public. Furthermore, several organizational scholars (e.g., Max Bazerman, Chip Heath, and Jeffrey Pfeffer) have written trade book versions of their and others’ academic work in an attempt to make the ideas of academics known to larger audiences, including practitioners of management.

It is beyond the scope of this book to delineate how researchers may cross the practice divide most effectively; for a more detailed discussion of this matter, see the October 2007 issue of the *Academy of Management Review*. It seems safe to say, however, that if we are not working on matters that practitioners care about, whether we can cross the divide is not likely to be consequential. Hence, this chapter considers some of the more attention-worthy practical considerations implicit in the interactive relationships between outcome favorability and process fairness.
Among the parties who most stand to benefit by drawing on the practical implications of the interaction effects are (1) people in positions of authority (e.g., managers in work organizations), who are trying to gain support for their decisions, themselves, and the institutions that they represent, and (2) those who are affected by the authorities’ decisions (e.g., the direct reports of those managers). In seminars with executive audiences, I often show them the process–outcome interaction effect illustrated in Figure 1.1 (see Chapter 1) and engage them in dialogue about how such findings may be applicable to their work. They always “get it,” albeit in different ways.

Some focus on the message that high outcome favorability reduces the impact of process fairness relative to when outcomes are unfavorable. Consistent with the age-old adage, “all’s well that ends well,” the takeaway for these executives is that as long as they can give their people the outcomes they want, they do not need to attend as much to how they go about doing so. Implementing decisions with high process fairness often takes time and psychological energy, which may be in short supply for decision-making authorities. For example, allowing people to have input may slow a decision-making process, as may the interactional fairness elements of providing explanations or treating people with dignity and respect. In a semihumorous defense of the sometimes-brusque behavior of New York City firefighters, a senior executive in the city’s fire department said: “We figure that if we are saving your life, we don’t have to concern ourselves with how courteously or politely we behave.”

Other managers focus on the message that high process fairness reduces the influence of outcome favorability relative to when process fairness is low. In other words, the takeaway is that if the process is done fairly they do not have to concern themselves as much with whether people will be satisfied with the outcomes of the decision. Given that it could be quite economically costly to implement decisions with high outcome favorability, the practical relevance of this observation virtually speaks for itself. In short, whereas I have yet to hear executives utter the words, “interactive relationship between outcome favorability and process fairness,” they nevertheless are able to conceptualize the interaction effect in ways that are meaningful to them.

At first blush, these two ways in which executives assign meaning to the interaction effect depicted in Figure 1.1 seem to suggest that outcome favorability and process fairness are interchangeable, in that implementing decisions with a high level of one of these dimensions reduces the need to do so with a high level of the other dimension. However, there is more to it than that, which managers also are quick to realize. Usually, the economic costs of giving many people the outcomes that they want far outweigh the economic costs of implementing decisions to many people with high process fairness. Thus, when done on a large-scale basis, the enactment of high outcome favorability is usually much more cost prohibitive than is implementing decisions with high process fairness. This is an important consideration for managers,
whose jobs, after all, often entail gaining the greatest employee support in ways that are least financially costly to their organizations.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Drawing on empirical evidence, I begin by making the business case for why it is important for managers to practice high process fairness. Studies examining the interaction effect set forth in Chapters 2 and 3 contribute mightily to this case. They show that particularly in the face of unfavorable outcomes, high process fairness (which may be relatively inexpensive financially) engenders employee attitudes and behaviors that contribute positively to the bottom line. The next section of the chapter elaborates on a paradox embedded in the preceding sentence, that is, if high process fairness in the face of unfavorable outcomes makes such good business sense, then why is high process fairness not practiced even more regularly? Drawing on expectancy theory, I cite a variety of motivational forces that may impede the practice of high process fairness. The emerging picture is one in which managers may be experiencing a good deal of ambivalence. On the one hand, practicing high process fairness is both a business imperative and a moral imperative. On the other hand, managers are subjected to a host of forces that make it difficult for them to practice high process fairness.

Given these conflicting influences, I next consider some of the individual and organizational factors that make managers more versus less likely to exhibit high process fairness. The chapter concludes by considering two points of intrigue: (1) The conundrum managers are likely to experience when they deliver unfavorable outcomes. Doing so with low process fairness, on the one hand, may cause the recipients to feel resentful toward management; on the other hand, doing so with high process fairness may cause recipients to feel badly about themselves. (2) There is the prospect that enacting high process fairness may become more important in the future than it is now (and it is hardly unimportant now). Given the technological advances that have made it easier to record and publicize people’s behavior, the stakes associated with whether people in authority positions exhibit high process fairness may be even greater in the years ahead.

PRACTICING HIGH PROCESS FAIRNESS: MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE

Whereas some managers readily see how the process–outcome interaction has applied relevance, others may need a bit more persuading. For example, it is one thing to say that high process fairness does not cost much (relative to high outcome favorability). It is another thing to illustrate how managers and the organizations that they represent
stand to benefit by planning and implementing decisions with high process fairness. Fortunately, the latter type of evidence is beginning to build, based on studies examining or related to the interactive relationship between outcome favorability and process fairness considered in Chapters 2 and 3. Some of these studies showed how high process fairness helps to “soften blows” that would otherwise have a negative impact on the organization’s bottom line. Other studies suggested that once outcome favorability has reached a moderate level, companies may be better advised to focus on high process fairness than to enact the typically more expensive strategy of trying to provide outcomes that are more than moderately favorable. I explain both of these points further.

**High Process Fairness as Blow Softener**

Organizations sometimes inflict unfavorable outcomes on their employees, which could lead employees to respond in ways that are economically harmful to the organization. By reducing the sting associated with unfavorable outcomes, high process fairness makes people less likely to engage in retaliatory behaviors that may be costly to the organization.

**Employee Dismissals and Wrongful Termination**

Lind, Greenberg, Scott, and Welchans (2000) found that one of the strongest predictors of whether employees file a wrongful termination lawsuit is their perception of the fairness with which the termination process was implemented. The more that employees felt that their former managers (1) were concerned about being fair, (2) were sympathetic to their needs, (3) explained the reasons for the termination, and (4) were honest and up-front in dealing with them, the less likely they were to file suit. More specifically, only 1% of ex-employees who felt that they were treated with high process fairness (in which they gave ratings of 5 on a 5-point scale) filed a wrongful termination lawsuit. However, those who believed that they were not treated with process fairness (those who gave ratings of 1 on the same 5-point scale) filed lawsuits at a much greater rate: 17%.

Based on a 20-year-old (and hence conservative) estimate of what it costs a company to defend itself against a wrongful termination suit ($80,000), for every 100 employees that a company dismisses, the expected cost savings of practicing high process fairness is $1,280,000. This figure is calculated as the difference in expected costs when process fairness is low ($1,360,000; i.e., $80,000 times 17) versus high ($80,000; i.e., $80,000 times 1). Moreover, inflation during these past 20 years alone would cause the $80,000 figure to swell to more than $120,000 today. Of course, what is less clear is the financial cost of practicing high process fairness in the termination process. Given the nature of high process fairness in this study (e.g., expressing genuine concern to the dismissed employees and treating them with dignity and
respect), it seems quite likely that the costs of enacting high process fairness are considerably lower than $1,280,000 for every 100 dismissed employees (or, nearly $13,000 for each dismissed employee).

The relationship between process fairness and the filing of lawsuits is not limited to exchanges between employers and their former employees. Customers also are more likely to file suit against a service provider when they are not treated with process fairness. Levinson, Roter, Mullooly, Dull, and Frankel (1997) found that patients typically do not sue their doctors for malpractice simply because they believe that they received poor medical care. A more telling factor is whether the doctor took the time needed to explain his or her treatment plan (those less likely to be sued took 18.3 minutes with each patient whereas those more likely to be sued took 15.0 minutes, a mere difference of slightly more than 3 minutes) and to answer the patient’s questions with care and concern, in short, to treat patients with high process fairness. In comparing the doctors who were more versus less likely to be sued for malpractice, Gladwell (2005) reported that, “There was no difference in the amount or quality of information they gave their patients; they didn’t provide more details about medication or the patient’s condition. The difference was entirely in how they talked to their patients” (p. 42).

Pay Cuts, Employee Theft, and Voluntary Turnover

Whereas theft and turnover clearly differ (in that the former is unethical, whereas the latter usually is not), both are costly to an organization’s bottom line. Theft is obviously costly. Moreover, a 2004 study by the Employment Policy Foundation showed that the average cost of turnover for a full-time worker in the private sector is more than $13,000 (and is many times larger than that among managers). Greenberg (1990) studied the effects of process fairness on theft and turnover in the face of the unfavorable outcome of temporary pay cuts that employees had to endure in two manufacturing plants. Employees in one of the plants were treated with relatively little process fairness. A company vice president simply called a meeting at the end of the work week in which he took 15 minutes to announce the pay cut, explain why it was necessary, thank employees, and answer a few questions.

In the other plant, the identical pay cut was implemented with higher process fairness (Greenberg, 1990). The meeting in which this pay cut was announced was run by the company president. Employees were told at that time that other cost-saving options had been considered, such as layoffs, but that the pay cuts were deemed to be the least unpalatable-choice. Much like the doctors who were less likely to be sued for malpractice, the company president in this instance took more time to address employees’ questions and concerns (the meeting lasted for 90 minutes rather than for 15). Furthermore, the company president repeatedly expressed regret about having to reduce employees’ pay.
The results showed that the rate of both employee theft and voluntary turnover in the plant treated with higher process fairness was significantly less than that shown by those who had the same pay cut delivered with lower process fairness (Greenberg, 1990). Again, it is difficult to assess the economic costs to the company to enact the pay cut with higher process fairness. However, it seems safe to say that a 90-minute meeting held by the company president (relative to the 15-minute meeting held by a vice president) more than paid for itself in the form of reducing employee theft and voluntary turnover.

Work–Life Conflict and Organizational Commitment

Whereas layoffs and pay cuts refer to relatively discrete or infrequent “unfavorable outcomes” that may cause people to behave in ways that are costly to their employers, certain conditions cause employees to experience unfavorable outcomes on a more continual basis. Consider work–life conflict as a case in point. Many organizations do little to help employees manage their work–life conflict, perhaps figuring that the responsibility rests on employees’ shoulders. Organizations that do try to lend a helping hand often do so in the form of costly programs or policies. As described in Chapter 2, studies by Siegel et al. (2005) revealed an additional strategy for dealing with work–life conflict: high process fairness. Siegel et al. discovered that work–life conflict had no effect on employees’ organizational commitment, provided that they felt that senior executives (1) generally provided good reasons for organizational decisions and (2) generally treated them with dignity and respect. Again, high process fairness softened the blow associated with unfavorable outcomes, in that employees were willing to remain committed to their organizations when work–life conflict was high if (and only if) executives in their organizations practiced high process fairness.

“Show Me the High Process Fairness”

In the movie Jerry Maguire, the character played by Cuba Gooding Jr. uttered the now-famous line, “Show me the money.” Indeed, when it comes to dealing with certain human resource management problems, some companies (presumably the more well-off ones) appear to have heeded this advice. For example, downsizing organizations sometimes offer much in the way of tangible resources to the people who are losing their jobs, such as severance pay, assistance in finding other jobs (including but not limited to outplacement counseling), and continuation of health insurance or other kinds of benefits until people become gainfully reemployed. And, as discussed in Chapter 2, companies sometimes expend huge resources to help their expatriate employees adjust to their overseas assignments. The results of several studies suggest, however, that there may be a more cost-effective way to handle things. As long as executives practice high process fairness, they may be able
to reduce dramatically (note: not eliminate) the amount of tangible and costly assistance that their firms need to offer.

Survivors' Reactions to Downsizing

In a series of studies, my colleagues and I examined whether the perceived size of the severance package given to those who lost their jobs affected the organizational commitment of the employees who remained (Brockner et al., 1994). One might have expected that survivors would be committed to the organization when they believed that the severance package was large (i.e., that there would be a positive main effect of the perceived size of the package given to the layoff victims on the organizational commitment of those who remained). Instead, we found an interactive relationship between process fairness and outcome favorability. Specifically, the perceived size of the package was weakly or not at all related to survivors' organizational commitment when the organization handled the layoffs with high process fairness. Thus, whether survivors believed that companies spent a large amount or only a moderate amount in providing for the terminated employees did not lead to differences in survivors' organizational commitment, provided that the layoffs were implemented with high process fairness. It was only the survivors who believed that the layoffs were handled with low process fairness who showed a positive relationship between the perceived size of the package and their organizational commitment.

Managing Expatriates

When expatriates depart prematurely from their overseas assignments, it may be extremely costly to their organizations (and often to the expats themselves). Conventional wisdom has it that expats are prone to depart prematurely if they or their family members have not adjusted well to their living conditions. Accordingly, companies often go to great expense to facilitate the adjustment of expats and their family members. As described in Chapter 2, Garonzik et al. (2000) evaluated how much expatriates' and their family members' adjustment to various aspects of their lives outside work (e.g., housing, schooling, and health care) was related to the expats' intention to depart prematurely from their overseas assignments. The results showed that how well expatriates and their family members had adjusted to their living conditions had little effect on expatriates' intentions to depart prematurely, provided that the expats believed that their bosses generally treated them with high process fairness (e.g., allowed them to have input into decisions). In other words, even when they or their family members had not adjusted particularly well to their living conditions, high process fairness provided them with an impetus to "tough it out" and not return prematurely from their overseas assignments. In contrast, when process fairness was low, expats were much more likely to think seriously
of departing prematurely if they (or their family members) were less rather than more well adjusted to their living conditions.

I do not mean to suggest that when managing survivors’ reactions to downsizing or expatriates’ adjustment to their overseas assignments, organizational authorities should unilaterally provide high process fairness instead of offering tangible support. Rather, the takeaway message from theory and research is that organizations need to provide some tangible support even as its authorities practice high process fairness. How much tangible support to offer is perhaps best captured by the expression “the law of diminishing returns.” Once a moderate level of tangible support has been offered, it may be much more cost-effective for organizations to practice high process fairness than it is for them to allocate additional tangible resources to the challenge at hand. For example, to address employees’ work–life conflict, organizations have invested in many costly policies and programs, including day care centers, stress reduction programs, gymnasiums, concierge services, dependent care, and elder care allowances. These are worthwhile endeavors that may increase employees’ commitment to their jobs and organizations. However, companies may not need to “go overboard” in providing tangible support (which is financially costly), provided that the practice of high process fairness is integral to their organizational culture.

THE PARADOX OF PROCESS FAIRNESS

To authorities seeking to gain support for their decisions and the organizations that they represent, high process fairness seems to have many desirable features. The behaviors that comprise high process fairness usually are not financially prohibitive. Moreover, as I suggested in the preceding section, high process fairness has positive effects on employees’ attitudes and behaviors that directly or indirectly influence the bottom line. In addition to these sound business reasons for managers to practice high process fairness, doing so will help them to satisfy the moral imperative. For every element of process fairness (e.g., voice, giving explanations, etc.), the more that it is practiced, the more that the agent is behaving in an ethically appropriate fashion. Indeed, one of Leventhal et al.’s (1980) six elements of procedural justice is the ethicality rule, which refers to how much decision makers use procedures that are compatible with existing moral and ethical standards.

Given all that high process fairness has going for it, one might expect managers to practice it to a high or even to a very high degree. The paradox, however, is that this appears not to be the case. For example, in an executive education program at Columbia Business School (which has been attended by more than 500 managers from organizations and industries all over the world), we ask participants to complete a 360-degree feedback exercise in which they rate themselves (and are rated by their boss, peers, direct reports, and customers) as agents of
organizational change. This 34-item instrument covers various elements of successful change implementation, including surfacing dissatisfaction with the status quo, providing a vision of the future, having a process in place to move people from the dissatisfying status quo to the more alluring future state, and helping organizational members work through their resistance to change. Of 34 items, there is only 1 in which people rate themselves significantly more positively than how they are rated by each of the other rater groups: “When managing change, I make extra efforts to treat people with dignity and respect.” These findings suggest that when they are planning and implementing change, managers practice process fairness (or, at least, the interactional justice element of process fairness) far less than others think that they do.

Further evidence that process fairness is not practiced nearly enough came from a spate of studies (seven at last count; for a review, see Skarlicki & Latham, 2005) conducted on literally thousands of managers, which have investigated the effects of training managers in process fairness. Study after study showed that managers who completed the training not only were perceived by their subordinates as showing greater process fairness than their untrained counterparts, but also that the subordinates of the trained managers responded more positively than the subordinates of the untrained managers, as measured by their willingness to go the extra 9 yards in doing their work and their commitment to remain with the organization. Several studies even have shown that employees whose managers underwent process fairness training were significantly less insomniac in the face of stressful work conditions (pay cuts and layoffs) relative to employees whose managers had not undergone the training (e.g., Greenberg, 2006). The good news from these studies is that managers can improve their process fairness. The bad news is that, in the absence of training, many if not most managers leave a lot to be desired vis-à-vis the practice of process fairness.

**Accounting for the Paradox of Process Fairness**

The evidence that managers often do not practice high process fairness is somewhat circumstantial; further research is needed to evaluate just how widespread its underperformance is. If, however, high process fairness is at least somewhat underperformed, then for both practical and theoretical reasons it is important to delineate why this is the case. As with any behavior, acting with high process fairness while doling out unfavorable outcomes depends on the motivation and ability levels of the implementers of decisions. Thus far, I identified some of the motivational factors that induce decision implementers to behave with high process fairness: It may cost relatively little financially, it may lead to positive results on the bottom line, and it is the “morally correct” thing to do. Provided that the implementer has the requisite abilities needed to enact high process fairness (e.g., social skill in delivering bad news), then high process fairness should be likely to ensue. This
reasoning suggests that it may be worthwhile to consider the motivation- or ability-based factors that explain why executives do not practice high process fairness.

Motivational Deterrents: An Expectancy Theory Analysis

Based on the expectancy-valence theory of motivation (e.g., Vroom, 1964), there may be at least three sets of motivation-based deterrents to the practice of high process fairness. First, people need to believe that the effort that they put forth in trying to behave with high process fairness while delivering unfavorable outcomes will bear fruit. In the terminology of expectancy theory, this is the E (for effort) that leads to P (for performance) belief. The belief that “E leads to P” is influenced by or reflects people’s perception that they have the ability to perform the focal behavior. If people do not think that they have the ability to perform a certain behavior, they are unlikely to believe that by trying hard they will perform the behavior well. Second, people need to believe that behaving with high process fairness while delivering unfavorable outcomes will elicit certain outcomes. In the language of expectancy theory, this is the belief that “P leads to O” (for outcomes). Third, people need to assign positive value to the outcomes that are perceived to be contingent on the performance of high process fairness. In the terminology of expectancy theory, this is the belief that “O is valued.” Moreover, the expectancy-valence framework is a multiplicative one, suggesting that if any of these three elements is not in place, then the behavior is relatively unlikely to occur. I now consider how each of the three elements of expectancy theory helps us to identify obstacles to the practice of high process fairness.

Obstacles to Believing That E Leads to P

Molinsky and Margolis (2005) suggested that the delivery of unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness requires three sets of skills: technical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. For example, managers delivering the unpleasant news of layoffs have to ensure that they can communicate the message properly rather than sugarcoating or downplaying what is happening (technical), that they are able to handle smoothly the unpleasant behaviors and emotions that may be hurled their way by the pained recipients of the message (interpersonal), and that they can tolerate the various sources of internal discomfort (e.g., guilt and anxiety) they are likely to experience by being the bearer of bad news (intrapersonal). Molinsky and Margolis (2006) provided a vivid example of the intrapersonal challenge experienced by one manager in the course of implementing layoffs:

Internally, there is a nervous stomach, you feel on edge. Sometimes you get physically nauseous or a headache. Very often the night before or
after you have very bad dreams that are not necessarily related to the downsizing itself, but from that stress. There is a degree of nervousness that almost makes you have to step back and say, “I have to be calm, I can’t show that I am nervous about delivering this message.” (p. 149)

Being able to meet the intrapersonal challenge, let alone all three of these challenges, is no simple task. Understandably, many managers may doubt their abilities to do what is necessary, which is to deliver the unfavorable outcome with high process fairness.

A study by Cole and Latham (1997) provided evidence that managers may fail to practice high process fairness when delivering unfavorable outcomes because they do not believe that they have the capability to do so. The purpose of the study was to evaluate whether managers who had been trained to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness would be more likely to do so relative to a control group of managers who had not been trained. The training consisted of a blend of lectures, group discussions, and role-playing exercises, in which the goal was to increase the likelihood that managers would display the behaviors comprising high process fairness (e.g., providing a clear and adequate explanation of why certain decisions were made, allowing the affected parties to express their points of view, and treating the affected parties with dignity and respect). Managers were randomly assigned to be trained or not. Subsequent to the training manipulation, all of them asked one of their subordinates to take part in a hypothetical disciplinary situation in which participants had to administer an unfavorable outcome to the subordinate because of the subordinate’s subpar behavior (e.g., being absent from work on account of taking a second job or not performing well in the afternoon after drinking alcohol during the lunch break).

Managers who were trained were seen as significantly higher in process fairness while taking the disciplinary action relative to their counterparts in the control group who had not been trained. What accounted for the higher process fairness shown by the trained managers? Both prior and subsequent to the training manipulation, all participants completed a measure of their self-efficacy beliefs pertaining to the behaviors comprising high process fairness. As might be expected, managers who had undergone the training developed stronger feelings of self-efficacy pertaining to their ability to enact high process fairness relative to the untrained group. Moreover, these self-efficacy beliefs mediated the effect of the training on the process fairness exhibited by participants when taking disciplinary action (i.e., when delivering unfavorable outcomes).

The flip side of doubting one’s ability to deliver the unfavorable outcome with high process fairness is to be overly confident about one’s ability (or at least tendency) to do so. However, neither bode well for the likelihood that high process fairness will be exhibited. Those who doubt their ability to enact high process fairness are unlikely to be
motivated to do so, as Cole and Latham (1997) found. Instead, they may distance themselves from (or otherwise avoid) the recipients of the unfavorable outcomes, which typically leads to behaviors that are antithetical to high process fairness. Those who overestimate the frequency with which they practice high process fairness (a high percentage, as suggested by the results of the previously described survey of managers attending the Columbia executive education program) either may “come on too strong” (that is, fail to deliver the unfavorable outcome with interpersonal sensitivity) or may not be motivated to improve their process fairness, figuring that they are already enacting it.

Why managers overrate themselves in the practice of process fairness is itself an intriguing question, one worthy of further research. Perhaps they have more access than do outside observers to their intentions to treat others with dignity and respect; unfortunately, they simply may not be very good in reading how those intentions come across in the eyes of others. Another, more self-serving, possibility is wishful thinking. Managers may view treating others with dignity and respect as akin to showing them “common courtesy” (my emphasis). Since most people think that they are better than average (ironically, more than 50% think this to be the case; e.g., Kruger, 1999), they may believe that they generally do better than that which is common. Whatever the reasons, managers’ blind spots about themselves may be yet another barrier to the practice of process fairness.

Obstacles to Believing That P Leads to O

Those who implement decisions may fail to exhibit process fairness because its resulting benefits sometimes may not be obvious. As described in Chapter 2, a study of more than 25,000 Finnish employees examined the relationship between how much they had experienced significant negative life events specifically, the onset of severe illness of a close family member, and the frequency of their sickness-related absences from work over the next 30 months (Elovainio et al., 2007). Participants also rated the extent to which managers in their workplace exhibited process fairness. Consistent with previous research on the health consequences of negative life events, the onset of serious illness of a family member elicited more frequent sickness-related absences relative to that shown by people who did not experience such an unfortunate event (e.g., Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Of greater relevance to the present discussion is the moderating influence of process fairness on the negative life event. That is, the tendency for the negative life event to translate into sickness-related absences depended on how much process fairness employees experienced in the workplace. When process fairness was high, the negative life event was much less likely to lead to sickness-related absences than when process fairness was low. Moreover, this effect lasted for 30 months after the onset of the event. Said differently, not being pretreated with process fairness led to “absences waiting
to happen” (i.e., when employees subsequently encountered negative life events). The fact that high process fairness may have this positive type of spillover effect may not be obvious to organizational authorities, thereby reducing their tendencies to practice high process fairness.

On a related note, recall the aforementioned studies that showed that high process fairness reduced the relationships between (1) how well expatriates and their family members adjusted to their overseas assignments and the expats’ intentions to depart prematurely (Garonzik et al., 2000) and (2) employees’ work–life conflict and their organizational commitment (Siegel et al., 2005). In both of these instances, process fairness referred to employees’ perceptions of how decisions were made in general, not simply about their expatriation experience in the former case or about their work–life conflict in the latter case. The fact that process fairness in contexts other than the focal one may nevertheless spill over to affect people’s reactions to outcomes received in the focal context may not be apparent to managers, which also may explain why high process fairness may be underperformed.

Perhaps the positive spillover effects are attributable to trust (Brockner et al., 1997). That is, when managers generally implement decisions with high process fairness, they are likely to be seen as trustworthy. The perception of trustworthiness in turn may carry over to other situations and thereby have a moderating influence on the favorability of the outcomes received in those situations, such that high trustworthiness reduces the influence of outcome favorability on people’s support for decisions, decision makers, and institutions relative to when trustworthiness is low (Brockner et al., 1997). In any event, the nonobviousness of possible spillover effects of high process fairness may reduce decision makers’ tendencies to practice it.

**Homo Economicus, Run Amok**

Sometimes, implementers’ guiding assumptions may lead them to overlook the possibility that behaving with high process fairness when doling out unfavorable outcomes will be beneficial to their organizations. Thus, when companies are accused of or criticized for some wrongdoing, all too often they try to address the concern by focusing on outcomes, or “what” they do (e.g., adopting an environmentally friendly policy when none existed beforehand), to the relative exclusion of processes, or “how” they go about trying to address the concern. Relatedly, Oberholzer-Gee and Frey (1996) analyzed “siting” decisions, which refers to the act of locating hazardous waste facilities in certain communities. Among their findings is that those who make siting decisions (senior government officials) often do not pay adequate attention to the fairness of the process used to make these decisions (e.g., ensuring the input of various parties who will be affected by the decision, such as residents of the communities in which the facilities will be located) and instead focus almost
entirely on outcomes (i.e., giving the residents more compensation for having the facility located in their community).

To cite another example, driven by outcome- or economically based assumptions, managers who wish to minimize the negative effects of layoffs may believe that they can best reduce the sting of job loss by providing a generous severance package to those who lose their jobs. At a cocktail party not so long ago, the chief executive officer of a major international bank proudly told me about the hefty severance package that his company provided to the people who had been recently downsized from his organization. I expressed admiration for his organization’s obvious show of concern for the layoff victims and then proceeded to ask him the (conversation-ending) question of whether the company had said anything to or done anything for the people who remained. What I had in mind, of course, was whether the organization showed process fairness toward the employees who remained (e.g., explaining why the layoffs were necessary, listening to and trying to respond to their concerns going forward, etc.). Somewhat defensively, he said that he and his senior management team believed that it was only necessary to do something for the employees who were “affected” by the layoffs because, after all, the remaining employees were “lucky enough to still have their jobs.”

On a related note, it is striking how often executives at downsizing companies use the word *affected* when referring to the people who had lost their jobs. The use of this word—perhaps an Orwellian version of “organizational Newspeak”—is misleading in its implication that the employees who remain somehow are *not* affected. In short, it is not that outcome- or economically based solutions are wrong as much as they reflect an *incomplete* understanding of what needs to happen when authorities implement important decisions. It is possible that managers who focus on outcome-based solutions (i.e., the economics of the situation) may do so *in lieu of* process-based solutions (i.e., the psychology of the situation), thereby failing to appreciate fully the benefits of behaving with high process fairness due to their “managerial myopia.” The two types of solutions, however, are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, in a downsizing context, not only does high process fairness elicit more favorable reactions among those who remain, but also it can lead to less unfavorable reactions among those who leave, as indicated by the Lind et al. (2000) finding that employees were much less likely to sue for wrongful termination when they believed that they were treated with interpersonal sensitivity when told that they were being let go.

**Homo Legalicus, Run Amok**

It is one thing to say that high process fairness is not practiced because the benefits of doing so may not be obvious. Yet another explanation is that implementers actually may believe that they or their organizations could suffer harmful consequences if they were to behave with
high process fairness. Authorities exhibit process fairness by providing explanations of their decisions and, more generally, by making themselves available to their people. However, legal counsel may discourage companies from providing explanations or from having their managers make themselves available on the grounds that disclosure of information could make the firm vulnerable to lawsuits. This logic has it that it is better not to say anything at all rather than to risk having the information come back to haunt the firm in the courtroom. Of course, by not saying anything at all process fairness is less likely to be exhibited. Legal considerations about what to communicate are important, of course, but they should not be taken to unnecessary extremes. All too often, firms may withhold information (e.g., that they had considered alternatives to downsizing) when they may have been far better off revealing such information to their employees.

Obstacles to Believing That O Is Valued

I suggested that authorities may be motivated to practice high process fairness because doing so (1) could be financially prudent (i.e., in exchange for behaviors that may cost them and their organizations relatively little money, they may elicit employee attitudes and behaviors that contribute positively to the bottom line) and (2) may help them to satisfy the “moral imperative.” However, this analysis overlooks the possibility that authorities also have other needs, which they may believe are unlikely to be satisfied if they were to behave with high process fairness (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, & Diekmann, 2009). I now discuss three such needs: (1) the desire to wield power and influence, (2) the desire to maintain a positive view of themselves, and (3) the desire to reduce their cognitive loads. In discussing each of these needs, I provide a basis for understanding how managers may believe that the practice of high process fairness may be costly rather than beneficial to them.

Wielding Power and Influence

Authorities may believe that engaging in process fairness represents a threat to their power. One of the main elements of process fairness is allowing those affected by a decision to have input. However, a long-standing obstacle to involving employees in decision making is managers’ beliefs that their own power and influence may be reduced when employees are given a say in how things should be done (Klein, 1984). Moreover, managers who unwaveringly believe that “knowledge is power” may be unwilling to share information, in which case they are unlikely to provide explanations or make themselves available for two-way communications with their direct reports.

Clearly, managers sometimes do run the risk of losing power when they show high process fairness by involving others in decision making or by providing information about why certain decisions were made.
Perhaps even more often, however, the practice of process fairness is likely to increase managers' power and influence. When managers involve their direct reports in decision making or make decisions on the basis of the criteria set forth by Leventhal et al. (1980), such as accuracy and consistency, the direct reports are likely to be intrinsically supportive of (rather than merely compliant with) decisions, their bosses, and the organization as a whole. Indeed, research by Zapata-Phelan, Colquitt, Scott, and Livingston (2008) provided evidence that being treated with high process fairness engenders many of the psychological states that undergird intrinsic motivation, such as perceived control, positive self-regard, and a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Consequently, managers who practice high process fairness and thereby intrinsically motivate their direct reports actually may increase rather than decrease their degree of power and influence over their direct reports (Hill, 1994). Admittedly, building one's power and influence by practicing high process fairness does not happen overnight; it requires managers to be willing to make investments in time or psychological energy that they may be unwilling or unable to do.

Maintaining a Positive Self-View

In their roles as organizational agents, managers typically have incentive to do that which is in the best financial interests of their firms. In addition (and sometimes in conflict with this motive), they want to act in ways that will enable them to enhance or at least protect their self-esteem. Molinsky and Margolis (2005) suggested that decision-making authorities have several reasons to experience the self-esteem-threatening emotion of guilt when doling out unfavorable outcomes. Whereas moderate levels of guilt may induce prosocial behavior, including high process fairness, high levels of guilt may lead authorities to engage in self-protective behaviors, such as psychologically distancing themselves from or avoiding the recipients of the unfavorable outcomes, the very antitheses of high process fairness.

For example, managers may feel guilty if they see themselves as responsible for creating the conditions that made it necessary for them to administer the unfavorable outcomes to the recipients. As Molinsky and Margolis (2005) suggested, “a manager who has failed to coach a poorly performing employee will feel more personal responsibility for creating conditions that necessitate firing that employee than will a manager who has tried, albeit unsuccesfully, to change an employee’s behavior through feedback and mentoring” (p. 251). Folger and Skarlicki (1998) found that when managers were led to believe that others had lost their jobs because of the managers’ mistakes rather than because of market conditions that were beyond the managers’ control, managers were more likely to distance themselves from the people whose jobs were lost. Much like the doctors who were more likely to be sued for malpractice (Levinson et al., 1997), managers who believed that the job...
loss was caused by their own mistakes (rather than market conditions beyond their control) were not willing to spend much time meeting privately with the layoff victims to discuss their dismissals. Furthermore, even if managers do not see themselves as responsible for creating the conditions that made it necessary to administer unfavorable outcomes, they may experience responsibility and hence guilt to the extent that they played a role in the planning or implementation of the decisions that brought about the unfavorable outcomes.

Molinsky and Margolis (2005) suggested that managers’ guilt in delivering unfavorable outcomes also depends on the justifiability of the harm produced in relation to the good achieved: the lower the justifiability, the greater the guilt. Thus, if people receive unfavorable outcomes through no fault of their own, then it is harder for managers to justify delivering them. Or, if the delivery of the unfavorable outcomes is a relatively unusual event (e.g., a previously paternalistic organization that chooses to lay off some of its employees for the first time), it may be seen as less legitimate, less necessary, and therefore less justifiable.

A series of studies by Grant, Molinsky, Margolis, Kamin, and Schiano (2009) provided evidence of how managers may distance themselves from the recipients of unfavorable outcomes (in the form of reduced process fairness) as a way to reduce their guilt. In one study, participants were asked to imagine that they had to deliver the bad news to students that the scholarships that they were expecting to receive were being cut back. (Participants had no say in the making of this decision but rather had to deliver it.) The authority responsible for actually making the decision did so either procedurally fairly or unfairly. Cross-cutting the manipulation of the authority’s procedural fairness was whether participants’ prosocial identities had been made salient to them. For example, those whose prosocial identities had been made salient to them were asked to respond to questions about the extent to which behaving prosocially is central to their sense of identity.

The dependent variables consisted of how much participants experienced negative self-relevant emotions such as guilt and shame and the extent to which they expressed compassion toward the parties who were unfavorably affected by the decision in communicating with them about it. Consistent with previous research on the reactions of the recipients of decisions yielding unfavorable outcomes, when participants’ prosocial identities had not been made salient they experienced more negative affect when the authority who made the decision was procedurally unfair rather than fair (Brockner et al., 2007; Cropanzano & Folger, 1989). Although participants had no say in the making of the procedurally unfair decision, they may have felt badly about being associated with its delivery, causing them to feel worse about themselves. Moreover, the letters that they wrote to the recipients of the decision were more compassionate (i.e., higher in interactional fairness) than when the authority had been procedurally fair.
What about those whose prosocial identities had been made salient to them? Presumably, these participants would not want to violate their now-activated self-concepts that emphasized not doing harm to others. However, by virtue of being in a position in which they had to deliver unfavorable outcomes to others, they were likely to experience a dissonance-arousing, self-threatening psychological state (“I think of myself one way, but I am being asked to behave in a different way”). If the authority responsible for making the decision was procedurally unfair, participants may reduce dissonance by seeing the authority as responsible for the unfavorable outcomes associated with the decision (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001), thereby freeing them from feeling badly about themselves (e.g., guilty) and correspondingly reducing their impetus to behave compassionately toward the recipients of the decision. If the authority was procedurally fair, however, then participants were less able to reduce dissonance by blaming the authority for the unfavorable outcomes that they have to deliver. One way to behave consistently with their prosocial identity when the authority was procedurally fair is by delivering the unfavorable outcome with greater compassion. This reasoning suggests that when people’s prosocial identities had been made salient, they may deliver the news to the affected parties with greater compassion (process fairness) when the authority responsible for making the decision was procedurally fair rather than unfair; in fact, this is exactly what Grant et al. (2009) discovered.

Moreover, in a second study, Grant et al. (2009) replaced the measure of compassion expressed, which is more of an indicator of process fairness, with a measure of how much the harmed parties should be compensated, which is more reflective of distributive fairness. Analogous results emerged: When people’s prosocial identity had not been made salient, the harmed parties received greater compensation when the authority making the decision was procedurally unfair rather than fair, whereas just the opposite occurred when people’s prosocial identity had been made salient.

Reducing Cognitive Load

Molinsky and Margolis’s (2005) analysis also suggests that it is psychologically draining for people to deliver unfavorable outcomes to others, inducing a state known as high cognitive load (“the mentally taxing experience of maintaining heightened awareness and focused attention,” p. 253). Most people do not enjoy being the bearer of bad news (Tesser & Rosen, 1975), and yet the role of delivering unfavorable outcomes requires them to be exactly that. They may find themselves caught between wanting to make things better for the recipients and knowing that doing so is not possible. To make matters worse, the reactions of the recipients may be quite palpable, for example, when the people who have to deliver the unfavorable outcomes identify with the recipients
personally or with the situation in which the recipients find themselves (Brockner, 1990; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005).

While delivering unfavorable outcomes, implementers have to decide whether to do so with higher or lower process fairness. The former typically requires them to make themselves psychologically available, that is, to reduce the psychological distance between themselves and the recipients. Unfortunately, there is a price to pay in reducing psychological distance, namely, an increase in cognitive load. Consequently, they may choose to distance themselves to reduce their cognitive load. Moreover, implementers may distance themselves from the recipients even in the absence of feeling responsible for the recipients’ plights. The receipt of unfavorable outcomes is likely to elicit a host of unpleasant emotions, such as anxiety, anger, and sadness. Studies of emotional contagion have shown that people sometimes take on the emotional states of those around them (Barsade, 2002). Consequently, managers may go into avoidance mode and as a result fail to exhibit high process fairness so they do not “catch” the painful emotions that are being experienced by the recipients of the unfavorable outcomes.

Furthermore, there is even evidence that cognitive load may short-circuit people’s tendencies to experience the very emotions that may predispose them to act with high process fairness, such as sympathy (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002). Hence, when it comes to delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness, implementers may be “caught between a rock and a hard place.” If they experience high levels of emotionality, for example, through the related factors of palpability and contagion, then implementers may expend psychological resources trying to manage their own emotions. Moreover, the inherent complexity of dealing with the technical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal requirements of the task at hand, by heightening cognitive load, may block the onset of the emotions that engender high process fairness. Either way, the chances for unfavorable outcomes to be delivered with high process fairness become remote.

**Ability-Based Deterrents to the Practice of Process Fairness**

Expectancy theory helps to identify some of the reasons why people may not be motivated to practice process fairness. One of these is the belief that E leads to P, which is affected by or reflects people’s beliefs about their abilities to perform the appropriate behavior. Whereas having confidence in their ability to perform the appropriate behavior makes people more motivated to engage in it, it does not ensure that the behavior will be properly enacted. In addition to considering the other two expectancy-theory-based elements of motivation, we need to take into account whether people actually have the abilities needed to perform the behaviors successfully. All behaviors are a function of people’s motivation and ability to enact them. Hence, even if people are
motivated to behave with high process fairness, they may or may not have the ability to do so.

As Molinsky and Margolis (2005) pointed out, doling out unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness requires technical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. It is entirely possible that implementers will be dispositionally deficient in one or more of these skill sets. Moreover, even if they have the requisite skills, the motivational and emotional challenges associated with delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness may make it difficult for them to utilize their skills. As Molinsky and Margolis put it:

Guilt, sympathy, performance anxiety and cognitive load ... tax an individual’s capacity to perform. ... Capacity refers to the intrapsychic resources available to a performer at the moment of task execution for handling the technical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal demands of performing the task. ... Psychological resources are finite and can be depleted by competing demands that arise. ... Even if performers are highly motivated to behave in a pro-social manner [a questionable assumption, given the above analysis] this motivation must be matched with sufficient available psychological capacity. That capacity is increasingly depleted as guilt, sympathy, performance anxiety, and cognitive load rise. (p. 255)

In summary, given that behavior is a function of motivation times ability (which suggests that the behavior is unlikely to be performed if either motivation or ability is relatively low), it becomes more understandable why high process fairness may not be exhibited by those responsible for the delivery of unfavorable outcomes.

**Motivational and Emotional Ambivalence**

The picture emerging from the motivational analysis set forth is that the implementers of unfavorable outcomes are subjected to multiple forces with competing effects on their likelihood of exhibiting high process fairness. On the one hand, practicing high process fairness makes good economic sense for organizations in that behaviors that are not financially expensive to implement elicit outcomes that positively contribute to the bottom line. Moreover, practicing high process fairness may help implementers satisfy the moral imperative. On the other hand, implementers may lack confidence in their abilities to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness, they may not necessarily believe that the positive consequences of being process fair are more likely to occur than are the negative consequences, and they may assign greater value to the consequences of not behaving with high process fairness than to the consequences of behaving with high process fairness.

Molinsky and Margolis (2005) artfully described the emotional experience (or “internal drama”) associated with the motivational ambivalence experienced by the implementers of unfavorable outcomes. On the one hand, feelings of sympathy and guilt, at least when experienced
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to moderate degrees, would predispose implementers to do the prosocial thing of behaving with high process fairness. On the other hand, strong feelings of sympathy and guilt, along with performance anxiety and cognitive load, may make them less likely to exhibit process fairness. Whereas expectancy theory delineates some of the factors that deter managers from practicing high process fairness, Molinsky and Margolis (2006) provided an analysis of the various ways in which managers’ failure to practice high process fairness manifests itself, in an insightful article, “The Emotional Tightrope of Downsizing.” Their analysis focused on how managers fail to exhibit process fairness when implementing organizational downsizing. However, it is likely to apply to a broader range of situations in which managers have to deliver unfavorable outcomes (e.g., when planning or implementing threatening organizational changes other than downsizing or when called on to deliver unflattering performance appraisals).

More specifically, implementers sometimes may come on “too soft.” Their discomfort as the bearer of bad news may cause them to understate or cushion its enormity. Or, the unfavorable outcomes may be presented in ways that make them seem open for bargaining and negotiation. Whereas both of these strategies may have the desired effect of at least temporarily reducing the emotional strain for both parties, they violate the process fairness rule of being honest and up-front in dealing with others. Moreover, to the extent that actual bargaining does take place, it invites inconsistency (e.g., some people slated to be laid off may negotiate to be retained longer than others, even though all were originally targeted to be dismissed at the same time), which represents yet another violation of high process fairness (Leventhal et al., 1980).

On other occasions, implementers may come on “too strong.” That is, if they feel emotionally distraught by the task before them, they may unload their emotions in the course of delivering the bad news. For example, overcome by sadness, they may cry excessively while delivering the news. Or, feeling resentful about having to be the bearer of bad news, they may lash out against the organization during the delivery. In either case, the focus is on the deliverers’ emotional state rather than on the recipients’, in which case the latter are less likely to feel that they were treated with dignity and respect. Implementers also may come on too strong in how they respond to the recipients’ reactions. For example, it is not uncommon for recipients to respond to unfavorable outcomes in ways that anger the implementers, for example, by holding the implementers responsible. To the extent that implementers take the bait and start arguing with the recipients, high process fairness also is unlikely to be exhibited.

A third type of reaction that makes high process fairness less likely to occur is the tendency for implementers to distance themselves psychologically from the recipients. Rather than trying to soften the blow or going on the offensive, this strategy is designed to reduce the intensity
with which implementers experience their own negative emotions associated with delivering the bad news (e.g., anxiety, guilt) or the negative emotions elicited in recipients by the bad news (e.g., anger, sadness). It may take the form of delivering the unfavorable outcome in a very mechanical, awkward fashion or in doing so with great dispatch, neither of which is likely to make recipients feel that they were treated with dignity and respect.

**Getting to High Process Fairness**

Given the huge upsides associated with delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness, and given the many motivational or emotional obstacles that may stand in the way, we need to learn more about the factors affecting whether unfavorable outcomes are delivered with high process fairness. As Molinsky and Margolis (2005) implied, it is critical to understand the motivational and emotional experience of the deliverers as they contemplate and execute the task before them. Simply showing them the benefits and encouraging them to “just do it” are unlikely to be sufficient. In a qualitative study of how to overcome the motivational and emotional obstacles to delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness, Molinsky and Margolis (2006) found that managers used a number of different cognitive and behavioral strategies. For example, to reduce the likelihood of coming on too soft, they justified the correctness of the decision. Thus, managers who had to implement layoffs told themselves that people who lose their jobs often go on to “bigger and better” things subsequently (a “silver lining” justification). Or, they convinced themselves that the layoffs were necessary to ensure the viability of the company as a whole.

To make it less likely that they would come on too strong, managers found ways to release emotion before or after but *not during* their meeting with the recipients of unfavorable outcomes. One manager described how talking to close others prior to the difficult conversation better enabled her to prepare for it: “We will sit and we will talk about, ‘Gee, isn’t it awful that we have to layoff all these good people and I feel bad for this person,’ or ‘I have to tell three pregnant women today that they are getting laid off.’” Another method used by some to ward off the likelihood of coming on too strong was to divert attention away from the negative emotion that they were experiencing. As one manager put it, “I try to think about other things. My family, you know, the games that my kids are going to or playing that evening. I try as best as I can not to bring too much of that back to the house with me” (Molinsky & Margolis, 2006, p. 156).

Still others used a method that reduced their tendencies to engage in the distancing behaviors that are noxious to the recipients of the unfavorable outcomes. This technique, which Molinsky and Margolis (2006) called “quarantining,” entails managers distancing themselves temporarily from the negative emotions that they were experiencing.
Users of quarantining offered expressions such as “putting on a game face” and “putting emotion on the back burner” to describe it. At first blush, quarantining sounds similar to the psychological distancing that may translate into a lack of process fairness in delivering unfavorable outcomes. Quarantining differs from distancing, however, in that the implementers are intentionally using it to be psychologically available to the recipients. One manager who drew on this strategy said, “I’ve … taken a step back and tried to remove myself emotionally from the meeting … yet maintaining enough empathy with the person to be able to make them feel like they’ve been treated with dignity and respect.”

The various strategies used by managers illustrate just how precarious it is for unfavorable outcomes to be delivered with high process fairness. In enacting each strategy, managers walk a fine line between behaving versus failing to behave with high process fairness (e.g., the aforementioned subtle distinction between quarantining and psychological distancing). Moreover, if the justification strategy used as an antidote to coming on too soft is taken too far, managers run the risk of delivering the unfavorable outcomes coldly and callously, that is, of coming on too strong. Similarly, if the methods used to ward off coming on too strong are overdone, managers may make the opposite mistake of coming on too soft. For example, either releasing or distracting may cause managers to underestimate the magnitude of the situation as it is experienced by the recipients of unfavorable outcomes.

In summary, the analyses of Molinsky and Margolis (2005, 2006) illustrated (1) the various ways in which implementers of unfavorable outcomes may fail to exhibit high process fairness and (2) the cognitive and behavioral strategies they use to cope with their predicaments, such that some strategies are more likely to lead them to practice high process fairness than are others. Whereas it is useful to know how implementers of unfavorable outcomes may fail to practice high process fairness and how they cope with the predicament of having to deliver unfavorable outcomes, it is also important to identify the factors that make them more versus less likely to practice high process fairness in the course of delivering unfavorable outcomes. For example, Margolis and Molinsky (2008) examined whether the deliverers of unfavorable outcomes tended to psychologically distance themselves from, versus engage with, the recipients. They discovered a nearly even split between these two tendencies, with those who distanced themselves less likely to exhibit high process fairness. Thus, even though deliverers may distance themselves from the recipients of unfavorable outcomes does not mean that they will do so. Further research on what makes it go one way or the other is clearly needed.

Both individuals and organizations may have a part to play in this regard. Moreover, some factors are likely to influence or reflect implementers’ motivation to practice high process fairness, whereas others are likely to influence or reflect their ability to practice high process fairness.
What Individuals Can Do

Some people may naturally have the emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) needed to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness. For example, they may have the abilities to (1) regulate their negative emotions such as guilt and anxiety and (2) keep a “cool head” in the face of others’ negative emotions, such as sadness and anger. Cole (2004) examined how managers behave when delivering unfavorable outcomes in the context of having disciplinary discussions with their unionized employees. The results were noteworthy in two respects. First, Cole identified an extensive set of behaviors that predicted the extent to which managers were seen as exhibiting high process fairness in the course of the disciplinary discussions. Among the strongest predictors of perceived fairness were (1) transformational leadership, that is, how much managers acted in ways that enhanced their employees’ self-worth, how much they encouraged employee participation, and the extent to which they shared information; (2) active listening; (3) “conversational maintenance,” which referred to the extent to which they were attentive to the employee; and (4) fact finding, that is, how much they sought facts or clarification from employees. Whereas there have been numerous discussions of the elements that comprise process fairness (e.g., voice, the Leventhal et al., 1980, criteria, and interactional justice), the Cole findings lend even greater specificity to what managers need to do if they want to be seen as behaving with high process fairness.

Second, Cole (2004) also discovered that there were highly significant differences between male and female managers in their tendencies to express the four (and other) predictors of perceived fairness, such that the female managers were rated higher than their male counterparts on all of the dimensions. The study did not delineate the cognitive or behavioral strategies that women managers used to enable them to behave in ways that were judged as more process fair than the men; delineating such strategies represents an important question for future research (e.g., Gross, 2001). However, the findings suggest that the likelihood that unfavorable outcomes will be delivered with high process fairness may depend on characteristics of the implementers, which raises the question of whether there may be other attributes of the implementers that may be influential.

For example, delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness would seem to require not only emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) but also interpersonal or political savvy. Ferris, Davidson, and Perrewé (2005) identified four key dimensions of political skill: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Those who score high on any or all of these dimensions may be more apt to deliver unfavorable outcomes with higher process fairness. For example, to the extent unfavorable outcomes are delivered with apparent sincerity (e.g., in which concerns for the recipients’ well-being
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are expressed), recipients are likely to believe that they were treated with dignity and respect.

In summary, individuals who have more of the technical, interpersonal, or intrapersonal skills needed to practice high process fairness (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005) are more likely to do so for two reasons: First, these people have more of the ability needed to practice process fairness. Second, to the extent that they accurately perceive their skill sets, they are likely to maintain more positive beliefs that lead to and, as a result, be more motivated to practice process fairness.

What Organizations Can Do

Factors residing within work organizations also may affect how well managers handle the various negative emotions they may experience while delivering unfavorable outcomes, which in turn may affect the extent to which they exhibit high process fairness. Moreover, different sorts of workplace factors may influence the various ways in which implementers fail to exhibit high process fairness. For example, suppose that the implementers’ guilt about being the bearer of bad news causes them to come on too soft (via cushioning or appearing to leave matters open for negotiation). If senior managers can induce implementers to believe that the unfavorable outcomes are absolutely necessary, then the implementers may engage in the justification process, enabling them to deliver the message in a forthright manner (Molinsky & Margolis, 2006).

For example, if senior managers convincingly demonstrate to the implementers that they carefully considered alternatives to the chosen action and that the chosen action clearly dominated the alternatives (by minimizing costs and maximizing benefits), then implementers may be less likely to come on too soft. Moreover, if senior managers communicated how, in the course of selecting the chosen alternative, they experienced some of the negative emotions that implementers are likely to be feeling (e.g., guilt and performance anxiety), then implementers also may be less likely to come on too soft in their delivery of the unfavorable outcomes. By sharing their own emotional struggles in selecting the chosen course of action, senior managers are likely to convey that it is appropriate for the implementers to have mixed feelings about what they have to do, but at the end of the day they need to deliver the message forthrightly. In short, if senior managers were to behave in the ways described, then lower-level managers may be motivated to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness.

Other factors may make it less likely for implementers to act out their emotional discomfort (e.g., guilt, performance anxiety, or cognitive load) in the form of coming on too strong. Molinsky and Margolis (2006) suggested that some implementers coped by distracting themselves from the emotional pain of delivering unfavorable outcomes, instead focusing their attention on other positive aspects of their lives. Just as some managers may proactively redirect attention on their own,
organizations may make activities available to managers that facilitate this process. Moreover, managers’ likelihood of coping successfully with the emotional turmoil may be further enhanced if the activities provided by the organization are self-affirming (Steele, 1988). Implementers may come on too strong because they are unable to manage the threat to self-integrity elicited by or reflected in the negative emotions that they are experiencing. For example, guilt resulting from seeing themselves as responsible for the unfavorable outcomes may threaten implementers’ self-conceptions as kind and caring people who do not inflict harm on others. Furthermore, performance anxiety emanating from the difficulty of the task at hand may threaten their sense of competence and control.

If this reasoning is correct, then the deliverers of unfavorable outcomes may be better able to cope with their emotional turmoil by engaging in self-affirmation. One type of self-affirming activity that organizations may be able to provide is corporate volunteerism. Research has shown that employees who participated more in corporate volunteer programs were more committed to the organization. In one series of studies, the beneficiaries of employees’ volunteer efforts were external to the organization (Brockner, Senior, & Welch, 2009), whereas in another study the beneficiaries were internal to the organization (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008). Furthermore, the positive relationship between employees’ tendencies to take part in corporate-sponsored volunteer programs and their organizational commitment was mediated by the experience of self-affirmation. In sum, certain types of distractions may better enable implementers to cope with the emotional pain brought on by having to deliver unfavorable outcomes. If implementers’ emotional pain (and corresponding tendencies to come on too strong when delivering unfavorable outcomes) emanates from threatened self-integrity, then it behooves organizations to ensure that its implementers of unfavorable outcomes have opportunities to experience self-affirmation.

As self-affirmation theory has suggested, people can counteract the threat to their self-integrity (i.e., reduce the impact of the threat on their beliefs and behaviors) by doing something that reaffirms their self-integrity (Steele, 1988). If the failure to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness is the result of implementers feeling self-threatened, then they may be more likely to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness when they can do so in ways that allow them to affirm their self-integrity. Unfortunately, the protocol in most organizations (even well-intentioned ones) makes this unlikely to happen. When unfavorable outcomes need to be delivered, organizational authorities often provide the implementers with tightly choreographed scripts on how to do so. Whereas tight and well-crafted scripts may serve to ensure that at least a baseline level of process fairness is enacted, and whereas they may satisfy legalistic concerns that recipients are not to be told “too much,” they are hardly a recipe for implementers to experience self-affirmation. Perhaps giving implementers some
freedom in how they choose to go about practicing high process fairness (even if that were to mean allowing them to choose from a range of options deemed acceptable by organizational authorities) may make them more likely to exhibit process fairness precisely because the act of doing so will be more self-affirming (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008).

Furthermore, implementers’ failure to exhibit high process fairness when delivering unfavorable outcomes may take the form of distancing themselves from the recipients. To offset this possibility, organizations may find it helpful to provide implementers beforehand with a realistic preview of the emotional turmoil that delivering unfavorable outcomes often elicits. People are better able to tolerate negative events (and their psychological reactions to those events) if they have been forewarned about them (Janis & Mann, 1977). Put differently, negative events and emotions are much less tolerable when they catch people unaware. A common reaction to experiencing unexpected negative events and emotions is to flee from the scene relative to whether those same events and emotions had been anticipated.

For example, one of the main reasons for employee turnover, especially the costly sort that emerges shortly after people have joined the organization, is “reality shock,” in which employees discover that their job and organizational environments are less desirable than what they expected them to be. Because employers want to be wanted by prospective employees, recruiters tend to present the organization in a desirable light. Unfortunately, this practice is shortsighted. Whereas it may attract people to the firm, it also sets the stage for them to be disillusioned when their actual experience falls short of their prior expectations. The irony is that certain features that employees find undesirable may have been quite tolerable if only they had been told about them in advance. Studies showed that employee turnover is significantly reduced when new recruits are given a realistic job preview (RJP), which tells them not only about the upsides but also about the downsides associated with taking a position in the firm (Phillips, 1998; Wanous, 1980).

Just as providing would-be employees with an RJP reduces their tendency to withdraw behaviorally from the firm in the form of turnover, giving would-be deliverers of unfavorable outcomes a realistic preview of the painful or at least conflicting emotions they are likely to experience may reduce the likelihood of them psychologically withdrawing, manifested by distancing themselves from the recipients of the unfavorable outcomes. Perhaps knowing in advance about the emotional challenges associated with delivering unfavorable outcomes will motivate implementers to develop ways to meet these challenges if they were to arise. For example, implementers may find it useful to form a “self-help” group in which they validate one another’s feelings (“misery loves company”) as well as provide guidance to one another on how to cope with the emotional challenges. Then, when the emotional challenges actually do arise, implementers may be better equipped to deal with them relative to their counterparts who had not anticipated them. The net effect

may be a reduced likelihood of fleeing from the scene psychologically, that is, less of a tendency to distance themselves from the recipients of unfavorable outcomes and, with that, an increased chance of them delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness.

Delineating the essence of the emotional challenges associated with delivering unfavorable outcomes has implications for process fairness training programs. Promisingly, numerous studies have shown that managers can be trained to improve the extent to which they practice process fairness, which is particularly important when they have to deliver unfavorable outcomes (Skarlicki & Latham, 2005). As Molinsky and Margolis’s (2005, 2006) analyses of the psychology of delivering unfavorable outcomes suggest, an important element of a process fairness training program may be to help implementers manage the emotional and motivational challenges they experience when deciding how to deliver unfavorable outcomes. Whereas this element may be present in some process fairness training programs, it is possible that the training programs could be enhanced even further if this particular element were to be given greater emphasis.

In summary, organizational authorities may help to create the conditions that make lower-level executives more likely to implement unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness. Some of these conditions may exert influence by heightening implementers’ motivation to practice high process fairness; others may exert influence by heightening their ability to do so, and still others may heighten implementers’ motivation and ability. For example, process fairness training programs have been shown to heighten managers’ self-efficacy beliefs about practicing process fairness (Cole & Latham, 1997), which may heighten their motivation to practice process fairness by establishing more positive beliefs that E leads to P. Furthermore, process fairness training programs also may enhance trainees’ actual ability to practice process fairness.

**TOWARD A MORE NUANCED VIEW OF PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Thus far, this chapter has considered some practically important matters associated with the process–outcome interaction effect discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, in which high process fairness reduces the effect of outcome favorability on employees’ support for decisions, decision makers, and institutions relative to when process fairness is low. Practical implications grow out of the fact that (financially inexpensive) high process fairness accompanying the delivery of unfavorable outcomes has positive effects on employee attitudes and behaviors that directly contribute to the bottom line. Given this prospect, we need to understand better the motivational factors and emotional challenges that prevent implementers from practicing high process fairness, particularly when they are delivering unfavorable outcomes.
Further complicating matters are the practical implications emanating from the process–outcome interaction considered in Chapter 4, in which high process fairness heightens the impact of outcome favorability. That is, when delivering unfavorable outcomes managers would like to gain the support of recipients for their decisions, for themselves, and for the institutions that they (the managers) represent. Moreover, they want to gain the recipients’ support in the most economically prudent ways, suggesting that it is wise for managers to deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness. Note, however, that delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness may have other effects on the recipients, which may or may not be preferred. For example, in Chapter 4 we saw that high process fairness heightens the influence of outcome favorability on people’s self-evaluations, for better or for worse. Favorable outcomes delivered with higher process fairness engender more positive self-evaluations than do those same outcomes delivered with lower process fairness. However, unfavorable outcomes delivered with higher process fairness may actually cause people to feel worse about themselves, especially when they assign more psychological significance to their unfavorable outcomes or when the higher degree of process fairness induces them to see themselves as more responsible for their unfavorable outcomes (Brockner et al., 2008; Holmvall & Bobocel, 2008).

Given that process fairness may be inversely related to people’s self-evaluations in the face of unfavorable outcomes, implementers need to consider several questions carefully prior to delivering unfavorable outcomes. First, how troubled would they be if recipients were to feel worse about themselves in response to the unfavorable outcomes? Under certain conditions, implementers may not be especially bothered by this prospect and may even welcome it. For example, it could be argued that if people were to receive negative feedback (in the form of unfavorable outcomes), they may not be motivated to change unless they also were induced to take the feedback seriously (read: personally). As numerous studies suggested, people are more likely to take unfavorable outcomes seriously or personally when the outcomes are delivered with higher process fairness (e.g., Schroth & Shah, 2000). On other occasions, however, managers may prefer to minimize the self-esteem loss caused by delivering unfavorable outcomes. If so, then delivering unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness may have the unwanted effect of reducing the recipients’ self-esteem.

This raises another set of questions. If implementers prefer to minimize the recipients’ loss of self-esteem in response to unfavorable outcomes, how may they best achieve this goal? Should they practice high process fairness? My advice is that implementers should practice high process fairness but simultaneously remain vigilant about the possibility that recipients may feel worse about themselves (than if the implementers did not practice high process fairness). For one thing, when outcomes are unfavorable, process fairness may be unrelated (rather than inversely related) to people’s self-evaluations: no harm, no foul.
Moreover, if and when process fairness is inversely related to people's self-evaluations, then implementers may be able to take other steps to counteract the reduction in self-esteem felt by recipients in response to high process fairness. For example, giving recipients an opportunity to reaffirm their self-integrity (Steele, 1988) may be particularly useful under such conditions.

In short, herein lies yet another way in which implementers may find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place when they have to dole out unfavorable outcomes. Delivering the unfavorable outcomes with low process fairness makes it quite likely that recipients will feel resentful toward the decision makers and fail to support them, their decisions, and the organizations that they represent. Alternatively, delivering the unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness runs the risk that recipients will become down on themselves. Of these two types of downsides, the ones associated with behaving with low process fairness seem to be more serious. For one thing, it is not even certain that process fairness will be inversely related (rather than unrelated) to recipients' self-esteem. As suggested in Chapter 4, an inverse relationship between process fairness and self-evaluations in the face of unfavorable outcomes is much more likely to arise when people assign significance to their unfavorable outcomes, such as when they are prevention rather than promotion focused (Brockner et al., 2008) or when they see themselves as more personally responsible for their outcomes (Holmvall & Bobocel, 2008).

Moreover, even if higher process fairness does reduce people's self-evaluations in response to unfavorable outcomes, they still may be able to restore their sense of self-worth by experiencing self-affirmation. For example, if managers were to deliver an unfavorable performance review with high process fairness, the recipients may be motivated to take the feedback seriously; they could not easily externalize the negative feedback as resulting from an unfair process. If, however, such a performance review also included constructive and personalized feedback on how to improve, then recipients may respond positively for several reasons related to self-affirmation. For one thing, constructive feedback may help them to attain the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to improve, thereby bolstering their sense of self-efficacy or self-confidence. Moreover, the symbolic message associated with being given personalized feedback communicates that their needs are taken seriously by the source of the feedback, which also may bolster their feelings of self-worth.

It has long been known that people are more likely to engage in constructive behavioral change when they are threatened and when they can see a clear and attainable path forward (e.g., Dabbs & Leventhal, 1966; Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1997). Delivering unfavorable outcome feedback to people with high process fairness may cause them to experience self-threat. If, however, such a delivery were to be accompanied by clear information on what they need to
do to improve (i.e., how to counteract the threat), people are likely to respond constructively. This analysis also reminds us that implementers need to concern themselves with other things besides whether they deliver unfavorable outcomes with high process fairness; helping the recipients who may feel self-threatened determine how to respond constructively also is important.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICING HIGH PROCESS FAIRNESS: NOW MORE THAN EVER?

The age-old expressions with which I began this book (e.g., “It’s not only what you do, but also how you do it”) suggest that the importance of the process of behavior, quite apart from its substance, has long been recognized. This book has elaborated on the importance of process in two respects. First, I shined the spotlight on one particular element of process: its perceived fairness. Second, I considered when process fairness is particularly likely to be influential (e.g., when outcomes are unfavorable).

An interesting op-ed piece by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* (June 27, 2007) suggested that how we behave is likely to be, if anything, increasingly important in the years ahead. Friedman described an incident that had transpired years earlier, in which he was misperceived as having behaved with low process fairness.

I was catching a plane at Boston’s Logan Airport and went to buy some magazines for the flight. As I approached the cash register, a woman coming from another direction got there just behind me—I thought. But when I put my money down to pay, the woman said in a very loud voice: “Excuse me! I was here first!” And then she fixed me with a piercing stare that said, “I know who you are.” I said I was very sorry, even though I was clearly there first.

Whereas Friedman (2007) was courteous enough to apologize, he went on to say that if this situation happened today rather than years ago, he would be even more motivated to treat the woman with dignity and respect. Why? Friedman suggested that technological advances have given us the capability of publicizing others’ behavior. Celebrities, of course, have known this for years. They have to be vigilant about paparazzi catching them in the act of doing something that would shine unfavorably on them and then publicizing their behavior. Now, however, the fear of exposure applies to all of us, celebrities and noncelebrities alike. As Friedman put it:

I’d be thinking there is some chance this woman has a blog or a camera in her cellphone and could, if she so chose, tell the whole world about our encounter—entirely from her perspective—and my utterly rude, boorish, arrogant … behavior. When everyone has a blog, a MySpace page or Facebook entry, everyone is a publisher. When everyone has a cellphone
with a camera in it, everyone is a paparazzo. When everyone can upload video on YouTube, everyone is a filmmaker. When everyone is a publisher, paparazzo, or filmmaker, everyone else is a public figure. We're all public figures now.

Quoting Dov Seidman (2007), the author of the recent book, "How," Friedman (2007) went on to say: “In the information age, life has no closets or chapters; you can leave nothing behind, and you have nowhere to hide your skeletons. Your past is your present.”

So, Friedman (2007) suggested, “Whether you’re selling cars or newspapers (or just buying one at the newsstand), get your hows right—how you build trust, how you collaborate, how you lead and how you say you’re sorry. More people than ever will know about it when you do—or don’t.”

Together, Friedman (2007) and Seidman (2007) provided two somewhat different reasons why the stakes associated with practicing process fairness have never been higher. One of these reasons, described in this chapter, is prevention focused (Higgins, 1998). As Friedman’s anecdote suggests, the costs of treating others with low process fairness may be heightened to the extent that such behavior can be easily made public. To minimize such costs, then, we would be well advised to behave with high process fairness. In the truest sense, the ounce of “prevention” may be worth the pound of cure. The other reason, not mentioned thus far, is promotion focused. That is, in addition to preventing bad things from happening, high process fairness may actually make positive things more likely to occur. As Friedman put it:

But this also creates opportunities. Today “what” you make is quickly copied and sold by everyone. But, “how” you engage your customers, “how” you keep your promises, and “how” you collaborate with partners—that’s not so easy to copy, and that is where companies can now really differentiate themselves.

Quoting Seidman (2007) again, Friedman (2007) wrote: “When it comes to human conduct there is tremendous variation, and where a broad spectrum of variation exists, opportunity exists, ... the opportunity to outbehave the competition.” Friedman then provided several examples of how to outbehave the competition, including one in which a “hospital taught its doctors to apologize when they made mistakes, and dramatically cut their malpractice claims.”

I rest my case.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter explicitly considered several practical concerns emanating from the interactive relationships between process fairness and outcome.
favorability to which we researchers should devote our energies. For example, the interaction effect depicted in Chapters 2 and 3, in which high process fairness reduced the effect of outcome favorability relative to when process fairness is low, suggests that a strong business case may be made for managers to practice high process fairness. More specifically, when employees’ outcomes are unfavorable, managers may be able to elicit high support and thereby enhance the organization’s bottom line by enacting the (typically financially inexpensive) behaviors that constitute high process fairness. High process fairness may soften the blow associated with receiving unfavorable outcomes, thereby lessening employees’ tendencies to retaliate in ways that could be materially harmful to the organization. Moreover, once organizations have delivered outcomes that are at least moderately favorable to their constituents, they may be better served not by giving out even more in the way of favorable outcomes (which could be rather financially expensive) but rather by putting more of an emphasis on practicing high process fairness.

Given the strong economic incentives managers have to practice high process fairness, and given the moral imperative for them to do so, it is intriguing that many decisions are not implemented with relatively high levels of process fairness. This chapter analyzed why this is the case. Three principles central to expectancy theory helped to delineate some of the countervailing forces to the practice of high process fairness. Managers may not believe (1) that they have the wherewithal to practice high process fairness, (2) that the benefits of practicing high process fairness are more likely to arise than are the costs, and (3) that the benefits outweigh the costs (quite apart from the perceived likelihood of both).

Behavior is a function of motivation and ability. Thus, in addition to the aforementioned motivational factors that may impede the practice of high process fairness, managers’ tendencies to practice high process fairness may be compromised if they lack ability, for example, if the cognitive load imposed on them reduces their capacity to meet the various challenges that delivering high process fairness entails. In short, managers have reasons to practice high process fairness, but they also have reasons not to do so. Given this state of affairs, it is important to delineate the factors that make the practice of high process fairness more versus less likely, as I have tried to do in this chapter. The chapter also called attention to the conundrum managers are likely to experience when they dole out unfavorable outcomes. On the one hand, to the extent that they deliver unfavorable outcomes with a fair process, the affected parties are likely to feel angry and resentful. On the other hand, to the extent that they deliver unfavorable outcomes with an unfair process, the affected parties may feel worse about themselves. Ways for managers to deal with this conundrum also were considered. Finally, I offered the conjecture that whereas practicing high process fairness always has been worthwhile, it may become even more important in the years to come given the growing ease of recording and publicizing people’s behavior.
Outcome fairness refers to the extent to which the outcome is consistent with the prevailing norm or basis for making allocation decisions, such as equity, equality, and need (Deutsch, 1985). Outcome favorability refers to how much people stand to benefit (economically, psychologically, or both) as a result of the decision that was reached. Whereas there are obvious conceptual distinctions between outcome fairness and outcome favorability, the two constructs also are related to one another. When equity is the fairness norm (which is often the case in work organizations), outcome fairness is present when the relationship between people’s benefits and contributions is similar to the benefits-to-contributions relationship of the appropriate targets of comparison, which typically but not always consist of their coworkers (Adams, 1965). To the extent that people rate their own contributions highly, they also are likely to believe that they are entitled to receive favorable outcomes. In other words, favorable outcomes are fairer than unfavorable outcomes provided that people have relatively positive views of their own contributions. Research has shown, moreover, that people generally have positive views of their contribution toward collective action (e.g., Messick & Sentis, 1979), often to an unjustified extent (Taylor & Brown, 1988). This reasoning may help to explain why people’s estimates of outcome fairness tend to be strongly related to their judgments of outcome favorability. In fact, correlations tend to be in the neighborhood of .70 (Brockner et al., 2003; Skitka, Winquist, & Hutchinson, 2003).

Other empirical findings (in particular, research on the interactive relationships between process fairness and each of outcome fairness and outcome favorability) provide further evidence of the overlap between outcome favorability and outcome fairness. Some studies have examined the interactive relationship between process fairness and outcome fairness (e.g., McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992), whereas others have investigated the interaction between process fairness and outcome favorability (e.g., Schaubroeck, May, & Brown, 1994). Across studies, the interactive relationship between process fairness and each of outcome fairness and outcome favorability took the same basic form as that described in
Chapters 2 and 3, such that high process fairness reduced the effect of outcome fairness/favorability on people's support for decisions, decision makers, and institutions relative to when process fairness was low.

A few studies included both outcome fairness and outcome favorability. For example, Brockner et al. (2003, Study 1) looked at the interactive effect of process fairness and outcome fairness/favorability on participants' self-evaluations. Some of the items in the outcome measure tapped fairness (e.g., “The outcome was fair”), whereas others referred to favorability (e.g., “The outcome of this encounter benefited me”). In one regression analysis, we examined the interaction between outcome fairness and process fairness. In a separate regression analysis, we tested the interaction between outcome favorability and process fairness. The interaction effects were significant in both instances and took the form set forth in Chapter 4: High process fairness heightened the positive relationship between each of outcome fairness and outcome favorability and self-evaluations, relative to when process fairness was low. We then conducted an additional regression in which both interaction effects were entered simultaneously. This time, neither interaction effect was significant, suggesting that outcome fairness and outcome favorability were virtually interchangeable in how they interacted with process fairness to influence people’s self-evaluations. Put differently, it was what outcome favorability and outcome fairness had in common that interacted with process fairness to influence self-evaluations.

Conceptual and empirical considerations suggest, however, that outcome fairness and outcome favorability are not always interchangeable. After all, even correlations as high as .70 suggest that at least half of the variance in one factor cannot be accounted for by variance in the other. Findings provided further evidence that outcome fairness and outcome favorability are meaningfully separable. Skitka et al. (2003) conducted meta-analyses of the antecedents and consequences of outcome fairness and outcome favorability, finding important differences in both cases. For example, whereas various elements of process fairness (other than voice) were significantly predictive of people’s judgments of outcome favorability and outcome fairness, the relationship between process fairness and outcome favorability was considerably stronger than was the relationship between process fairness and outcome fairness. Moreover, as main effect predictors of other factors, outcome fairness and outcome favorability were shown to behave differently. For instance, outcome fairness was more strongly related to organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and task satisfaction than was outcome favorability.

In one study of the antecedents of black engineers’ attraction to an organization as a function of the organization’s affirmative action policies, Cropanzano et al. (2005) provided a different type of evidence attesting to the distinction between outcome fairness and outcome favorability. The independent variables included people’s judgments of
the following elements of the organization’s affirmative action policy: outcome fairness, outcome favorability, procedural justice, and interactional justice. The dependent variables included an attitudinal measure of the perceived attractiveness of the organization as well as an assessment of participants’ intention to apply to the organization.

One purpose of the study was to examine how procedural justice and interactional justice interacted with each of outcome fairness and outcome favorability to influence the dependent variables. Accordingly, a regression analysis was conducted in which the following three-way interaction effects were entered simultaneously: (1) Outcome fairness × Procedural justice × Interactional justice and (2) Outcome favorability × Procedural justice × Interactional justice. If outcome fairness and outcome favorability were behaving similarly, then both of the three-way interaction effects should be nonsignificant when they were entered into the regression equation simultaneously. This did not happen. On the attitudinal measure, the three-way interaction involving outcome fairness was significant, whereas the three-way interaction involving outcome favorability was not. On the intention-to-apply measure, both three-way interactions were significant. Whereas the different findings on the two dependent measures are of some interest in their own right, the more important conclusion for present purposes is that outcome fairness and outcome favorability did not behave interchangeably.

In summary, conceptual reasoning and empirical evidence suggest that outcome fairness and outcome favorability are at once strongly related to and meaningfully distinct from one another. An important mandate for future theory and research is to predict when and explain why outcome fairness and outcome favorability have similar versus different effects. Skitka et al. (2003) took an important first step in addressing whether outcome fairness and outcome favorability differ as main effects. A logical next step is to learn more about when and why outcome fairness and outcome favorability behave similarly versus differently in how they interact with process fairness.

FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

To guide such thinking, it may be useful to return to basic theoretical accounts of why outcomes interact with process fairness. For example, the cognitive appraisal theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) gives reason to believe that outcome fairness and outcome favorability may interact similarly with process fairness. After all, the receipt of either an unfair outcome or an unfavorable outcome could lead to the perception of threat during the primary appraisal process. In contrast, fair outcomes or favorable outcomes are much less likely to elicit the perception of threat. Information pertaining to process fairness in turn may be used for secondary appraisal purposes, which enables people to determine whether they will be able to counteract the threat.
Primary appraisal (perceived threat) and secondary appraisal (perceived control) interact with each other to influence felt stress (a notion considered in greater detail in Chapter 2). Hence, when the primary appraisal leads to the perception of threat (due either to low outcome fairness or to low outcome favorability), the secondary appraisal shaped by process fairness information will have much more effect on felt stress relative to when the primary appraisal process does not lead to the perception of threat (i.e., when outcomes are relatively fair or favorable). This reasoning leads to the expectation of an interactive effect of outcome fairness and process fairness on stress like that found in the studies by Greenberg (2006) and Tepper (2001), and it leads to the expectation of a similar interactive effect of outcome favorability and process fairness on stress like that found in studies by Vermunt and Steensma (2003) and Elovainio et al. (2007).

Alternatively, outcome fairness and outcome favorability sometimes may behave differently in how they interact with process fairness due to the fact that unfair outcomes and unfavorable outcomes may represent different kinds of threat. Unfair outcomes may raise people’s concerns about how fairly they will be treated by the other party over the longer haul. Unfair outcomes may be somewhat less apt to arouse people’s concerns about whether they will receive favorable outcomes over the longer haul. For example, consider the case of “positive inequity” (Adams, 1965), in which people’s outcomes are unfair, in that they are receiving more than they deserve if resources had been allocated on the basis of their contributions, but also are favorable. If the threat elicited by unfair outcomes is concern about fair treatment over the longer haul, then process fairness information should be highly relevant and therefore likely to have a highly significant effect on felt stress.

In contrast, unfavorable outcomes may represent a different kind of threat, namely, how much people may expect to receive favorable outcomes over the longer haul. Whereas process fairness information may be somewhat informative (such that people are likely to be more reassured about the favorability of their longer-term outcomes when process fairness is high rather than low), it also may be that process fairness information will be judged as saying less about the favorability of future outcomes than it says about the fairness of future treatment. Consequently, felt stress may be less affected by the interaction between outcome favorability and process fairness than by the interaction between outcome fairness and process fairness.

The last prediction assumes that people do not assign greater significance to the receipt of favorable outcomes over the long term than they do to the receipt of fair treatment over the longer haul. If, however, long-term outcome favorability were more important to people than long-term outcome fairness, then a larger portion of the variance in felt stress may be accounted for by the interaction between outcome favorability and process fairness than by the interaction between outcome fairness and process fairness. That is, even though process
fairness may be less indicative of long-term outcome favorability than of long-term fair treatment, the greater importance assigned to outcome favorability may make people’s felt stress more susceptible to the moderating influence of process fairness on outcome favorability than to the moderating influence of process fairness on outcome fairness. In any event, further research is needed to delineate when and why outcome fairness and outcome favorability interact similarly versus differently with process fairness.