The relationship between organizational justice and conflict style

B. Charles Tatum and Richard J. Eberlin

In his latest book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman (2005, p. 8) argues that the global competitive playing field is being leveled – the world is being flattened. He identifies ten forces (e.g., workflow software, open sourcing, supply chaining) that are allowing “…more people than ever before to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world – using computers, email, networks, teleconferencing, and dynamic new software”. Arguably, many of these same forces are leading to the flattening of organizations as well. More people than ever before are collaborating and participating in decision making processes within all types of organizations. The days of the rigid, hierarchal chain of command are rapidly fading and being replaced with semi-autonomous work groups, self-managed teams, and matrix organizations. With all of this interpersonal interaction and sharing of ideas and viewpoints, conflict is virtually unavoidable. One very powerful source of conflict derives from the way justice issues are handled within an organization by those that serve as managers, leaders, and decision makers.

Introduction to organizational justice and conflict

Leaders in organizations are expected to create organizational systems that members perceive as fair, caring, and open. In a just and ethical organization, decisions that leaders make should reflect fair treatment of people and concern for their welfare. Addressing issues of fairness and just treatment of people is a vital part of the business strategy and decision making process. Failure to address these concerns can often lead to conflict and organizational dysfunction.

Conflict will never be eliminated, and it is often constructive, but it can also be very destructive if issues of fairness and justice are not dealt with effectively. Regardless of the outcome of conflict, there are emotional costs (Levine, 1998). Win or lose, these emotional effects remain and can linger long after conflict has been “officially” resolved (analogous to plaque that builds up in arteries and later results in a heart attack). The parties involved can be trapped in their anger over a promotion lost, continue to gloat over beating a competitor, or constantly berate themselves over a missed opportunity. These emotional after-effects can be diminished if proper attention is paid to what has been called “organizational justice” (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano, 1993).

Organizational justice has taken many forms over the years, but Greenberg (1993) has developed a taxonomy that has proven empirically sound and highly useful. Part of Greenberg’s taxonomy categorizes organizational justice into “structural justice” and “social justice”. Structural justice means that employees are involved in the decision-making process and the employer provides a fair distribution of outcomes. Social justice, by contrast, means that employees perceive the organization as openly sharing information...
with them, and they believe that the employer cares about their well-being. Some readers may be familiar with the distinction between procedural and distributive justice. The structural/social justice distinction not only incorporates distributive and procedural justice (see Folger, 1977; Folger and Konovsky, 1989), but also adds an important element of interpersonal interaction – how people are treated on an interpersonal level when an organization institutes its policies and procedures (Bies and Moag, 1986). Attention to structural justice has traditionally been viewed as vital to maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict within an organization. Recent studies (e.g., Eberlin, 2005; Tatum et al., 2003) suggest that perceived social justice, with its emphasis on the interpersonal dimension, is especially important in the minds of those asked to contribute to the organization.

**Justice and the manager-employee interaction**

Whenever a manager and an employee interact, there is the potential for conflict. This conflict can be exacerbated when issues of structural and social justice emerge, either intentionally or unintentionally. Structural justice issues take the form of concerns about how decisions are made and whether the distribution of outcomes (e.g., raises, promotions, awards, bonuses) is fair and impartial. Social justice issues revolve around whether people are treated with respect and dignity, and whether information is shared in an open and honest manner. Fairness, justice, dignity, and honesty are key elements in these exchanges, and managers and organizations are well advised to avoid anything that might be perceived as favoritism, bias, or the lack of impartiality.

One consequence of not being aware of the importance of organizational justice is that managers, leaders, and decision makers in organizations may be subject to legal scrutiny. For example, some researchers (e.g., Barrett and Kernan, 1987; Werner and Bolino, 1997) have linked categories of organizational justice to perceived fairness of performance appraisals. Through analyses of legal decisions it was determined that appraisal practices that promoted perceptions of fairness were also those that tended to withstand legal scrutiny. In fact, these researchers have concluded that issues related to fairness and due process carry more weight in important judicial decisions regarding organizational decisions and practices than more scientific issues of validation.

**Conflict styles**

Conflict is inevitable, but the way we handle or manage these conflicts will determine the quality of our relationships and long term emotional costs. There are many ways in which conflict can be managed. Thomas (1976) suggests five general approaches (or styles):

1. competing;
2. avoiding;
3. sharing;
4. accommodating; and
5. collaborating.

As shown in Figure 1, these five styles are distributed on a two-by-two grid formed from low and high values of two mutually exclusive dimensions (cooperative/uncooporative and assertiveness/unassertiveness). In any conflict situation, according to Thomas, individuals vary in their commitment to satisfying other’s concerns, and the manner in which they assertively stand up for their own concerns.

The first of these styles (competitive) reflects a strategy that achieves one’s own goals at the expense of another’s. This “domination” tactic is often referred to as a “win/lose” approach to resolving conflict. The second style (avoidant) reflects an approach to resolving conflict that demonstrates indifference to both parties’ needs and concerns, and neglects the interests of either person. The third style (sharing) reflects an approach to resolving conflict by “compromising” between a dominating and appeasing approach. In this approach both parties involved in conflict give up something and get something, without completely
satisfying either party's needs. The fourth approach (accommodative) is achieved when individuals seek to resolve conflict by simply giving in to the other person's needs and abandoning their own. In this approach, an individual has “appeased” the other person by making no effort to achieve his or her own needs. The fifth and last style (collaborative), attempts to resolve conflict by completely satisfying the needs of both parties. In this approach an “integration” of both parties' needs and concerns are incorporated, and seeks to develop a “win/win” solution.

Is one conflict management style better than another? The answer is no. Conflict styles are situational and relational. One's cultural, organizational, and personal values can influence the way one style is determined to be most appropriate depending on the situation and relationship involved. For example, the competitive approach might be considered desirable in circumstances of athletic events. However, in organizational situations we strive for approaches that maximize our ability to reach outcomes that are win/win. Rather than generalizing a best approach for every situation, Thomas (1977) suggests that it is best to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of each approach, and the circumstances for which each approach may prove most appropriate.

An analysis of two vignettes

The following two vignettes are presented to illustrate the influence of organizational justice and conflict in an organizational setting. One vignette represents the operation of high levels of justice (both structural and social) within a potentially high conflict situation (see Appendix 1). The other vignette portrays low levels of justice within a potentially high conflict situation (see Appendix 2). Table I shows how sensitivity to organizational justice issues affects different uses of conflict styles when managers are in a high conflict exchange with an employee.
Table I  High and low justice and the relationship to conflict style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Competitive (domination)* (Style 1)</th>
<th>Avoidant (neglect)* (Style 2)</th>
<th>Sharing (compromise) (Style 3)</th>
<th>Accommodative (appeasement)* (Style 4)</th>
<th>Collaborative (integration) (Style 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager is sensitive to organizational justice issues (High justice)</td>
<td>This manager is not concerned with competing with or dominating employees. The manager is concerned with a fair outcome and expressing concern for the employee.</td>
<td>This manager does not avoid conflict. Avoidance or neglect would not foster a just review because the employee would not be brought into the process and would not have access to information.</td>
<td>Sharing is a vital part of organizational justice. The manager's willingness to compromise, however, would depend on what is best for both the employee and the organization as a whole.</td>
<td>Accommodation is only an option if justice is served. If accommodation or appeasement creates an unfair distribution of outcomes, or withholding of information to others, then the manager will avoid this style.</td>
<td>Most likely approach for this manager. Collaboration (integration) promotes information sharing, involvement, fairness in the distribution of outcomes, and an expression of caring and concern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager is insensitive to organizational justice issues (Low justice)</td>
<td>This manager is more concerned with procedure than with fair outcomes or employee concerns. If competing or dominating achieves the manager's objectives, then this style might be adopted.</td>
<td>A concern with organizational justice takes time and effort. A manager who does not care about fairness, openness, or trust may opt for avoiding conflict and thereby saving time and effort.</td>
<td>If sharing information and trying to reach a compromise are viewed as the most direct way to complete the task, then the manager may adopt this style.</td>
<td>If accommodating and appeasing are the best way to accomplish the goals of the review (i.e. get the employee to accept the outcome), then this may be a viable choice.</td>
<td>This manager may select this approach, but not because of justice. The manager may adopt collaboration as the best way to complete the review with minimal employee resistance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * The competitive, avoidant, and accommodative styles are not commonly used by the high justice manager.
Source: Adapted from Tatum and Eberlin (2006)

As indicated in Table I and illustrated in the vignette in Appendix 1, a manager that is sensitive to organizational justice issues is more likely aware of potential conflicts that might arise during an encounter with an employee. For these managers, awareness of justice and conflict go hand in hand. They are not seeking to dominate or compete with an employee (i.e. adopting a “Competitive” style: Style 1 in Table I), but rather they are there to deliver fair outcomes in this situation. They seek to encourage the employee, and display care and concern, while at the same time maintain a fair distribution of outcomes. The manager, for which justice sensitivity is abundant, does not avoid conflict (i.e. “Avoidant” style: Style 2 in Table I) or accommodate (i.e. “Accommodative” style: Style 4 in Table I) the employee unnecessarily during the discussion because then the employee would not have access to necessary information or be able to contribute to the process. The manager would only resort to the use of accommodating or appeasing the employee if the integrity of justice was served. Any situation that created an unfair distribution of outcomes, or withholding of information to others, would be unacceptable. The most likely and beneficial approach to addressing conflict for the manager who is highly sensitive to organizational justice issues is collaboration (i.e. “Collaborative” style: Style 5 in Table I). This method of resolving conflict affords the integration of both parties (manager and employee) to arrive at an outcome that promotes information sharing, employee involvement, and a genuine demonstration of care and concern from the manager. These managers leverage the use of structural and social justice elements to their advantage; building trusting and lasting relationships that persist well beyond immediate events.

In contrast to the manager who is sensitive to organizational justice (intentionally attends to structural and social elements of justice), the insensitive manager tends to be more concerned with procedure than with the fairness or openness of processes (see Table I).
During a potentially high conflict situation such as the one illustrated in the vignette in Appendix 2, the manager could easily resort to conflict resolution styles that would impose a competitive or dominating resolution tactic (Style 1 in Table I). Here, if the manager's objectives cannot be achieved, then the perceived fairness or just outcome is put aside. The manager who is insensitive to organizational justice issues is likely a manager who is seeking to get through the exchange with little effort and time. Consideration of organizational justice issues (structural and social) requires time and thought. A manager who is unable to entertain and attend to justice elements seriously is likely to opt for avoiding conflict altogether in an attempt to save time and effort (Style 2 in Table I). It is also likely that this manager will seek to appease or accommodate the employee (Style 4 in Table I) as the best method of completing the current discussion, thus escaping potential conflicts and getting the employee to accept the outcome. Oddly, the manager for which justice is of little concern might actually employ the conflict resolution approach of collaboration (Style 5 in Table I). In this case the manager is not acting to elevate the levels of justice embedded in the exchange; rather, this manager may chose this method to better expedite and complete the discussion with the least amount of resistance possible. The goal is not a heightened sense of justice, but a single-minded focus on finishing the task. The manager who chooses to operate with little or no concern for organizational justice is clearly not the ideal one would wish to emulate. Unfortunately, many managers do emulate this approach and their conflict management style reflects this choice.

Discussion and conclusions

Organizational change occurs when managers and leaders can achieve one or more of the following objectives:

- raise performance;
- improve processes and relationships;
- enhance fairness and equity; and
- increase subjective wellbeing.

As researchers, practitioners, managers, and leaders, we should be concentrating efforts to ensure that what we do exemplifies these objectives. If we strive to attend to these objectives seriously, we need to account for the role that organizational justice plays in almost every one of these objectives. Organizational justice has been linked to critical organizational processes such as employee commitment, citizenship, job satisfaction, and performance (Colquitt et al., 2001; Colquitt et al., 2002; Greenberg, 1993; Tatum et al., 2002). The main point of this paper is that there is also an intimate relationship between organizational justice and conflict style.

Win/win solutions are commonly referred to as optimal resolution approaches. Managers who consciously attend to organizational justice (structural and social) are more likely to achieve these win/win outcomes. Attending to organizational justice probably means that the conflict style of choice is collaboration. Integrating the needs of the organization with the needs of the employees is more likely to result in the perception of ethical treatment and fair play, and more likely to produce a fair and equitable distribution of outcomes. As shown in Table I, other conflict management styles can be used by managers and leaders who are concerned with justice, but the collaboration strategy is best suited in this situation. Of course, if a manager or leader does not care about sharing information, is not concerned with trust and respect, and cares little about fairness, then styles such as competitive or avoidant are more efficient ways of dealing with conflict.

Organizations need to facilitate resolution approaches that afford the best possible outcomes for members who experience conflict situations. As the world becomes more flat, Friedman (2005) suggests that we need to learn to survive in less hierarchical environments and rely more heavily on semi-autonomous work groups, self-managed teams, and matrix organizations. In times when we are being asked to do more with less, the tight coordination
of efforts and a shared vision can allow the miracles of teamwork to occur. Levine (1998, p. 165) states, “The synergy of teamwork can be an extraordinary thing, and delivers results with incremental power (accomplishing more with less). It is the clear agreement with others that builds teams, teams that experience an exponential expansion of power”. The resolution process can afford great power by joining one’s vision with that of others. For example, a Clydesdale horse can pull the weight of 7,000 lbs when working individually. By contrast, two Clydesdale horses can pull between 18,000 lbs and 25,000 lbs together. Resolving conflict and working together in just and fair systems is more important than ever in these times when the global playing field is being flattened. Careful attention to organizational justice will ensure that we deliver a workforce that is able to meet the new demands.

References


Manager: Well don't be nervous [expression of concern = high social justice]. It's all here in my project-review process notes and it should be very clear. Remember, the company designed this project review process with the input from all employees [involvement in decision making = high structural justice]. We want to help you develop your skills [caring and concern = high social justice] as well as increase potential project viability. First, I want to share with you all the information I have [sharing information = high social justice]. Let's look at your XYZ Company proposal process overall and talk about it. In general, I have great respect for your abilities [caring and concern = high social justice]; you have captured the essence of the proposed project quite well. I see that you have really put a lot of effort into this proposal, and I know that all of your previous proposals are of good quality and well received by clients. Very good in fact! [caring and concern = high social justice]. However, I see that you were not on time with this project proposal, and that has caused a major delay for this very high-profile prospective project. This is not fair to our customer or your coworkers who depend on timely delivery [points out the need for fair distribution of outcomes = high structural justice].

Employee: Yes I see that, and I agree with what you are saying. However, I was late on my proposal because of legitimate reasons. I am not comfortable sending out project proposals to clients unless they are ready to go. I also have trouble getting the rest of my team to get things in on time and it slows my process down.

Manager: Don’t get me wrong. I trust your intentions are good [trust and respect = high social justice]. Let me give you the big picture here [sharing information = high social justice]. We believe in meeting the client’s needs in every way, and that is a critical element for high profile projects like this one for XYZ Company. I understand that others’ timelines impacted your work and your ability to meet the deadline. I know that you are a conscientious employee and have the potential for many future high-priority projects [caring and concern = high social justice]. I recognize that you perform quality work. I hope you see the company’s need to satisfy clients’ deadlines?

Employee: Yes. I hear what you are saying, and I do understand that my assignment to high priority projects is not just related to the quality of work, but also intimately tied to meeting deadlines. I see the value of getting projects out on time. However, I am torn between getting them out to clients as acceptable versus exactly on time. I value and care about my job and hope to maintain my ability to work on other high-priority project proposals.

Manager: I hear you and appreciate your commitment. You raise good points [caring and respect = high social justice]. It is a fine balance between timeliness and acceptable quality. I value your concern for meeting the expectations of the client and doing a good job [respect and trust = high social justice]. However it is equally important that we get client project proposals, especially priority projects, completed within expected timelines. All employees at this company know about the importance of deadlines [sharing information = high social justice], and it is clear that assignment to high profile projects is based on meeting these timelines [fair distribution = high structural justice]. This method of determining assignments was established by employee consensus [involvement in decision making = high structural justice].

Employee: Yes. We all agreed that meeting deadlines was vital. I do understand that assignment to high priority projects is not just related to the quality of work, but also intimately tied to meeting deadlines. But I am not clear on why good work that is a little late will keep me from taking on the next big project?

Manager: Our customers need to be able to depend on receiving work within an acceptable timeframe, and, despite your excellent work quality [respecting the employee = high social justice] you did not meet those deadline requirements. It would be unfair to the other employees who have met this expectation if I rewarded you [fair distribution = high structural justice]. I have to be concerned with all aspects of your performance, and failing to...
meet client deadlines impacts the ability of this organization to uphold and honor our most important client contracts. In determining the assignment of high priority projects, I must carefully and objectively weigh the value and impact of every component of an employee’s performance [fairness of process = high structural justice].

Employee: I understand what you are saying.

Manager: So in conclusion, I would like to regard this project proposal review as an opportunity for us to develop an action plan that will assist you in developing into a well-rounded employee [respect and concern = high social justice]. I think that creating stricter personal deadlines (deadlines that you impose prior to actual delivery dates), increasing communication among your team members, and learning to better understand the balance between work being on-time and perfect, will really assist you. I have much faith in your ability to take on these challenges and excel [trust and respect = high social justice]. Unfortunately, I will not be able to assign you to future high level projects at this time because you were unable to meet the deadline, but I want to work with you to improve your performance in the future so that we can get you involved once you have demonstrated that you have overcome your challenges [collaborative/integrative management].

Appendix 2. Low levels of justice vignette

Employee: I have been anticipating this conversation regarding my project proposal for XYZ Company, and I am a bit nervous about it.

Manager: Never mind that [missed opportunity to show concern = low social justice]. It’s all here in my project-review process notes, and it should be very clear. We are here to determine if you should be involved in future high priority projects. I see that your project proposals are of good quality and well received by clients. However, [did not compliment worker on good work = low social justice] I also see that you were not on time with your project proposal for XYZ Company, and it has caused a major delay for this very high-profile prospective project. This is not good [could have shown the importance of fair distribution of outcomes = low structural justice].

Employee: Yes I see that, and I agree with what you are saying. However, I was late on my proposal because of legitimate reasons. I am not comfortable sending out projects to clients unless they are ready to go. I also have trouble getting the rest of my team to get things in on time and it slows my process down.

Manager: Forget about the team. We are only concerned with your performance and how it impacts our clients [disrespect for employee’s concern = low social justice]. We believe in meeting the client’s needs in every way, and that is a critical element for determining assignment to high profile projects. The fact that you perform quality work does not help this company satisfy clients’ deadlines [missed opportunity to compliment employee on the quality of the employee’s work = low social justice].

Employee: Yes. I hear what you are saying, and I do understand that my assignment to high priority projects is not just related to the quality of work, but also intimately tied to meeting deadlines. I see the value of getting projects out on time. However, I am torn between getting them out to clients as acceptable versus exactly on time. I value and care about my job and hope to maintain my ability to work on other high-priority project proposals.

Manager: Obviously there is a balance between timeliness and acceptable quality [failed to give credit to the employee for making a valid point = low social justice]. You should know about the importance of deadlines. Your assignment to these high level projects is based on meeting these timelines [makes it appear that this only applies to the employee = low structural justice]. I determine assignment to priority projects, and meeting deadlines is a big factor [no employee involvement in decision making = low structural justice].

Employee: Yes. Meeting deadlines is vital. I do understand that my assignment to high priority projects is not just related to the quality of work, but also intimately tied to meeting deadlines. But I am not clear on why good work that is a little late will keep me from taking on the next big project?

Manager: Our customers need to be able to depend on receiving work within an acceptable timeframe, and the quality of the work is a separate issue [failure to show respect for the employees work quality = low social justice]. You are not meeting those deadline requirements. How can you expect me to reward you for not meeting expectations? [missed opportunity to show how the distribution of rewards is fair and applies to all employees = low structural justice]. Failing to meet client deadlines impacts the ability of this organization to uphold and honor our most important client contracts. In determining the
assignment to important projects I look at those areas that are deficient in an employee’s performance [unfair process that ignores other aspects of performance = low structural justice].

Employee: I understand what you are saying.

Manager: So in conclusion, you failed to get this proposal through [no sharing of information on how to improve = low social justice]. You will not be getting assigned to any future high-profile projects because you were unable to meet the deadline [competitive/dominating management].

Corresponding author
B. Charles Tatum can be contacted at: ctatum13@cox.net