Running Head: ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Organizational Justice in Virtual Team Settings

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Introduction

Research has demonstrated that organizational justice, the study of fairness in organizations, has an impact on both individual and team outcomes. However, until now, no studies have investigated how justice might unfold within the virtual team environment. The purpose of this article is to analyze organizational justice in virtual team settings and to discuss future implications based on this analysis. In order to meet this goal, this article is organized into three main sections. First, existing research on organizational justice will be reviewed. Next, organizational justice will be combined with the virtual team literature in order to assess how justice processes may be likely to unfold in virtual team settings. Finally, based on this analysis, implications and future trends for managers and researchers working with virtual teams will be presented.

Background

As organizations increasingly globalize their operations and utilize virtual teams, researchers have begun to assess how to apply knowledge from existing research areas to the virtual team setting (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). One area in need of more attention is the application of organizational justice to virtual team settings. Organizational justice is the study of fairness in the workplace (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003). There are four different types of justice: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational (Colquitt, 2001). Distributive Justice (Adams, 1965) is based on equity and focuses on the fairness of outcomes. Procedural Justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975) refers to the fairness of the processes, or procedures, used to reach certain outcomes. Interpersonal Justice (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993) focuses on whether people are treated with dignity and respect by others in their organization. Informational Justice (Bies & Moag, 1986) focuses on the quality of the explanation given to

people to describe why procedures were implemented a certain way or why outcomes were distributed in a certain manner. (Please see Table 1 for a list of major terms used throughout this article).

The justice literature is based, to a large extent, on the foundation of equity. Equity Theory (Adams, 1965) states that people have a desire for equitable treatment and that the ratio of inputs and outcomes should be equal across comparable people. In other words, if the inputs of two individuals are equal, their outcomes should also be equal. If there is a state of disequilibrium between these ratios, either due to over-reward or under-reward, people will feel uncomfortable and become motivated to equalize the situation. For example, employees who feel they were treated unfairly may work slower and be less productive in order to decrease the perceived inequity.

In order to make equity judgments, employees rely on a social comparison process (Festinger, 1954). There is evidence that people engage in a social comparison process whereby they compare themselves with similar others. People compare notes with one another to gain information about how they are doing relative to others. There is also evidence to suggest that employees receive cues from their environments which help shape their experiences and their reality (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Some of these cues may come from coworkers in the form of comments about their work situation, or judgments regarding the way they have been treated by the authorities in the organization. Therefore, the social comparison process is an important means by which employees decide whether they have personally been treated fairly.

Research has demonstrated that organizational justice has a large impact on the way employees feel and behave at work. Fair treatment is positively related to important variables including job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior and organizational commitment

(Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), as well as job performance (Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002). Unfair treatment, on the other hand, has been linked to feelings of dissatisfaction, lack of commitment to the organization, and even deviant behavior. Employees who are treated unjustly are more likely to steal from their employers (Greenberg, 1993), be absent from work (Gellatly, 1995), and commit acts of workplace sabotage in order to retaliate against employers (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002). Because of the range of both beneficial and detrimental employee reactions to treatment in the workplace, it is important for managers and researchers to understand how employees decide what is considered fair and unfair treatment.

Organizational justice researchers have also begun to examine justice at the team level of analysis over the past several years. These justice studies in team settings have shown that perceptions of justice affect team level behavior and outcomes. For example, people working in teams use the experiences of team members in order to form judgments about authority figures and the overall fairness of situations. Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, and Gee (2002) demonstrated that people will sacrifice some of their own outcomes in order to punish an authority figure who was unfair to a third party. Lind, Kray and Thompson (1998) also demonstrated that when authority figures are procedurally unjust (in the form of denying others voice into a process), participants lower their opinions of those authority figures. Finally, Colquitt (2004) demonstrated that higher levels of team performance occurred when a member's own justice and the justice of their teammates was consistent. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that people do use others' experiences when they form justice judgments and that justice is important to both individuals and teams.

However, because virtual teams are a relatively new phenomenon, most of the team level organizational justice research is based on face-to-face settings. What might happen when the social cues which aid the social comparison process and the formation of justice judgments are no longer available? Because virtual teams often do not interact with one another in a real-time setting, they lose much of the verbal and non-verbal communication that aids in the social comparison process. To date, however, there is no research specifically investigating how justice unfolds in virtual teams which may infrequently (if ever) meet face-to-face. If managers and researchers are to understand how best to manage in the virtual team environment, it is important to understand how prior research findings from organizational justice research in face-to-face settings may or may not generalize to individuals working within virtual teams. It is also important to understand how justice perceptions can form in the virtual team environment, because research shows that perceptions of fair treatment lead to positive outcomes that help teams and organizations function well. As such, an investigation of how justice research findings from face-to-face settings can be applied to virtual team settings is warranted. In the next section, I explore how the justice process, which typically relies on social comparison, may unfold in a virtual team environment.

Integrating Organizational Justice and Virtual Teams

One good way to start integrating the areas of organizational justice and virtual teams is by using what we know about the way that people make justice decisions and combining this with the virtual teams literature. One justice theory which seems particularly relevant here is the fairness heuristic theory (Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & deVera Park, 1993). This theory maintains that people use the information that is either most easily available to them or the first information they came across in order to make justice judgments. They use these heuristics in order to come

to some assessment about the trustworthiness of the other person they are dealing with (an authority figure typically). This then simplifies future justice judgments dealing with the same individual because unless something really unjust happens, the fairness heuristic can be used instead of the person having to make a whole new judgment about this person. There is empirical evidence to support that people make justice judgments based on the information they process first (Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997) and based on the information that is available to them (Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998).

Integrating the fairness heuristic theory with perceptions of justice in virtual teams may be fruitful. Some of the findings thus far in the virtual teams literature would suggest that this may be a reasonable link to make. For example, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) investigated communication and trust in global virtual teams. Because these teams do not have all of the same opportunities to get to know each other that face-to-face teams do, Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999) mentioned that "swift trust" is required in these teams. Specifically, their findings showed that teams who start off with members who are engaged in the process, enthusiastic about the process, and responsive over email seem to do the best in terms of establishing and maintaining trust. This would seem to imply two things. First, it implies that, similar to the notion of the fairness heuristics about what information is processed first (Van den Bos et al., 1997), first impressions seem to matter in virtual teams. Second, similar to the availability heuristic (Van den Bos et al., 1998), it implies that people make decisions based on the information that is available to them. In the case of the virtual teams, the responsiveness of others over email and the frequency with which they respond may be as important as the content of the messages. This is one way in which the areas of virtual teams and justice can be theoretically integrated.

A theoretical framework that provides the integration between virtual teams and justice needs to include the four types of justice (distributive, procedural, interpersonal, informational), the fairness heuristic theory, and the various typologies of virtual teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). The virtual team typologies generally specify a degree of virtualness, which may range from somewhat virtual interaction (i.e. the team does some work via teleconferencing and email) to completely virtual (i.e. the team never meets in a face-to-face real-time environment) (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005).

In the organizational justice meta-analysis conducted by Colquitt et al. (2001), the results generally showed that procedural and distributive justice had the strongest relationships with some critical outcome variables (e.g., outcome satisfaction, organizational commitment, withdrawal). Interpersonal justice and informational justice usually had weaker relationships with these outcome variables. This was often the case, but not always. However, within the virtual team context, the strength of the relationship between the different types of justice and important work outcomes may be different than in a face-to-face setting. For example, for distributive justice, Adam's equity theory of the fairness of outcomes relies on a social comparison process and knowing how your referent other is doing. If you work on a purely virtual team, this information about the referent other may not be available. Procedural justice, or the fairness of the process, may be available virtually, depending on the extent to which the virtual communication includes information about the degree to which processes are being applied evenly among team members. Again, however, procedural justice assumes some level of knowledge about how others are treated in order to know whether the process is being applied consistently and free from preferential bias. This may not be available in virtual teams. Interpersonal justice, or the degree to which people are treated with dignity and respect, could be

ascertained via the electronic communication that people send back and forth. Finally, informational justice, or the degree to which people know how decisions were arrived at may be one of the most readily available forms of justice in the virtual setting. Assuming that people are copied on the relevant emails for the decisions that affect them, information about the way things were decided may be highly available.

Therefore, informational and interpersonal justice may be critical in virtual teams. While distributive and procedural justice tend to be more important in the face-to-face interactions where people have information with which to make social comparisons, informational and interpersonal justice may dominate in virtual teams to the extent that those social cues and comparisons are unavailable. Thus, the strength of the relationship between the different types of justice may vary according to the degree of virtualness of the team. To the extent that the team interacts more virtually and sequentially, as opposed to face-to-face and simultaneously, heuristics such as the first information presented or the most accessible information presented will become important. In this case, the informational and interpersonal forms of justice should be most salient. However, as the team becomes more real-time and approximates a face-to-face team, more social cues and comparisons will be made. This then puts the team more into the realm of the face-to-face teams and the findings regarding the relative strength of the justice dimensions from Colquitt et al. (2001) may be more likely to prevail. (Please see Figure 1 for a diagram depicting predictions about the four facets of organizational justice as a function of team virtualness).

Future Trends

Until now, no research has specifically addressed justice in virtual teams. Future research will need to empirically investigate the extent to which the four dimensions of justice

matter as a function of team virtualness. Furthermore, as justice is applied in the virtual team setting, several practical implications arise. First, managers and team leaders may need to focus on different kinds of justice in different environments. As the medium of communication becomes more virtual (fewer face-to-face meetings and real-time interactions), informational and interpersonal justice can become more important. Second, because informational and interpersonal justice can be very important in a virtual team setting, it is important to train managers and team members to communicate effectively in virtual teams. For example, if email is being used as a primary means of communication, then it is critical that the content of the emails provide plenty of information about the decisions being made in the organization (informational justice) in order to keep people informed. It will also be important to provide frequent communication in order to keep the team engaged instead of out of sight and out of mind. Finally, it is also critical for people working in virtual teams to be very courteous (interpersonal justice) and to use clear writing in their electronic communication. Especially without the benefit of having non-verbal communication, things like humor may be misinterpreted and lead to misunderstandings. Perhaps virtual team training should incorporate guidelines for the use of symbolic means of expression, such as emoticons/smileys :-), in order to indicate humor. This may be one way of indicating facial expressions and preventing misunderstandings in written communication. This type of training may be important especially when virtual team members are in time zones that are very far apart and there are no hours during the work day when they can talk over email, voice, or video chat programs that allow for more real-time communication, clarification, and feedback.

Conclusion

Because employees can have a broad range of important positive and negative reactions to fair/unfair treatment at work, the study of justice can help inform virtual teams. To the extent that justice theories can be applied and implemented in virtual team settings, prior research suggests that the teams should have more positive outcomes and perform better. Conversely, the knowledge gained from studying virtual teams can help inform justice theory. Obviously, one interesting thing about virtual teams is that they infrequently, and perhaps never, meet face-to-face (Bell & Kozlowski, 2000; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005). The overwhelming majority of the justice research deals with people who work together or people who have some level of interaction in a laboratory setting. However, will the findings in face-to-face settings hold in the virtual setting? It is possible that without face-to-face interaction which provides those social cues (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and social comparison opportunities (Festinger, 1954), employees may change the way in which they judge overall fairness. Given the global nature of the business environment today and the advancing technology which makes virtual teams a growing phenomenon, it is important for both researchers and managers to understand how to manage fairness in a virtual team setting.

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Table 1

Terms and Definitions

Clear Writing. Communicating to virtual team members in a manner that is clear and to the point so that team members can understand the message being conveyed without the benefit of nonverbal communication.

Emoticons/smileys[1]. A combination of keyboard characters used to create images resembling human faces to help express emotion in typed communication occurring through email or newsgroups. For example, a smile :-) or a wink ;-)

Nonverbal Cues. Gestures and facial expressions made during conversations which provide the receiver of the communication with information about the sender's emotions and thoughts.

Organizational Justice. The study of fairness in the workplace. This construct includes four components: distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice and informational justice.

Social Cues[2]. Verbal and nonverbal cues that employees perceive within their environment; these cues provide information about the environment and help shape employee perceptions.

Team Virtualness[3]. The extent to which the members of a team engage in sequential, asynchronous communication with little or no non-verbal communication and few social cues, as opposed to synchronous, real-time, or face-to-face communication which provides verbal and non-verbal communication as well as social cues.

Verbal Cues. Spoken words and sounds (or lack thereof in the case of silence during a conversation) that provide the receiver of the communication with information about the sender's emotions and thoughts.

*Note: These definitions are from the following sources:
[1] Webster's New World Dictionary of Computer Terms, 1997, 6th ed.
[2] Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978
[3] Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005

Figure 1. Continuum of Team Virtualness