

Tips for Managing Difficult Decisions

In every team and organization important decisions need to be made related to goals, strategy, and allocation of resources. When decisions are announced people make evaluations of the fairness of the decision based on two aspects. First, the outcome of the decision (distributive justice) and second, the process by which the decision was made (procedural justice).*

Distributive Justice

What did I receive as an outcome of a decision?

Procedural Justice

How was this decision made?

Research has found that people are more willing to accept decisions, even if not favorable to them, when they know a fair process has been followed. This opens the possibility of maintaining strong relationships between supervisors and supervisees even in the face of unfavorable decisions.

Here are four elements of procedural justice:

Treatment with dignity and respect: People seek to be recognized and have their rights and status acknowledged, including by polite and respectful treatment.

Trustworthiness of the decision-maker: People assess decision-makers' motives, including caring, efforts to be fair, consideration of perspectives, and a desire to do the right thing.

Conflict of Interest: People want the decision-maker to be free from personal biases, including personal gain.

Participation: People wish to participate in the resolution of their individual or team problems or conflicts by presenting their perspectives and expertise.

Frequently, when decisions are announced people fail to provide information on how they arrived at the decision, leaving others to wonder if it was arbitrary. Other times, due to discomfort in sharing difficult news, managers fail to share information respectfully, cutting short conversations or not allowing for a response or feelings to be expressed.

Incorporating elements of procedural justice, such as including perspectives of people who will be impacted; clearly sharing a rationale; and providing information about the process used, can be an effective way to help people understand decisions. When people feel the process was fair, they are more likely to accept decisions.

During transition and change it can be challenging to make room for all to participate and feel heard. The Ombuds Office is here to help you discuss decision-making processes or to prepare for sharing a decision. Please call or email us to schedule an appointment.

*Adapted from the research of Tom Tyler

Judi Segall, Ombudsperson, jsegall@mit.edu / Nick Diehl, Ombudsperson, diehln@mit.edu

Kalina Schloneger, Program Coordinator, kalina_s@mit.edu

77 Massachusetts Avenue, 10-213 / 617.253.5921 / ombudsoffice.mit.edu