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On Fairness

One of the “Unofficial” OD Values

By Dick and Emily Axelrod

Have you ever had this experience? A red-faced, foot-stomping child yells at the top of their voice, “That’s not fair!” “Life isn’t fair,” responds the adult, “Get over it.” One of the great things about being an OD practitioner is that we take a different view. We say, “Life isn’t fair, but we can do something about it.”

Our field has been at the forefront of making organizations fairer places to work. Sometimes our work takes the form of major change initiatives, such as diversity and inclusion, or creating more democratic organizations through self-directed work teams. Sometimes it is as simple as making sure that everyone has a say about his or her work.

We understand that fairness is contextual and cultural. Solutions that work in one situation may not work in another. We do not run from fairness because it is difficult. We run toward fairness because it is necessary.

We Seek the Balanced Answer to Difficult Situations

In our work, we seek both justice and compassion. Justice in the sense that we try to help our clients find evenhanded solutions to the difficult issues they face. And compassion in the sense that we seek to understand and empathize with the underlying reasons for people’s behavior. We work with our clients to seek the balanced answer to difficult situations.

As OD professionals, we are not afraid to engage our clients in the fairness discussion. We ask, “Why do you need to

lay people off? Are there other alternatives? What does it mean if the top of the organization remains untouched while others lose their jobs?” “If you must lay people off,” we say to leaders, “Imagine you were the person being laid off and how you would like to be treated. Can you design a policy that treats people the way you would like to be treated?”

We ask these questions. We do not hide from them. Sometimes simple questions produce big results. Early in his career, Dick Axelrod was consulting to an auto manufacturer. The factory was like many factories. There was an office at the front of the building and the manufacturing occurred in the rear. Between the office and the factory was a door. What was interesting about this door was that it was unlocked on one side and locked on the other. Office workers had free access to the factory, but factory workers could not enter the office unless they were buzzed in. So Dick Axelrod asked not so innocently, “Why is this door locked?” The next day the locks were not present. Both factory workers and office workers had easy access to each other. Simple question with a big result.

Our publisher, Berrett-Koehler (BK), was dealing with the effects of the recent economic downturn. As is their practice, they regularly shared financial results and the state of the business with all employees. The news was not good. After much discussion, the group came up with a unique approach to the situation that had fairness written all over it:

» Priority was given to honoring all

written and verbal agreements to all stakeholders.

- » The BK mission and strategy would guide the organization's actions.
- » There would be a 10% salary reduction for all but the lowest paid employees.
- » No bonuses for any employees (including management).

Fast forward to present day. Berrett-Koehler, unlike many publishing companies, is thriving. The pay cuts and bonus cuts are a thing of the past. The company is reaping the benefits of efficiencies identified by employees. Fairness benefits both the company and those who work there.

Emily Axelrod's current collaboration with The Dreamcatcher Foundation to help victims of sex trafficking in Chicago is rooted in her sense of fairness, justice, and compassion. It comes from her desire to help right a wrong, to help those who have not gotten a "fair" shake in life.

Fairness is Present in Everything We Do

At the heart of involving people in decisions that impact them is a sense of fairness. It is not fair to create change in a person's job or the way people work together without them having a voice in creating the change.

Increasing information flow while creating forums where people can make sense of that information is an act of fairness. At the heart of these actions is the notion that everyone needs good information in order to make sense of their work and what is going on in their organization and the world around them. Dictatorships understand the power of a free flow of information; it is the first thing they cut when the dictatorship is threatened.

Increasing autonomy so people have more control over their work and work life is an act of fairness. It means everyone should be able to make decisions that impact the quality of their work and their work environment.

Creating situations where people are heard and understood are acts of fairness. Sometimes this is as simple as who gets to speak and who does not, or who gets to use the microphone and who does not.

Dick and Emily Axelrod founded The Axelrod Group, Inc., a consulting firm that pioneered the use of employee involvement to effect largescale organizational change. Along with Julie Beedon and Robert Jacobs, they coauthored *You Don't Have to Do It Alone: How to Involve Others to Get Things Done*, which the New York Times called, "the best of the current crop of books on this subject." Dick Axelrod is the author of the award-winning *Terms of Engagement: New Ways of Leading and Changing Organizations*. He is the recipient of the Organization Development Network's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Teaching Excellence Award from the University of Chicago. He has taught at Columbia and American University. They have both taught at the University of Chicago. Their latest book is *Let's Stop Meeting Like This: Tools to Save Time and Get More Done*. Dick Axelrod can be reached at dick@axelrodgroup.com; and Emily Axelrod can be reached at emily@axelrodgroup.com.

Sometimes it means raising the question, "Why is it that those who appear to petition their case in many towns and villages find that the village officials are on raised platforms, while the citizens find themselves seated below?" Other times it requires the hard work of getting two people or two groups to understand the other person's or group's point of view.

Fairness Impacts Our Brains

What we are learning from neuroscience is that people are naturally oriented toward fairness and compassion. In his book, *The Neuroscience of Fair Play*, Donald Pfaff shows that given the choice between a fair, compassionate solution and an unfair, mean-spirited solution, most people will chose the fair, compassionate solution. He goes on to say that humans across time and geography have similar notions of good and bad, right and wrong (Penttila, 2007). David Rock postulates that when people experience fairness, they perceive less of a threat and the innovative, collaborative part of the brain lights up (Rock, 2009).

Fairness Matters

Fairness leads to trust between people, trust of leaders, and trust of institutions. On the national level, the growing discomfort between the 1% and the 99%, voting rights, marriage equality, and access to healthcare and education are all questions of fairness.

Fairness benefits society as a whole and the people and businesses that are part of that society. Our society is struggling

with the big questions, questions without easy answers. What is fair? What are we willing to do to increase fairness? What are we not willing to do to increase fairness?

As OD practitioners, we have access to many different methodologies to help our clients. Some methodologies have fairness in the foreground, and other methodologies have fairness in the background. No matter where it sits, fairness is always there. We ignore fairness at our own peril.

We Choose Fairness not Because it is Easy, but Because it is Who We Are

We have chosen to write about fairness even though it is not on the list of "official" OD values of respect and inclusion, collaboration, authenticity, self-awareness, and empowerment. We write about fairness because it speaks to us. We strive to push for fairness in our work with our clients. We strive to work with our clients in a way that is fair to both our clients and ourselves. Do we always achieve fairness? Of course not, but that does not keep us from the task.

References

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