

You are required to explain the relationship between workplace conflict, workplace stress and workplace justice and to discuss the ways in which an understanding of this relationship may assist the parties to improve their approach to conflict and stress in the workplace.

The nature of the workplace and of working conditions within the organisational environment is rapidly changing. Contemporary workplaces now entirely depend on human capital with an increased knowledge mind-set, a greater reliance on technology and a thirst for organisational efficiency and process optimisation.¹ With this modern cultural change arrives an increasing obligation for employees to perform at higher levels of intensity – while an escalating managerial directive forces them to improve both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of their role. Evidently, a by-product of this new organisational environment is a greater level of employee resistance stemming from an atmosphere fuelled by conflict, stress and often a misrepresented view of workplace justice. The majority of this conflict and stress is attributed to ‘work design and the organisation and management of work, and an employee’s social and environmental contexts, which have the potential for causing psychological, social and even physical harm’.²

In the *Maxwell Report*,³ it was stated that definition of stress is ‘the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs the worker.’⁴ These emotional responses typically result from a change in the nature and intensity of psychosocial stressors in the workplace, and highlight the increasing importance of monitoring and addressing the mental and physical health of all employees. The onset of such psychosocial stressors can typically be attributed to a stimulus, response or interactive based emotion which stems from a particular event or circumstance in the workplace.⁵ Each of these emotion stimuli are usually the direct product of organisational change which has resulted in a transform of a ‘person’s cognitions about change, affective reactions to change, and behavioural tendency toward change’.⁶ As a result, positive attitudes towards change are typically critical in achieving organisational goals, while negative attitudes towards it are met with increased resistance and result in net

¹ Dollard, M. F, *Introduction: Costs, theoretical approaches, research designs* in M. F. Dollard, A. H. Winefield, & H. R. Winefield (Eds), *Occupational stress in the service professions*, London Taylor & Francis, 2003, Pg 1-43.

² Cox, T, Griffiths, A, Barlowe, C, Randall, R., Thomson, L, & Rial-Gonzalez, E. *Organisational interventions for work stress: A risk management approach*, Sheffield, 2000.

³ Maxwell, C, *Occupational Health & Safety Review (The Maxwell Report)*, 2004.

⁴ *Ibid* at pg 39.

⁵ Vakola, Maria and Nikolaou, Ioannis, *Attitudes Towards Organizational Change: What is the Role of Employees’ Stress and Commitment?*, *Employee Relations*, 2005, Vol. 27, p 160-174.

⁶ *Ibid* at pg 162.

detriment to the organisation. Consequently, the management and assessment of an employee's response to organisational change is typically a precursor to the level of stress they are experiencing.

This infers that the effective management of change in the organisational environment will have an immediate impact on minimising the level of conflict which occurs in the workplace. In turn, this will diametrically affect the amount of stress exhibited by employees during confrontational situations. Conflict has been directly attributed to organisational change⁷ – whether it be task, relationship or process conflict – since the majority of workplace disagreements start with change tension. Stress created by poor employee relationships, overloaded expectations and unfair pay and benefits are positively correlated to organisational change and all increase the level of conflict in the workplace. Consequently, organisational research has indicated that employee's who believe they are being treated fairly and equitably within an organisation will tend to have lower stress levels, be less resistant to change and engage in acts which are entirely beneficial to the organisation – while those who feel the opposite will have higher stress levels, resist change entirely and engage in acts that are detrimental.⁸ Evidently, this corollary suggests that organisational change, stress and conflict are positively correlated in the workplace, and if policies and processes are implemented which monitor and seek to reduce the impact of each factor individually – this will allow for proactive improvements in the workplace universally.

Consequently, it is apparent that the role of justice directly interrelates with conflict and stress by being 'concerned with the ways in which employees determine if they have been treated fairly in their jobs and the ways in which those determinations influence other work-related variables'.⁹ Undoubtedly, the management of fairness and justice impressionism in an organisational context is critical to an employee's decision-making process in determining whether these factors are consistently presented to them in the workplace. The author has reviewed ample evidence which suggests that a positive correlation exists between employee perceptions of fairness and justice within an organization and their subsequent behaviour.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid 4 at pg 39.

⁸ Barling, J. & Phillips, M., *Interactional, formal and distributive justice in the workplace: An exploratory study*. Journal of Psychology, 1993, Vol 127, Pg. 649-657.

⁹ Moorman, R. H. *Relationship between organizational justice and organizational citizenship behaviors: Do fairness perceptions influence employee citizenship?*, Journal of Applied Psychology, 1991, Vol 76, Pg 846.

¹⁰ Cropanzano, R. & Greenberg, J.. *Progress in organizational justice: Tunneling through the maze* in C. L. Cooper & I. T. Robertson (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organizational psychology*, 1997, 12: 317-372.

Equivalently, a number of studies examined¹¹ have also highlighted that when organisational decisions and managerial actions are perceived to be unfair or unjust, employees become increasingly pessimistic in their opinion of the organisation and engage in socially negative actions. Such negative behaviour directly impacts the amount of psychosocial stressors which occur within the working environment, and is attributable to an increase in the level of conflict and stress experienced by employees.

Thus, it is clear that a strong interrelationship between workplace stress, fairness and justice exists in an employee's overall opinion of an organisation. An inverse association can be drawn between the level of transparency and openness exhibited by an organisation, and the amount degree of stress and conflict in the workplace. If organisational change is proactively and clearly communicated by management in the workplace, then the level of inter-workplace conflict reduces which lowers the amount of psychosocial stressors in the workplace and decreases the probability of emotive responses from employees. Evidently, the effective management of transparency and openness in the workplace enables an organisation to promote fairness and equality, and increase an employee's sentiment towards organisational justice.¹² It is through the implementation of preventative, rather than reactionary, measures which allow employees to disseminate organisational change. By ensuring that employees are aware of possible psychosocial stressors in the working environment – an organisation can actively manage and reduce workplace stress and conflict levels, and promote fairness and equality.

It is important to recognise that a common sense approach needs to be taken by organisations when attempting to implement change at any level – and this includes the introduction of policies which attempt measure workplace stress, conflict and justice. Clearly, this implies that it is not viable for a singular system to be implemented at any organisational level which can effectively measure the social and organisational impacts on employee's health, well-being and overall effectiveness.¹³ However, it is definitively possible for organisations to integrate new systems and procedures into existing organisational frameworks which ensure that emerging risks within the workplace are identified and appropriate responses are facilitated. The more flexible and dynamic these systems are in measuring risks such as

¹¹ Ibid 24.

¹² Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J. Porter, C. O. L. H., & Ng, K. Y., *Justice at the millennium: A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research*, Journal of Applied Psychology, 2001, 86, Pg 426.

¹³ Rasmussen, Thomas H. and Jeppesen, Hans Jeppe, *Teamwork and associated psychological factors: A review*, Journal of Work and Stress, Vol 20, April 2006, Pg 121.

emotional demands, workplace bullying, organisational fairness and equality and the impact of organisational change – the more appropriate organisations will be able to deal with stress, conflict and equality in the workplace.¹⁴

Thus, it is evident that the balance of conflict, stress and justice in the workplace needs to be more effectively managed by the organisations in order to ensure they reduce the impact that each of these attributes places on employees.¹⁵ The workplace contains a complex mix of psychosocial job characteristics and social and organisational contexts that can potentially impact on an employee's health, well-being and effectiveness¹⁶ – and it is only through the implementation of transparent and proactive policies that an organisation will be able to effectively manage this environment. Evidently, conflict and stress will always exist in any organisational workplace – regardless of the policies and procedures that are implemented to reduce them. However, it is the manner in which an organisation can effectively deal with, and reduce such attributes that will determine the organisations effectiveness in dealing with stress, conflict and impressionism towards workplace equality and justice.

¹⁴ Ibid at 123.

¹⁵ Stewart, Andrew, *Stewarts Guide to Employment Law*, The Federation Press, 2008, Pg. 156.

¹⁶ Dollard, M. F, *Introduction: Costs, theoretical approaches, research designs* in M. F. Dollard, A. H. Winefield, & H. R. Winefield (Eds), *Occupational stress in the service professions*, London Taylor & Francis, 2003, Pg 27.

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