

# SIGMA

## Leader Character Series



**Great Leaders  
Are Just**



## GREAT LEADERS ARE JUST

“

**Injustice anywhere is a threat  
to justice everywhere.**

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Have you ever left a situation at work feeling like you were treated unfairly? If so, that experience may have shaped your feelings about your work and organization. Research suggests that perceptions of injustice are linked to key outcomes, such as decreased organizational commitment, trust in management, prosocial behavior, and performance.<sup>1,2</sup> Thus, when an employee feels like a work situation is unjust, it can have major consequences. However, the same work situation can be viewed multiple ways by different people. This is because some individuals care more about equality — such as receiving the same resources as others — whereas others may value equity — such as the consideration of individual circumstances.<sup>3</sup> What is seen as just depends on individual perceptions.

Justice can be defined as the enforcement of decisions that are accepted as legitimate and reasonable by others. Just leaders ensure that individuals are treated fairly and that consequences are proportionate to contributions. They also remain objective when making decisions, ask others for their opinions on processes and procedures, and provide timely, specific, and candid explanations for decisions. The willingness to redress wrongdoings both inside and outside the organization is another important characteristic of a just leader.

In assessing how just you are as a leader, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I rewarding good performance and addressing poor performance?
- Do I consider the equality of outcomes while making decisions?
- Am I concerned about respecting differences of others?
- Do I remain objective when listening to others?
- Am I concerned with making the best possible decision for the most amount of people?
- Do I care about supporting others who have been wronged?

### Ways to Improve Your Justice

**Use perspective-taking:** If you are unsure of how to start exercising the justice dimension and want to enhance your process for making fair decisions, a great first step is to consider the perspectives of all parties involved.<sup>5</sup> Putting yourself in the shoes of those who will be impacted is a great way to make sure you are coming at a decision fairly. You may find it helpful to first think about the specific circumstances that each person is starting from, and then expand your

focus to considering how your decision will impact others in terms of their outcomes. This empathy-focused approach will help you consider both the equality and equity of your decision.

**Know the difference between equity and equality:** As mentioned above, the same outcome can be perceived differently by different people. Because of this, think about what is most important to you before deciding on an outcome — equality of outcomes regardless of circumstances, or the consideration of individual factors. This difference may be particularly important if you find yourself in charge of organizing team rewards and bonuses. In this scenario, you may have to decide if everyone on the team should be given the same amount, or if individual bonuses should be given using performance-based inputs.

**Document your decision-making process:** In addition to taking ownership of your decisions, it is beneficial to document your thought process. This will help with others' perceptions of procedural justice, including the fairness of the decision-making process<sup>6</sup>, as they can see that you have considered all relevant information. If any follow-up questions or concerns arise, documenting your process can allow other parties to see, step-by-step, how you came to that decision. This process is also helpful as you work toward building up your justice. For example, you may want to document your decision-making processes to look back on in future decisions.

## Consider These Tips to Moderate Your Justice

Effective leaders are able to balance the 11 leader character dimensions rather than focusing on just a few. As you develop your leader character, look for places where strengths may need to be moderated. If you scored a 4 or higher on justice, use the tips below to help you balance the expression of this character dimension.

**Avoid having too many cooks in the kitchen.** When you care deeply about justice and participatory decision-making, it can be easy to invite too many people into the decision-making process. Having too much consensus may make it difficult to make decisions and can halt efficiency. Know when to invite participation from others and when to stick with your own judgment.

**Don't let the fear of displeasing someone stop you.** In some cases, it may be tempting to water down the delivery of potentially controversial decisions to avoid confrontation. However, avoiding tough conversations can lead to worse outcomes overall. Have the courage to deliver bad news in a tactful but transparent manner to be respectful of others' time and feelings.

**Don't lose sight of the people affected by your decisions.** Alternatively, some leaders get so caught up in their own decision-making process that they may fail to think about their delivery. Because of this, leaders that are at the forefront of an important decision should also spend some time thinking about how to respectfully deliver the outcome to others. It is important to remember the people that will be impacted by any decisions you make and do your best to support them. The goal is to be as direct as possible while still remaining considerate.

## Resources



[How to Create a Fair Workplace: Crash Course Business: Soft Skill #5](#)



[Five Ways to Promote Fairness in the Hybrid Workplace](#)



Develop your justice by taking advantage of SIGMA's [coaching services](#).

Contact SIGMA for leader character coaching.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: [support@SigmaHR.com](mailto:support@SigmaHR.com)

Call: 800-265-1285

## References

<sup>1</sup> Cohen-Charash, Y., & Spector, P. E. (2001). The role of justice in organizations: A meta-analysis. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 86(2), 278-324.

<sup>2</sup> Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C. O. L. H., & Ng, K. Y. (2001). Justice at the millennium: A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 425-445.

<sup>3</sup> Gardiner, S. K. (2019). Equity and equality. YouTube.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCS7Rus4 -Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCS7Rus4-Y)

<sup>4</sup> Bies, R. J., & Moag, J. F. (1986). Interactional justice: Communication criteria of fairness. In R. J. Lewicki, B. H. Sheppard, & M. H. Bazerman (Eds.), *Research on Negotiations in Organizations* (Vol. 1, pp. 43-55). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, P. (2022). 4 Ways to be a fair leader. *About Leaders*. Retrieved from  
<https://aboutleaders.com/fair-leader/>

<sup>6</sup> Colquitt, J. A. (2012). Organizational justice. In S. W. J. Kozlowski (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of organizational psychology*, Vol. 1, pp. 526-547). Oxford University Press.