Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – Insights from a Justice Perspective

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Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion have been topics of increasing interest as many organizations give lip service to the importance of treating employees fairly. In this paper we expand the discussion of justice - noting that equity is only one of twelve justice-based elements and clarifying why all twelve of those elements are essential in increasing employee belonging and commitment. We encourage organizations to expand their commitment to all the elements of justice to increase employee ownership and performance and to build greater organization trust.

Keywords: Diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, employee commitment

1. Introduction

In the modern business environment where organizations of all types have struggled to earn public and employee confidence (Harrington, 2017), a growing issue has been the fairness, or lack thereof, of organizations in dealing with diversity and inclusion (Leach, 2021). Both the legitimacy of leadership and the inadequacy of their values have been called into question in a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). As a result of those shortcomings, leaders and organizations have consistently failed to establish high trust, engage employees, or earn employee commitment and loyalty (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

Although there has been frequent dialogue about the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in creating productive organization cultures, there continues to be an underlying awareness that leaders are failing to bridge the gap between talking about improving the work environment and taking meaningful actions that mitigate deeply ingrained attitudes and behaviors (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). As Robert Livingston (2021) has articulated, making a transformational difference in addressing diversity and inclusion requires a clear understanding of the nature of justice and the practical application of associated principles.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the important nuances of justice in enabling today's organizations' success. We begin by defining diversity and inclusion and explain why those concepts are vital for the success of today's organizations. We identify twelve facets of justice; explain how each of these facets are ethically and morally based and fundamental to diversity and inclusion; and explain why understanding justice is critical to generating a greater degree of belonging and commitment for employees. We then identify four contributions that this paper makes for practitioners and scholars interested in creating a healthier, more just world and more effective organizations.

2. Understanding Diversity

Each person has worth and value – separate and apart from their "worthiness" in the eyes of others or the unique qualities (Peck, 2003). Although the value of each individual has been acknowledged by philosophers, scholars, and prophets, the importance of individuals often escapes the understanding of leaders of organizations and is a verity that virtually everyone sometimes forgets (Covey, 2004). Recognizing and appreciating the differences inherent in diversity is not only a courtesy universally owed but is a resource that can help organizations achieve and sustain competitive advantage (Bowes, 2021).

Unfortunately, bias, preferential treatment, discrimination, and the negation of others' value have permeated society for millennia. Many leaders and organizations continue to rationalize their failure to respect and value others -- fallaciously believing that doing so is somehow in their own best interests, essential to their organizations' success, and justifiable to society (Burdick, 2021). Lack of empathy, fear of the unknown, and a distorted perspective about the

world are root causes of failing to acknowledge the value of differences (Brown, 2021; Livingston, 2021), but the inability to recognize the value of diversity is pervasive in individuals, in organizations, and in society (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020).

Differences abound. Bailey Reiners and Jessica Powers (2022) cite 39 distinct diversity characteristics and define diversity as simply "the qualities and characteristics that distinguish individuals from one another." McGrath and colleagues (1995) defined diversity in terms of demographic differences. Larkey (1996) emphasized differences in perspectives and behaviors. Cox (1993) focused diversity on cultural distinctions; Kochan and colleagues (2003) identified diversity in "non-observable" characteristics; Thomas and Ely (1996) noted that diversity also included differences in perspective toward work and personal identity.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of diversity, there is agreement that diversity encompasses characteristics or dimensions that differentiate individuals or groups from one another (Roberson, 2006). Implicit within the practical application of diversity is the obligation to demonstrate respect for and appreciation for others who possess such differences (Johnson, 2020). The ideal for organizations is to collaboratively incorporate differences of perspective to pursue shared goals (Donahue, 2022).

Although diversity, discrimination, and the right to be different have been widely talked about and have frequently generated passionate responses throughout history, society has continued to be uneven in extending individual rights, respect, and opportunities to the many individuals and groups labeled "different" – even when those groups include major sectors of the world community.

In addressing the nature of diversity as a societal issue that has a profound impact on individuals and on organizations of all types, an unfortunate reality is that the nature of the diversity problem and the significance of its impacts are rarely fully understood (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). Failing to understand the complex nature of biases that are endemic in society makes it exponentially more difficult to address the debilitating consequences of those issues and can only result in incomplete and ineffective efforts to address diversity as a systemic problem that must ultimately be resolved to enable individuals and organizations to optimize their effectiveness (Livingston, 2021; George, 2021).

3. Understanding Inclusion

The purpose of inclusion extends beyond merely allowing the participation of diverse individuals and groups but includes fully empowering them to contribute to their organizations' success (White, 2021). Inclusion overlaps with a diversion in its appreciation of others' value and is a process for involving, including, and engaging participants within a group (Wise, 2022). In its common organizational usage, inclusion allows individuals and groups to become fully socialized as group members (Roberson, 2006). This socialization is especially important to address if individuals or groups have historically been excluded from full participation or have previously not been involved in nor given opportunities, rights, or benefits available to others (Shah, 2022).

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Inclusion and diversity are terms sometimes used interchangeably because both oppose discrimination and racism, but the concepts are also different (Pelled et al., 1999). Inclusion is a more personalized concept that includes the degree to which individuals can become full "owners and partners" of an organization (cf., Block, 2013). Inclusion provides individuals with the experience of actively participating and enables them to participate in decision-making by sharing ideas, seeking solutions to organizational problems, and contributing to the improvement of an organization (Livingston, 2021).

Inclusion treats individuals and group members as valued, respected and supported team members and seeks to understand and respond to the needs of every individual. Inclusion, as envisioned by leaders like Herman Miller's Max DePree (2004) includes what he and other scholars describe as a "covenantal" duty to ensure that the right conditions are in place for each person to achieve their full potential. DePree was just one of many leading experts who viewed the obligation of organizations as an" ethical stewardship" responsibility and viewed inclusion as a fundamental duty of leaders (cf. Hernandez, 2012; Contrafatto, 2014; Okpala & Caldwell, 2019).

Stephen R. Covey (2004 & 2013) advocated an organization's responsibility for creating a culture and environment that recognizes, appreciates, and utilizes every employee's talent, skills, and perspectives to achieve that organization's objectives and mission. Inclusion incorporates creating a culture that not only espouses the respectful and inclusive treatment of employees but translates those words into policies, practices, and systems that value individuals and groups and enables them to experience close affiliation, acceptance, and regard (Schein & Schein, 2016).

When individuals and group members become active partners and full participants in the decision-making activities of an organization and are empowered employees, they develop a sense of belonging that is an accompanying characteristic of full employee engagement (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Caldwell & Anderson, 2021).

4. The Link between Belonging and Commitment

The sense of belonging occurs when people feel welcome, no matter their differences. In such an environment, every member feels respected and valued for their potential contribution -- and their inclusion as part of a group is never questioned (Dunn, 2020). Comparing diversity, inclusion, and belonging with the metaphor of being a part of a concert group, diversity is being a member, inclusion is playing an instrument that contributes to the melody, and belonging is being a featured solo instrumentalist.

A growing body of empirical evidence confirms that team members in organizations that are superior to their competitors feel a higher level of individual commitment (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Shahid & Azhar, 2013; Macey et al., 2011). Commitment to an organization is demonstrated on a continuum directly related to the degree to which individuals feel that their leaders are worthy of their trust (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017). That continuum of commitment equates high trust with the belief that their organization's systems, processes, and practices are fair and supportive of the entire workforce (Hayes et al., 2015).

Organizations where individuals demonstrate high levels of belonging and personal commitment are noted for their leaders' commitment to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of team members (Peck, 2003). Amber Cabral (2020) affirms that organizations that adopt and incorporate principles of inclusion and fairness create a culture in which their employees literally become "allies and advocates" of those organizations.

5. The Nature of Justice

Aristotle (2004) described justice as the underlying foundation of any healthy society. To Aristotle, justice encompassed virtuous conduct in honoring obligations due to others. Velasquez and colleagues (1990) equated justice with moral rightness. In writing about the nature of justice, Erich Fromm (2003) observed that people should be valued in terms of their inherent worth and be treated with great dignity and respect. As shown in Figure 1, justice encompasses both diversity and inclusion as ethically and morally related concepts.
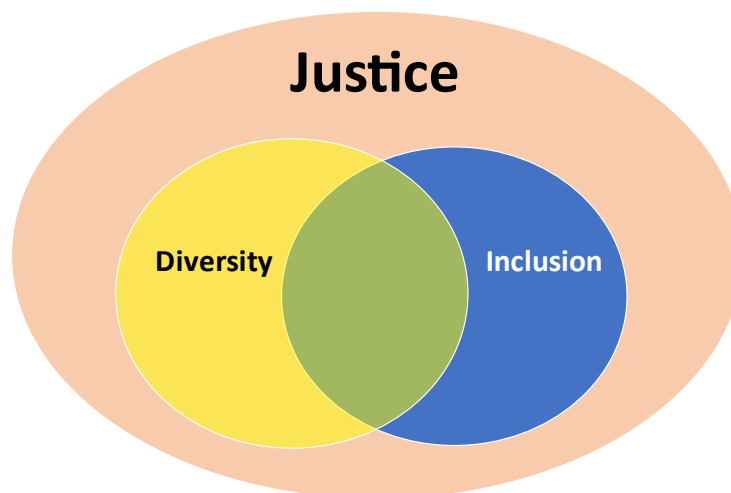

Figure 1. The Nature of Justice

Justice has been closely aligned with trustworthiness as a measure of personal conduct and the two virtues are highly related (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011). Both justice and trustworthiness are associated with relationships, processes and rules, and decision-making (Clapham, et al., 2014) and are foundation elements of ethical and moral conduct (Anderson & Caldwell, 2021; Folger & Cropanzano, 2013; Hudson, 2003). In its complexity, justice has been widely understood to be a complex construct, composed of many facets (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; Colquitt & Greenberg, 2013). When leaders and organizations treat others justly, their organizations are more likely to flourish (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Clapham et al., 2014; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Primeaux, Karri & Caldwell, 2003).

Justice has long been identified as being comprised of three categories: distributive justice which is outcome based; procedural justice which involves processes, systems, and practices; and interactional justice which is based upon the relationships of leaders with individuals and how those individuals are treated (Beugre & Baron, 2001; Colquitt, et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990; Bies & Moag, 1986). Incorporating the research of those who have written about justice we identify twelve individual and organizational justice elements.

5.1 Distributive Justice

According to the ***Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosoph*y**, distributive justice plays a major role in social justice, focusing on allocating and distributing goods, resources, opportunities, and rewards (Lamont & Favor, 2017). Distributive Justice is economically- and outcome-based and seeks to make decisions primarily based upon four facets of Distributive Justice (Roemer, 1996). These four facets of Distributive Justice are the following.

- **Equality-based Justice:** Equality-based justice distributes benefits in equal measure to all parties - based upon the premise that membership entitles each group participant to an equal share of available opportunities, benefits, and rewards (Hare, 1991). Equality-based justice also argues that penalties for misconduct, violation of the law, or deviation from compliance with work rules must be meted out in the same way to all individuals or groups (Sturm, 2003).

- **Need-based Justice:** The assignment of benefits or resources based upon need recognizes that individual parties are not the same but that their need for available resources may vary (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies, 2001). An underlying assumption of this perspective is that the members of a group view each other as valued partners mutually committed to each other's welfare, growth, and wholeness and who acknowledge their respective needs as a distributive priority (Brock, 2012).

- **Equity-based Justice:** Accountability for results and contribution to achieving group goals are fundamental elements of equity-based justice (Lamont, 2017). The assumption is that each contributing party should receive an allocation of benefits equivalent to their measurable contribution to achieving organizational outcomes (Konow, 2001; Folger, 1986). Bies (1987) noted that equity-based justice often failed to acknowledge differences in the opportunity to add value and the ability to accurately measure contributions objectively.

- **Restoration-based justice:** Just distribution of resources may also acknowledge that parties may have had past rights denied by events associated with the actions of others (Hosmer, 2010). Zehr (2003) explained that restorative justice sought to recompense injured parties resulting from social injury. Restoration-based justice has also included reparations for an offense and penalties being applied to offenders within a criminal justice context (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2008).

5.2 Procedural Justice

Processes and methods used to allocate resources, resolve problems, and determine outcomes are the primary considerations of procedural justice (Rohl & Machura, 2019). Procedural justice reflects individuals' basic need to feel that those processes and methods are understandable and rational, fairly and consistently administered, and provide parties the opportunity to be heard before determining ultimate outcomes (Tyler, 1989). There four facets of Procedural Justice are the following.

- **Rules-based Justice:** The rationale for rules and processes and the logical articulation of applicable standards and expectations establish guidelines for society and identify universally accepted values about behavior and outcomes (Greenberg & Cropanzano, 2002; Hegtvedt & Clay-Warner, 2008). Rule fairness is measured by the degree that established rules reflect a rational and logical intent, are consistently applied to all parties, and are neutrally and objectively considered in the weighting of decisions (Blader & Tyler, 2003).

- **Compliance-based Justice:** The degree to which established rules, processes, and methods are carried out represents critical factors determining individual perceptions of compliance-based justice. Subjective enforcement by administrators of procedural rules and inconsistent interpretation of guidelines can undermine the perceived justice of rules and destroy trust (Hough et al., 2010).

- **Voice-based Justice**: The opportunity to be heard, to explain one's point of view, and to defend one's actions are elements of voice-based procedural justice (Lind & Kulik, 2009). The right to be heard and to have the opportunity to influence an ultimate outcome is perceived to be as sacrosanct as the actual decision about that outcome (Landau, 2009).

- **Transparency-based Justice**: Transparency is the extent to which a procedural process is open, explained clearly, and carried out according to established criteria. Transparency is fundamental to the credibility of a decision-

making process and the degree to which a decision is perceived as legitimate (Hosmer, 2010). Transparency and accountability are closely related in establishing the legitimacy of procedural justice (Berman & Fox, 2010).

5.3 Interactional Justice

The degree to which individuals are treated with courtesy, kindness, respect, consideration, and concern are the common elements of Interactional Justice and are typically perceived as more important than the procedures followed or the outcome of interactions (Clapham, et al., 2014). Justice and perceptions about trust and trustworthiness are integrated constructs. How individuals are treated has been shown to be a major factor in determining how that treatment affects their perceptions about justice (Colquitt & Rodell, 2014). There are four facets of Interactional Justice. These four facets of Interactional Justice are the following.

Respect-based Justice: Relationships based upon honesty and truth increase others' perceptions of the fairness of processes and outcomes and are fundamental to interactional justice (Beugre & Baron, 2001). Treating others with respect and human dignity exponentially enhances individuals' perceptions about their experiences and their attitudes toward those experiences (Bies, 2015).

Courtesy-based Justice: The degree to which individuals believe that they are dealt with politely and courteously and are listened to without interruption is also an element of interactional justice (Ramkisoon, 2016). When a violation of an obligation or the failure to honor a perceived duty is owed, the courtesy shown by the offending party and the apology offered play a major role in the emotional response of the offended party (Tomlinson, 2012).

Kindness-based Justice: Treating individuals with a demonstrated commitment to their welfare, growth, and wholeness demonstrates the authentic intent of a party and is perceived as fundamental to interactional justice (Peck, 2003). Caring about others and demonstrating responsibility for others' welfare builds the trust relationship inherent in interactional justice (Gilligan, 2016; Tata & Bowes-Sperry, 1996).

Compassion-based Justice: Interactional justice that incorporates both empathy and compassion are key elements of relationship building and are fundamental tenets of interactional justice (Goleman, 2005). Compassionate efforts to respond to others' needs and to authentically work to address their concerns honors the duty that individuals perceive to be a fundamental element of how they view relationships (DePree, 2004; Covey, 2004).

The twelve facets of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice are reflected in Figure 2.
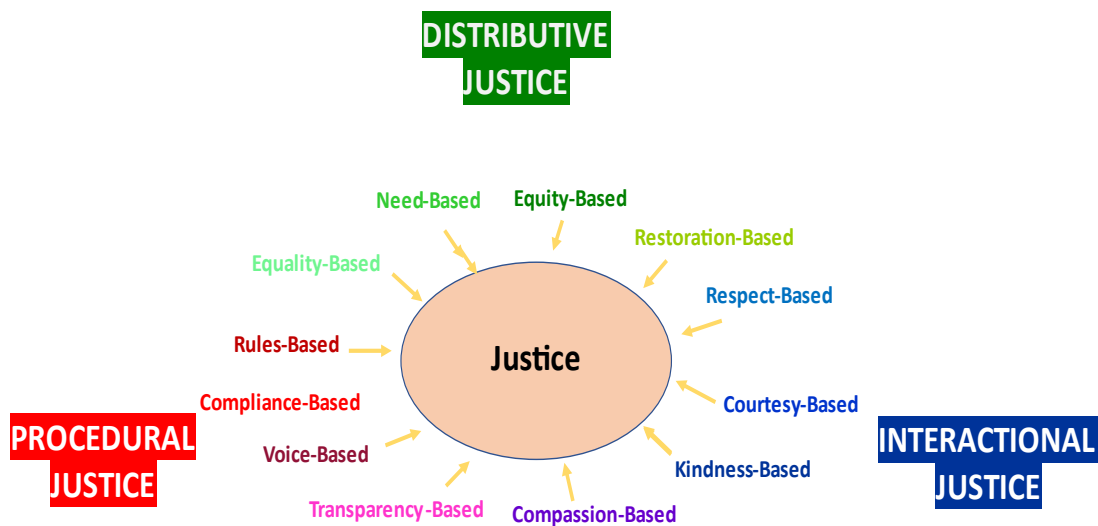

Figure 2. Integrating Justice Facets with Diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are fundamentally based upon individual rights and standards of moral and ethical conduct that have profound societal, organizational, and personal consequences. Each of the twelve facets of justice applies to both diversity and inclusion and confirms that the nature of justice includes but extends beyond equity-based justice. Table 1, provided below, offers insights into each of the twelve facets applies and affirms the important role of justice and its complex nature.

Table 1. Twelve Facets of Justice and their Impacts on Diversity and Inclusion

Justice Facet	Impact on Diversity	Impact on Inclusion	Comment
Equality	Treats all persons alike and withholds no privileges or rights	Includes everyone, regardless of differences.	Does not distinguish one from another.
Need	Recognizes that some individuals need more to remain whole and healthy.	Enables those with needs to have those needs met.	Acknowledges that needs differ.
Equity	Enables everyone to contribute and be rewarded for adding value.	Acknowledges that individuals with differences can contribute greater value.	Values each person based on value-added.
Restoration	Seeks to address past deficiencies and retore lost rights and opportunities.	Rectifies injustices and seeks to provide opportunities for all.	Honors duty of providing opportunity.
Rules	Identifies rational, logical, and clearly enumerated guidelines for everyone.	Clear rules honor the rights of every group and individual.	Protect people with every unique quality.
Compliance	Follows established rules consistently for all.	Provides groups and individuals with assurances of protection of rights.	Uniformity and consistency are key.
Voice	Enables every point of view to be heard, explained, and considered.	Respects the potential added value that can be gleaned from differences.	Protects the right to be heard for all.
Transparency	Conducts business within a context in which actions and rationales are clear.	Provides the opportunity to address and resolve questionable outcomes.	Establishes accountabilities for all.
Respect	Honors the importance of each person and affirms their inherent worth.	Honors and protects rights and does not withhold opportunities.	Affirms each person's dignity and value.
Courtesy	Everyone exhibits civility and politeness.	Individuals and groups are acknowledged and treated properly.	Standards of civil conduct are honored.
Kindness	Demonstrates a commitment to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of all.	Encourages each individual and group to be a fully contributing partner.	Shows valuing all by demonstrated actions.
Compassion	Takes helpful action to respond to individual situations, as needed.	Recognizes what can be done to facilitate others and responds.	Takes empathy to a higher level

Table 1 provides rich insight into the importance of all twelve facets of justice on diversity and inclusion and suggests a standard of conduct for human relationships that elevates the quality of interpersonal relationships. Fully acknowledging the value of differences and taking advantage of the contributions that diversity and inclusion make possible can enable those who lead organizations to unlock that often untapped potential, increase the organization's ability to flourish, and improve its overall performance (Clifton & Harter, 2021).

Because feeling a sense of belonging impacts the degree to which employees are fully engaged and committed participants (Clifton & Harter, 2019), incorporating the twelve facets of justice within organizations can strengthen the ability of those organizations to benefits from diverse perspectives and for employees being included as full partners (Block, 2013). Treating others with the respect, dignity, kindness, and compassion that the twelve facets of justice emphasize is part of the moral and ethical obligations of leaders and organizations to employees – as well as the fundamental obligations of all human interaction in society (Covey, 2004; DePree, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002).

6. Contributions of the Paper

Presenting the insights contained in this article has provided the opportunity to contribute to the dialogue about diversity and inclusion in four important ways.

1) **We suggest that the complex nature of diversity and inclusion is rarely fully understood and is unlikely to be addressed effectively until it is understood** (cf. Livingston, 2021). Although much has been written and more has been said about diversity and inclusion, the topics need to be more fully understood and the nature of justice needs to be incorporated in that understanding.

2) **We expand the importance of understanding the overarching importance of justice in the dialogue about diversity and inclusion.** Diversity and inclusion are fundamental issues regarding the treatment of others in society and are implicitly justice-related and associated with the moral and ethical obligations that make up societal interactions (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021).

3) **We link the twelve facets of Justice to diversity and inclusion and provide insights about how those facets can enhance the ability of organizations to strengthen employees' sense of belonging and commitment**. Increasing employee engagement, empowering employees by including them as full partners, and treating employees justly have been shown to exponentially increase commitment and lead to higher profits, lower turnover rates, better customer satisfaction, and improved productivity (Cameron, 2011).

4) **We affirm the importance of all individuals and groups who are characterized as diverse and distinguish the inherent worth of those individuals and groups, as opposed to their perceived worthiness.** Recognizing the value of differences and the competitive advantage that they can create has enabled companies to achieve superior performance (Clifton & Harter, 2021). However, valuing each group and individual as being of great inherent worth is much more than simply an economic decision – it is a moral and ethical obligation (Covey, 2004; Pava, 2015; Peck, 2003; Greenleaf, 2002).

We encourage practitioners and scholars to expand the dialogue about justice, diversity, and inclusion so that a greater understanding of the practical, moral, and ethical benefits can accrue by achieving greater insights into these critically important social issues.

7. Conclusion

Although the management of diversity and inclusion has become a frequently discussed part of organizational dialogue, understanding the complex nature of those concepts has often been limited. The ability of leaders and organizations to understand the nature of justice with its twelve facets can expand that understanding. Fully understanding the nature of justice and its relationship to diversity and inclusion can enable those who work in organizations and those who study the concepts of effective leadership to recognize the importance of treating others justly and fairly – thereby increasing employee commitment, increasing a sense of belonging, and enhancing the long-term success of organizations.

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