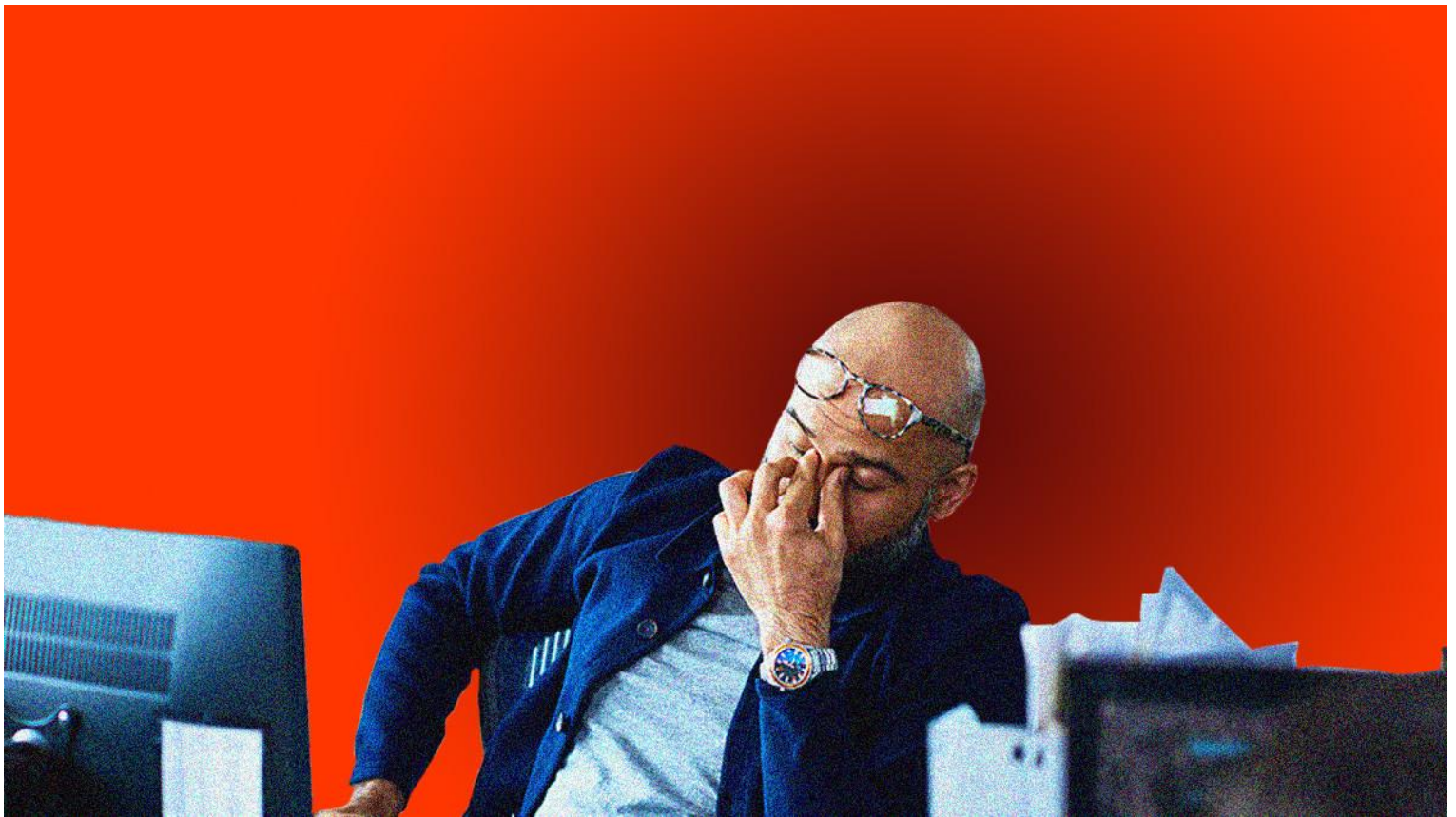


Research: When Managers Are Overworked, They Treat Employees Less Fairly

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Fair managers can reap big dividends. Extensive research finds that employees who feel fairly treated are better performers, helpful to colleagues, more committed to their workgroups and the organization, and less likely to steal or be rude to others.

Yet, all too often, employees find themselves being treated unfairly - their boss makes decisions concerning them without consultation or due process, or their boss is inconsistent in applying rules. They may think that their boss is incompetent or biased, or even worse, just plain mean. Although this may be true of a few bosses, most recognize the importance of fairness and want to act fairly. So why then do some act unfairly, even when they recognize its corrosive effects?

In a recent paper, published at the Academy of Management Journal, we propose that one explanation is that many managers are, simply put, too busy to be fair. They are often expected to juggle multiple responsibilities under intense time and work pressures, and so treating employees fairly may take a backseat to other pressing priorities.

Acting fairly is not always easy. Over 60 years of research finds that fairness is not one simple, singular choice but a complex and integrated set of decisions and actions. To be judged as fair by employees, bosses have to attend to four aspects of fairness: First, they have to ensure *distributive fairness* by making sure that employees are equitably rewarded for their contributions. Second, they have to follow *transparent and clear procedures* in arriving at those rewards. These include ensuring decisions are consistently applied across people and situations and are based on accurate information, suppressing bias in the decision process, and providing opportunities for employees to voice concerns. Third, they have to engage in *informational fairness* by explaining the logic behind their decisions in a timely manner. Last but not the least, they have to be *interpersonally fair* by treating employees with dignity and respect.

These are complex, effortful, and time-consuming activities. Seeing fairness in this light suggests that unfairness may be less about bosses being biased or mean, and more about them lacking adequate personal resources to juggle multiple, competing priorities. When fairness is up against other technical responsibilities, it can become the unfortunate casualty of busyness. Surveys have found that many employees complain that managers are “too busy” to meet with them, listen to their concerns, or update them about decisions. Similarly, managers have acknowledged that they behave insensitively towards employees or act less fairly because they are “overloaded” or lack time.

In our paper, we sought to develop a more rigorous understanding of whether and why overworked bosses are less likely to treat employees fairly. Our main thesis was that as managers’ workloads increase, they are more likely to prioritize work tasks focused on supporting the functioning of the

organization's technical core (e.g., overseeing production of products or services, reporting to superiors, interacting with clients, and implementing new initiatives) over fairness-related tasks, or actions that convey fairness towards employees (e.g., taking time to carefully evaluate employee contributions, following due process to resolve concerns, providing evidence and rationales for decisions, and making time to listen to employee concerns).

We also sought to understand what organizations could do to help overworked managers act more fairly. So we investigated whether rewards could prompt managers to maintain fairness along with their technical performance.

We examined these questions via three studies. In our first study, we recruited 107 managers in the United States to complete two daily surveys for 10 workdays. The first survey, completed around the middle of the workday, asked them about their workload that day. The second survey, completed at the end of the workday, asked them about the extent to which they had prioritized their core work tasks over fairness toward employees that day and the extent to which they had acted fairly towards employees based on the four fairness aspects outlined above.

We found that on days when managers experienced heavier workloads, they prioritized their technical tasks to a greater extent, and acted less fairly toward employees, compared to days they had lighter workloads. However, this finding depended on whether organizations rewarded managers for fairness. In an earlier survey, we had asked managers whether their organization rewarded them for treating employees fairly, and some organizations did so more than others. For those that did reward fairness (e.g., via pay, promotions, recognition, or awards), we found that managers were less likely to de-prioritize fairness even on days with heavier workloads.

A second study explored a slightly different question: Are managers with persistently heavier workloads more likely to treat their employees unfairly compared to those with persistently lighter workloads? We surveyed 166 managers in India about their workload over the previous three months, and whether they prioritized technical tasks over fairness tasks during this period. Then we asked a direct report of each of the managers about their bosses' fairness towards them, and we had a second direct report assess the boss' task performance.

Using these three independent data sources, we found that bosses with heavier (vs. lighter) workloads prioritized core technical tasks over treating employees fairly, and as a result, were less likely to be reported as acting fairly by their employees. Like the previous study, we surveyed managers as to whether their organizations rewarded fair treatment. We again found that in organizations that rewarded fairness, managers were more likely to act fairly despite heavier workloads. Supporting our argument that managers are only “pushed” to de-prioritize fairness when they are overworked, managers with lighter workloads acted fairly regardless of such rewards.

In this study, we were also able to tease out whether managers with heavy workloads who were rewarded for acting fairly did so at the cost of their performance on core work tasks. Interestingly, in organizations where fairness was rewarded, overworked bosses were more likely to act fairly *and* perform well on other work tasks, compared to those in organizations where fairness was less explicitly rewarded.

Our third study had 239 business undergraduates complete a managerial simulation in the lab. They had to complete a technical task (create a report about a new position for their department head) and a fairness-related task (write a memo to an employee explaining an unfavorable promotion decision). We varied the amount of time participants had to complete the task to simulate varying workloads-20 vs. 30 minutes for heavy vs. light workloads. We also randomly assigned them to a condition in which the company’s reward system favored technical performance vs. a condition in which the company reward system was balanced between technical performance and fairness.

Our findings were similar to those of our first two studies. When they had less time to complete the task, participants tended to prioritize the technical task (report to the boss), thus performing worse on their fairness task (employee memo). This was more likely when the company’s reward system favored technical performance than when rewards were balanced between technical performance and fairness. When rewards were balanced, participants under higher workloads not only acted just as fairly as those with a lighter workload, their performance on the technical task was no different from those with a lighter workload. Acting fairly did not come at the cost of technical performance.

So, what can we learn from all of this? Well, being fair requires time and effort, and overworked managers may struggle to prioritize fairness when more urgent technical tasks demand their attention. For managers who want to ensure that they treat their employees fairly, it is important to

shield being fair from other competing tasks. Try cementing time with your employees into your schedule so that you're less susceptible to the effects of workload.

Our studies suggest that organizations can also nudge bosses to balance technical tasks and fair treatment by rewarding and celebrating managers who act fairly. Doing so clearly signals that fair treatment is a core leadership task. Some companies, like Google, have done exactly that, clarifying to managers that it is ok to devote less time to technical tasks and more to engagement with employees. Notably, at least in the studies we conducted, prioritizing technical work tasks harmed fairness, but did not improve technical performance. So organizations that reward fairness may see a win-win: busy leaders can act fairly without compromising their performance on core work tasks.

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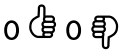
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7 COMMENTS

Peter Austin a month ago

Re: "or even worse, just plain mean". Nope, I've had both, and mean is better than unfair. With a mean boss, you still get team spirit against a common enemy. But an unfair boss causes resentment within the team, destroying team spirit, so there's no reason for the losers to stay.

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