**Improving perceptions of fairness within teams**

**Background**

Everyone in the workplace is motivated by something. **Equity Theory** was developed by a workplace behavioural psychologist named John Adams and is based on the idea that individuals are motivated by fairness. In simple terms, Equity Theory states that if an individual identifies an inequity between themselves and a peer, they will adjust the work they do to make the situation fair in their eyes.

Healthy workplace cultures can be damaged if there is a perceived lack of fairness and justice within the workplace. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that fairness is a fundamental concern for employees, and if employees believe there is a lack of fairness, it can negatively affect their productivity, trust in management and personal well-being. Even if an employee just witnesses a lack of fairness, it can have a negative effect on the culture and workplace relationships.

There are three main areas of which an individual may consider when evaluating how fair they believe a situation is:

**Distributive justice** – the way that tasks and rewards are distributed and whether the outcomes of decisions are seen as fair (e.g., workload distribution, remuneration, promotions, access to training and resources). This assessment of fairness generally involves a comparison between what an individual is experiencing compared with others in the organisation.

**Procedural justice** – the way that workplace procedures or decision-making processes are applied (e.g., annual leave allocation, shift allocation, the handling of complaints and conflicts). Determinants of procedural justice include consistency of application, unbiased decision making, information accuracy, and input from affected parties.

**Interactional justice** – the way that leaders or individuals treat others when carrying out decisions (e.g., did they provide open and honest explanations for decisions? Did they demonstrate empathy and social sensitivity? Did they give due consideration to the individual's views?)
Tips for improving perceptions of fairness

Listen to employees. If there is a perceived lack of fairness in the team but you are unsure what is causing this, it’s a good idea to explore this with your staff. It may be useful to conduct a small listening event/focus group to identify the root cause of the problem, with a focus on reasonable actions which can be taken to balance perceptions. Once the issues have been identified, steps should be taken to ensure that decision making is fair and equitable where possible, and that sufficient open and honest explanations are given around decision-making.

Delegate work fairly. Delegating work to your team may sound like a straightforward task of management, but, in fact, it’s complicated. You are juggling multiple interests in the pursuit of optimal team performance. There are real risks involved in not distributing the workload in an equitable way. If you overwork your high performers, you will lose them because they start to resent the fact that they’re doing more. Similarly, if you’re taking away work from people who are slower, they will lose interest. People come to work driven to succeed, to grow, and to be acknowledged. When they aren’t given an opportunity to do that, it’s poison. Click here to access an article on distributing work fairly and managing the different performances within your team.

Reaffirm that everyone will receive an equal opportunity to be recognized. One of the fastest ways to erode a workplace’s sense of fairness is by giving recognition unequally. This challenge can be especially difficult when managing employees across multiple sites. Regular one-to-ones and two way feedback are vital to support this process.

Create a sense that promotions are handled fairly. When an employee complains that a co-worker’s promotion wasn’t fair, his or her underlying question might actually be, “why wasn’t I promoted?” The best organisations address this by ensuring all employees receive frequent, constructive feedback and by providing personal support in professional development (see above).

Role model the values you’d like to see in your team. It takes time to build trust in a team, and it’s important to realise that trust has to begin with you. This means keeping your word, being honest, and being a good role model. You need to show your people that you’re willing to work just as hard as they are, and that you’ll support them when they need help.

Open up. If you’re gaining the trust of a new team, then "open up" first. Tell your team your background, some stories about your achievements, and most importantly admit to some imperfection. If you show that you’re willing to be vulnerable, it will likely help them open up to you as well.

Set expectations within the team. It might be more difficult to convince people to trust others. Your people may have broken one another’s trust in the past, or the team might be new with no past relationships to build on. Make it clear that you expect people to behave in a trustworthy way and create a culture that is intolerant of bullying, harassment or unethical behaviour. Discourage gossip, and reward good team behaviour. Encouraging trust in each other and healthy challenge within the team will be useful. Support employees to speak up if they see injustice or inequity.