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PEOPLE are sensitive to the fairness of decisions made or the treatment they receive. Research in work contexts has shown that it is important for processes like personnel selection, performance appraisal and compensation to be perceived as fair, because fairness perceptions influence how people react to situations and their leaders. This also applies to public policy implementation and public engagement efforts.

Given how important the perception of fairness is, we should learn from the research on fairness in order to understand how and why people think what is fair, or unfair, in public policy.

First, fairness perception is multi-dimensional. The research literature distinguishes between two major categories of fairness: outcome fairness and process fairness.

Outcome fairness refers to the extent to which we perceive that the distributions of outcomes are fair. These outcomes may be tangible, such as pay, benefits and promotions, but may also refer to less tangible outcomes such as praise.

How a person perceives the fairness of an outcome is determined by his expectations of how the outcomes should be distributed, what he knows about the situation, and his prior experience with similar situations.

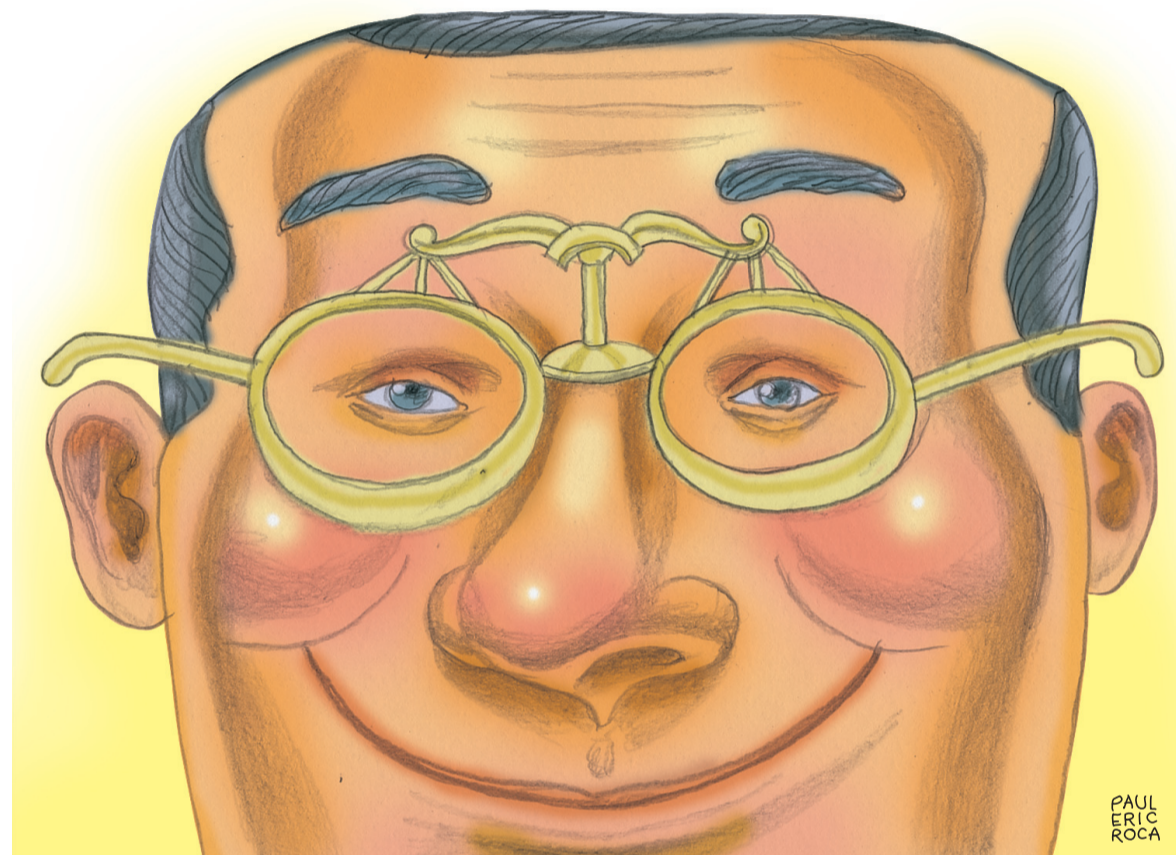
People are not only concerned about having fair outcomes, but also want the process leading to the outcome to be fair. Studies show that people are more likely to consider a process or procedure fair if it satisfies certain procedural rules.

The first is accuracy: Procedures are based on accurate and valid information. The second is absence of bias: Procedures are not affected by personal bias, preconception or self-interest. The third is consistency: Procedures are consistently applied across people and time in similar situations. The fourth is voice: Procedures allow people to have a voice or capacity to influence but not necessarily determine the outcome, such as opportunities to modify or reverse decisions like allowing appeals and grievances to be considered. Finally, procedures are more likely to be seen as fair if they are congruent with the values and reflect the concerns of the people involved.

People value process fairness as much as, if not more than, outcome fairness. People who perceive processes at their workplaces to be fair express higher levels of job satisfaction, are more commit-

Fairness: Processes as important as outcomes

What research on fairness perception tells us about policy and politics



ted to the organisation and more likely to take part in activities like making suggestions for improvement, independent of the level of outcome fairness.

There is also evidence that process fairness is a stronger predictor than outcome fairness in people's evaluation of the fairness of their leaders. It is more impor-

tant, for example, that people agree with the procedure used by their leader to determine the outcome, than whether the outcome is what they expected.

Another important form of fairness is known as interactional fairness. This refers to people's expectation about how an interaction should take place. They ex-

pect to be treated in a respectful, honest and sensitive manner. This is interpersonal fairness. They also expect to get adequate information and explanation about a process and the outcomes. This is informational fairness.

The two – informational and interpersonal fairness – are distinct concepts but

research shows they are highly correlated: A change in one affects the other significantly. It is difficult to feel respected if we do not receive adequate information and explanation; conversely, it is difficult to evaluate any information or explanation provided if we feel that we are not being treated sincerely or with honesty. Clearly, increasing both informational and interpersonal fairness will enhance the quality of the social interaction, and people will have more positive perceptions of public service standards and political leaders.

Three additional research findings in fairness perception are noteworthy.

First, the negative effects of unfairness are much stronger than the positive effects of fairness. This asymmetry of impact is consistent with the well-established power of negativity bias in human perception.

Second, our perceptions of fairness are influenced by how we see or believe our fellow employees or citizens are being treated. Fairness perceptions are contagious: An individual's fairness perception is likely to have multiplier effects on the fairness perceptions of other individuals.

Third, fairness effects are stronger when the decisions are perceived as discretionary rather than compelled. If a person eventually gets an outcome he considers fair, but only after he had to go through a grievance process or after he had to appeal to higher authority, the positive effects of that fair outcome would be reduced because it would be seen as having come about only after compulsion from a higher authority. It makes more sense to behave fairly in the first place, than to simply rely on an appeal process to address unfair practices.

In sum, because fair processes are as significant as fair outcomes, it is useful for politicians and public officials to pay more attention to how people see the process by which policies are decided and implemented, and the way administrative decisions are carried out.

The good news is, whether addressing policy issues of housing, transport, foreigners or costs of living, there is a robust body of research to help policymakers adopt evidence-based approaches to create processes that enhance fairness perception. Understanding fairness perceptions contributes to a principled adaptive leadership and helps in practical actions and solutions, be it in policy intent, content or implementation.

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