Skill Development Equity and The Ethics of Delegation

When asking whether a society is just it is easy to focus on the distribution of easily identifiable physical goods such as money, food, or water. But there are distributions of less tangible goods and harms that should concern us and are easy to overlook such as access to education, non-polluted environments, or the political process.

The same is true of organizations and companies. Organizations are pretty sensitive to thinking about just and fair distributions of easily measured goods like salary (or time) and often have rules and procedures in place to ensure equity with respect to those goods. However, it is easy for organizations and managers to not consider the just distribution of less tangible goods. This papers concerns one of those less tangible goods and its implications for what a manager has a right to do.

In this paper, I will argue that employees have a prima facie right to skill development equity in the workplace on grounds that are similar to the grounds for thinking that employees have a right to salary equity. This has four important implications related to the ethics of delegation or project management. In particular, it raises important challenges to widely accepted views about what managers have a right to do in the workplace.

Skill Development Equity is As Weighty as Salary Equity

It is typically taken as a given that salary equity is an important good that organizations should seek to maintain. People who are similarly skilled and doing similar kinds of work should receive similar pay and fringe benefits.

An organization and managers who value skill development equity embrace the idea that opportunities to develop skills and talents should be fairly distributed among employees.

An example of skill development *inequity* can be represented with the following example. Suppose Bob and Jill are both entry level employees with similar skill sets doing similar kinds of work. Suppose Bob's manager gives Bob an opportunity to work on a marketing project which will develop marketing skills and experiences that he didn't have before. After successful completion of the project, Bob has proven himself. So Bob is given a graphic design project. And next an event planning project. Jill, on the other hand, has been kept on the same tasks while Bob has been getting new and varied opportunities to develop skills. Jill might have a legitimate grievance that there is significant skill development inequity here. Her manager doesn't seem to have a fair procedure for distributing a significant good.

The argument that skill development equity is as weighty as salary equity is a simple one. One obvious benefit of a job, in addition to salary, is developing skills and building up experience. The more skilled you are, the more marketable you are for future positions that pay higher salaries. That is a significant benefit of employment, and one that almost every employee expects to receive to some degree. Managers have a prima facie obligation to distribute significant benefits in a fair and just manner that employees reasonably expect will be provided. So, managers have a prima facie obligation to equitably distribute opportunities to develop skills.

It's important to note that this is a decidedly *moral* reason to favor responsible distribution of skill development opportunities. There are several non-moral, pragmatic reasons that managers might have for distributing development opportunities evenly. You are more likely to retain employees who feel like they are challenged and growing in their talents. Giving employees a variety of new opportunities can also boost morale and job satisfaction which can, in turn, boost productivity. This matters, because while many managers might think that it is good to distribute opportunities evenly, if they have a moral reason to do so it will affect what many managers think is morally permissible to do when managing projects. I discuss four examples in the next section.

The Ethics of Delegation

Delegating Down

The idea that skill development opportunities ought to be distributed equitably has significant implications for some conventional wisdom related to management. First, it is often taken for granted that a fundamental goal of a manager is to delegate down the payscale whenever possible to improve efficiency and reduce costs. Let's call this practice "delegating down". It is very easy to assume that anytime a manager can delegate down, she should. It frees up her expensive time to focus on loftier organizational goals that only she has the qualifications to execute.

However, adhering to a policy of always delegating down will sometimes conflict with a duty to distribute development opportunities equitably. Suppose a manager delegates down tasks that offer no development opportunity and does this for an extended period of time. Eventually, an employee might start to have legitimate equity concerns when it comes to development opportunity, and the manager may find herself in situations where the only way to give an employee a development opportunity is for the manager to roll up her sleeves and perform tasks that would otherwise be "below her pay grade". In essence, development equity considerations might sometimes be reasons for managers to *not* delegate down.

Delegating to the Best

Another accepted given in project management is that it is permissible for managers to assign tasks and projects to the person on the team who would do the best job. This stems from an implicit assumption that once employed, employees can be tasked to whatever is necessary to achieve corporate goals in the most optimal way possible. As long as they are treated fairly with respect to pay and time, task assignment is a decision that is largely at the manager's discretion, and the manager can simply pick the most competent and capable person.

But if managers have a prima facie obligation to distribute development opportunities fairly, there may be cases where a manager is obliged to risk productivity in order to ensure developmental equity.

Notice we already do this for salary equity. Someone might demand a higher salary that would be regarded by many as unfair. If the employee threatens to leave, managers who take salary equity seriously will be forced to risk losing that employee and risk productivity. The same happens in hiring decisions. If the best person for the job demands too high of a salary, a hiring manager might need to hire a less skilled and less qualified person, and again sacrifice productivity for salary equity.

Analogously, a manager may sometimes find themselves in a situation where they are obliged to risk productivity by not putting their best person on the project and letting someone else use the project as a learning experience to develop skills.

Again, there are good, long term pragmatic reasons to manage in this way, but what we have established here is that there are also moral reasons to manage in this way.

Motivated Reasoning and Avoiding Delegation

Managers often need to be on guard against bias in their decision making. One common kind of bias comes from motivated reasoning against an option that is not in the manager's interests. If a decision is more profitable, but morally questionable, managers should be on guard if they find themselves reasoning that the action is permissible.

Skill development decisions sometimes pose potential threats to managers' long term goals. Suppose an employee wants to take on a project to develop communications and marketing skills. If the manager permits them to move in that direction, that employee is more marketable and could perhaps be lured away by another company or be deserving of a higher salary. It's not uncommon for managers to prevent talented employees from developing in a certain direction in hopes that they'll retain that employee for longer. There are pragmatic reasons for managers to not do this. Employees will often leave if they feel that there is no room to grow their talents in an organization. So, it is often in a manager's interests to provide development opportunities. However, this is a moral reason to think that managers should not prevent employees from developing.

Managing Delegation

This view has implications when it comes to managing managers. Managers might sometimes need to ask another manager to sacrifice a development opportunity for the sake of giving that development opportunity to a direct report. Suppose a manager doesn't want to delegate down because it would take too much time and she would prefer to do the work herself instead. It would be easy to defer to the judgment of the manager on the grounds of not micro-managing or respecting their domain. It would also be easy to defer to them because their job might be easier by *not* delegating. However, if development equity is an issue, then higher-level managers may need to insist that other managers take sacrifices and risks in order to ensure developmental equity.

[Note to Reviewers: The longer version of this paper will address a few more objections to the idea that salary equity and skill development equity are analogous. It will also address objections that argue that managers have more rights than what I outline above with respect to skill development equity. I hope, however, that this draft gives you a good idea that there is an interesting and novel conversation to be had surrounding skill development equity and the ethics of delegation]