THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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Playing Favorites

A Study of Perceived Workplace Favoritism

In the once-popular NBC prime-time sitcom "Friends," there is an episode where Rachel decides to take up smoking in an attempt to make inroads with her boss, because her colleague who takes smoke breaks gets more opportunities to talk with her boss, which ultimately leads to her suggestions being accepted over Rachel's. In this case, Rachel is a victim of workplace favoritism, and she takes a comical approach to ingratiate herself with her boss.

But comedy is just comedy; after the humor, no solutions to the problem, nor the effects of such phenomena were further discussed at the end of the show. But that episode always left me wondering if favoritism wildly exists in workplaces today and how it will impact the employees.

The Existence of Workplace Favoritism

There is some evidence that many leaders have favorite(s) — and, more importantly, treat favored employee(s) differently. In a survey study with 303 U.S. executives, Reinsch and Gardner (2014) found that more than half (56 percent) of executives admitted to having a favorite candidate when making internal promotion decisions, and 96 percent of them will promote their favorites rather than considering the candidates' communication

abilities, which is crucial for the position examined in the study. Similarly, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB, 2013) survey results indicated that 25 percent of American federal employees believe their supervisor practices favoritism, over 50 percent suspected that other supervisors in their organization practice favoritism, and 30 percent of human resources management staff agreed that favoritism occurs in the organizations in which they serve. Below, I discuss how such biased treatment impacts those who are not favored, some causes of workplace favoritism, and, perhaps more interestingly, what happens when you are the favorite.

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The Detrimental Effects of Workplace Favoritism

Leaders play favorites at work for various reasons. Some leaders practice favoritism to strategically maximize their self-interest — they adopt favoritism to seek their personal interests or the interests of a friend, a family member (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997) — or they use favoritism as a tool to manipulate and control situations by deliberately favoring some employees instead of others to gain loyalty and centralize power (Blase, 1988). This type of favoritism is typically deemed unethical, even illegal in extreme cases. But some other leaders may be seen as playing favorites simply because they have more in common with some employees than they do with the others, or they simply like some employees more than others. Subordinates may feel their leaders are exhibiting favoritism because "my supervisor hangs out with Sam more often," or "my boss constantly praises Kevin and nobody else."

In my study conducted with my advisor, Dr. Beehr of Central Michigan University, 47 percent of American employees reported that their supervisor had favorites. Moreover, 21 percent of the respondents admitted that their supervisor treated them better than their peers at work. Participants were also asked to report the frequency of which their supervisor had engaged in favoritism behaviors — a list of behaviors that were developed by subject matter experts at Central Michigan University. Such behaviors includes: praise, support, and socialization with certain employees more; providing better opportunities, more desired tasks, and more frequent and timely feedback to certain employees; considering suggestions of only certain employees; giving important work-related information to certain people; excusing certain employees for unproductive behaviors; cutting more "slack" for some but not others (e.g., excusing their unproductive behavior, letting them get away with actions that other employees would be reprimanded for), etc.

The consequences of favoritism were numerous. Employees not only deemed favoritism as a form a workplace injustice/unfairness, but also reacted to favoritism behaviors with negative emotions toward the organization, less loyalty to the company, less job satisfaction, stronger intentions to quit the job, less work motivation, and more emotional exhaustion. Subordinates who perceived higher degrees of favoritism also reported having poor work relationships with the leaders; receiving less recognition and professional help, such as mentoring and coaching, from the supervisor; receiving less support at work, and having less trust toward the supervisor.

Some Indicators of Workplace Favoritism

- Gives certain employees better treatment within my workplace
- Socializes with certain employees more
- Assigns desired tasks to certain employees
- Provides more development opportunities for certain employees
- Gives certain employees more frequent and timely feedback
- Let certain employees get away with actions that other employees would be reprimanded for
- Considers the suggestions of only certain employees
- Praises certain employees more
- Supports certain employees more
- Gives important work-related information only to certain employees
- Excuses certain employees for unproductive behaviors

The Environmental and Human Factors of Workplace Favoritism

The study found several organizational environment factors to be potential predictors of supervisors' favoritism behaviors, such that employees who reported higher levels of perceived workplace favoritism also reported higher levels of perceived organizational politics and higher levels of role ambiguity.

Organizational politics are behaviors that are strategically designed to maximize one's self-interest through an intentional social influence process (Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995). They are often found to be associated with favoritism through resource distribution, promotion, and other benefits at work. Politically-oriented supervisors also use favoritism to manipulate employees and centralize power. Therefore, in organizations where organizational politics are prevalent, employees perceived more favoritism behaviors from the supervisors. Meanwhile, role ambiguity — which represents the level of uncertainty and obscurity of one's job responsibilities, expectations, authorities, and objectives (Graen, 1976; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981) — was found to be related to perceived favoritism behaviors at work. Such work environments likely give supervisors more opportunities to display favoritism and more leeway to give favorites their preferred tasks or other desirable opportunities.

The study also found that abusive supervisors — for example, those who ridicule subordinates, lie to them, and blame employees to save themselves embarrassment (Tepper, 2000) — were more likely to play favorites at work. While employees holding a high level of power distance values —belief that power is not distributed equally and that one should fastidiously obey the authority, and power of those above them, such as supervisors — are more likely to accept and tolerate favoritism and the resultant unfair behaviors of their supervisors. As a benefit, however, they were also found to react less strongly to workplace favoritism than employees with lower power distance values.

Are Favored Employees Happy?

While most discussions on workplace favoritism focus on those that are unfavored, there has been little consideration to the effects of favoritism on employees who are being favored. As a result, the current study also sought to investigate this issue.

During initial stages of the study, several interviews were conducted to better identify common favoritism behaviors at work in an attempt to develop a measure of workplace favoritism. A few interviewees identified themselves as supervisors' favorites during the interview. According to them, their supervisors: share with them work-related information exclusively; excuse their mistakes while reprimanding the same mistakes made by their peers; are often friends with them outside of work; and praise them more at work. But when asked about how they feel about receiving preferential treatments, the answers were somewhat surprising: they felt stressed and queasy. In fact, one interviewee remarked, "I don't know why my boss likes me so much. But criticizing the person who also came to work late (as I did) and didn't blame me at all? What will others think of me? It makes me feel awkward."

Some results of our study supported such concerns. Although favored employees at work reported a significantly higher quality work relationship with their supervisor, they also reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion, turnover intentions, and reported more interpersonal conflict with their coworkers at work. Conversely, their amount of job satisfaction, work motivation, affection toward the organization, loyalty to the company, and perceptions of fairness and justice did not significantly differ from participants who do not think they were their supervisor's favorite.

These findings showed that the favored employees may also be the victims to a certain extent. They felt pressure from their peers for receiving better treatment, frequently perceive conflicts initiated by coworkers — likely due to envy and jealousy (e.g., Dogan & Vecchio, 2001; Johnson, 2012) — therefore exhibit higher levels of emotional exhaustion and express greater intentions of quitting.

Conclusion

This study reveals the detrimental effects of supervisor favoritism on employees. Other than potential legal disputes, these negative effects on employee attitudes, motivations and psychological well-being can be costly for organizations in terms of absence, sick leaves, medical bills, replacement costs, turnover and productivity in general. Providing preferential treatment to some but not others in a group can also interfere with the growth of unfavored employees by giving them less coaching, feedback or opportunities, which directly impedes talent development within the organization. Organizations can potentially lose their competitive advantage by failing to develop their human capital. Most importantly, initiating differential treatments can demotivate employees' morale and trust in general which, in turn, causes weak group cohesion, conflict and lowered group performance (e.g., McKnight, Ahmad, & Schroeder, 2001; Sias & Jablin, 1995).

Thus, playing favorites is a dangerous game.

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