

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT JUSTICE



It begins with a sentence that is actually only meant casually.

"Kathi, honestly? We no longer know what rules are used to make decisions here."

Said by Jana, team leader in service, after a management meeting. She's still standing in the hallway, jacket half-on, gaze open, not accusatory. And that's precisely why it hits home.

"Why are you saying that?" I ask.

She hesitates. "Because some people constantly get special treatment and others don't. And nobody understands why."

I nod slowly. This isn't a rumor. I'm familiar with the cases: flexible work arrangements, project-based staffing, bonuses, career development paths. We have good reasons for individual decisions. But reasons that no one knows become arbitrary in organizations.

And arbitrariness is poison.

The next morning, a concrete escalation landed on my desk. Two employees from the same department, both with similar roles. One received further training, the other did not. The manager's reasoning: "It's no longer worth it for him."

I feel anger. Not against the manager as a person, but against the casual harshness of this logic. "Is it no longer worth it?" — as if one had the right to mentally write people off if they aren't a perfect fit.

I'll call the manager, Martin, the department head. He'll come to my office in the afternoon.

"Martin," I say after we sit down, "I want to talk to you about the further education decision."

He clasps his hands together. "Okay."

"You approved the training for Thomas but not for Ahmet. Reason given: 'not worth it anymore'. What does that mean?"

He frowns. "Thomas is efficient, fast, and gets things done. Ahmet has been solid for years, but he's not developing. I want to use our budgets where they generate returns."

Return on investment. I pause briefly before answering. Justice doesn't begin with moralizing, but with a clear framework.

"Martin," I say, "I understand your budget responsibility. But your reasoning seems arbitrary and derogatory. And it is not compatible with our management principles."

He looks at me, puzzled. "But I have to differentiate."

"Yes," I say. "Differentiation is legitimate. But you have to justify it fairly and transparently. And you have to enable people to develop before you deny them that it's worthwhile."

He wants to say something. I hold his gaze. "Can you tell me the objective criteria you used to make your decision?"

He remains silent.

"You see," I say. "The team sees it too."

I lean forward slightly. "Justice doesn't mean treating everyone the same. Justice means making different decisions understandable and respectful."

"And what am I supposed to do now?" he asked more quietly.

"Two things," I say. "First: You have a development discussion with Ahmet. Not as a reckoning, but as an offer. What does he need to become stronger? What does the team need?"

Secondly, we define clear criteria for further training that apply to everyone. Then we don't have to decide based on gut feeling."

He exhales. I can see it's working for him. He's not being unfair. He's just grown up in a logic that prioritizes numbers over people.

"Okay," he says. "I'll do that."

That same evening, we develop the criteria: performance, potential, role, development goal, team benefit. Not as a rigid framework, but as transparent guidelines.

Two weeks later I receive a short email from Ahmet.

Thanks for the conversation, a clear development plan, and one sentence: "I honestly thought I was written off here. The conversation showed me that I still have a chance."

In the next leadership meeting, I will present the criteria — and deliberately include the uncomfortable sentence: "If you differentiate, justify it in such a way that you can say it to anyone's face."

Some nod. Some look away. That, too, is reality.

In the evening I call Jana. "We've introduced criteria," I say. "And we'll make decisions more transparent in the future."

She laughs briefly. "Good. Otherwise we lose trust from within."

Fairness is not niceness.

It is a foundation on which organizations stand.



Takeaway inspiration

Justice

Justice in leadership means making decisions that are transparent, respectful, and based on clear criteria—even if the outcomes differ. Fairness protects trust because it prevents arbitrariness.

When making your next decision involving differences, ask yourself: Can I explain it with clear criteria without devaluing anyone? If not, the framework is too vague or the stance too harsh.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT JUSTICE

1. Where do we perceive a sense of arbitrariness — and what is my role in it?
2. What criteria should apply transparently in our company to ensure fairness?
3. Which decision do I need to explain clearly or correct?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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