Unlocking safety information through a Just Culture
Unlocking safety information through a Just Culture

Dr Sarah Flaherty, our Organisational Culture Subject Matter Lead, illustrates how an organisation’s response to an event can impact on its ability to prevent future accidents.

Headlines and emotional responses

On the evening of 4th November 2011, seven people were killed and 51 injured in a multiple vehicle pileup on a motorway in the South West of England. The next day, the newspapers had labelled this one of Britain’s ‘worst ever’ motorway crashes. As the wreckage was being cleared from the carriageway, speculation regarding the potential cause of the accident was rife. Whilst initially thought to be due to heavy fog, eyewitness accounts soon turned attention towards a bonfire and fireworks party held by a local rugby club whose field adjoined the motorway.

Whenever an accident occurs, particularly one such as this where loss of life or serious injury occur, there is an overwhelming societal need to find a ‘cause’, stemming largely from an overwhelming psychological desire to control and show certainty. Often “any explanation is better than none.” Our response, however, is driven not by logic and reason, but by emotion.

Accident investigation, particularly within the aviation industry, cites its sole aim is “To improve aviation safety by determining the causes of air accidents and serious incidents and making safety recommendations intended to prevent recurrence” concluding that “It is not to apportion blame or liability.” We have a moral duty to prevent accidents and preserve life and yet the public response to accidents such as the crash on the M5 is often less philanthropic. Within a few days, the newspaper headlines announced that ‘M5 crash motorists blame fireworks but rugby club organiser says it’s NOT his fault’. The focus had moved from recounting the horror of the event and mourning the passing of the victims to finding someone that could be held to account for the tragedy: a shift towards a compensation-oriented society has driven a desire to “treat every accident as caused by someone’s criminal negligence”. An emotional rather than a rational response.

Studies have shown that approaching an accident investigation with the objective of finding ‘culprits’ or those responsible in order to exact punishment is counterproductive to determining the facts surrounding an accident event.

Blame is described as “an aspect of everyday conduct evaluation that identifies behaviour as morally wrong or socially opprobrious.” Or as Professor James Reason would have it, “a delicious emotion”. As a society we are quick to apportion blame, as it is emotionally satisfying, particularly with a focus on the outcome rather than upon the actions and omissions that preceded the accident.

Calming public outrage, blame and punishment have often been used to assuage corporate guilt, ensuring the problem, and most importantly the media, goes away quickly and trust in the company is regained.

It has been argued, however, that given that the majority of accidents are found to be attributable to human error where foresight and an intent to do harm are not present (although foresight is often assumed), blame and punishment serve little purpose in accident prevention and move only to demoralise the
individuals involved, discouraging people from sharing information which could possibly prevent future accidents.

“Blaming those responsible for a crash is not really important to the cause of safety. Nor even, necessarily, is finding the definitive, or probable, cause of a crash. Much more important is to find out how the crash can be prevented in the future.”iv

Being fair

Many organisations are keen to unlock their safety information. By this we refer to the encouragement of reporting, within an environment where people feel safe to do so without fear of reprisals or unwarranted sanctions. Only by staff raising issues, concerns, hazards and errors will an organisation be able to predict and prevent unwanted events in the workplace. To do this, however, requires organisations to acknowledge that despite employing inventive, flexible, and usually industrious human beings inevitable errors will occur and that these errors may result in tragic, costly and reputationally damaging accidents.

Furthermore they require the courage to not follow societal expectations and responding emotionally by pointing fingers and apportioning blame but by gathering and analysing data, assessing the reasons behind people’s actions and determining the most effective intervention to prevent the event from recurring. Dealing with people in a fair manner, despite the consequence of their actions, is the sign of a mature and forward thinking organisation and the philosophy underpinning the concept of a Just Culture.

Fairness is something that behavioural psychologists believe is ‘hardwired’ – we intuitively understand that consequences relate to actions and intentions and believe that ‘good’ consequences should be proportionally rewarded and ‘bad’ consequences proportionally punished.

The UK’s coalition Government spent the first few months in office expounding the fairness message and it is hard to argue against something so uncontroversial; it is the doctrine of the reasonable, after all. John Stacey Adams, a workplace and behavioural psychologist, argued that people were motivated at work by a sense of fairness. His Equity Theoryv proposed that when people feel fairly treated by their employers they are more likely to be motivated but conversely will feel disaffected or demotivated if they believe that their efforts are not sufficiently rewarded or if they feel they are not treated fairly. Granted this is not the only motivator but one that underpins a belief in the Just World hypothesis where the world is taken to be an ordered, predictable place, where people get what they deserve, and deserve what they get. Morality tales and fairy tales are all based upon and support this fallacy. Unfortunately, the emotion of blame often conflicts and we start to equate ‘bad’ consequences with ‘bad people’.

So as many organisations have come to realise that inappropriately punishing people for error is counterproductive to the aim of accident prevention, and have seen little return for having a ‘no blame’ philosophy, they have looked around for something more moderate, more mutually beneficial, and have adopted a Just Culture.

Exploring a Just Culture

So, what is a Just Culture? Professor James Reason describes it as “an atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged (even rewarded) for providing essential safety-related information, but in which they are also clear about where the line must be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.”vi It is a culture where
organisations hold themselves to account for ensuring that they suitably resource their staff to be able ‘to do things right’ and where individuals at all levels of the organisation are held to account for ‘doing the right thing.’

And why do organisations need a Just Culture? What are the implications for not having a Just Culture? If people feel that reporting events or near misses inevitably leads to what they perceive as unjustifiable punishment, they will be unlikely to report. If people are unsure what is deemed acceptable and what is deemed unacceptable behaviour; they will be unlikely to report. If people do not trust the system, they will be unlikely to report. If people feel that they are not being treated consistently and fairly, they will be unlikely to report. And to quote Paul Wilson, Head of the Eurocontrol Airport Business Unit, “Until you have an open reporting culture, you will never have a true idea of what is happening, and until you have an idea of what is happening, there is not a lot you can do about it.”

It is only by having a Just Culture that you can hope to unlock the safety information from within your organisation, and without it, even the most beautifully crafted Safety Management System strategies and manuals will be little more than aspirations.

The term Just Culture is not new and has been embedded, both implicitly and explicitly within aviation legislation for many years. In March 2011, however, the UK CAA published updated guidance to accompany the MOR scheme which included a formal definition of Just Culture and called for employers to avoid disciplinary action against employees which might in future inhibit the reporting of incidents. It concluded that Just Culture principles have “always been central to the investigation of air safety occurrences” and are to be found captured in UK law through the Air Navigation Order 2009 and concur with European Commission Regulation 69/2010 and European Regulation 996/2010.

Given that having a Just Culture could be seen to be beneficial from not only a legal but also a moral, safety and even logical perspective, how do organisations build a Just Culture, and as importantly, once you have one, how do you sustain it?

Implementing a Just Culture

A Just Culture is not something that can be written into a policy and filed in a manual. It is not something that can be bought ‘off the shelf’.

From the outset there will be a need for an overarching organisational safety and human performance strategy that will ultimately direct how Just Culture is perceived and implemented, supported by standards and expectations of behaviour that are clearly articulated and understood throughout the organisation.

Underpinning this is an infrastructure that facilitates reporting, an agreed upon format for capturing and analysing information and a clearly defined means of determining what the most appropriate intervention is when an event occurs.

As a tool to support a Just Culture, Baines Simmons developed and launched the FAiR® System in 2009. Originally conceived to determine the most appropriate interventions from a psychological and motivational perspective after an unwanted event occurred, the FAiR® System is offered as a free download for clients to use in their organisation and is used to determine whether individuals’ actions could be deemed culpable and whether disciplinary action is warranted and appropriate.
Taking the findings from a comprehensive event investigation, the FAiR® System guides decision making for a review group to ensure that the emotional response to events is managed and instead, the underlying reasons for people’s actions and choices is understood. It is not about finding someone at fault, someone to blame. It is not a knee jerk reaction to potential headlines. In applying a model such as the FAiR® System, not only is an organisation in a better position to determine why something occurred but they are also able to respond with the most appropriate intervention to prevent the event from recurring.

The FAiR® System was designed to be intuitive, offering consistency and clarity. It has been downloaded by over 200 organisations across all sectors of the aviation industry and has proven to be a vital part of the overall Just Culture toolset. Whilst models to determine culpability have been available for some time, the FAiR® System takes a broader perspective by enabling determination of effective interventions as well as assessing culpability and brings together academic research and real world experience to build something that meets an increasingly mature industry need. It provides an opportunity for organisations to pause before issuing sanctions, to involve their staff in determining why events occur and ways to stop them occurring again, and most importantly to encourage an open and honest reporting culture.

Implementing a Just Culture, however, will always be more than a toolkit and a set of policies and principles. It is something that requires three essential components to work, each requiring effort and investment from the leadership team:

- **Clarity** – a universal understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within the organisation
- **Commitment** – active leadership to ensure that the process is being supported and adhered to and that the ‘right’ behaviours are being exhibited by all levels of the organisation, from the management to the staff and across all functions and departments
- **Consistency** – a transparent policy for Just Culture which is both standard and globally applied

Where these concepts have been grasped by the leadership team, organisations have made great improvements in the level and detail of reporting. Staff feel more confident to raise their issues and concerns, safe in the knowledge that no unwarranted sanction will occur. Organisations benefit from learning about potential risks to their safety, operational capability and profitability and have the data to support their decision making. They are able to demonstrate active safety leadership and will be rewarded by a reduction in risk and improvements in operating and business efficiency.

For many organisations, there are significant challenges to be faced in implementing a Just Culture, moving from an emotionally based response to one that is ‘fair’. But the benefits and rewards of unlocking the organisational safety information will ultimately prove invaluable in the ongoing quest for safety improvement.
References


