

For more than twenty years, organisations within safety critical industries have considered how they can redress the toxicity of fear and blame. In recent years, Sidney Dekker's Restorative Just Culture approach has gained some traction. A Restorative Just Culture "aims to repair trust and relationships damaged after an incident"[1] This approach is founded upon three core considerations; Who is hurt? What do they need? And whose obligation is it to meet the need? It is a significantly more humanistic approach to responses to harm that are typically found within safety critical industries, and it is no surprise that it has found admirers. Too often our understanding of socio-technical systems gravitates to the technical to the detriment of the people within the system. An approach that humanises our response to harm is undoubtedly of merit. Adopting classical safety vernacular, however, it is reasonable to not only consider if an approach is suitable, one ought to also consider if it is sufficient?

Advocates of a Restorative Just Culture, including Dekker, contrast their approach to a Retributive Just Culture. It is argued that a Retributive Just Culture "can turn into a blunt HR tool or management tool to get rid of people...is linked with hiding incidents and an unwillingness to report and learn." [1] This argument is somewhat problematic. What hasn't been poorly applied has been significantly distorted. It is a battle waged against an army of strawmen. Reason's original articulation of the Just Culture concept argued that it would help create "an atmosphere of trust." [2] A culture that treated people fairly and transparently would enable them to feel sufficiently secure to report safety concerns, from which a learning culture would grow. Surprisingly, discussion about retribution and enabling management to get rid of people did not form part of the original argument. If a Restorative Just Culture is the solution opined, it deserves better than embarrassing false dichotomies.

One of the real differences between the Restorative Just Culture approach and the traditional version is how it considers accountability. Dekker defines accountability as "forward looking. Together, you explore what needs to be done and who should do it. An account is something you tell and learn from." [1] Any approach that holds people responsible for their actions and applies proportional sanctions is the road to blame and retribution. This repositioning of accountability has gained support. It also places the Restorative Just Culture approach in potential conflict with the wider literature.

In the brilliant *Fearless Organisation*, Amy Edmondson identifies that the core component for high performing teams is Psychological Safety.[3] Edmondson's research shows that it is not the teams that have the highest aggregate IQ or experience that perform best, but the ones that have a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.[3] Furthermore, Psychological Safety does not seek to reduce individuals accountability, indeed Edmondson identifies the power of someone saying sorry. A fearless organisation would seek to develop high levels of Psychological Safety and accountability, creating the "learning zone." [3] Those familiar with performance science, such as elite sport for example, may be used to importance of creating high challenge-high support environments. [4] Intellectually, these are two closely aligned concepts. The notion of accountability within Restorative Just Culture, however, does not reconcile itself neatly with this research.

Also, it is not clear why there ought to be an issue with the idea of accountability, as traditionally defined (Someone who is accountable is completely responsible for what they do and must be able to give a satisfactory reason for it.) [5] An important aspect that work provides countless people across the world is a sense of responsibility and purpose. Work does not, therefore, have an accountability problem. Too frequently, it does, however, have a significant application delta. Poor implementation of a classical Just Culture approach does not mean the concept itself is designed for retribution, likewise, poor management practices does not mean accountability and blame are equitable. Accountability is not a synonym for scapegoating. Neither is it a wicked problem that has to be redefined so that it is fit for use. Edmondson's research demonstrates that the best organisations will create the environment where people have a healthy relationship with accountability operating in the absence of fear.

Moving away from fear and blame is not a choice between valuing relationships or responsibilities. The barrier to improvement is not individual accountability (the research shows quite the opposite). While both Reason and Dekker have excellent contributions to improvement, it is not clear that they are enough currently in isolation. They may be suitable, but the argument that they are sufficient is not compelling. This is why a broader, holistic view of Just Culture has been advanced.[6] One that is based upon developing an environment that enables both individuals and the organisation to learn, grow, heal and excel.[6] As risk management continues to migrate from an approach founded on industrialised failure avoidance to one of professionalised high performance, a broader, collaborative and unifying perspective will become inevitable.

References

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