

Thought Leadership

# A Just Culture Reality Check



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**As a company who spends lots of time and effort implementing Error Management systems in partnership with organizations, we are aware of many success factors and how these can be 'measured'.**

Tools which attempt to embed what we call a Just Culture are one of these artefacts. Many organizations struggle to understand the term (individuals sometimes do but this understanding is variable) and find it simpler to discuss the concept around the idea of a 'fair' culture. After all - all anyone wants is to be treated fairly within an organization. Whether something is fair of course depends on who you ask.

Whilst acknowledging that outside of the construct of the organizational 'locus of control', outcomes for individuals implicated in more serious incidents and accidents often seem to be unjust and definitely not fair (see [Eurocontrol: Just Culture Guidance Material for Interfacing with the Judicial System Edition 1 date: 11.02.2008](#)). Within organizations a Just or fair culture is attainable - given the right control processes that ensure timely, practical and targeted application of the agreed behaviours and procedures.

Many Just Culture models and flowcharts have been either misinterpreted by managers with understandable organizational bias in terms of the outcome (severity of the consequence of error  $\propto$  severity of sanction) whilst others have been focused primarily on health and safety as opposed to being applied to aviation flight safety. This means that the actual 'doing' of a fair or Just Culture has been fraught with pitfalls. It doesn't really matter what tools, flowcharts or models are produced in an organization's exposition or SMS manual, what counts are the demonstrable outcomes (and the

perceptions around the organization of such outcomes). Ultimately, being fair or having a Just Culture must be (at the highest level) a part of the organization's Business Culture, and not be seen as an explicit and overtly separate mechanism. Clearly, for this to happen, it must start somewhere. This is where tools and flowcharts are useful in terms of guiding and shaping how an organization behaves when an unwanted event occurs. But this is not enough. Being fair is about a set of beliefs and a set of duties (see below) which should be a continual part of doing business. Culture change cannot be realized if left to flowcharts alone, and used in isolation and applied like an antiseptic lotion to cases where we are caused to be reactive to an event.

## **Creating and nurturing a Just Culture must include:**

### **A Set of Beliefs**

- ▶ Recognition that professionals will make mistakes
- ▶ Recognition that even professionals will develop unhealthy 'norms' (outside of SOPs)
- ▶ Fierce intolerance for reckless conduct
- ▶ An expectation that errors will be reported
- ▶ Accountability for choosing to take risk
- ▶ Expectation that system safety will improve

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### A Set of Duties

- ▶ To raise your hand and say “I’ve made a mistake”
- ▶ To raise your hand when you see risk
- ▶ To resist the growth of at-risk behaviour
- ▶ To participate in generating learning from our everyday low-consequence/high-probability observable system disturbances
- ▶ To absolutely avoid reckless conduct

*Inspiration: David Marx*

Clearly, talking to personnel within an organization will enable value judgements to be made as to whether these beliefs and duties are a reality or, if this is not the case, those barriers to effective normalization which may exist can be identified.

It is also from experience that one is led to assert that unless an organization's personnel (at **all** levels) can come to the unanimous conclusion that a Just Culture can work and is good for themselves (what's in it for me?) and for their business, the tools associated with creating a Just Culture will remain the domain of the Safety or Quality Manager and will be unable to create the desired culture change. Left unaddressed, the creation of positively aligned paradigms is difficult at best. An associated facilitated ‘hearts and minds’ communication campaign of sufficient duration which is directly linked to real business issues and experiences is a considerable part of overcoming Just Culture ‘inertia’ – a reticence to try out any proactive voluntary reporting mechanism due to nervousness about present levels of trust.

A recently created system has been devised which is designed to assist organizations with the structural aspect of the generation of a Just (fair)

Culture. It has been uploaded for review. It has been designed to be simple yet has been subject to academic rigour and ‘road tested’ in various organizations in the UK. Whereas previously there have been models which help to determine either the behaviour **or** the organizational reaction related to an unwanted event, the uploaded FAiR® (Flowchart Analysis of Investigation Results) System enables organizations to reliably arrive at a composite of these two components, allowing a



more complete judgement to be made.

It is a consistent and impartial approach to interpreting and evaluating the findings from event investigation using behavioural classifications. The FAiR® System responds to the challenge of creating an open reporting culture within complex regulated organizations at the same time balancing accountability with the desire for learning and improvement.

Until now, selecting and implementing the most appropriate interventions in order to address the situation has often been erratic, inconsistent and variable in terms of effectiveness. By focusing upon the individuals’ actions and intentions as opposed to the consequences, the FAiR® System guides intervention choices so that an organization can ensure that any defences put in place to prevent recurrence can be tailored to maximize effectiveness from both a systems and human performance perspective.

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The FAiR® System is predicated on the need for a complete and comprehensive event investigation and as such complements tools such as the Maintenance Error Decision Aid (MEDA) and the Human Factors Analysis and Classification System (HFACS), bridging the gap between the investigation and the organization's disciplinary processes thus enhancing an organization's Safety Management System.

Building upon existing academic research, the FAiR® System offers a straightforward practical solution leading to credible reproducible results. Simple to use, the tool requires minimal training and can be used by non Human Factors specialists.

Of course, in order for any of this to work in practical terms, an organization must have in place nominated individual(s) who can facilitate the fragile gestation or perpetuation of a Just Culture – especially when the acid test of an unwanted outcome is sent to test the fledgling defences of the system. Such a person must be empowered to go 'toe-to toe' with those who would bypass the Just Culture framework in order to mete out their own brand of retribution. This diagram attempts to show the requisite 'firewall' between the various processes (non-judgemental, decision, judgemental) designed to produce a fair outcome.

Assessing this ability in organizations is about looking at what palpable elements are in place (processes) but, as stated previously, the best barometer is a combination of staff interviews alongside widely available perception based safety culture questionnaires. Where an effective process is coordinated and is able to assess accurately the current Just Culture process and perceptions, it is normally the case that the results converge on a credible version of the 'status quo'.

Other major obstacles to success include widening out what we call the '*buy-in venturi*'. This is a phenomenon which is commonly felt in organizations. It describes the scenario where senior management 'buy-in' is relatively easily elicited and can be evidenced in words published in a Safety policy statement. Similarly, when the concept of Just Culture is explained fully to the people at the 'coal face' – be it flight deck or shop floor – they too are usually extremely keen to participate (with an amount of healthy scepticism). The pinch point of our venturi, where the pressure to buy-in to being fair or just seems to be lowest (equivalent to flow pressure in a venturi) is often at the middle management level of organizations. Here, the pressure to 'produce' is great, and often overrides the ability to give full consideration of events (containment and immediate rectification of which are often more pressing) in terms of being fair; after all, blame can seem a viable option as it is quick, easy and satisfying. So, linking the 'duty' to be fair and allowing the Just Culture system to work into managers' appraisals or key performance areas is a vital and often missing component in the Just Culture systems experienced today. Often this is due to the residue of the traditional approach whereby line managers are responsible for applying discipline in 'normal' circumstances.

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Whilst this is understandable and indeed necessary for everyday (normal!) disciplinary issues, such as poor time keeping or undesired conduct, the application of discipline in relation to an unwanted operational or maintenance event needs to be treated intelligently under the Just Culture framework. As we know, this is largely due to the fact that responsibility for most of the contributing factors to such events often resides within the organization's system setting them up to fail in the first place. This process in turn needs to interface with the organization's standard disciplinary policy which may not be equipped to transact in the same terminology as that contained in the Just Culture system. Alignment of this terminology is necessary to avoid derailment of the process.

Organizational success in the application of Just Culture contains many benefits for our industry - but will only be achieved through explicit and demonstrable management ownership of the above, and only then can we begin to create organizational cultures where proactive management of error producing conditions can occur.

The FAiR® System is designed exclusively by Baines Simmons and can be downloaded free at:

<http://www.bainessimmons.com/fair.php>