

## BUILDING A JUST CULTURE

### Learning Lab With Sidney Dekker

By Rosa Antonia Carrillo

One of Sidney Dekker's latest books is *Just Culture: Restoring Trust and Accountability in Your Organization* (2016). It is a nod to one of industry's top priorities: holding people and organizations accountable. Dekker maintains that there is more to accountability than establishing rules and laws.

**A just culture** is a culture of trust, learning and accountability. It protects people's honest mistakes from being viewed as culpable. But what is an honest mistake versus a willful act? There is no black-and-white answer. However, once you begin asking people to tell their story around why they took an action, you discover that the vast majority of mistakes were not willful acts of negligence or sabotage.

In my experience the most common approach to maintaining accountability in safety is through training, procedures, rules, regulations and punishment. The idea of increasing accountability through the development of a just culture faces overwhelming cultural challenges because of the beliefs that blame, guilt and retribution lead to justice. I attended Dekker's Learning Lab, a 1-day intensive workshop, to learn more about just culture and engage in conversation with Dekker and roughly 30 safety activists.

We asked ourselves, "What is just culture? Why is it important to safety performance? How do we become an organization with fair and reasonable thinking especially during the incident investigation process? How would you go about making the case to management to invest in the development of a just culture?"

The discussion began by defining accountability and linking it to inclusion, restoration and justice. The group discussed definitions for several terms:

- Accountability is taking ownership of our actions and nonactions.
- Accountability and justice are blame free.
- Accountability is looking out for co-workers.
- Accountability is holding oneself to one's own standards, not necessarily to another's.
- Accountability is about fixing the process, not the worker.
- Justice is inclusion, a culture of beliefs around fairness within that culture.
- Justice is about treating people fairly and equally.
- Restoration ties into accountability.

Restore respect after failure.

- To restore is to heal. Restore emotional safety.

#### How Do Stricter Rules Affect Accountability & Relate to a Just Culture?

Consider that some of the processes and approaches that the safety profession has developed with the intention to strengthen the safety culture may have undermined it because they violate the concept of just culture. One example is the golden rules or lifesaving rules of safety.

You have to develop a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal revelations.

These rules are usually about what not to do and often carry the penalty of dismissal for violation. Rules are inspired by tragedy and assume that people are making a willful choice to break a rule. One participant said his organization named its rules after the person involved in the incident as a badge of shame.

Dekker discussed a recent focus group with supervisors where they revealed why they did not leave their offices to observe workers. It was not simply because of administrative duties, but because they did not want to fire anyone who was not following a golden rule. The supervisors empathized that losing one's job can be an earthshattering event that hurts a person's family and the community. The company also loses the person with the most information about the incident, so no analysis or learning can take place.

"This [focus on rules and punishment] undermines collaboration, and what it means to be human at work," says Dekker. We have made the rules into idols. They are the arbiter between right and wrong rather than collaborative thinking and action. It is no wonder people disengage.

#### How Would You Argue Against Installing Lifesaving Rules?

Given the fact that these rules were developed to prevent drift and save lives, how would you argue against them? In the group's experience, the stricter the rules, the faster the drift. People are more easily able to maneuver around them. They create a brittle system because they have weakened supervision. Supervisors now fear having to fire people rather than teach or coach them.

One attendee shared an example to support the existence of lifesaving rules. In this example, 10 workers survived a serious incident because they wore their seat belts. In this workplace, refusing to wear a seat belt is a fireable offense. The examiners found that everyone survived because they were wearing their seat belts. This seems to vindicate the rule, but there may be some false assumptions here, according to Dekker. Many people wear their seat belts who are not being forced to do it, so are the rules the real reason that the workers wore their seat belts? Also, the complex conditions surrounding this incident could be completely different from other incidents.

Questions for management to ask are: What are you paying in return for the golden rules? Are you suppressing information by creating fear? Will people participate in identifying pathways to prevention when they are being threatened? Are you tying the hands of supervisors to gain the trust of their people and be effective?

#### Promote Information Sharing to Prevent Failure

Blame is so ingrained in one participant's workplace culture that an incident investigation team was fired because it did not name any individuals. When a close-call reporting system is based on blaming and hindsight, the greater the loss, the greater the guilt and the blame. Management needs to relentlessly identify everything in the organization that puts downward pressure on open communication, and identify the processes

and attitudes that suppress reporting or admitting mistakes.

One of the strongest arguments in favor of a just culture is that it maintains a level of trust and open communication that promotes the sharing of information for the purpose of preventing failure. Does a zero goal promote this? It is a great commitment but a terrible target. It creates a hostile situation that causes people to stop revealing what is going on. Dekker says, "What you can count doesn't count." The uncountable are trust, mutual respect and open communication.

The risk of hidden, uncommunicated damage is too great to worry about the few dollars that it would cost to build a just culture. When you make people pay fines or for damage, then they may not report.

Getting people to report takes trust. If you want to keep the discussion of risk alive, you have to tolerate dissent and diversity of opinion. You have to develop a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal revelations.

The most important practices to put in place to keep information flowing are:

- Protect the reporter: you can put it into policies. Do not make it discoverable.

- Build trust and credibility by responding to people's concerns and respecting confidentiality.

- Show results: people see something come of risk they took to report.

- Confidentiality is good, but anonymity is not because you cannot get back to the person on results or ask questions.

- Be nonpunitive.

- Maximize accessibility to communication.

- Minimize anxiety.

- Make it voluntary, not mandatory.

- Address the needs of the people. Workers do things for their own reasons so if you want to change behavior, address the need.

### Key Takeaways

I have written a lot about the role of trust, respect and personal relationships in a healthy safety culture. That day, I walked away with an added awareness that we have to think more profoundly

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and concretely about how we restore that sense of trust, inclusion and justice after a serious event where people were hurt physically or emotionally.

Until now, people have been expected to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps for the most part, especially workers in high-hazard environments. We need to pay more attention to emotional/social needs to increase accountability and inspire full participation in creating a safe workplace. We also need to acknowledge that rules are put in place to protect people, and sometimes to avoid liability, but usually with good intentions. When we are addressing management, I think the strongest question is, "How much is it costing you to suppress information, and what are the actions we have to take to increase the flow of information?" **PSJ**



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