



Just Culture

- A Just Culture in the workplace means that everyone should feel safe to speak up without fear of blame or punishment.
- Speaking up early about concerns, issues, and suggested improvements helps an organisation to
 - build a shared understanding of its challenges,
 - identify how it can improve processes, practices, and procedures, and
 - respond appropriately in rare cases where unlawful behaviour or neglect has occurred.
- If raising concerns or issues results in blame or punishment, this can lead to a fear of speaking up, placing staff and clients at greater risk.
- Too much focus on compliance can lead to a culture of 'box-ticking' at the expense of thinking outside the box and acting early to make improvements.
- Other industries have shown that having a Just Culture balances accountability and learning.

What is Just Culture?

A Just Culture exists in an organisation when its values, processes, procedures, actions, and responses are designed so that individuals are not punished for actions, omissions or decisions taken in line with their experience and training, and the usual standard of practice.

A Just Culture focuses on learning and improving. Staff must be encouraged and rewarded to share information. They must feel safe to report issues without fear of blame or punishment. The leaders of an organisation must be willing to listen, inform themselves, and respond with improvement in mind.

It is OK to make a mistake; it is even better to share, learn, and improve.

A Just Culture recognises that humans are imperfect; people will make mistakes, equipment will fail, and not everything will go as planned. In a Just Culture, safety is viewed as a balance between the design of the broader system and the actions of people working within it.

It is not a 'no-blame' culture where people can get away with unacceptable behaviour or negligent disregard for standards and safety. Unlawful behaviour, recklessness, violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people with a disability is not accepted.

The difference between acceptable and unacceptable may not always be black and white and relies on judgement. A Just Culture ensures judgement is underpinned by a fair process. This includes getting input from people who understand the context, reviewing the circumstances in which an incident occurred, examining factors across the system, and considering the likely conduct of a reasonable person under the same circumstances.

Understanding context

The way staff interact with clients and each other is only a small part of the disability support system. Decisions and actions are shaped by context and cannot be viewed in isolation.

A Just Culture focuses not on 'who did what' but on asking questions like 'what happened and why?' and 'what can we learn?'. It considers the context and examines how the work environment and elements across the wider system may have contributed to an incident.

"You cannot change the human condition, but you can change the conditions in which humans work"

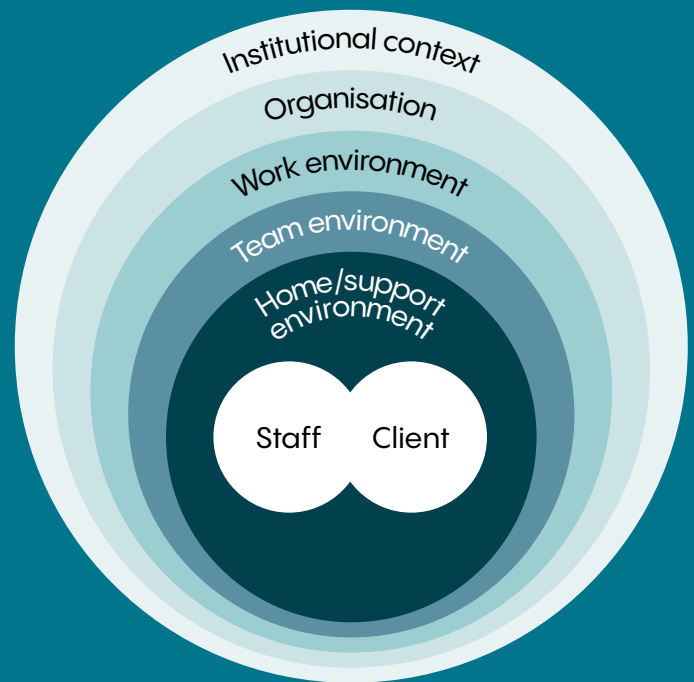
Professor James Reason

An analogy for the 'system' context

Think of the disability services system as an onion (see diagram).

- Staff, clients, and support delivery are at the core.
- The support delivered, decisions made, and actions taken are influenced by factors across all layers of the 'onion':
 - the team (for example, coordination, staffing levels, skill mix, supervision),
 - the work environment (for example, equipment, lighting, work process, demands),
 - the organisation (for example, policies, culture, resource management).
- The way an organisation operates is influenced by the context in which it exists (for example, funding, government policy, education programs, sector wide pressures).

It is important to understand factors across all these layers for learning, taking action, and influencing outcomes.



Considering the 'inside' view

The people involved or affected (for example, clients, family or carers, and staff) by an incident should be engaged in reviewing incidents or complaints and improving processes and practices. Reviews should also involve people who understand the context – either because of their responsibilities or because they bring lived experience of work, life, and support (for example, colleagues and other clients).

Everyone plays a part in maintaining and improving quality and safety.

Just Culture means putting oneself in the shoes of others to understand how their decisions and actions may have made sense to them at the time, given the circumstances and as events unfolded. A question to ask is whether another person with a similar background in a similar situation would act in the same way. This should be done with empathy and humble curiosity. Perfect rationality or ideal circumstances should not be assumed. Decisions and actions should not be judged harshly with the benefit of hindsight because the outcome is now known.

Worth a watch

Annie misread a glucometer which resulted in harm to a patient. Hear from her about her initial experience of being stood down after the incident and how a Just Culture made a difference to the response and learning.



Annie's Story: How A System's Approach Can Change Safety Culture – YouTube



How would Just Culture apply to frontline work?

It can be easy to blame a staff member when they have fallen asleep during their shift, remind them not to fall asleep, send them on training, and amend a policy.

Will that stop it from happening again for that staff member or others? Does that make staff feel respected and heard?

To learn and improve, we need to understand the context in which these incidents happen. Why are staff members falling asleep? Are they working in a dark and warm environment? Did they do a double shift to make up for staff shortages? Are the roster and work requirements providing work/life balance and adequate sleep opportunities? Do staff have engaging tasks to help them stay awake?

Have we done everything within our control to create conditions that make it easier for staff to stay awake and reduce the risk of fatigue? What barriers and opportunities for improvement do staff and clients see?

An intentional decision by a staff member to sleep on active night duty – without regard for their responsibility to support a client – is considered neglect and not acceptable.

What are the benefits of developing a Just Culture?

The most direct benefit of a Just Culture is that it supports fair processes and outcomes for clients and staff in complaints and incident investigations. A narrow focus on individual actions, without understanding why they occur, is unlikely to make clients safer and protect their rights. A Just Culture helps keep clients safe and defends their rights while being humane and showing empathy for staff.

A Just Culture makes it easier to uphold human rights by balancing risks for client safety and client choice and control. In a Just Culture, processes should focus on weighing off risks and solutions. This means staff can support clients to make well-informed decisions when they wish to take on more risk, rather than being focussed on limiting personal liability.

Clients, families, and carers benefit from a Just Culture as it leads to open and honest communication, engagement, and participation. The process is transparent, and everyone is involved in making improvements. It allows for trust to be rebuilt following a complaint or incident, based on open feedback about what happened, why, and what is being done.

How to put Just Culture in practice?

Awareness, policies, processes, and practices help build a Just Culture. People should be empowered to learn more about Just Culture and Human Factors (**see box**). This should include learning about the myths of human error and how systems and work environments can set employees, clients, and services up for success.

Organisational processes and policies must align with Just Culture principles to establish fair processes and outcomes. There must also be a safe space for anyone to challenge whether procedures, processes, and practices are (still) required and fit for purpose.

A Just Culture is only possible when leaders practice Just Culture values of fairness, openness and learning and trust that most staff members come to work with good intentions. Leaders must encourage and reward open communication and value different perspectives. They must make it clear that neither blame nor reckless or unlawful behaviour is accepted.

Human Factors

Human Factors is a discipline that applies an understanding of human behaviour, abilities and limitations. By considering the broader system, a Human Factors approach influences design by examining the relationship between people, technology, and the context within which they work and live. A Human Factors approach aims to fit tools, processes, environments and systems to humans, not the other way around.

This fact sheet is the start of a journey. Further guidance material will be provided, and conversations and learning sessions will be held to empower and support everyone to take part in the shared responsibility for maintaining and improving quality and safety.

How can I find out more?

Please contact Miranda Cornelissen, Director Just Culture, with any questions, concerns, or to share any thoughts or insights you may have on Miranda.Cornelissen@yooralla.com.au.

Building a Just Culture is a long slow journey.

It is a bit like snakes and ladders.

Everyone works hard to build a mature safety culture, and then one actual or perceived instance of blame puts it back a few steps.

It will become easier as we learn to look through a different lens and use different language.

For more information about Yooralla's Insights into Practice please contact:

yooralla.com.au | 1800 966 725 | yooralla@yooralla.com.au

Yooralla is a registered NDIS provider

 **yooralla.com.au/socials**

This publication is available at yooralla.com.au/about/research/

The information contained in this publication is correct as at May 2023. This material is for general information only. You should seek advice in relation to your particular circumstances. Yooralla, its employees and agents do not accept any liability for action taken in reliance on this document and disclaim all liability arising from any error or omission ABN 14 005 304 432 © Yooralla.