Understanding the Barriers and Challenges to Implementing a Just Culture

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What is a Just Culture?

- A 'just' culture is one that encourages accountability and learning from any errors made without the fear of a severe punishment for making mistakes. In a field like DevOps, this is important to foster an environment of improvement and collaboration.
- Key Ideas:
  - Building trust among teams and team members
  - Encouraging open communication and transparency
  - Focusing on improving a system overall instead of blaming or singling out an individual

What is emphasized in a Just Culture?

1. Accountability
   a. A just culture perfectly balances upon the fine line of making sure employees are responsible for their actions but also not punishing them for making human errors.
2. Learning from mistakes/failures
   a. In a just culture, mistakes are less seen as errors and more seen as learning opportunities. People are not punished for mistakes, but instead, are encouraged to learn from them.
3. Safety
   a. A just culture promotes communication, making employees feel safe when they have to report errors/issues without worrying about subjecting themselves to punishment.

Barriers to Implementing a Just Culture

1. Fear of repercussions
2. Inconsistent enforcement
3. Change resistance
4. Pressure on how it affects efficiency

Fear of Repercussions

In areas such as software development where things tend to be rapidly changing, it can be hard for employees to admit that they have made a mistake due to the fear they have of being punished. This is prevalent in many work environments—including ones that I have, personally, worked at—where many fear that admitting a mistake could result in loss of their job.

Inconsistent Enforcement

A just culture has to be enforced upon all areas of a team or a department. For example, if all members of a leadership team do not adopt the ideas of a just culture, then they may be enforcing the type of punishment that will make employees fearful to admit their mistakes. This can lead to frustrating, confusion, and will breach the trust that is necessary for a just culture to thrive.

Change Resistance

Many companies have been operating for years upon years, so changing the culture of any given company is not always the easiest thing to do. If something has been working this long, then why change it? Therefore, resistance to change can become a huge hurdle to overcome, especially in companies that strongly believe blame culture has proven far more effective.

Pressure on How it Affects Efficiency

We see in a lot of DevOps environments that things are usually changing and developing at a rapid rate—usually to keep up with customer/company needs or desires. A just culture is one that will take time to reflect upon and learn from mistakes, which will impact the timeline when things are moving so quickly. This sort of environment may discourage teams or their members from taking the time to fully understand how the mistake was made and how they can learn from it.

Visualization on How to Establish a Just Culture

How to Overcome the Barriers

1. Clear communication from leadership
   a. Make sure that all leaders support, model, and communicate the concept of a just culture often. Employees will feel safer if they see the leadership walking the walk and talking the talk.
2. Train/Educate
   a. Teach employees how they can investigate and learn from mistakes to prevent any more from happening in the future.
3. Clear processes
   a. Make sure that there is a clear process for handling mistakes that everyone can understand.
4. Ensuring safety
   a. Foster a work environment where employees are not afraid to share the mistake they make and are not punished for doing so

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