

Barriers to Implementing a Just Culture

Key Findings from Research and Case Studies

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What Is a Just Culture?

A just culture is an organizational mindset and process that avoids simple blame and instead evaluates behaviors in context. It requires trust, consistency, and clear processes for addressing incidents.

A just culture...

- Promotes fairness, learning, and accountability.
- Focuses on understanding behaviors and system factors behind errors.
- Seeks to replace blame with transparency, trust, and improvement.

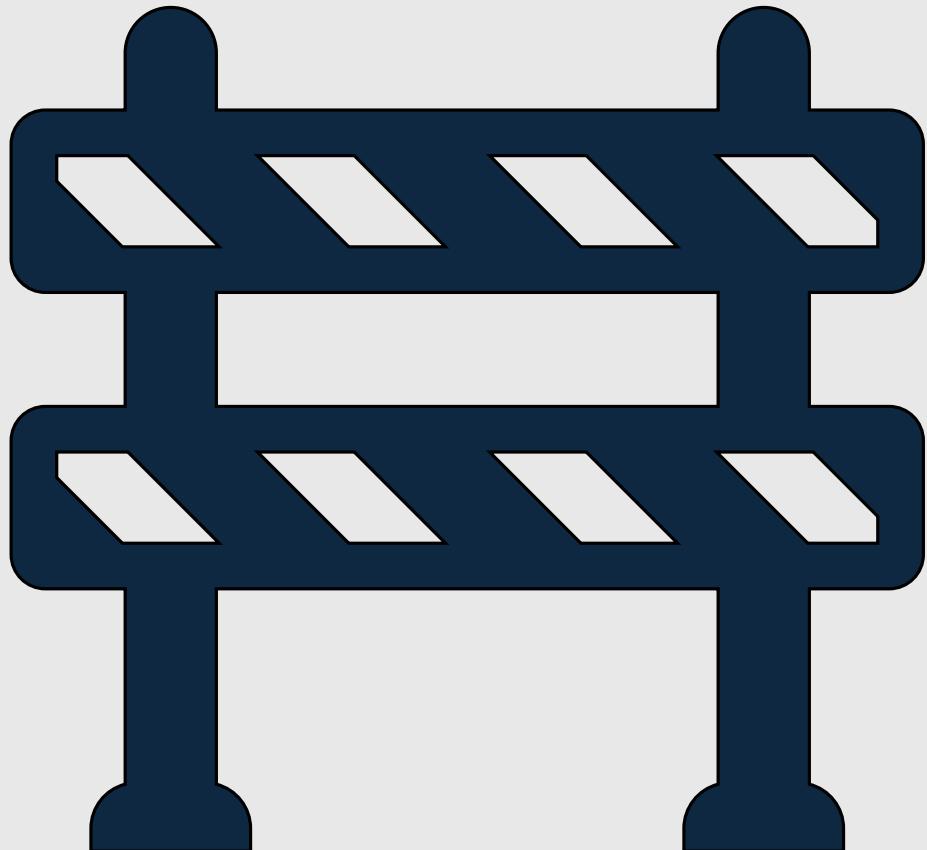


The Challenges of Implementing a Just Culture

Before exploring specific barriers, it's important to note that implementing a Just culture can clash with the long-standing traditional punitive practices and developed attitudes toward error.

- It requires a major culture and mindset change.
- Unfortunately, many organizations still rely on outcome-based discipline.
- Therefore, trust and openness can be difficult to build and maintain.

Barriers



Individual Barriers → blame, fear, lack of training

Team Barriers → weak relationships, unclear roles

Organizational Barriers → punitive policies, inconsistent processes, low transparency

Individual & Human-Factor Barriers

Individual fears and biases strongly shape whether employees report errors or trust the process. They often fear negative consequences, and organizations can sometimes resort to blaming individuals rather than analyzing systems or process.

- Blame culture: Individuals get blamed instead of examining system factors.
- Outcome bias: Severe outcomes often trigger harsher responses, regardless of behavior.
- Fear of shame or discipline: This is especially common among less experienced staff.
- Lack of knowledge/training: Employees may not understand reporting systems or just culture principles.

Team & Interpersonal Barriers

Team dynamics are critical. When communication or relationships within teams are inconsistent or hierarchical, employees may feel discouraged to report errors or express concerns.

Weak or distant relationships with supervisors reduce trust.

Lack of clarity in team roles makes speaking up harder.

Limited mutual understanding of the challenges teammates face.

Trust varies widely between departments, affecting reporting behavior.

Organizational & Policy Barriers

Organizational structures and policies can be misaligned with just culture principles. When employees don't know how decisions are made or see inconsistent outcomes, trust erodes.

- Policies that mandate punishment for errors conflict with a just culture.
- Discipline tied to *outcomes* rather than *behaviors*.
- Inconsistent assessment and incident-review processes.
- Reporting systems may feel bureaucratic, “faceless,” or unclear.
- The lack of transparency in how decisions are made.

Cultural & Leadership Barriers

Leadership sets the tone for just culture. If leaders are inconsistent or revert to blame during high-stakes events, staff will not trust the process.

Resistance to changing long-standing punitive mindsets.

Leadership may inconsistently model just culture behaviors.

Determining what counts as “error,” “at-risk,” or “reckless” behavior can be ambiguous.

Sustained leadership commitment is required but difficult to maintain.

Case Study Example: Fairview Health Services

This case shows that even committed organizations struggle with redefining culture, clarifying expectations, and ensuring consistent decision-making.

The initial environment showed inconsistent judgments and outcome-based discipline.

The organization revised policies, job descriptions, and bylaws.

Large-scale training was implemented across leadership and staff.

A just culture was integrated into daily safety and improvement processes.

Despite progress, ongoing challenges remained, including ambiguity in behavior categorization.

Conclusion & Key Takeaways

Implementing a just culture requires major shifts in policy, leadership behavior, and staff education.

Barriers exist at the individual, team, organizational, and cultural levels.

The central challenges are trust, transparency, and consistency.

Without addressing these barriers, a just culture cannot be sustained.

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