

# BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING A JUST CULTURE

# INTRODUCTION

A Just Culture is an organizational approach that promotes fairness, accountability, and continuous learning when mistakes occur. Instead of automatically blaming individuals for errors, it examines whether the issue resulted from human error, risky behavior, or reckless conduct. The goal is to improve systems while still maintaining appropriate accountability.

Although many organizations publicly support the idea of a Just Culture, putting it into practice can be complex and difficult. Cultural habits, leadership styles, fear, and misunderstanding often create barriers. This presentation explores the most common challenges organizations face when trying to implement a Just Culture and explains why overcoming these barriers is essential for improving safety and trust.

# UNDERSTANDING A JUST CULTURE

A Just Culture shifts organizational thinking from “Who is at fault?” to “What went wrong in the system?” According to WTW (2024), organizations that promote Just Culture encourage employees to report incidents without fear of automatic punishment. Research in high-risk industries such as healthcare and the military shows that when employees feel safe reporting errors, organizations are better able to prevent future harm (Military Medicine, 2023). However, misunderstandings about what “just” means often create confusion. Some employees think it removes accountability, while some leaders fear it limits discipline. In reality, Just Culture balances accountability with learning and improvement.



# BARRIER #1 – FEAR OF PUNISHMENT

Fear is one of the strongest barriers to implementing a Just Culture. If employees believe they will face discipline, embarrassment, or job loss for reporting mistakes, they are far less likely to speak up. Humanistic Systems (2023) explains that many organizations claim to support Just Culture, but employees often still experience blame when errors occur. When staff members have seen coworkers punished in the past, trust decreases. Without psychological safety, reporting declines, and important learning opportunities are lost. Fear creates silence, and silence increases risk.

- Fear of discipline or termination
- Damage to professional reputation
- Past experiences with blame
- Reduced reporting and transparency





1.2 Image: Our Be Loved

## **BARRIER #2 – LEADERSHIP INCONSISTENCY**

Leadership behavior directly influences whether a Just Culture succeeds or fails. If one manager handles errors with coaching while another responds with punishment, employees receive mixed messages. According to HQA (2023), consistency in policy enforcement and communication is essential for building trust. When leadership responses vary, employees may believe fairness depends on who is in charge rather than on policy. This perception weakens confidence in the system. For Just Culture to work, leaders must be trained, aligned, and committed to applying principles fairly across all departments.

- Inconsistent disciplinary decisions
- Poor communication of policies
- Lack of leadership training
- Employees question fairness

# **BARRIER #3 – RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

Changing organizational culture is not easy. Many workplaces have long-standing traditions of discipline and hierarchy. Research in Military Medicine (2023) highlights that rigid or highly structured organizations may struggle to adopt Just Culture principles because traditional systems often prioritize authority and punishment. Some leaders misunderstand Just Culture and believe it removes accountability. In reality, it still holds individuals responsible for reckless behavior while recognizing that human error is unavoidable. Resistance often stems from misunderstanding, lack of education, and discomfort with change.

- Deep-rooted blame traditions
- Fear of losing authority
- Misinterpretation of accountability
- Slow cultural transformation



# REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

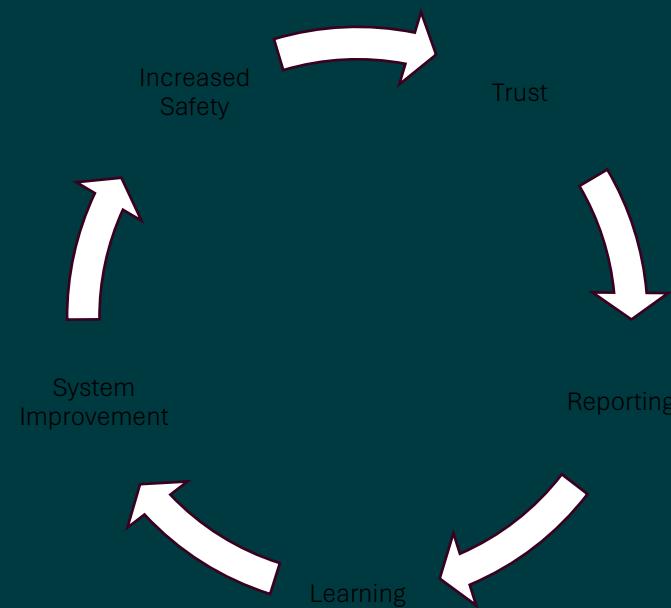
Consider a hospital nurse who administers an incorrect medication dosage. In a blame-based culture, the nurse may immediately face discipline or termination. This response discourages others from reporting similar mistakes.

In a Just Culture, leadership would investigate contributing factors such as fatigue, unclear labeling, staffing shortages, or workflow design. If the mistake was an honest human error, the organization would focus on improving systems rather than punishing the individual. However, if the nurse knowingly ignored safety protocols, accountability would still apply. This example demonstrates the balance Just Culture seeks to achieve.

1. Blame culture focuses on punishment
2. Just Culture investigates system factors
3. Human error vs. reckless behavior distinction
4. Encourages learning from mistakes

# THE TRUST AND REPORTING CYCLE

- Trust plays a central role in implementing a Just Culture. When employees trust leadership, they are more likely to report incidents. Reporting leads to analysis and system improvements, which reduce harm and strengthen safety practices. As safety improves, trust grows stronger.
- WTW (2024) emphasizes that organizations must actively build trust to maintain this positive cycle. However, if fear or inconsistency replaces trust, reporting declines and risks increase. Understanding this cycle helps explain why leadership behavior is so important.



# CONCLUSION

Implementing a Just Culture offers clear benefits, including improved safety, transparency, and organizational learning. However, barriers such as fear of punishment, inconsistent leadership, resistance to change, and misunderstanding of accountability make implementation challenging.

Overcoming these barriers requires long-term commitment, education, and consistent leadership behavior.

Organizations must create psychological safety while still maintaining appropriate accountability. When properly implemented, a Just Culture strengthens trust, reduces repeated errors, and creates a safer environment for everyone involved.

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