

Discipline and Accountability in a JUST CULTURE

Creating Trust as the Foundation of Servant Leadership

By Mike Blevins



Mike Blevins has been a supporter and practitioner of servant leadership since the early 90's. In his former role as COO of Luminant (the power generation subsidiary of Energy Future Holdings) Mike, with his leadership team, was responsible for establishing a culture of servant leadership at the Comanche Peak Nuclear Power Plant. His and the team's efforts brought awards and recognition of the facility in safety, production, and a top rating as a nuclear plant.

As we share servant leadership principles, some misinterpret the model of servant leadership as being "soft" in the tools of accountability. We dialogue with Mike about the need for an understanding of how managerial oversight tools are essential to the servant leadership model. In this series of articles, Mike shows how discipline and accountability are seamlessly woven into a "just" or servant-led culture.

Discipline and accountability are bantered around a lot in most organizations. Many people assume that we all have a common understanding of what they mean. Some organizations are very clear about what they mean and others are not. Even in commercial nuclear power, an industry that defines everything, we don't have a common definition of these two words. I wouldn't normally harp on the meaning of two words, but I think the use of these words leads us to take the wrong action...in many cases leading to the wrong results. Those wrong actions cause people to react and believe differently, often differently

than we want them to. Then, the cultural dominos begin to fall.



Creating a Just Culture through Servant Leadership

Since 1992, I have been interested in servant leadership and the importance of leaders serving, supporting, and developing others in the organization. My mentors have been servant-leaders who believed in my abilities and wanted to see me succeed. So over the past 20 years, I have looked for leadership tools that support the principles of servant leadership. The idea of a “Just Culture” is one of those concepts that seem to fit with the principles of servant leadership.

Just culture is not a phrase that is readily used in business, except for a few experts and practitioners or those that have a keen interest in culture. I fall into that last category. Just culture is one of those phrases we often have to explain and even defend when we use it. People get defensive if we question whether they have a just culture or not. Perhaps this is true of any question we ask regarding the culture of another person’s organization.

I would imagine that some may think discipline, accountability and just culture are three words (ok, four) that don’t go together. At least, they don’t go together easily. My goal is to not only convince you they do go together, but also to convince you that discipline and accountability are an essential part of a Just Culture¹ helping to create a workplace where servant leadership resides.

First, is it really worth worrying about? Why strive for a Just Culture?

Let’s agree on a definition for Just Culture. This is more easily said than done. To my surprise, and frustration, Sidney Dekker never really defines Just Culture in his book, *Just Culture*.

¹ Just Culture by Dekker

He says that “A just culture protects people’s honest mistakes from being seen as culpable.” To me, this explains what a just culture *does*, not what it *is*.

James Reason offers a more specific definition:

“An atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged (even rewarded) for providing essential safety-related information, but in which they are also clear about where the line must be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.”

While I believe this to be true, I think it is too complicated and has too many qualifiers to make it easily understood. What do you think a just culture is? Have you ever tried to explain it to anyone?



You can insert your own definition of “culture” but mine includes the social condition that remains when there is no outside force being

applied. In other words, it must self-exist and not require the continuing insertion of management, corporate or consulting forces to sustain it. **It's what we do when no one is looking.**

I don't want to get too hung up on explaining Just Culture because it is one of those phrases that nearly everyone understands even if they haven't read a dozen books on the subject. We all understand "fair" which can often be substituted for the word *justice*. In fact, a UCLA study shows that "fairness" is wired into the brain at birth. It stimulates the same section of the brain, in a rat, as food. Don't ask me to explain how they know when a rat thinks he is being treated fairly but the conclusion is that we all understand the concept intuitively.



It may be intuitive to most that a Just Culture is a valuable treasure to work toward. To my dismay, this isn't the case with many organizations. I have a friend who occasionally needs help with his computer, sometimes with the most basic of operations. I have helped him a number of times and make it a goal to teach him what I did. He often tells me not to use "intuitive" in the same sentence with "computer." My point? Intuitive or not, working in a Just Culture is what we all would hope for.

Many have spent a great deal of time and



emotional energy working to convince an organization that striving for a just culture is a worthwhile goal.

So why bother? Here is why I think it is worth the effort.

The simple answer is **sustainability**. Perhaps this is another over-used word today but in my role as leader of CPNPP, I was searching for a way to create and sustain a high performance organization. This sounds visionary, but I confess that it took me over a decade to realize what we were trying to achieve.

The whole concept of sustaining high performance organizations is fascinating, but of particular interest is how to sustain a culture change, even though many of the concepts apply to the broader topic. A broad study of high performing organizations, such as that done by Tosan² for the Utilities Service Alliance³, concludes that there is a difference in culture in those organizations that sustain high performance when contrasted to those that don't. Long lasting, high performance organizations have something Tosan calls a Constructive Culture. I

² Tosan, Inc – see www.tosaninc.com

³ Utilities Service Alliance – see www.usainc.org

believe that a Just Culture satisfies the role of a Constructive Culture for human performance. It underpins a constant reinforcement that justice is valued in order to increase justice to the point that it prevails.

So, let me be presumptuous and tell you what I think a just culture is: *A culture where justice is valued and prevails.*

There are dedicated individuals who spend much of their careers teaching culture change techniques to reduce human error. Many are successful to a point, then leave the organization later learning the organization returned to its old ways...with employees thinking the culture change initiative was just another passing fad.

Why doesn't it last? I believe that they never had or lost their Just Culture. Most likely, this is caused by a change in leadership that doesn't see the benefit in maintaining the culture as part of the initiative. It can be caused by a period of poor performance. There is nothing like poor performance to convince weak-kneed leaders that this "touchy-feely-culture stuff" really doesn't work. I believe sticking with a culture change through tough times convinces the workers that management is committed to the change; it gains their respect and their support.

In Aubrey Daniels'⁴ book, *Bringing Out the Best in People*, he presents this formula:

$$A \rightarrow B \therefore C$$

This formula serves as the basic law of behavior and behavior change. Daniels says we do what we do because of the consequences we get. To change behavior, we must change the consequences.

So what does this have to do with sustaining a Just Culture? Everything!



Daniels tells us there are only two ways to increase a behavior—provide positive or negative reinforcement. The best way to sustain an increase in behavior is to provide positive reinforcement. You may have heard of it. Also, according to Daniels, the best forms of reinforcement are those that are immediate and certain. He calls these PICs (positive immediate consequences) and NICs (negative immediate consequences). They get immediate results coincident with the consequences.

Daniels goes on to say there are only two ways to diminish a behavior, through punishment or penalty. Again, immediate and certain consequences bring the quickest change.

Think of a circumstance when you thought you were treated unfairly. I bet you can still generate that bad feeling even from a memory. The result was that you got something you didn't want, being treated unfairly. This is called *punishment* by Daniels and diminishes a behavior. This led you to be inclined to stop whatever you did that caused you to be treated unfairly. That would be good if it were an undesired behavior in the organization but the fact that you felt you were treated *unfairly* tells me it was something you thought you were supposed to do.

⁴Aubrey Daniels – see www.aubreydaniels.com

Now think about a time when you did something you were supposed to, a desired behavior, and were treated fairly. Doesn't it feel differently? It probably made you feel good. That means you got something you wanted, positive reinforcement, and would be inclined to continue or maybe even increase the behavior.

Now remember a situation where you were the leader, formal or informal, and you had the ability to make things right and you did. Didn't it feel really good when you realized people thought they were treated fairly, justly? So, the same action can be positive reinforcement for leaders as well as for workers and encourage a desired behavior to continue or increase.

Let's tie a couple of remote concepts together. Daniels says we do what we do because of the consequences. If those consequences are positive then the behavior increases. I say the best consequences, positive or negative, are natural--like burning your hand on a stove or eating a bowl of ice cream. You can expect the same consequences every time and immediately. I believe organizations deliver the same kind of "natural" consequences through their cultures.

In the case of an organization with a just culture, it is an expectation that justice will happen soon and with certainty. But it is not a PIC yet. Where is the positive part? Remember the UCLA study. When we are treated fairly, it satisfies a basic need in us, like food. It feels right. It feels good. Therefore, when justice prevails it is positively reinforcing to the organization. You will get more of the behavior. Interestingly, these just consequences can come from peers as well as management.



In the context of servant leadership, Robert Greenleaf understood the importance of influence over behavior and said it in a different way, "The best test (of a servant-leader) and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?"

In summary, a Just Culture is necessary to sustain a culture change initiative because it continues to reinforce the desired behaviors and diminish the undesired behaviors in a just way, perceived by the organization as fair, right and good. A mindset of servant leadership supports the positive immediate feedback that must occur to sustain the process.

In the next article, I will discuss the role discipline plays in sustaining a Just Culture.

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