

MOVING BEYOND THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY: JUST, BLAME, AND NO-BLAME CULTURES REVISITED

Navigating the complexities of organisational culture requires a nuanced understanding of just and blame cultures. These cultures often coexist within organisations, with different areas and functions exhibiting different tendencies, as **Martina Ivaldi, Fabrizio Bracco** and **Marcello Scala** explain.

KEY POINTS

- **Just culture is not synonymous with a no-blame culture. While Just Culture emphasises learning and improvement, it also recognises the importance of accountability and responsibility.**
- **Just and blame cultures can coexist within an organisation. Different areas or functions may exhibit different tendencies toward just or blame culture, and it's important to consider these nuances rather than applying oversimplified labels to the entire organisation.**
- **The five commitments of the EUROCONTROL Just Culture Manifesto provide a framework for understanding Just Culture: ensuring freedom to work, speak up, and report without fear; supporting people involved in incidents or accidents; not accepting unacceptable behaviour; taking a systems perspective; and designing systems that facilitate doing the right things.**
- **Different organisational areas demonstrate different facets of just and blame cultures. This includes near-miss reporting systems, organisational responses after accidents, sanctioning systems, accident investigations, and improvement actions. Each area may prioritise different aspects of just or blame culture.**
- **While policies and procedures may be oriented toward Just Culture, practices within an organisation can still exhibit elements of blame culture. Understanding the cultural nuances within a company is crucial for promoting a culture that encourages accountability, trust, and improvement.**

Just ≠ No-Blame

When things go wrong, questions of justice and blame often quickly come to the surface. Indeed, 'Just Culture' has sometimes been equated with 'no-blame'. This is a mistake, for several reasons. One is that Just Culture is not simply about removing blame. It concerns learning and improvement. Another is that Just Culture remains strongly linked to the concept of responsibility. Incident and accident investigations require that professionals are open about their mistakes and can talk about problems without fear. A final reason is that Just Culture is based on the organisation's ability to draw a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

"Just Culture and blame culture are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, they tend to coexist."



Just and blame cultures have different characteristics. However, they are often described by taking into consideration only some of these characteristics. Here are some typical examples:

- Just culture is key to increasing trust in reporting. Blame culture makes people unwilling to report mistakes.
- Just culture is about the fair management of accountabilities. Blame culture is a punitive approach to errors.
- Just culture involves a systems approach to unwanted events. Blame culture is a search for culprits.

“It would be naïve to think that practices are always guided by the same organisational culture.”

When we think of an organisation, what aspects of the two cultures are we considering? Since the organisational reality is complex, Just Culture and blame culture are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, they tend to coexist. Within the same company, some organisational areas may be oriented toward Just Culture, and others toward blame culture. Even within the same part of an organisation, there may be facets of just and blame cultures. It is therefore probably better to consider different functions, such as reporting systems, responses after accidents, sanctioning systems, investigations, and improvement actions. How do ideas about justice and blame feature in each of these?

Just Culture (and Blame Culture) Facets

From the five commitments of the EUROCONTROL Just Culture Manifesto, we can consider at least five organisational areas in which Just Culture (and blame culture) manifest.



Near miss reporting systems

Reporting systems can be conceived differently in the two cultures. Just culture pays attention to workers' concerns in reporting, and for this reason confidentiality, feedback, and information on the function of the reporting system, rights, and responsibilities are provided. In a blame culture, managers are less attentive to these aspects. They focus on finding and punishing the person who is responsible for the reported event for not complying with the rules.

Organisational responses after accidents

After accidents, the two orientations can diverge in the degree of care for the needs of those affected by accidents because of their professional role (sometimes called 'second victims'). For some, support programmes may be provided, while for others, there may be scapegoating through the distancing of the operator from the organisation (Dekker, 2017).

Sanctioning systems

In a Just Culture, accountability is defined by considering the physical, social, and organisational context in which errors and violations took place. In a blame culture, any behaviour that violates rules is sanctioned with little or no account of context.

Accident investigations

Just and blame cultures can influence the goals and conduct of accident analyses. Investigations may consider behaviour either as the product of organisational defects or as the result of the free will, aiming to find system contributions or culprits. In a Just Culture, it is important to consult operators to understand the reasons behind their behaviour. In a blame culture, the operator's point of view is overlooked (Reason, 2000).

Improvement actions

In a Just Culture, interventions are evaluated for their impacts at the systemic level, especially on their unwanted effects on workers. In a blame culture, the solutions focus on operators to improve safety, as if they were the only faulty element of the system, for example through training (Hollnagel, 2021).

To avoid applying oversimplified labels of Just Culture and blame culture to the entire organisation, it is important to reflect on how the two cultures can appear side by side; this enables managers and practitioners to be more aware of the nuances of justice and blame.

Can Just and Blame Culture Coexist?

The answer is yes, and as an illustration of this, we present two scenarios from the field of aviation.

Scenario 1: Just and blame cultures in different organisational areas

It would be naïve to think that practices are always guided by the same organisational culture. For example, aviation relies on feedback and lessons learned from accidents and incidents. Translating lessons into practice may require costly and demanding reorganisational processes. Thus, it may be easier for the company to target training at operators rather than intervening on systemic factors. This may not protect from the occurrence of similar incidents (unless competency really is the problem). In this case, investigations may be based on a systems approach (see EUROCONTROL, 2014), but improvement actions, are oriented toward individuals. Thus,

going back to the EUROCONTROL Just Culture Manifesto, we can observe the coexistence of a blame (and retrain) approach in one organisational area (improvement actions) with a just approach in another (accident investigations).

Scenario 2: Just and blame cultures in the same organisational area

Just and blame cultures can coexist even within the same organisational area, such as in reporting systems. Reporting, analysis, and dissemination of conclusions regarding safety-related occurrences aims to prevent accidents. Occurrences are reported using a mandatory or voluntary reporting system. Mandatory reporting concerns events which may represent a significant risk to aviation safety, while voluntary reporting concerns other safety-related information. From a Just Culture perspective, instead of attributing accountability to individuals, managers should focus on the five principles of the EUROCONTROL Just Culture Manifesto. Despite this, operators may be reluctant to report due to the teasing or judgemental attitudes and behaviours of peers. This is not aligned with Just Culture, and the reason is not to be found in either the design of the reporting system or in the manager's approach. In this situation, some aspects of blame culture are


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present in the staff, despite the company investing in building just reporting systems.

A Nuanced Perspective

Aviation is a complex sector, in which practices, policies, and procedures are not always oriented in the same direction. Since work-as-imagined does not reliably coincide with work-as-done (because the organisational reality is much more complex than that which can be planned), policies and procedures on safety culture do not always succeed in creating coherent safety practices. For this reason, procedures and policies may be oriented toward Just Culture, while practices may be oriented toward blame culture. It is even possible to observe facets of just and blame culture within policies and procedures (e.g., from different organisational departments).

This is true especially when an organisation is shifting away from a punitive approach.

While it is desirable to have as many policies, procedures and practices oriented toward Just Culture as possible, we cannot apply the label 'Just Culture' only because managers have invested in some of its facets, and neglected others. Instead, we must be aware of the cultural nuances present in a company. 

References

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The EUROCONTROL Just Culture Manifesto can be found on SKYbrary at <https://skybrary.aero/enhancing-safety/just-culture/about-just-culture/just-culture-manifesto>



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