

# EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE: THE DOG HAS NOW BEEN REMOVED FROM THE TAIL


What is a Just Culture approach to safety learning? **Joji Waites** and **Captain James Burnell** add some thoughts on learning within a just culture framework from the frontline perspective of UK airline pilot operations.

## KEY POINTS

- Enacting epistemic justice will help any airline trying to improve its learning.
- The dangers of epistemic injustice are ever-present with systematised approaches to data curation.
- Ethical approaches to management always allow people to be the arbiters of their own truth.
- When workers make a safety report, they want to send a message to the rest of the organisation. Epistemic justice means respecting that it's the reporter's report.

As Sidney Dekker puts it, Just Culture policies are built in response to the question, "How do we get workers to report their safety concerns so we can learn from them?" It is likely that certain airlines will have among the best designed and implemented just culture approaches in the aviation business today. This is certainly borne out by our first-hand experience; we see some airlines going to great lengths to uphold the principles laid out in this concept.

However, we see a potential problem with some airlines where such a view prevails. Despite such efforts and other industry-leading structures, including advanced safety management systems (SMS), we find that there is often little learning beyond the safety taxonomies of the airlines' databases. In part, the problem is how the data are collected and analysed without full appreciation of the underlying context of what was happening during any given safety event, or the reasons



"This is my story."

why a safety concern was reported. Safety statistics without context can seem detached from reality.

One result of this approach to learning is not just that 'the tail is now wagging the dog', but that the 'dog has now been removed from the tail'. This siloed approach to learning makes it ineffective and disenfranchises the people we need to learn from.

## A Note From the Frontline

The excerpt below is from an email received from a fifteen-year captain following a large company's recent response to a filed air safety report (ASR) and is indicative of the problem we hope to highlight here.

### “WHAT A WASTE OF TIME PUTTING IN AN ASR.”

This was the last of several ASRs filed by different pilots to highlight similar failings in a new ground operational procedure that was putting significant operational pressure on pilots during turnarounds. The captain felt ongoing pressure during turnarounds due to the perceived removal of a key role, but the investigator reframed the reporter's original truth as a simple one-off error in the process, and muted the bigger issue of the pressure on pilots that could compromise safety. This stripped the reporter of their power to control and influence their future and identify a systemic issue.

The whole group gave up reporting the problem because of the responses received. Due to the length of time the company was ignoring the issue, the community of pilots created workarounds and the issue was normalised into daily operations. While the pilots wanted to identify and remedy an operational issue, this was seen by the company as pilots getting used to a new procedure. It is a familiar pattern in procedural change management.

“Safety professionals and managers in organisations often interpret events to fit the constraints of the reporting system.”

## Defining the Problem

Even in the top-performing airlines, there can be a barrier to reporting, which is far stronger than the fear of retribution. The problem in these cases, perhaps, is that safety reporters are not deterred by the lack of psychological safety created by a fear of retribution, nor by the process of the investigations, but by the fact that their truth has the potential to be reinterpreted.

Rather than allowing people to define their own position and help create sustainable paths to a better future, safety professionals and managers in organisations often interpret events to fit the constraints of the reporting system (including the database), then determine what the future should look like based on this limited interpretation of the situation. This kind of epistemic injustice strips the reporter of their power to command their own narrative and potential future, and they end up feeling disenfranchised and oppressed. Consequently, reporting is curtailed to situations where reporting is seen as unavoidable.

## Why Might This be Happening?

It is likely that there are a few reasons for this approach by safety professionals, beyond a lack of understanding of ethics and commercial pressures.

The first factor is the conceptualisation of airline operations through an engineering lens, where outcomes are deterministic and either right or wrong. This means that there is only one correct narrative – one objective truth that can be used to fix the system or, easier still, the worker. This leaves the investigator with only one choice of outcome, which is the right one. As the safety professional is the expert, the right choice must be theirs. And so, safety becomes disconnected from the reality of operations.

As many now understand, any system containing humans is by its nature a complex system, and subject to uncertainty and emergence, where small effects can create big differences in outcomes. This understanding allows us to recognise the possibility of multiple, potentially contradictory truths, which may each have value and are worthy of consideration.

By forcing learning only through mandated safety management structures, learning through nuanced narrative and social processes is made difficult to impossible. However, learning through narratives can happily sit alongside the SMS, and allows significant insight to be gained beyond the simplified information needed to feed computer-based learning systems. An example of an approach beyond the SMS would be the learning review as pioneered by Ivan Pupulidy and implemented in an airline context as the Operational Learning Review by Cathay Pacific Airlines.

## What is Epistemic Justice?

The word 'epistemic' means 'relating to knowledge'. Epistemic justice is a term used to describe how power is used in defining the truth. In all situations, the power belongs to the arbiter of the truth and the term epistemic justice is used to indicate how ethically that power is being used.

Epistemic justice means that the narrative and the interpreter of the truth must be the originator; otherwise, some ethical damage is being done.


### Conclusion

So, "How do we get workers to report their safety concerns so we can learn from them?" The conclusion we hope those reading this article draw is that until epistemic justice is enacted, the reporting rate and the value of the insight derived from reports will not reach their true potential. Content will continue to be driven by the current systemic drivers of reporting such as what is mandated or expected to be reported, rather than by a motivation to openly share experiences from which everyone can genuinely learn.

**"Learning through narratives can happily sit alongside the SMS, and allows significant insight to be gained beyond the simplified information needed to feed computer-based learning systems."**

Our experience, particularly in the most forward thinking of airlines, is that the primary driver of a reluctance to report is not fear of retribution but epistemic injustice.

Safety is an emergent property of the system, influenced by the people doing the work and needs to be driven by them because they are best placed to maximise an empowering structure to achieve good outcomes.

We feel it is time to start to learn in a way that allows the dog to again wag its own tail. 

### Reference

McCarthy, P. (2021). Marginal gains in safety, wellbeing, and performance at Cathay. *HindSight*, 32. Brussels: EUROCONTROL. <https://skybrary.aero/articles/hindsight-32>



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