

Just and learning culture central to improving care

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust provides specialist inpatient and community services at more than 80 sites to support mental health, learning disabilities, addictions, brain injuries and physical health for 11 million people in the north west. It is one of three trusts in the UK offering high secure mental health services.

In recent years, the trust has more than doubled in size, largely through acquisitions. This growth is happening at the same time as an aspiration to deliver 'perfect' care. Getting closer to perfect means striving for better care all the time, which in turn requires the trust to gain insight about the care they provide and to respond effectively to improve care. This ambition is perhaps more difficult when also expanding and trying to integrate different organisations.

Staff were too afraid to help the trust learn

Trust leaders recognised that getting insight from staff when care is not delivered as well as hoped was vital to its continuous improvement aspirations. But staff were often reluctant to engage with the trust's learning process because they lacked confidence that they would be treated fairly if they disclosed details about specific episodes, with many fearing they would be blamed.

During 2015, the trust recognised that many of its processes and practices were having detrimental effects on staff, and they wanted to change the way they responded to incidents (including suicides patient harm, violence and complaints made against staff). They recognised that previous responses had been driven by HR and incident management policies and practices that followed a more retributive approach. At the same time managers believed that there was more learning from those incidents that wasn't surfaced because many of the staff members who were working during those times were too afraid to engage with the process.

Moving away from blame: piloting just culture

Partly inspired by the work of Professor Sidney Dekker, leaders and staff side within the trust decided to test whether a change of tack would bring benefits. Looking at the Secure Division initially, managers, HR and other staff side representatives piloted a "restorative approach with a focus on healing as opposed to hurting". When a patient safety incident

occurred, managers looked at what happened, not at 'who' was responsible. Instead of rushing into a HR investigation, they prioritised finding out where support was required after the incident, and who could best provide this support.

Managers do use supporting principles and guidance to help them decide whether an individual needs some support or intervention to work safely, the focus is culture change not process.

The trust believes the pilot worked as the number of patient safety incidents reported across the pilot sites increased and simultaneously disciplinaries and suspensions fell.

The trust is more and more confident that the right approach is to focus on 'healing'. It recognised that while it cannot undo or re-open the past, it can apologise when it gets something wrong.

This shift in culture has not always been straightforward and it is not yet complete: some parts of the organisation have embraced the concept more than others. It can take time to cement trust between managers and employees – a genuine commitment to fairness needs to be shown, and sustained leadership and follow through are needed to make the changes stick.

What's next for Mersey Care and Just and Learning Culture

Mersey Care now believes it has a strong business case for just culture. Not only does the increased openness of staff support its efforts to make care safer, but the trust is also gathering evidence for the economic viability of its approach. Mersey Care are working with Professor Sidney Dekker to publish a study on highlighting the economic case for just culture based on their experience.

The trust has started to embed just culture in leadership competencies: establishing the ability to assess behaviour skills around just culture to impact the hiring and evaluation of staff to make this truly part of their culture.

As Amanda Oates, Executive Director of Workforce, says "Just culture now touches everything we do. Any time we consider a change to policy or approach, we ask, 'would that be consistent with a just and learning culture' and encourage our staff to ask us the same questions."

Some insights from Mersey Care to help live just culture

- **Secure leadership buy-in at all levels:** Sustaining a culture change is difficult and requires commitment from leaders at all levels, including executive. Managers working on the frontline need to lead by example, living and enacting the values of a just culture.
- **Focus on language and its impact on people:** Many words have negative connotation or imply that someone did something wrong, eg 'hearing' or 'inquest' or even the word 'wrong' when something does not go as expected. Mersey Care looks to set the tone right to reinforce a focus on learning from 'when care doesn't go to plan.'
- **Empower managers to support staff:** Actions influence culture more than policies and corporate goals. At Mersey Care managers can support staff at their discretion when deemed helpful.
- **Develop and use HR as a force for change:** Building the skills and confidence of HR staff has meant they feel empowered challenge behaviour that doesn't feel consistent with the organisation's just culture approach and trust values. The trust now also involves HR, managers and staff in more procedures.
- **Create an infrastructure for just culture:** The trust appointed a just and learning culture lead and identified a group of just and learning culture ambassadors from across the trust. These ambassadors provide essential intelligence, share information and are helping to select, phrase, define and deliver the trust's corporate objectives. Many have been personally involved in an incident and they are keen to share their experience. Mersey Care has also set up a microsite where staff can share examples of care not going to plan and what they have learned from the experience. The trust believes people feel comfortable to speak openly and honestly and the site supports a culture of learning.
- **Role of Just Culture ambassadors**
 - Mersey Care appoints Just Culture ambassadors to help select, phrase, and define the trust's corporate objectives and help those to be delivered. The ambassadors are a vital source of intelligence and information sharing. They are supported by training, engagement and interaction across the Just and Learning organisational yearly objectives and interventions. They shape the trust priorities every year.
 - The ambassadors volunteer or are nominated to apply for these roles. Many ambassadors have been involved with an incident in the past and keen to share their experience. This is encouraged, but it's important that they are well and in a constructive frame of mind before taking part.

Contact us: **0300 123 2257** | enquiries@improvement.nhs.uk | improvement.nhs.uk

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