

Just Culture vs. Fair Culture

The concept of Just Culture - in the sense of 'equitable' or 'proper' rather than 'only' or 'merely' - has been the focus of much interest in the last decade or so, with several books and many papers published. From a cynical perspective (i.e., my perspective), just culture can be seen as an artefact of the blame-and-shame tradition, i.e., the view notion that accidents have a cause, and that this cause must be found and dealt with. Since the cause in general is assumed to be human actions, specifically 'human errors,' there is clearly a need somehow to protect people from being unjustly blamed for their purported wrongdoings, and even to encourage them to report on such things. Just culture can thus be seen as an artefact of a Safety-I view (q.v. under 'Ideas').

However, if just culture is an artefact, then it is possible to do something about it, for instance change to a Safety-II perspective. In the spirit of resilience engineering, this can be described as a fair culture. (For prior usage of the term, see below). Resilience engineering recognises that performance always is variable, and that it is because of this that things go right. But then it is only fair to remember that this is so when things go wrong. The fair culture is a culture that recognizes that work is based on performance adjustments, and that this is so whether things go right or things go wrong.

A fair culture will resolve the potential - and actual - conflict between what is explicit (or prescribed) and what is implicit (or tacit). A good example of that is compliance to procedures. Compliance is on the one hand touted as the solution to (all) safety problems, while it on the other is recognized that people have to be flexible and adjust what they do to the conditions. (This is the ETTO paradox: that people are expected to be efficient except when in hindsight they should rather have been thorough.) There is thus a built-in conflict between work-as-imagined, the procedures and the demands to compliance, and work-as-done. A fair culture is one where there is no bias from hindsight. It is simply not fair tacitly to condone what people do and even encourage them to do it, and then blame them if it did not work.

Whereas the notion of a just culture is an artefact of the blame culture, i.e., the belief in causes and the search for humans that are responsible because they have made an error, the notion of a fair culture is a consequence rather than an artefact of resilience engineering. The notion of a fair culture is not needed because common practice, and myths, require something to offset an artificial and hence unnecessary bias, to wit the 'human error.' The notion of a fair culture is rather a consequence of the realization, or if you will the assumption, that things that go right and things that go wrong happen for the same reasons. It is not needed to compensate for anything but only needed as a logical outcome of a train of thought. Interestingly, a fair culture is first and foremost an issue for management, although it of course also must be subscribed to by everyone in organization. But that should be a lot easier to do than to create a just culture.

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Prior usage of the term.

'Fair culture' as not surprisingly been used earlier, but in a different context. In 2005 the Finnish Ministry of Culture launched a project with the purpose of exploring the ethical dimensions of cultural policy. In this project, fair culture was defined as "the realisation of people's cultural rights and inclusion in cultural signification, irrespective of age, gender, language, state of health, ethnic, religious or cultural background."

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