

The Just Culture Model: A Roadmap to a Safer Environment

by Lorraine Breffni

Jennifer, the Pre-K classroom teacher, is talking on a cell phone as her group of four-year-old children are playing on the playground: digging in the sandpit, climbing the structure, riding tricycles on the cycle track, and playing games of tag. A child falls from the top of the structure and starts to cry. He refuses to stand. He tells Jennifer that he cannot walk because his leg hurts. After a visit to the emergency room, it is discovered that the child has a broken femur and will be in a cast for at least six weeks. A formal investigation into the incident is initiated and Jennifer meets with you in your office. When asked to explain what happened to the child, she states that she did not see the incident. Jennifer does not disclose that she was talking on a cell phone at the time; however, another member of staff shares this with you later.

In the aftermath of an accident, especially one where a child is injured, the pressures on a program to respond can be great. What do you do?

- Do you terminate Jennifer's employment because she failed to follow a policy that is not only clearly stated in the employee handbook, but also was discussed during a staff training held only two weeks prior?
- Do you punish Jennifer because she did not divulge the fact that she was on her cell phone when originally asked about the incident?
- Do you do nothing because you understand that accidents happen and you don't want to lose an otherwise valuable member of staff who is loved by parents?

Assessing Behavior

As program administrators we are called upon often to judge the behavioral choices of another person. Most of the time, our decisions are guided by our program policies and/or those of a licensing or accrediting agency. Other factors such as pressure from parents, personal beliefs, and intuition can also influence how we choose to respond. All decisions we make, of course, have consequences:

- If we choose to do nothing about the use of cell phones on the playground, children's safety will continue to be jeopardized.
- If the consequences for reporting errors or incidents result in trouble for staff, they may decide it is in their best interests to keep quiet.

Reporting and disclosure can be perceived by staff as so dangerous that when faced with the decision of whether to share a mistake and get into trouble for it or not report it and hope no one else does, the latter often seems the safest bet (Dekker, 2007). The result of this failure to disclose is that opportunities to identify faulty systems and improve overall safety are lost.

Just Culture

An alternative to either a blame-free or a punitive system for responding to failure may exist in the 'Just Culture' approach. The principles of a Just Culture are based on research by behavioral and management experts and are widely used in the high-risk fields of aviation and health care. Within this model:

- a balance is sought between learning from incidents and accountability.



Dr. Lorraine Breffni is the Director of Early Childhood Programs at the Mailman Segal Institute for Early Childhood Studies, Nova Southeastern University where she supervises the operation of three early childhood programs: infant/

toddler, preschool, and parent education. Lorraine co-authored the text *All About Child Care and Early Education* and its companion *All About Child Care and Early Education: A Trainees Manual*.

- organizations (or programs) are held accountable for the policies and systems they have in place.
- staff are held accountable for their behavior and for reporting policy or system failures.

A Just Culture attempts to ensure that administrators respond to unsafe behaviors on a case-by-case basis in a fair, respectful, and professional manner.

In a Just Culture, there are three types of behavior that lead to unsafe acts:

1. *Human error*: Where the unsafe action is the result of an unintentional slip, lapse, or mistake.
2. *At-risk behavior*: Where the unsafe action is the result of choice that increases risk, where the risk is not recognized, or where the risk is mistakenly believed to be justified.
3. *Reckless behavior*: Where the unsafe action is the result of deliberate disregard of a substantial and unjustifiable risk. (Reason, 1997)

Gauging Intent

The *intent* of an employee is central to deciding what course of action to take. Let's return to the situation described at the beginning of the article.

Jennifer's actions may at first glance appear to be the result of reckless behavior. She was trained on playground supervision and understood that she should not have been using a cell phone. However, first impressions are not always accurate. What if Jennifer explained that she found the cell phone on the playground when she first arrived? She felt it posed a safety hazard for the children and was removing it when it rang. Thinking the owner may be calling, she took the call and it was during this time that the child fell. Described in this way, Jennifer's behavior would seem to be the result of an unintentional lapse. She did not mean to violate a policy; rather, she felt she was keeping children safe by identifying and removing a hazardous item. She also felt she was being helpful by answering the phone when it rang.

According to Marx (2002), the response to this behavior should be to console the individual and include her in determining how to prevent future occurrences (perhaps the playground should be inspected before children's use).

Let's consider an alternative explanation.

What if Jennifer told you she was aware that she should not be on the cell phone on the playground, but she was waiting for a very important call from a parent? You had told her that it was critical that she make contact with this particular parent. When she called, no one picked up so she left a message and her cell phone number. She took her phone to the playground because she didn't want to miss the call. And it was while talking with the parent that the child fell. Jennifer knew from the training that communicating with parents is an important part of her role as a teacher. She also knew from training that cell phone use was not permitted on the playground. Jennifer felt she was in the difficult position of having to decide which of the two policies took precedence: using her cell phone on the playground or complying with a request by the director to communicate with a parent. Jennifer's behavior in this situation may qualify as risky. She did not intentionally ignore the rule on cell phone use. Rather, she was conflicted between two policies and this was deemed to be an isolated error.

A Just Culture response in this situation would be to retrain staff and make it clear that safety has priority over all other activities — including directives from administration or requests by parents.

What if Jennifer admitted that at the time of the accident she was on her cell phone? She knows there is a policy that prohibits cell phone use, but she sees many other staff members using theirs throughout the day and didn't think it was a 'big deal.' To further justify her actions, Jennifer explains that she was buying tickets to a concert as a birthday present for her boyfriend. The tickets were on sale for only a very limited time. In this instance, Jennifer consciously disregarded a policy and, as a result, took an unjustifiable risk. Her failure to adequately supervise the children in her care placed them in danger.

A Just Culture response in this circumstance would require implementing disciplinary action; there is zero tolerance for reckless behavior.

Creating a Just Culture

The Just Culture model can also be used to help prevent unsafe behaviors from happening in the first place. Preventative action begins by engaging everyone in conversations about safety:

- Staff openly identify and examine their own weaknesses.
- Organizations foster 'mindfulness' in their staff (Frankel, Leonard, & Denham, 2006).
- Through dialogue and transparency, a Just Culture organization constantly looks for ways to improve safety policies and systems. It recognizes that each individual is accountable for providing a safe environment.
- It asks staff to admit weaknesses in their own actions or in the program's

policies or systems without fear of repercussion.

- It creates an environment in which staff are able to express their concerns, seek help, and monitor others who work with them; staff know that when they voice a concern, responses will always be respectful.
- Staff know they are accountable, but they should also know they will not be blamed for system or policy failures that are beyond their control.

Fostering a culture of safety in programs does not lie solely with front-line classroom staff. Program leaders and administration should know that they have a clear duty to resolve safety problems or issues when they are identified. They should be aware of the tendency to be biased by the outcome of an error: Would Jennifer's behavior be treated the same if a child was not injured? Program leaders must recognize that to truly understand why errors happen, they must view safety mishaps 'from below,' from the perspective of the staff, as well as 'from above.'

A Just Culture can be achieved by:

- clearly defining and articulating what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behavior. (Note: these should be specific to and aligned with the values of the organization and the profession.)
- providing comprehensive training on safety.
- promoting excellent teamwork and ongoing, open communication among staff and administration.
- sharing enhancements to safety practices with staff in a timely and efficient manner.

- creating structures where staff can safely reveal their errors.

Ultimately, if children's safety is our first priority, we want to avoid incidents like Jennifer's from occurring in the first place. People will, unfortunately, continue to make behavioral choices that lead to accidents. While risk is everywhere, we can control whether we focus on blaming the individual(s) involved or focus on learning from the behavior and enhance our safety practices. Finally, it is critically important to recognize that a safe environment starts with building an atmosphere of trust among all members of the organization. Effective leadership is perhaps the single most important factor to creating and sustaining a Just Culture.

References

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