

# EMBRACING A LEARNING CULTURE AT A UK RAIL OPERATOR



KeolisAmey Docklands (KAD), franchise operator of London's Docklands Light Railway (DLR), has embraced a profound shift toward a culture of learning and restoration. **Adam Johns** outlines the steps taken on this transformative journey, as well as the difficulties along the way and ultimate benefits.

## KEY POINTS

- KAD previously had a somewhat punitive culture of blaming frontline operators for safety incidents, hindering learning, and fostering a culture of limited improvement.
- The organisation conducted culture surveys with their new director of safety, implementing a programme to promote a just, learning culture. This included replacing the traditional investigations with learning reviews and adopting a restorative just culture approach.
- Changing the culture and processes proved challenging, with some resistance to change and difficulties in tailoring academic approaches to the organisation's context. It was important to ensure understanding regarding the new approach.
- The organisation experienced improved communication, increased confidence among staff to raise safety concerns, and a reduction in disciplinary investigations. Changing the language and fostering a positive, supportive approach played a key role in improving organisational performance.

## What was the problem to be solved?

KAD had a longstanding, mostly punitive culture surrounding the investigation of safety incidents. Typically, frontline operators could face disciplinary action for making mistakes or appearing to not follow procedures. This approach resulted in very limited learning and improvement, as well as concern about making mistakes and reporting them. Therefore, the identification of risks was hampered, as was the prevention of incident recurrence, due to a hyper-focus on the individuals involved and what they seemed to do 'wrong'.

## What actions did we take?

A series of culture surveys had indicated a clear desire across the organisation to try a new safety approach. Safety performance, at least as measured by undesired events, had plateaued, and culturally the organisation had a cloud hanging over it relating to safety. KAD's new director of safety brought a new approach, largely based on 'New View' safety concepts and practices. A new safety team was recruited to help advance the organisation towards this, through a dedicated programme called Next Platform. The main thrust was to create a more just, learning culture across the organisation, so that not only safety performance could be improved, but also operational performance, staff engagement and wellbeing.

Practically, this focused on replacing the existing safety incident investigation protocol with a) the 'learning review' – first coined and developed by Ivan Pupulidy at the US Forest Service – and b) a 'restorative just culture' predominantly promoted in the safety field by Sidney Dekker. The organisation's learning reviews utilise systems thinking and a non-judgmental 'sensemaking' approach to understand why things happen, including the workplace influences upon people.

The aim of a learning review is to ensure that everyone learns from events. This type of learning cannot be achieved within an overarching culture – or perception – of blame; as Dekker and others say, "You can learn or blame, but you can't do both." Learning reviews are 'blameless' in their approach, but the learning review process takes place in the context of a restorative just culture.

KAD's restorative just culture focuses on restoring trust, confidence and accountability after an undesired event, acknowledging that the conditions for the vast majority of such events are created by imperfect work systems, and the errors of operators are simply exposing these imperfections.

Rather than asking retributive questions such as 'What rule was broken?', 'How much was it broken by?', and then, 'What should the consequences [for the individual] be?', the restorative approach starts with three very different questions.

1. Who has been impacted (including the staff member most proximal to the event)?
2. What are their needs?
3. Who bears the responsibility of meeting those needs?

This approach doesn't guarantee that learning takes place, but it creates the conditions for learning, by addressing psychological, emotional and other impacts first after an event. By doing so, it maximises the chances of rich

information being shared about what happened and how it happened, and allows an open dialogue to take place about learning. Accountability is distinct from blame, and is forward-looking. Everyone involved is accountable for learning and improving based on what is learned. When employees feel safe after an event, both psychologically and in terms of their job security, they are more likely to open up and share valuable insights to help us learn. This has certainly occurred within our organisation.

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At the core of the organisation's evolution was a focus on changing language. Phase 1 of Next Platform focused on 'Changing the Conversation'. This meant a systematic and concerted effort, through formal and informal conversations, meetings, documentation

and training, to evolve the language used to describe safety and operational work from one that was viewed as negative and blame-focused, to one that was neutral and learning-focused: investigation became learning review, interview



became conversation, non-compliance became variation, cause became influence. Behind this strategy was the idea that words create worlds: people attach meaning to words and phrases, and over time they can develop negative and unproductive meanings. In order to evolve our safety approach, we had to start with the words we used and how we talked about safety towards a more positive, supporting and caring approach.

## What were the difficulties?

Seeking to change culture and processes is tough. It's a long, hard slog. There will always be resistance to change, and there was. But it's not the new approach that people are often resistant to, it's the process of change itself. It's important to ensure everyone understands the purpose, the picture, the plan, and their part. We found difficulty in tailoring academic approaches to our context, and also helping the organisation to understand that a just culture is not a consequence-free culture. It does allow for people to be disciplined, but only if their actions were seriously egregious – extremely and conspicuously bad – and there is benefit in doing so.

## What were the benefits?

There has been a tangible improvement in management-to-frontline interactions concerning safety. Many frontline staff now feel more confident to raise safety concerns and know that when they are involved in an event, the company will first ensure their wellbeing, and then seek to understand the context in which it occurred.

Relationships between managers and their staff are improving as safety-related conversations don't take place under a cloud of accusation or allegation. The number of disciplinary investigations relating to safety events has dropped by a very significant amount, and this is helping to reduce the culture of fear. Overall, the focus on changing language first, and explaining why this is important, has started us off on the right path.

Here are some comments from staff who have been involved in a Learning Review:

*“... it has now given me more confidence in my role, and I have shared with my teammates that the company will listen from all sides and take a positive approach when issues arise. I see things from a different perspective and of how our company is a very forward-thinking progressive place to work.”*

*“... I was able to tell my side of the events without fear of what disciplinary action will be taken against me...”*

*“... I believe the genuine aim was to learn from the situation... Before the conversation began, the procedure and purpose were thoroughly described to me. I am ecstatic that the word ‘investigation’ has been replaced with ‘learning’. I enthusiastically endorse and welcome this culture shift, and I eagerly anticipate a more positive attitude to situations.”*



*“I felt it went really well, feedback was good and constructive, having the ability to know what went well or what could have been improved. And having the conversation was really productive.”*

## Summary

The benefits of the organisation's move to a restorative just culture are continuing to materialise as the approach matures. One tangible impact so far has been a vast reduction in the number of safety events resulting in disciplinary actions against staff. This impact was desired and expected, since the learning review and restorative just culture approach help us to better understand why a decision or action made sense to someone at the time, rather than applying a hindsight-based judgment to what they did and punishing them for it.

We are also starting to see green shoots of improvements to engagement as staff hear more about the approach. This is not yet quantifiable as it takes a longer time to materialise in a quantifiable way, as is normal for lagging indicators for safety. However, it is clear that improvements are spreading throughout the organisation, which can be seen in our organisational culture, continuous learning and safety performance.



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