

DIVERSABILITY AND RESTORATIVE JUST CULTURE

Restorative Just Culture involves restoring relations, trust and confidence after an occurrence. This can require resolving emotional tensions via discussions on inclusion and diversity. In this article, **Milena Bowman** gives real-life examples and suggests practical approaches to restorative Just Culture.

When it comes to 'just culture' in air traffic management, we usually think of air traffic controllers and things that go wrong on the sector. But just culture also applies to the engineering side of the business, which is getting ever more complex.

Last year, at MUAC, we had a system upgrade that had to be reversed straight after implementation. This was a very unusual and disruptive event as we had to put in place a couple of workarounds during the day while we investigated what went wrong. We found that there was an error in a part of the configuration data in the software. A fix was prepared for validation by lunchtime.

However, while the operations were secured, there were intense discussions about when to implement the fix, because

that meant either stopping the upgrade of a different system or coming up with an intricate solution. The discussions were laden with emotions and questions. *Why did the error occur? Why did the testing not catch it? Why can't we just replan the other baseline?* We had people from operations, planning, testing, safety, quality, and software development on two different products, and everyone had their point of view triggering their own reactions. Through a series of smaller discussions, we found a solution for deploying both baselines by calling in extra people during the night. This ensured that we could guarantee enough time to implement the fix and the new baseline.

But that was not the end of it. The emotions stayed with people long after the issue was resolved, and the system

changes implemented. Emotions remained unaddressed, and an information vacuum created an opportunity for everyone to make their own judgements and conclusions. These were sometimes shared without consideration of wider aspects.

A colleague initiated a restorative just culture intervention, which we called a retrospective session. During the 90-minute meeting, six different people shared their recollections on the content (*what happened*), and the emotions they experienced during and after the event resolution (*what they felt*). Ultimately all the participants, their teams and the whole MUAC organisation learnt from the event. Importantly, they also preserved or restored human connections, avoided lingering emotional damage, and moved from “*who is to blame?*” to restoring trust and repairing harm.

You may be asking yourself how this story is linked with diversity and inclusion. Restorative just culture is a mindset that provides the foundation to build, maintain and repair relationships. It turns out that the very same set of competences that help people work and thrive in a diverse environment also helps them to apply a restorative just culture. In my previous column in this magazine, I called this *diversability* – the ability to thrive in and benefit from a diverse environment.

Successful diversity and inclusion programs benefit disproportionately more from face-to-face encounters than from other types of training. Social psychology research suggests that when a person feels that they are in a safe environment, they are more likely to be vulnerable and share when their mental models about the world are challenged. When behaviours, decisions or assumptions are challenged, emotions often arise. Reflecting on and sharing our personal experiences of these feelings creates a powerful environment to recognise, explore and own mistakes. The diversity and inclusion workshops we held were helpful to the organisation because they provided the opportunity to meet, connect and experience vulnerability among people with whom you do not work every day. They were memorable because they touched the hearts of the people who attended.

Persistent practice in engaging in such discussions develops the ‘diversability muscles’ of people and their organisation. It is not the statistical numbers of diverse groups that bring the dividend from diversity, but the ability to understand someone else even when emotions run high in the group.


A recent paper by Leonie Boskeljon-Horst and colleagues in the context of Royal Netherlands Air Force illustrates the complexities of fostering a restorative just culture. The authors revealed the need for vulnerability through their interviews with participants in a restorative just culture intervention. Two different participants shared their stories with their colleagues. One focused more on the content of the event while the other told a personal story not only of the event, but also how he felt during the days and weeks after, when he had so many questions and remarks from colleagues. He explained how it could have happened to anyone. This participant shared that while it felt liberating, the experience felt very painful. I speculate that this pain could be diminished if the people

sharing are already used to disclosing personal emotions and being vulnerable.

Speaking about diversity can often induce feeling of blame or anxiety in a team setting. Some people opt out to just listen, but not engage. Emotions trigger others to engage but not listen at all. Skilful moderation can bring the needed structure and psychological safety so people can speak, listen, and engage while recognising their own emotions, and the emotions of others. Courageous conversations, role modelling, and resolving the tension between learning and blaming become the fundament to a restorative just culture. In turn, this creates emotional healing, moral engagement, and organisational learning from an occurrence and makes restorative just culture much easier to apply.

Boskeljon-Horst, L., Snoek, A., & van Baarle, E. (2023). Learning from the complexities of fostering a restorative just culture in practice within the Royal Netherlands Air Force. *Safety Science*, 161, 106074. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2023.106074>

Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 94(7), 14.

Note: The session was initiated by Maurice van Noppen, and designed and moderated by our internal coach Marinella Leone, both of whom will be happy to share their experience and the model used (maurice.van-noppen@eurocontrol.int and marinella.leone@eurocontrol.int). 



Milena Bowman is an Executive Manager Airspace, Systems and Procedures at MUAC Operations, EUROCONTROL, founder of a Diversity and Inclusion Think-tank and a PhD candidate with Leiden University researching the topic of Team Diversity and Safety Climate. She is also a member of the Just Culture Committee at EUROCONTROL
milena.bowman@eurocontrol.int