Leadership in A Just Culture

Key to the success of A Just Culture is smart and consistent leadership in the front lines of care. A Just Culture provides direction for listening, identifying error and risk, and consoling. It thrives in a learning environment in which potential error is thwarted and future error prevented.

Managers with responsibility for patient care and clinical departments will help educate staff and bring the working dynamics of A Just Culture into the workplace. The essence of A Just Culture is transparency, and managers can foster transparency by empowering staff to voice concerns about patient safety without fear of retaliation. In A Just Culture, leaders help to foster an environment in which staff members are confident that they will be listened to and action will be taken in a fair and consistent manner.

In this environment of safety, staff can feel free to speak up and identify opportunities to improve patient safety every step of the way. Research has shown that the single greatest impediment to error prevention in health care is that care givers are typically punished for making mistakes. A Just Culture changes the old way of thinking by introducing a new accountability for patient safety that is fair and balanced.

The ‘Decision Tree’

A Just Culture provides a specific structure and guidelines for analyzing errors, near misses, adverse events, and the behaviors demonstrated in these circumstances. It establishes rules to play by, in which staff members are accountable, but not inhibited. It fosters a constructive environment that strives to eliminate the impediments to preventing error.

A Just Culture begins by recognizing that competent professionals sometimes make errors, and also by realizing that individual practitioners should not be held responsible for system failings over which they have no control. A Just Culture assures us that when error occurs, leadership will be ready with the appropriate response to events.

In recent training, leaders were introduced to the “Decision Tree,” a structured sequence of responses to an adverse
clinical event. The Decision Tree involves four distinct questions for leadership to consider:

1. Was there desire to do harm?
2. Does there appear to be evidence of ill health or substance abuse?
3. Did the individual depart from agreed protocols, safe procedures, and/or standards of care?
4. Could two or three others make the same mistake or behave in the same way in similar circumstances?

In a culture of transparency and trust, leadership can gather information and consider the questions in sequence. For example, if the answer to question 1 is yes, it means there was “malicious action,” which would then involve a prescribed set of actions. If the answer to question 1 is no, the manager proceeds to question 2. If the answer then is yes, the employee may be “unfit for duty,” which requires a different set of actions — and so on through the sequence of four questions, covering every variable. The process gets at the cause of error and provides specific and appropriate, actionable responses. Instead of immediately asking, “Who is to blame?” leaders are encouraged to ask, “How did this happen?”

**The Human Element**

“What is key to whether or not A Just Culture will be successful,” says Thomas Worrall, MD, medical director, Quality and Innovation, “is the human element. Clinical staff will need to have transparent conversations and feel comfortable talking about how error happens.”

This is why it is essential that UPMC’s patient care and clinical leaders foster open communication among their teams and support staff in a fair, learning-oriented culture. Front-line staff need to feel comfortable disclosing errors, including their own. For A Just Culture to work, all staff must be on board and committed to the culture and process.

**Learn More about A Just Culture**

This is the first of several manager communications to deepen our understanding of A Just Culture and its practice in the workplace. For more information on A Just Culture and manager training, go to Infonet and search “A Just Culture” in the Help box at the upper right. Select “A Just Culture – Home” and follow the Manager Training link.