



Why we need positive examples in our just culture

by Job Brügger

“Just Culture? Sure! Management checks whether the result was due to gross negligence or if it was an honest mistake. So then we either punish or let them off the hook.”

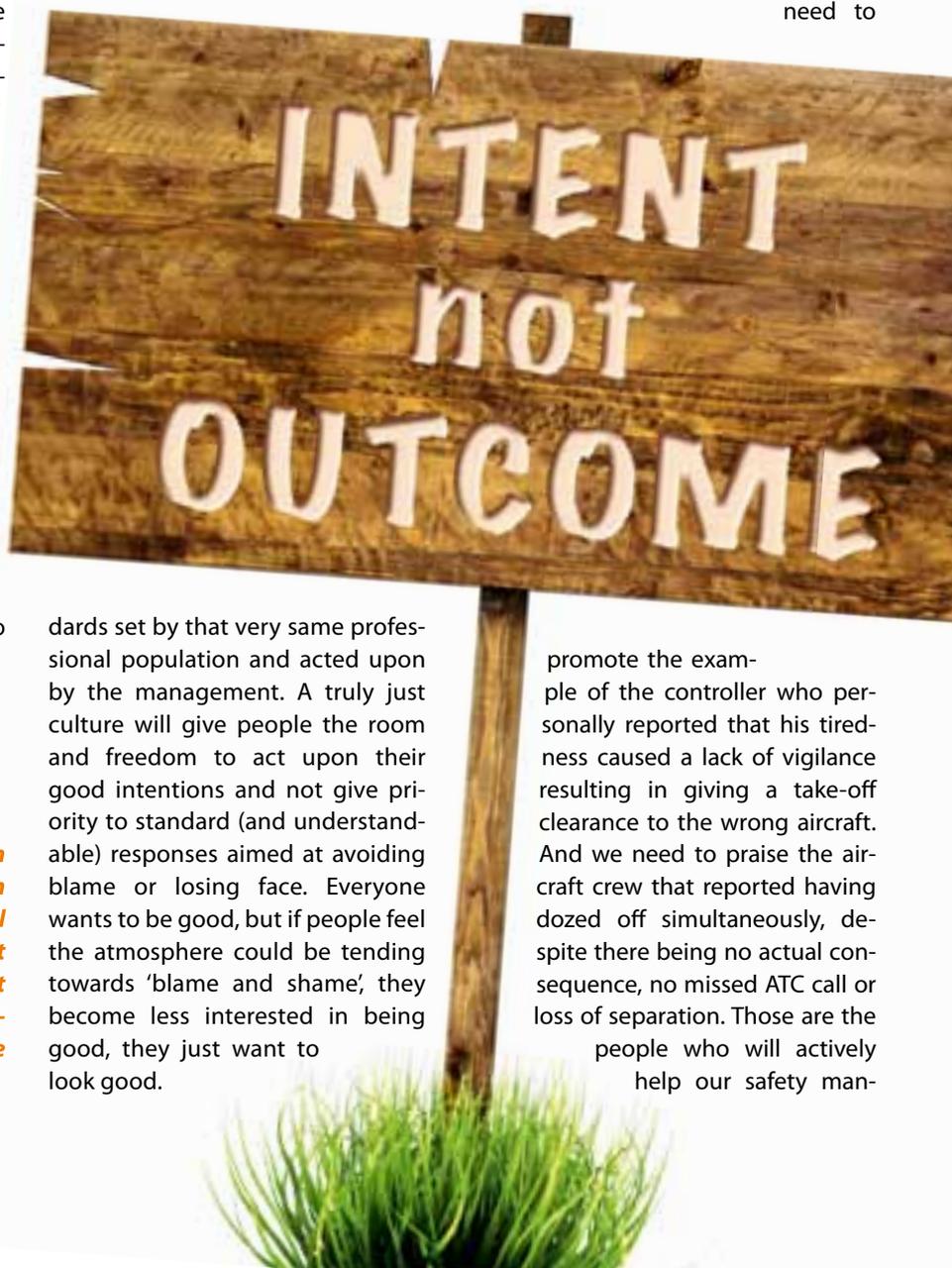
It is wrong guys. That is not how you create a just culture. Firstly, you should not look at the result, but rather at the action, even better the intent behind the action. Secondly, apparently the options are to punish or let them off the hook (so they were on the hook in the first place?), making very clear that the focus is on determining whether or not somebody is to blame. How ‘just’ would that feel to you? If you’re lucky, you’ll get a ‘get out of jail free’ card, if not, you’re busted? And thirdly, ‘management checks whether...’ is very questionable. Management is already holding all the trump cards, so now they also get to decide if you made an honest mistake or acted with gross negligence? How ‘just’ would that feel, especially if you knew that the relationship with your management was already tense, perhaps over a union conflict or a personal issue? It is all focussing on the negative side and that is what I want to correct with this short article.

It does not hurt to quote James Reason’s description of Just Culture:

An atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged, and even rewarded, for providing essential safety-related information, but in which they are also clear about where the line must be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. [J. Reason, 1997]

‘Just’ would be the culture if the professional population was able to perceive, even better: experience, that the entire range of behaviour of professionals would be assessed fairly, based on stan-

Thus we need to have examples of people demonstrating the desired behaviour. We need to commend the controller who admitted to having made a mistake, causing a conflict between two aircraft. We need to



dards set by that very same professional population and acted upon by the management. A truly just culture will give people the room and freedom to act upon their good intentions and not give priority to standard (and understandable) responses aimed at avoiding blame or losing face. Everyone wants to be good, but if people feel the atmosphere could be tending towards ‘blame and shame’, they become less interested in being good, they just want to look good.

promote the example of the controller who personally reported that his tiredness caused a lack of vigilance resulting in giving a take-off clearance to the wrong aircraft. And we need to praise the aircraft crew that reported having dozed off simultaneously, despite there being no actual consequence, no missed ATC call or loss of separation. Those are the people who will actively help our safety man-

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agement system to work and provide the opportunity for improvements by reporting what happened and explaining why.

Taking that a step further, even more desirable would be to have professionals on your staff who are actively involved in spreading “the right stuff”. People that are not afraid to lose face over a silly error on their part and because they handle such a situation professionally, they achieve exactly the opposite: they gain credit and respect. Controllers that actively involve themselves in the safety management system and work in investigations, safety surveys or promotion activities. Telling the youngsters how easy it is to make a mistake and how to act upon it. Teachers are what we need! Better still: people that improve the very system you are applying to guarantee the safety in your organisation.

So you can see that the subject of Just Culture to me is not about where precisely this magic ‘line’ is drawn. There is no line. Every event is unique and there are various shades of colour (to avoid writing ‘grey’...). A Just Culture is about stimulating the whole workforce to grow in the direction of ‘better’ attitude and performance. The organisation itself must want to strive for continuous improvement and that automatically implies that the positive role models will be needed to provide the examples to follow. The graphic below tries to express eight different classes of human behaviour; that is about the number you can still manage without making it too complicated. No one person will ever fit precisely one of the boxes, but it gives you an excellent picture of where you should be heading. Of course there will be people that need correction and coaching. But I believe the organisation should provide role models for the workforce to adopt so that people really can perceive the ‘atmosphere of trust’ that is needed to grow the right culture.

I would bet that providing the right examples on the positive side is, in the long run, more effective than providing examples on the negative side. Only a very small portion of our professional community demonstrates (gross) negligence and we all agree we have no place for them. It is not worth much of your management time. The majority of the people intend to perform well. We need to give them the credit and status that fits their intentions and actions and give them the positive role-models that a good Just Culture needs. **S**



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the safety manager of ATC The Netherlands (LVNL) and is particularly known for his activities in Just Culture developments. He was one of the first to demonstrate the detrimental effect of prosecution of air traffic controllers on incident reporting. In 2003 he re-created the CANSO Safety Standing Committee and chaired it for six years. He is currently leading the effort for the FAB Europe Central safety management activities. He also advises in the health care industry on safety matters with a particular focus on Just Culture and safety leadership.



Figure 1 – Eight different classes of behaviour (Brügger & Kools 2013 from www.safetyandjustice.eu)