

Step 2.2 – Select Team

Non-Punitive Culture

Introduction

A non-punitive culture – sometimes referred to by the trademarked term “Just Culture” – is a work environment in which staff are encouraged to deliver their best work possible in every situation. When errors occur, the organization focuses on accountability of the individuals involved and the context in which the error occurred. These organizations become learning organizations that are committed to creating work environments where processes are developed to always minimize errors and focus on safety. They are proactive in identifying and changing system flaws at all levels of the organization.

In a non-punitive culture the individual is held accountable for his or her actions. The organization acknowledges that human error is not only possible, it is likely under certain circumstances. Staff are held to professional accountability in admitting errors, including their own errors, to improve systems and prevent further errors. A non-punitive work environment is one in which it is recognized that many individual errors are predictable and unavoidable when human beings, including highly skilled human beings, interact with and use systems and equipment. It acknowledges that individuals should not be held accountable for errors over which they have no control.

A fair and just culture means giving constructive feedback and critical analysis in skillful ways, doing assessments that are based on facts, and having respect for the complexity of the situation. It also means providing fair-minded treatment, having productive conversations, and creating effective structures that help people reveal their errors and help the organization learn from them. Root cause analysis is often one of the first steps of analysis when an error occurs.

A non-punitive culture is the opposite of a blame culture. Individuals in a blame culture work environment are held accountable for all errors regarding residents under their care, no matter what the source of the errors. Even if lip-service is paid to the idea that “mistakes are bound to happen once in a while,” the official reaction and process when an error does occur makes it clear that mistakes never are supposed to happen. When a staff person makes an error, the response in a blame culture work environment is to “re-educate” that employee and discipline him/her. This method results in a work environment in which staff members are afraid to admit to making errors. This culture results in staff demoralization, high human resources costs for disciplinary efforts and to combat employee turnover, and the stifling of creativity and quality improvement.

Applying these principles creates an opportunity to have the greatest impact on the safety of the persons served and achieve the highest level of excellence. Staff can speak up about problems, errors, and conflicts in an environment where the shared goal is the best environment for co-workers and respect, creativity, and teamwork are celebrated. The input of residents and their families is valued and their satisfaction, safety, and outcomes based on personal preferences are supported by all employees of the organization.

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