

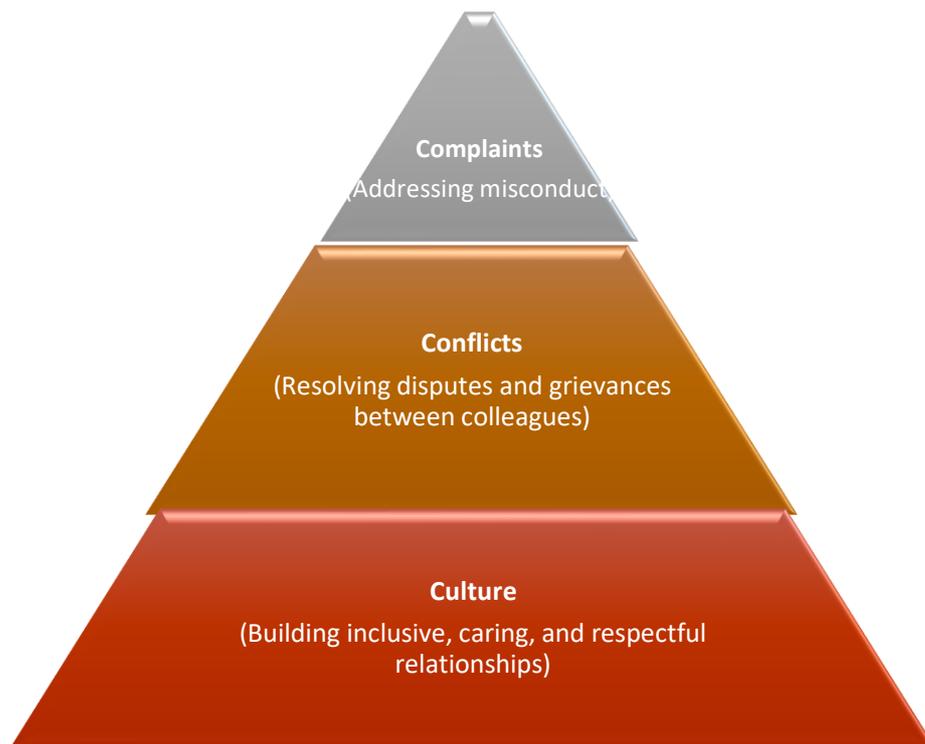
Towards a Restorative Organisation

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What is a restorative organisation?

As restorative justice practice has moved beyond the criminal justice system it has become increasingly institutionalised, concerned with promoting structural and cultural change in institutions and administrative systems. This has led to the idea of specific workplaces, community groups, business enterprises, learning institutions, residential facilities, public agencies and regulatory bodies consciously striving to be 'restorative organisations.'

In essence, a restorative organisation is one that is intentionally conditioned by the principles, values, practices and priorities of a restorative justice framework. As well as handling conflicts, complaints and failures in a restorative manner, it develops policies and practices that recognize the needs of its staff or clients as whole persons, exhibits a distributed style of leadership and inclusive decision-making, and develops a culture of belonging and respect throughout the organisation. It is worth looking at these elements in more detail.



A restorative organisation

Handling conflicts, complaints and failures restoratively

A restorative organisation is built on a foundation of respectful and caring relationships. But even healthy relationships come under stress from time to time as a result of interpersonal conflicts, performance failures or episodes of misconduct. People can feel they have been

mistreated in some way by another colleague, perhaps by bullying or harassment or lack of recognition or avoidance or gossiping or discrimination or rudeness or exploitation or overwork or something similar.

Research repeatedly shows that conflict and resentment are endemic to most workplace settings and have a dramatic impact on the ability of people to carry out routine responsibilities. A significant proportion of most managers' time is spent dealing with interpersonal disputes and its visceral impact on workers' wellbeing.

Many organisations deal with such issues in a top down, adversarial and punitive way. A restorative organisation, by contrast, invites the affected parties into a dialogical process in which they can take responsibility for their role in the problem and its resolution, determine how to repair the harm caused and restore trust and respect to damaged relationships, and to discuss how to avoid repetition. Adopting such an approach gives expression to distinctive restorative justice principles and priorities:

- Restorative approaches encourage the **active participation** of all those in the organisation affected by the incident, both those directly involved in it and those indirectly affected as bystanders or witnesses or co-workers.
- Restorative practice **allows for multiple voices across the organisation** and multiple accounts of the problem to be heard, and for respectful dialogue to occur.
- Restorative practice strengthens the skills of **collaborative problem solving and consensus-based decision making** in the workforce.
- Restorative approaches necessarily entail the reaffirmation of shared values and interests over individual rights and claims, and **reinforce the legitimacy of the collective rules governing the organisation.**
- Restorative conversations **help to rebuild trust between colleagues**, which is fundamental to any organisation's success, by making space for personal storytelling, confession, remorse, apology and reconciliation to occur.
- Restorative processes serve to **dissipate feelings of anger, alienation and impotence in the workforce** by acknowledging each person's experience and empowering them to devise solutions
- Restorative inquiry **enables systemic and structural causes of the harm, if any, to come to the surface** and for prevention strategies to be co-designed
- Restorative resolutions, by focusing on the repairing of harms and meeting of needs, **allow for a better future to emerge** and for past mistakes to become learning opportunities

A restorative organisation, then, is one that employs restorative tools in handling grievances or conflicts or where disciplinary action is needed. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. An

authentically restorative organisation is primarily and proactively concerned with fostering positive, respectful and caring relationships between people throughout the organisation.

Nurturing a restorative culture and connections

The heart of any organisation is its culture, that invisible but powerful set of assumptions, beliefs, norms and values that govern how people behave and that give the organisation its distinctive flavour or personality.

While policy making and planning are important, when it comes to organisational performance, it has been famously said, “culture eats policy for breakfast”. A restorative organisation is one where its collective culture is intentionally formed by core restorative values, norms and priorities.

To achieve this requires more than listing a set of clichéd values or aspirations in the strategic plan or mission statement. Ideally it involves a participatory process in which all members of the organisation collectively identify the standards, values and behaviours they want to observe and expect of one another.

Such a process not only engenders collective ownership of the outcome, almost invariably it produces the same results. People want a working environment based on emotional safety, mutual respect, integrity, fairness, honesty, appreciation, empathy and accountability. In essence, they desire an organisational culture shaped by four underlying commitments:

- **Relationships:** A restorative culture is one that focuses on cultivating collaborative and caring connections between people. Cooperation is prized over competitive rivalry. Staff members are cared for as integrated persons whose performance at work is not divorced from a concern for their general wellbeing.
- **Respect:** A restorative culture seeks to uphold the equal dignity of everyone in the organisation. Each person’s unique identity and differences are acknowledged and valued, and no one is treated or spoken to in ways that belittle, embarrass or humiliate them.
- **Responsibility:** A restorative culture sets high expectations for personal conduct and performance and expects people to be accountable for their actions and their consequences.
- **Repair:** In a restorative culture hurts, conflicts and failures are treated as problems to be solved, harms to be put right, and opportunities for growth rather than as occasions for retributive punishment.

The culture of an organisation, then, is the product of the values it prizes and the quality of relationships that exist between its members. To become a restorative organisation requires, one further ingredient – leadership.

The character of restorative leadership

Leadership is critically important for any organisation aspiring to become more restorative. Grass roots ownership is vitally important too, but lasting organisational change is usually achieved from the top down rather than the bottom up. This is because only senior leadership has the power to:

- Initiate an audit of the organisation's existing values, vision, mission and strategic direction,
- Authorize a new shared language to support change in a restorative direction,
- Instigate collaborative decision-making and change-management processes that give voice to those affected by the outcomes,
- Validate restorative priorities in measuring institutional performance,
- Model restorative values in their own leadership practice, so that others in the organisation begin to emulate them as well.

Shaped by a restorative philosophy, restorative leadership is relational, values-driven, context-sensitive, authentic, inclusive, humble and empathetic. A restorative leader is necessarily a servant leader, one who asks staff about their concerns, listens to their needs, affirms their contribution, and aids them in their daily struggles. Such acts of service engender a pervasive culture of service in the organisation and inspire others to model similar behaviour towards others.

Restorative leadership is both visionary and grounded. It is visionary in that it is motivated by a set of relational ideals and aspirations; it is grounded in that it works with the skills, experiences and potential already available in the people in the organisation.

The combination is crucial. Visionary leadership on its own can be uncompromising and brutal, sacrificing people to the institutional cause. Grounded leadership by itself can be so deeply grounded in present reality it becomes rigid and authoritarian.

Restorative leadership holds both aspects in creative tension, both the importance of a future vision and an awareness of current constraints. And it can do so only because the vision it casts is fundamentally a *relational* vision. It is not about achieving maximum institutional performance in the abstract, but about what *these* people, in *this* place, at *this* time, can achieve *together*. Power over others gives way to sharing power with them.

Just as the starting point for any restorative justice intervention is the assumption that everything a group needs to begin to make positive changes in its circumstances is already present in the room (which includes the capacity to identify what assets are currently lacking in the room), so restorative leadership starts by affirming the potential already latent in the workforce and seeks to draw this out, even if in doing so it becomes apparent that new people or additional skills are required.

Restorative practice, after all, is normatively about *restoration* rather than replacement, *recovery* rather than repudiation, *redemption* rather than rejection. This means that restorative leadership must be concerned, in the first instance, with identifying and building on existing strengths rather than scrapping what is and starting afresh.

Using circle processes to build a restorative community

A restorative organisation or community is one that responds to harms and conflicts in reparative ways *and* that nurtures inclusive, compassionate connections between people. Both aspects are essential, and the restorative tool kit includes a range of practice models to achieve both ends.

Whatever model is used, in order for it to qualify as a genuinely *restorative* practice it must be: (i) open to all those who are affected by the issue or incident in question, (ii) exhibit equal respect for the intrinsic worth of each person, (iii) provide everyone with the opportunity to speak for themselves and to be listened to without interruption, (iv) aim to build or rebuild just relationships, and (v) reach outcomes on the basis of consensus rather than majority vote.

One simple but immensely powerful tool for promoting community development is the use of Restorative Circles. The Circle model seeks to combine the insights of indigenous ways of addressing community issues based on a profound awareness of human interconnectedness with modern insights into cross-cultural communication, consensus-building, change management and personal transformation.

A Circle process is one where community members sit in a circle (the geometry is important for signifying equality and interconnection), agree together on the values and ground rules that will guide their deliberations, and use a “talking piece” to confer uninterrupted speaking rights on each person present.

The Circle has a facilitator or enabler (sometimes called a “Circle Keeper”), but their role is not to manage the conversation but to launch and conclude a process in which they are equal participants. Leadership is distributed by means of the circle arrangement, the agreed guidelines and the talking piece which enable everyone to speak freely and be listened to respectfully.

Typically Circles involve several rounds, with each round addressing different layers of the matter under discussion. Rather than “getting to the issues quickly”, the goal in the opening rounds is to build empathetic connections between people by inviting them to share something personal of themselves or experience.

This creates a level of vulnerability and elicits trust. It also encourages a constructive, problem-solving approach to emerge in place of an argumentative, adversarial one. By inviting self-disclosure, and by being inclusive of everyone’s contribution, the Circle fosters a holistic perspective on the issues at stake and promotes innovative solutions.

The Circle format can be used for a wide range of reasons. Where the Circle focuses on addressing the aftermath of a crime or injury, it functions as an *accountability and healing* circle. Where it seeks to resolve interpersonal or inter-communal conflicts, it is a *peacemaking* circle. Where it involves problem solving or transition management, it is a *decision-making* circle. There are also *connection* circles, *celebration* circles, *reintegration* circles, *learning* circles, *support* circles and countless other kinds of circles. In every case, the shape of the circle symbolizes the equality and interdependence of all participants and their shared responsibility – and capacity – to resolve their own problems.

Conclusion

The journey to become a restorative organisation is not an easy one. Ask any school principal that has led a restorative school and they will tell you that to achieve this involves a lot of hard work, both personally and as an organisation. Ask any of these principals about the pay-off and they will undoubtedly point to a healthy, vibrant school community that produces well-rounded young people ready to take up the responsibility of citizenship. For other organisations, restorative principles offer the same potential for creating a healthy, learning organisation that is able to deliver on its mission because its people are able to perform at their best. This begins with leaders engaging with their staff in a restorative conversation to create this bold vision.

Case Study: Just Culture – The Movie

Following is a link to a video documentary case study about Mersey Care NHS mental health trust in the UK. It provides a powerful example of organisational change using restorative principles.¹

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=bu9yhdOegm8> (27 minutes)

Chris Marshall, 2018

¹ Dekker, S. (2018, Apr 15). *Just Culture | The Movie* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu9yhdOegm8&app=desktop>