

# Restorative Just Culture Guide for Veterinary Teams



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**RJC Foundation**  
RESTORATIVE JUST CULTURE



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# 1. Introduction

This is a comprehensive guide to implementing restorative approaches that foster safety, learning, and accountability in veterinary settings. It was developed as part of the Restorative Just Culture Campaign, a collaborative project between VetLed and the Restorative Just Culture Foundation.

## The RJC Campaign

(Feb 2026)



A collaboration to introduce the powerful **principles of Restorative Just Culture** to the Veterinary Profession



Launch of a co-developed **6-module training course** for veterinary teams, available to individuals or organisations



Free expert-developed **Restorative Just Culture in Veterinary Practice** guide available - a much needed resource for veterinary teams



Launch of a 3-day **Restorative Practitioner Training** programme delivered by the RJC Foundation



**Free co-delivered webinar** introducing veterinary teams to Restorative Just Culture



One month **online campaign** throughout February 2026, including social media and email marketing

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## 2. What do we mean by Restorative Just Culture?

Professor Sidney Dekker fundamentally challenges traditional approaches to Just Culture, which often focus on determining culpability and assigning blame following adverse events. Traditional just cultures ask, "Who is responsible?" and seek to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, often relying on predetermined rules and disciplinary matrices. This approach, whilst appearing fair on the surface, can create environments where team members fear speaking up, where learning is stifled, and where the complexity of clinical work is oversimplified.

Restorative Just Culture takes an entirely different stance. Rather than asking "Who is to blame?", it asks, "Who has been hurt?" "What do they need?", and "Whose obligation is it to meet those needs?". This shift represents a profound reorientation from retributive to Restorative Just Culture. This approach recognises that unexpected events occur in practice, there are ripples of harm that extend beyond the immediate incident—affecting patients, colleagues, the wider team, and the front-line team members themselves. Restorative approaches focus on understanding what happened within the context in which they occurred, acknowledging harm, rebuilding trust, and creating conditions where similar events are less likely to recur.

Restorative Just Culture emphasises forward-looking accountability rather than backward-looking punishment. It seeks to repair relationships, restore dignity, and support higher levels of Psychological Safety. In veterinary practice, where clinical decisions are made under uncertainty, time pressure, and resource constraints, this approach acknowledges the inherent complexity of the work whilst maintaining meaningful accountability. It recognises that the vast majority of veterinary professionals come to work intending to do their best, and that understanding the context in which decisions are made is essential to understanding how real work is done.





# 3. Historical Foundations: Where This Work Originates

## Ancient and Indigenous Roots

Restorative justice principles have deep historical roots extending back to Roman times and Quaker communities, where the focus was on healing, reconciliation, and community restoration rather than retribution. Indigenous communities worldwide have long practiced restorative approaches, recognising that harm affects the entire community and that healing requires collective participation, dialogue, and the restoration of relationships.

These ancient practices understood something profound: that punishment alone does not heal wounds, rebuild trust, or reduce the risk of future harm. Instead, they emphasised bringing people together, creating space for honest dialogue, acknowledging harm, and collectively working towards restoration and learning.

## Modern Safety Science

In the modern era, Professor James Reason first coined the phrase "Just Culture" in the context of safety management, recognising that organisations needed to balance accountability with learning. Reason's work highlighted the dangers of purely punitive approaches and the importance of understanding system factors that contribute to adverse events.

Professor Sidney Dekker built upon this foundation, drawing from restorative justice principles to create a more humane and effective approach. Dekker's Restorative Just Culture moves beyond Reason's framework by fundamentally shifting the questions we ask and the processes we follow when incidents occur, creating truly learning-oriented organisations.

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## 4. Why have VetLed and the Restorative Just Culture Foundation (RJCF) joined together to create this guide for veterinary professionals?

VetLed and the Restorative Just Culture Foundation have created this guide specifically for veterinary professionals because we recognise the unique challenges facing the veterinary sector. The profession experiences high rates of burnout, compassion fatigue (also described as empathic distress fatigue), and psychological distress, often exacerbated by workplace cultures that inadvertently punish human fallibility rather than learning from it. Too often, well-intentioned attempts to implement "traditional Just Cultures" result in superficial policy changes that fail to address underlying cultural dynamics.

This guide exists because veterinary practices deserve better. The animals we serve, the clients we support, and the professionals who dedicate their lives to this work all deserve environments built upon a foundation of compassion. An environment where people genuinely feel safe to take risks that are inherent within veterinary work, where speaking up is explicitly encouraged and role modelled, where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities, and where accountability is meaningful rather than punitive. We aim to provide veterinary practices with the deep understanding necessary to embark on authentic cultural transformation—not through the proliferation of quick fixes, decision trees, or tick-box exercises that promise straightforward implementation, but through sustained commitment to restorative principles that fundamentally reshape how we respond to the inevitable challenges of clinical practice.



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# 5. Restorative Just Culture and Clinical Incidents

When incidents, events, or errors occur in veterinary practice—whether medication errors, surgical complications, diagnostic oversights, or communication breakdowns—the traditional response often centres on identifying what rule was broken and who broke it. This approach, whilst appearing straightforward, fails to capture the complexity of clinical work and can actively harm both learning and wellbeing.

Approaches to incidents within a Restorative Just Culture are fundamentally different. When unexpected events occur, the restorative response begins with understanding the context in which decisions were made. What pressure was the team member facing? What information was available at the time? What competing priorities were at play? What systemic factors contributed to the conditions in which the incident occurred? This contextual understanding is not about making excuses—it is about truly comprehending what happened so that meaningful learning and system improvement can occur.

Crucially, restorative approaches recognise that incidents affect multiple stakeholders. The patient and their caregivers experience harm. The veterinary professional(s) involved often experiences significant psychological distress, guilt, shame, fear, and self-doubt. Colleagues and the wider team may feel shaken in their confidence or concerned about their own practice. Restorative processes create space to acknowledge all of these harms, bringing people together in facilitated conversations where experiences can be shared, needs can be expressed, and collective healing and learning can occur. This approach does not eliminate accountability—rather, it creates more meaningful accountability through understanding, repair, and prevention.



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## 6. Beyond Incidents: The Broader Application

Whilst Restorative Just Culture is often discussed in the context of incidents and errors, its principles and practices extend far beyond crisis response. A truly restorative culture shapes everyday interactions, decision-making processes, leadership behaviours, and organisational policies. It fundamentally influences how teams communicate, how conflicts are addressed, how feedback is given and received, and how people treat one another during the routine challenges of clinical practice.

In veterinary settings, this broader application is particularly significant. The daily pressures of practice—challenging cases, difficult conversations with clients, resource limitations, administrative burdens, emotional labour—all create opportunities for misunderstandings, conflicts, and relationship strains. A Restorative Just Culture approach provides practices for addressing these everyday challenges before they escalate into more serious issues. Simply speaking, a restorative approach sets the team and organisation up for success. As it creates environments where colleagues feel safe raising concerns about workload, where disagreements about clinical approaches can be discussed openly, and where the emotional impact of the work is acknowledged and supported.

Restorative Just Culture also applies to how practices handle team conflicts and dynamics, performance concerns, and organisational change. Rather than avoiding difficult conversations or resorting to disciplinary processes as first responses, restorative approaches encourage early, honest dialogue aimed at understanding different perspectives, identifying needs, and collaboratively developing solutions. Examples include restorative conversations, restorative circles, and restorative team pledges. This creates mechanisms that workplaces can use to enable people to feel valued, heard, and supported—not just when things go wrong, but as a fundamental aspect of organisational life. The result is improved retention, enhanced wellbeing, stronger teamwork, and ultimately better outcomes for the animals and clients we serve.

Apart from a possible intent to 'do the right thing', economic benefits should be an additional argument for (more) restorative practice. Studies in 2018 and 2021 have identified significant economic benefits of a Restorative Just Culture, conservatively estimated at 1.5% to 2% per annum. There was a significant reduction in investigations and suspensions after the introduction of a Restorative Just Culture. Other benefits included improved staff motivation and job satisfaction, as identified through staff surveys, and a reduction in work-related stress and staff members coming to work despite not feeling well. The economic benefit of introducing a Restorative Just Culture was primarily due to an increase in productivity.



## 7. Responding to Ruptures and Loss of Trust

When unexpected events and incidents occur in veterinary practice—whether through clinical incidents, interpersonal conflicts, or systemic failures—trust is often damaged. These ruptures can occur between colleagues, between practitioners and clients, between team members and leadership, or between individuals and the organisation itself. Left unaddressed, these ruptures fester, creating lasting damage to relationships, team cohesion, and organisational culture. Restorative Just Culture provides specific approaches to address these ruptures and begin the process of rebuilding trust.

Rebuilding trust is not instantaneous—it requires time, consistency, and demonstrated commitment to changed behaviour. Restorative processes recognise this reality, creating approaches for ongoing dialogue and relationship repair rather than expecting single conversations to resolve complex ruptures. In veterinary practices, this might involve regular check-ins following incidents, peer support arrangements, restorative conversations between colleagues in conflict, or structured processes for clients and practitioners to come together after adverse events.

Crucially, restorative responses to ruptures must be voluntary. Whilst organisations can create conditions that encourage restorative approaches, participation in processes like restorative conversations or circles must be freely chosen by all parties. This respect for autonomy and agency is embodied with restorative approaches, recognising that genuine healing and accountability cannot be coerced. When people choose to engage in restorative processes, conversations or circles, the outcomes—in terms of healing, learning, and relationship repair—are far more meaningful and sustainable than imposed solutions could ever be.

## 8. Key principles of Restorative Just Culture

Implementing Restorative Just Culture in veterinary practice requires understanding and embodying the ten Restorative Just Culture Principles. These principles serve as a guide for decision-making, policy development, leadership behaviour, and everyday interactions. They represent fundamental values that must permeate organisational culture rather than being treated as optional add-ons or procedural requirements.

These principles interconnect and reinforce one another. For example, higher levels of Psychological Safety enable honest dialogue about what happened. Learning and understanding prevent unfair blame. Collective responsibility for harm validates experiences and opens pathways to healing. Design for dignity means structures, policies, etc., must protect people's dignity. Relational leadership and collegiality strengthen the social fabric necessary for resilient individuals and teams. Together, they create cultures fundamentally different from traditional hierarchical, blame-oriented approaches—cultures where people and organisations can thrive even whilst navigating the inherent challenges and uncertainties of veterinary practice.



# 9. First and Second Victims: Understanding the Distinction

## First Victims

The patients and their caregivers who experience direct harm from an adverse event. They are the primary focus of clinical care and the most obvious recipients of harm when things go wrong. Their needs—medical, emotional, and relational—must be acknowledged and addressed with honesty, compassion, and appropriate remediation.



## Second Victims

The veterinary professionals involved in or witnessing an adverse event who experience psychological trauma, guilt, shame, fear, and self-doubt. Research shows that being involved in a serious incident can have profound and lasting impacts on clinicians' wellbeing, confidence, and even career continuation. Second victims require specific support to process their experiences and heal.



The distinction between first and second victims is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures that we do not lose sight of the primary harm experienced by patients and their caregivers, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that harm ripples outward to affect others. Secondly, it legitimises the very real suffering experienced by veterinary professionals following adverse events, recognising that feeling distressed after being involved in patient harm is a normal, human response—not a sign of weakness or unsuitability for the profession.

However, this distinction requires careful handling. Acknowledging second victims is not about diminishing the primacy of patient harm or creating equivalence between different types of suffering. Rather, it is about recognising that addressing both is essential for genuine healing, learning, and prevention. A veterinary professional drowning in unaddressed guilt and shame cannot fully engage in the reflective learning necessary to prevent future incidents. Similarly, organisations that fail to support second victims create cultures of fear and silence that ultimately compromise patient safety.

Restorative Just Culture enables the holding of both truths simultaneously: that patients and their caregivers deserve our primary focus and concern, and that supporting the wellbeing of veterinary professionals is both ethically important and essential for maintaining safe, effective practice. This requires creating support structures that attend to both first and second victims, ensuring that neither is neglected in the aftermath of adverse events, and recognising that supporting one does not diminish our commitment to the other.



# 10. Where to Start: Practical Steps Forward

Implementing Restorative Just Culture can feel daunting, particularly for practices accustomed to traditional approaches. The key is to understand your starting point and where you are heading, then with small, meaningful steps, you can begin shifting your culture in restorative directions. Change does not happen overnight, but consistent commitment to the restorative principles gradually transforms organisational culture from the inside out. Some considerations:

- 1** Leadership Commitment to move from a traditional blame-/performance-orientated mindset without consideration for human factors, to one focused on learning, support, and repair. Ultimately, leadership must understand and champion the Restorative Just Culture.
- 2** Personal Mindset Shift – to people-centred, human-to-human.
- 3** Discomfort – all colleagues need to be prepared for discomfort, vulnerability, and questions about their own practices, style, and approach as part of the transition.
- 4** Psychological Safety for all – how can your people feel safe to speak up, share experiences, and disclose information without fear of retribution.
- 5** Language and Cultural Reframing – be conscious of how language is used in person and across organisational communications and policies. For example, reframing “mistake” as “didn’t go as expected.” Helping to reduce bias and blame.
- 6** Training and Capability Building – before implementing, organisations need to invest in training, so their people have the confidence to practice restorative approaches.
- 7** Inclusive interested parties’ engagement – it shouldn’t be a mandate, but involve all interested parties early, so it organically grows within.
- 8** Time, patience, and incremental growth – accept it’s a long journey, and you need to be realistic, remembering trust is built in small moments, space for testing, learning, accepting setbacks, and gradual continuous improvement.
- 9** Support – organisations may find it helpful to establish an internal delivery group, or external support through action learning sets, etc.
- 10** Organisational structures and practices – do they reflect real work? You need to be prepared to review and sustain new ways of working and reflect them in the design and development of policies and protocols. What tools and processes might help you to understand the realities and challenges of work within your practice, together with an understanding of whether or not the current protocols/policies/SOPs are fit for purpose?



# 11. Introduction to the Restorative Just Culture Foundation Directors

## Professor Sidney Dekker

Professor and Director of the Safety Science Innovation Lab at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia.

Sidney Dekker (PhD, Ohio State University, USA, 1996) is Professor in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, and Director of the Safety Science Innovation Lab at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia.



Sidney has lived and worked in seven countries across four continents. He coined the terms 'Safety Differently' and 'Restorative Just Culture' in the 2010s, which have since turned into global movements for change. They encourage organisations to declutter their bureaucracy and enhance the capacities in people and processes that make things go well—and to offer compassion, restoration and learning when they don't. His work has inspired generations of professionals and consultants globally. Many today will recognise Sidney's ideas and concepts in, for example, 'HOP,' 'Learning Teams,' the 'New View,' and more.

An avid piano player and pilot who learned to fly at age 14, he has been flying the Boeing 737 for an airline on the side. He is a trained mediator and Crisis Chaplain.

Sidney is prolific and bestselling author of, most recently: Ten Virtues of a Positive Safety Culture; Random Noise; Stop Blaming; Foundations of Safety Science; The Safety Anarchist; The End of Heaven; Just Culture; Safety Differently; The Field Guide to Understanding 'Human Error'; Second Victim; Drift into Failure; Patient Safety; Compliance Capitalism, and Do Safety Differently. He has co-directed the documentaries 'Safety Differently,' 'Just Culture,' 'The Complexity of Failure,' and 'Doing Safety Differently.' His work has well over 20,000 citations and an h-index of 63.

Stanford has ranked Sidney among the world's top 1% most influential scientists since Newton. More at [sidneydekker.com](http://sidneydekker.com)

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# Introduction to the Restorative Just Culture Foundation Directors (cont.)

## Professor Robert J. de Boer

Author safety and manager in higher education.

Robert J. de Boer (PhD Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands, 2012) is Professor of Safety Management and Director at SDO University of Applied Sciences.

Robert J. de Boer, MSc, PhD (1965) was trained as an aerospace engineer at Delft University of Technology. He graduated in human-machine systems and earned a cum laude degree in 1988 on the thresholds of the vestibular system. After gaining experience in line management and consulting, he joined Fokker Technologies in 1999, where he worked as Director of Engineering at Fokker Aerostructures from 2002 to 2007.

Mid-career, he switched to academia and earned his PhD from Delft University of Technology in May 2012. From 2009 to 2018, Robert was a professor of Aviation Engineering at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Currently, he is Director of SDO University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands and also teaches safety management there. He is active as a scientist and consultant in the oil and gas, defense, nuclear, healthcare, and aviation industries. He helped set up successful Restorative Just Culture courses in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and his book on Safety Leadership was published by CRC press in the spring of 2021 and has been well-received.



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# Introduction to the Restorative Just Culture Foundation Directors (cont.)

## Amanda Joy Oates

Amanda is one of the NHS's most respected and pioneering Chief People Officers, with board-level experience spanning more than 15 years across multiple NHS trusts. Operating consistently at the most senior levels since 2008, she is widely recognised for transforming workforce strategy into a powerful driver of culture, quality, and performance.

She now runs a thriving consultancy and is also a Director for the Restorative Justice Culture Foundation. More recently, Amanda has been appointed as a Non-Executive Director at The Christie, a world-leading cancer hospital in Manchester, UK.

Amanda is a leading figure in organizational development and human resources, known for her transformative approach to workforce culture and engagement. She has pioneered the concept of 'Restorative Just Culture,' fostering environments where Psychological Safety and inclusivity thrive. She developed the Restorative Just Culture online learning for all NHS Trusts and healthcare organisations. Her innovative strategies have significantly reduced employee relations issues while enhancing staff satisfaction and retention.

Amanda's expertise extends to strategic leadership, learning and development, and external regulatory compliance, making her a sought-after speaker and advisor on workforce initiatives at both national and international levels. She has received numerous awards for her contributions to HR, including the Chartered Institute of Personal & Development Companion Status and multiple awards for excellence in organisational development.

Amanda is widely acknowledged nationally and internationally as a key note speaker for Restorative Just Culture. She has also co-authored with industry experts Restorative Just Culture in Practice: Implementation and Evaluation, which provides insights into effective cultural transformation in healthcare settings.



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# 12. Introduction to VetLed

## About VetLed

VetLed was created by veterinary people for veterinary people. Founded by vet Ru Clements, in 2017, VetLed helps veterinary teams overcome the obstacles in the way of reliably delivering the patient care they want to.

Training like this is long-established in other safety-critical professions, from aviation to human healthcare...and it's also essential in veterinary medicine.

VetLed's vision is to create real, sustainable change for the profession through the application of Human Factors. They understand veterinary practice and know that Human Factors provides many of the answers people are searching for to help them thrive while doing the job they love.



## Dan Tipney

Dan is the Training Director at VetLed. Bringing vast expertise across numerous industries as a former international athlete and coach, airline pilot, and Human Factors trainer, he now applies his expertise to training veterinary teams.

Dan has spent many years as Head of Culture, Patient Safety and Human Factors at The Ralph Veterinary Referral Centre, witnessing first-hand the profound impact of integrating Human Factors into veterinary practice. He is a dynamic trainer whose delivery is always inspiring and engaging!



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# Introduction to VetLed (cont.)

## Dr. Sara Jackson

Sara is an ECC vet and a much-loved VetLed Associate Trainer. Delegates appreciate her pragmatic approach, down-to-earth nature, and deep compassion for practising veterinary teams. Long experience of high-pressure ECC cases helped Sara realise the centrality of non-technical skills such as decision-making and excellent team communication. Sara loves to help teams reframe adverse events as learning opportunities and a chance to embed a just culture.

Sara is a BVA Great Workplaces Accreditor and represents the Northeast of England on the BVA Council.



## 13. Further Resources

**VetLed website** <https://www.vetled.co.uk>

**Restorative Just Culture Foundation website** <https://www.rjc-foundation.org/>

**The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error**, Sidney Dekker, 2014

**Restorative Just Culture from Disciplinary Action to Meaningful Accountability** (4<sup>th</sup> Edition) – Sidney Dekker, 2025

**Restorative Just Culture in Practice, Implementation and Evaluation**, edited by Sidney Dekker, Amanda Oates, Joseph Rafferty, 2022

**Stop Blaming, Create a Restorative Just Culture**, Sidney Dekker, 2023

**The Human Contribution: Unsafe Acts, Accidents and Heroic Recoveries**, James Reason

**Safer Healthcare: Strategies for the Real World**, Charles Vincent, Rene Amalberti

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