

Part 3: When Silence Feels Safer: Just Culture, Trust, and Reporting



No one thought it was a big deal.

The workaround saved time, the flight went fine, and no one wanted to be *that person* who raised a concern. No damage. No injury. No immediate consequence.

Filing a report felt unnecessary — and a little risky. Would it reflect poorly on the individual? Would it trigger questions, scrutiny, or blame for something that hadn't actually gone wrong?

So nothing was written down.

Weeks later, the same condition appeared again. This time, under more pressure. Less time. Fewer options. What had once felt minor now carried real risk — not because the hazard was new, but because the opportunity to learn from it had quietly passed.

This is how safety gaps form — not through reckless behavior, but through silence.

Most aerospace organizations have a Safety Management System (SMS).

Far fewer have the **culture** required to make it effective.

At the heart of that culture sits a critical intersection: **Just Culture, psychological safety, and reporting**. When these elements are weak, hazards remain hidden. When they are strong, organizations learn earlier, respond faster, and prevent accidents before they occur.

The Heart of Safety Culture



The **Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG)** defines safety culture as *“the set of enduring values, behaviors and attitudes regarding safety, shared by every member at every level of an organization.”*

That definition makes one thing clear: safety culture is not a policy — it is how people behave, especially when something goes wrong.

Just Culture: Fairness That Enables Learning

According to SMICG, *Just Culture* reflects *“the extent to which safe behavior and reporting of safety issues are encouraged or even rewarded and unsafe behavior is discouraged.”*

SMICG also emphasizes that organizations should distinguish between **unintentional errors** and **reckless behavior**, and that use of a reporting system should not have negative consequences for the reporter — except in cases of reckless behavior or gross negligence

When people believe honest mistakes will be treated fairly, reporting increases. When they fear punishment or inconsistency, silence becomes the safer option — and risk grows quietly in the background.

Psychological Safety: The Permission to Speak Up

Psychological safety is what allows Just Culture to function day to day. It exists when people feel safe raising concerns, admitting mistakes, and questioning decisions without fear of embarrassment, retaliation, or career impact.

SMICG notes that a positive safety culture relies on a **high degree of trust and respect between the workforce and management**.

Without that trust, even well-designed reporting systems will be underused.

Leaders play a decisive role here. How reports are received, how follow-up happens, and how feedback is provided all send powerful signals about whether speaking up is truly safe.

Reporting: Where Culture Becomes Action

SMICG highlights that reporting systems are most effective when employees are willing to report **not only accidents, but also minor incidents, near misses, and potential hazards**.

These low-severity signals often provide the earliest warning of deeper systemic issues.

In more mature safety cultures:

- Reports are used to spot patterns and reduce risk
- Feedback loops are closed, reinforcing trust
- Over time, employees may feel more comfortable identifying themselves when reporting

SMICG specifically notes that in a more mature safety culture, the concept of justness can encourage employees to report **confidentially rather than anonymously**.

What This Means for Safety Leaders

An effective SMS is not measured by how many reports are required — but by **why people are willing to submit them**. If reporting exists only to satisfy compliance, critical information will be missed. If reporting is supported by trust, learning accelerates.

Just Culture, psychological safety, and reporting are inseparable. Together, they determine whether an organization learns *before* an event — or only after one.

In **Part 4**, we'll explore how leadership behaviors and day-to-day decision-making either reinforce these cultural foundations — or quietly undermine them.

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References

Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG). (2019). [Industry Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance](#). April 2019.