



Just Culture — Decision Guide for Managers

Before anyone is blamed: the substitution test and the four questions that separate a system failure from an individual one

The principle. Most incidents are caused by systems that let a competent, well-meaning person make an error. Punishing the person hides the system. This guide is used before any judgement, and the answers are recorded.

Test	Question	If YES	If NO
1 · Deliberate harm	Was there any intention to cause harm?	Refer to HR / police. Stop.	Go to 2.
2 · Health	Are there indications of ill health or substance use that explain the action?	Occupational health; support; adjust duties. Stop.	Go to 3.
3 · Foresight — the substitution test	Did the person depart from an agreed protocol or safe procedure? Were the protocols clear, workable and in routine use? Would another person with the same training, in the same situation, have done the same thing?	If protocols were unclear, unworkable or routinely ignored, or if a peer would have done the same: it is a system issue → RCA, no individual action.	If a clear, workable, routinely used protocol was knowingly departed from without reason → go to 4.
4 · Mitigating circumstances	Were there significant mitigating circumstances (staffing, workload, an emergency, a first-time situation)?	Address the circumstances; individual coaching at most.	Individual accountability may apply: reflection, supervision, training; HR only for repeated or reckless conduct.

Record

Incident ref · date · manager	
Test 1 · 2 · 3 · 4 answers	
Conclusion: system issue ☐ · individual learning ☐ · HR referral ☐	

Support offered to the staff member (second-victim support)

Adapted from the NHS England "A Just Culture Guide" (2018), Open Government Licence v3.0.

ASF standards: Governance — safety culture; Code of Conduct (fair treatment of staff)