
When did Intolerance become a Virtue?

The Implications of Zero Tolerance for Constraining Learning in Organisations



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The Importance of Philosophical Consistency in Setting Goals and Policy

A virtue is a character trait or moral quality which is considered to be good. In the world of relationships the idea of intolerance is rarely considered good, when people make a mistake in a relationship they want their partner to be understanding and compassionate. Intolerance generates breakdown in relationships. The reason why tolerance is normally considered a virtue is because it is a necessary characteristic required for movement, maturation and learning. The organisation which understands the dimensions of what it is to be human understands that the notion of “zero” doesn’t accommodate change, reflection, reconsideration, reframing or the power of repentance. The trouble with “zero” is there is no place to go, no movement, zero is absolute. An organisation with a policy and goal of zero tends to concentrate on the categorisation of mistakes not the values and attitudes which lead toward them. The idea of zero is in contradiction to the notion of “continuous improvement”. The funny thing about the advocates of intolerance is that it is always framed as something good for others.

Intolerance and Indoctrination

The opposite of a “virtue” is a “vice”, a vice is usually associated with values and actions which ultimately dehumanise others. When there is no tolerance, there is only conformity and compliance, there is no imagination outside of the absolute, this is the position of the fundamentalist, there is only black and white. In a system founded on “zero” humans are expected to be more like machines, education is traded for indoctrination, the human is viewed as the sum of inputs and outputs. This is the position of behaviourism; feed in the regulations, legislation, rules and expectations and people will comply. The trouble is, humans are not machines, indoctrination is only good for automatons.

In the world of safety, quality and security when the stakes are high it is understandable that organisations are tempted to set goals for “zero”, no one wants people to get hurt, no one wants the consequences of insecurity. However, “zero” only inspires perfect people, the rest of us are motivated by patience, tolerance, understanding and the scope to learn and mature. The real outcome of a focus on the absolute of “zero” in organisations is a subculture of cynicism, scepticism and confusion. Cynicism, scepticism and confusion “whiteant” organisations, the structure may look OK on the outside but it corrupts from within. The reality is that a policy of “zero” in the end drives anti-learning.

Tolerance and Learning

The learning organisation and learning individual are able to transform and change. Systems and organisations which focus on the absolute black and white of “zero” lack the capacity to adapt. Unfortunately, in this age of such complexity in systems there is more need today for flexibility, adaptation and tolerance than ever before. The organisation with adaptive complex systems will survive the turbulence of change and uncertainty much better than organisations stuck in fundamentalism. The organisation and individuals who learn, know that growth and development are welcomed, are motivated by being understood, they understand that flexibility and understanding is present for the moments when they fall, mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning. This is the best way to manage human performance.

Expectations and Setting Goals for Motivation and Learning

It is important that words and language actually have meaning, our use of language is one of the primary ways we define organisational culture. If organisations use the word “zero” and try to redefine it to mean not zero, this ultimately generates confusion and cultural cynicism. “Zero” rhetoric, policy and goals give an organisation a focus on intolerance, absolutes and unlearning. This being the case, it makes much more sense for organisations to set policies, mottos and goals which are achievable and understand the way humans learn. The following table compares the two pathways of zero/indoctrination and tolerance/learning.

Comparing Intolerance and Indoctrination with Tolerance and Learning

	Intolerance and Indoctrination	Tolerance and Learning
Key Words	Zero Comply Policing Rules Conform Train	Motivation Learning/educate Growth Maturity Development Ownership Encouragement Relationship
Teaching style	Injection	Extraction
View of People	People are instruments and cogs in the machine or project	People are complex and understanding their motivations and behaviours is critical in developing learning and change
Strategy for Change	Punishment, authority and control change culture	Culture changes as people develop ownership of values and are “inspired”
Focus Question	How can people be made to behave?	How do people learn and change?
View of Culture	Culture is defined by rules, little thought is given to the creation of counterproductive sub-cultures	Culture is the expression of underlying values, beliefs and attitudes. Sub-cultures drive congruence and change
View of Organisations	A traditional hierarchy with strong lines of command and control	Organisations are organic and a complexity of interrelated systems of people, groups and values
Sub-cultures	Hidden resentment Scepticism, cynicism People are categorised as “Champions” or “Misfits” Uniformity is achieved through compliance	Engagement Humaising Relationships Understanding diversity Harmony through understanding
View of Safety	Training obligations under the Act Train to the regulations	Engagement, critical thinking and learning the “spirit” and values of the OHS Act. People follow safety rules through ownership and motivation.
Essential Focus	Minimum requirements are sufficient	Inspiring people to excellence, beyond just the basics to maturity