

# A NEW ERA

Toward a  
**Restorative Approach**  
for Workplace Culture,  
Conflict, and Crisis



# Acknowledgements

The idea for this report was born in 2023 when Just Outcomes decided to convene a roundtable on restorative approaches in the workplace. In the spring of 2023, we gathered a group of organizational leaders and HR professionals across Canada who were eager to explore how restorative approaches intersect with their work.

Over the course of three sessions, this group of professionals explored relevant questions and priorities that showed up for them as they thought about, or practiced, restorative approaches in their workplaces.

In many ways, the spirit of this report reflects the spirit that roundtable participants brought to that initial exploration. Many of the themes we cover in this report were also first flagged for us by these brilliant roundtable participants. Thank you to these folks (many of them listed here) for engaging with us and each other to further this work:

Tammi Barkman, Human Resources Manager – Canada, Profile Products LLC;

Carol Davidson, District Principal of Human Resources, Surrey Schools;

Dalya Israel, Executive Director, Salal Sexual Violence Support Centre;

Anne Marie Malleau, Senior Director of Human Resources and Administration, Great Wolf Lodge;

Rehana Nanjijuma, Learning & Development Specialist - Equity, Diversity/Decolonization and Inclusion, City of Vancouver

Michèle Pankratz, Manager, Organization Development, Talent Strategies Division, Human Resources, City of Vancouver;

Dr. Mónica J. Sánchez-Flores, Associate Professor of Sociology, Thompson Rivers University;

Ali Smith-Cairns, Manager of People & Projects, Echo Storytelling Agency;

Doug Tennant, Chief Executive Officer, UNITI; and,

Angela Weltz, Executive Director Policy and Research, BC Public Service Agency.

Thanks also to the many colleagues who contributed to this report on the other side of writing, through editing, offering insights and questions, and affirming that there is value in adding our voice to this discussion.

# Overview

Our places of work are being called to new levels of adaptation and innovation as they respond to the fallout from

a global pandemic, an uncertain economy, increasing ideological polarization, game-changing new technologies, and numerous other currents. The challenge of preventing and addressing workplace bullying, harassment, micro-aggressions, and discrimination is ongoing. Many workplaces are also beginning to reckon in earnest with the systemic inequities that workers with marginalized identities – those who are Indigenous, racialized, queer, female, neurodiverse, or otherwise variously excluded from privilege by colonial norms and institutions – have been pointing out for decades. Even on a good day, this landscape of challenge and opportunity is a lot to navigate for anyone in organizational leadership.

Within this global context, it is becoming clear to us that a growing number of workplaces are beginning to integrate an understanding of the centrality of human relationships in how they operate. For example, as Frederic Laloux points out in *Reinventing Organizations*, where they once functioned as machines, contemporary organizations are becoming more likely to envision themselves and behave like living organisms where all parts are codependent and relational in their functioning<sup>i</sup>. This cognitive and behavioral shift has all kinds of positive implications for organizations, a few of which are documented here. According to numerous recent articles released by Harvard Business School faculty, employee satisfaction (which means more to employees in 2024 than it ever has in the past<sup>ii</sup>) is becoming as much about workplace culture and relationships as it is about compensation, prestige, etc. Workplaces must now prioritize relational wellbeing to meet goals like staff retention, attracting top talent, incentivizing employee innovation, and productivity. From Brene Brown’s *Dare to Lead* to the IBM

Institute for Business Value’s recent *Accelerating the Journey to HR 3.0* report, an understanding is emerging that the most successful organizations are shifting to workplace models that centre principles such as trust, transparency, belonging, and equity. As some Indigenous knowledge keepers and scholars

*We have also observed the promise that exists when workplaces embrace a culture that nourishes healthy and just relationships.*

have pointed out, these efforts toward just and equitable relationships within workplaces occur within a wider conversation around decolonization: the active dismantling of oppressive systems, institutions, policies and social relationships. Simply put, organizations and leaders are on the cusp of a new era of consciousness.

For the past 10 years, Just Outcomes has come alongside dozens of organizations, from non-profits to corporations to government agencies, as they’ve reimagined just responses to harm and its causes within their unique contexts. From assisting workplaces in developing satisfying responses to conflict or harassment, to working more proactively to improve workplace culture, we have observed the harm that poor workplace culture can have on employees, their relationships with each other, and on an organizations’ productivity. We have also observed the promise that exists when workplaces embrace a culture that nourishes healthy and just relationships. Based on our practical experience, we immersed ourselves in the growing discourse about restorative and just workplaces. We have become increasingly curious about the real impact of relational approaches in the

workplace, and how (if at all) this impact is being measured and discussed in relevant fields such as human resources, law, business ethics and organizational leadership. In 2023, we began a deep exploration into this question. Our exploration has included interviews with workplace leaders in Canada and the U.S., academic research, and direct engagement with other thought leaders through roundtable discussions and conference presentations to test our understanding. As a learning organization, we continue to experiment and deepen our understanding in this arena. This report is an invitation into our learning journey and an expression of our belief that workplaces can play a crucial role in contributing to greater wholeness and justice in our world.

We offer this report as a contribution to an existing global conversation, knowing that our specific identities, worldviews, experiences, failures and triumphs (more on our team here) provide us with both blind spots and unique insights. We believe that while a “restorative” approach in the workplace offers distinct and valuable principles and practices to the kind of shift in organizational consciousness we’ve spoken of here, this term and the framework behind it is new to many organizations. Complicating matters, those who use the term often bring different meanings to it. So, this report aims to bring greater clarity to the meaning of a restorative approach from our perspective, explore its implications and benefits for the workplace, and talk about some of the common challenges workplaces face in working to adopt this approach. This is an invitation toward continued learning, growth and innovation – both in workplaces, and within the burgeoning restorative justice field.

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# what is a *Restorative* Approach?

Employing a restorative approach means working to prevent and address harm, while recognizing the central role of relationships in human health and safety. When relationships break down, a restorative approach gives voice and agency to those most affected, asking:

What needs to be healed? What needs to be repaired? What needs to be learned in the wake of a harm? Who needs to have a voice? And, what needs to be strengthened if such things are not to happen again?

Or, as our friends at the [Dalhousie Restorative Lab](#) have offered, “an approach that is truly ‘restorative’ pays attention to the importance of connection and relationship among people, groups, communities and systems...it is a human-centred, transformative approach focused on understanding and responding to the impacts on and needs of affected individuals and communities.”<sup>iii</sup>

The term “restorative” comes from the emerging global restorative justice movement, which aims to remember and re-imagine “justice” as being rooted in understandings of human dignity, healing and interconnectedness. Inspired by many Indigenous peacemaking traditions, faith traditions and straightforward common sense, restorative justice is a modern term for a timeless set of ideas. Since “justice” can be a loaded and limited term, the field has adopted new language as it expands to include not only our criminal justice systems, but also processes for healing, repair and community-building within workplaces, schools, healthcare systems, communities, collective harms, and beyond. “Restorative practices,” “restorative

discipline,” and “Just Culture” are among the vernacular. In this report we speak of a “restorative approach.”

Restorative justice is also grounded in data about how humans work and what we need to thrive. Consistent with much empirical research from fields such as neuroscience and beyond, restorative approaches assume people are:

- worthy of inherent dignity and respect;
- wired for belonging and connection;
- deeply interconnected with one another;
- responsible for repairing harm resulting from their choices and actions;
- in need of a supportive ‘community’ when harm has occurred;
- capable of healing and change; and,
- influenced both by individual choice and by social context.

# principles of a *Restorative Approach*

While there are certain practices commonly associated with a restorative approach (more on that shortly), the reality is that any of these practices are “restorative” only so far as they give expression to restorative principles.

In fact, one of the strengths we find in the idea of a restorative “approach” (rather than “process” or “practice,” for example), is that this description leaves a lot of space for practical flexibility and creativity while always staying rooted in core principles. Much has been written about restorative principles, and we recommend that anyone exploring this approach takes the

time to discover those. For some in-depth discussion, [check out this article by John Braithwaite](#), this [video clip by Fania Davis](#), or this [video clip by Jennifer Llewellyn](#), for example. In our work with organizations, we find the following four basic principles to be useful – in part because they are memorable.

## Dignity



A restorative approach strives for empowering and inclusive processes, spaces, and cultures rather than adversarial and hierarchical ones. Recognizing that autonomy and agency are basic human needs, the voices of those affected by decisions are meaningfully included in decision-making. In this approach we strive toward deep respect, curiosity and positive regard for all. A restorative approach seeks to cultivate confidence within individuals about their inherent value and worth.

## Belonging



Belonging is a basic human need. A restorative approach seeks to foster positive experiences of our interconnectedness. It aspires toward environments of mutual trust, support, reciprocity and accountability. Importantly, belonging does not equate directly with “fitting in;” while “fitting in” involves conforming to external expectations, belonging is about being accepted for one’s self. True belonging can be built only when dignity is honored.

## Transformation



As Stephen Hawking observed, “intelligence is the ability to adapt and change.” A restorative approach means working toward systemic evolution and change based on collective learning, resilience and adaptation. Transformation requires communication and collaboration across the constituent parts of a system, and mechanisms for that collaboration to yield influence. It requires the pursuit of inclusion and equity in relationships, to ensure adaptation and change is informed by diverse perspectives. Transformation also invites leaders to work toward strengthening the capacity and resilience of individuals and communities to adapt to change, manage conflict effectively, and prevent breakdowns in relationship.

## Repair



Repair is a process of restoring or cultivating experiences of dignity, belonging and wholeness among people and groups after there have been experiences of harm, violation, crises or ruptures in relationships. Harm and injustice can take many forms, impacting individuals, relationships, communities, organizations, systems, and entire societies. A restorative approach to justice invites us to facilitate opportunities for repair at these multiple levels. While attending to acute and interpersonal harms, this principle also invites us to attend to harmful social/organizational conditions and structures. A restorative approach invites a shift of concern from what people responsible for causing harm deserve, to what all people involved need in order to achieve or regain a sense of well-being. Who has been harmed? What do they need? Who has obligations here? And, when needs to happen to ensure this won’t occur in the future?

# applying a Restorative Approach

What does a restorative approach look like in practice? As we've been discussing, this is not a "cookie-cutter" or one-size-fits-all technique but is wide-ranging and dependent on context. To understand the spectrum of practices associated with a restorative approach, we need to think wholistically about organizational systems and the process of change.

Human communities and organizations share much in common with other living systems such as organisms and ecosystems. In these systems, occurrences in one part of the system impact the functioning of the system as a whole; no part of the system can be understood or treated in isolation. And, because these systems tend to be resilient and regenerative (for better or for worse), they will commonly reject attempts at piecemeal or superficial change. For example, research suggests that attempts at redress for specific harms, absent of a larger systemic and cultural shift, are often prone to failure. Maybe just as importantly, taking a narrow approach misses the opportunity to improve the experiences and relationships

## Empathic Communication

Individualized skillsets in reflective listening, assertive communication, interest-based negotiation, de-escalation, emotional intelligence, conflict coaching and similar skillsets are consistent with a restorative approach because they work to build healthy relationships and prevent conflict escalation and the prevalence of harmful behaviours.

## Conflict Mediation

Mediation is a voluntary, facilitated process to increase mutual understanding, explore underlying needs and values, and/or create agreements in conflict situations. Mediation, especially where it prioritizes enhancing trust, empowerment, recognition, and equity in relationships (as opposed to more transactional/settlement driven forms of mediation) can be an important facet of a restorative approach.

## Restorative Dialogue and Conferencing

This voluntary, facilitated process involves people involved in, and impacted by, a specific incident of harm. A trained facilitator typically guides the responsible and affected parties through a process revolving around an inquiry into the impacts of the incident, resulting needs, and commitments toward repairing harm, addressing root causes, and making things as right as possible.

of all those who aren't involved in these moments of crisis. Therefore, a restorative approach is a spectrum of responses that are both proactive/preventative and responsive; it is focused on strengthening, repairing and rebuilding relationships, through both times of calm and times of 'storm.'

The following outline some examples across that spectrum. Some of these are likely already familiar, and some might be unfamiliar. We believe that a willingness to explore all these elements together, rooted in the values above, help create a healthy and restorative culture across an entire organization.

## Circles

Circle is a variable model in that it can be used to deal with a particular incident of harm or conflict, share perspectives on important issues, and/or build relationships. Common elements in Circle are shared values and guidelines; specific questions or 'prompts;' the use of a talking piece (ceremonial/significant item signifying who is the speaker); and, a 'circle keeper(s)' whose facilitation role is somewhat distinct from other models. Circles can be used within small to quite large groups. Common forms of Circle include:

- Peacemaking/responsive circles: Circles to address a specific incident, infraction, conflict or pattern of behaviour.
- Circles of Support: Circles of community members to support individuals through a particular life circumstance or phase. For example, Circles of Support and Accountability are used in Canada to support ongoing accountability with formerly incarcerated people responsible for sexual harms who are transitioning to community life; support circles are also used to support healing and recovery among crime survivors.
- Community-Building Circles: These circles, often used in educational, carceral, workplace and other organizational environments, are intended to provide opportunities for transparent sharing, listening and trust-building among participants.

## Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Initiatives

Given the many forms of structural oppression our society continues to reckon with through the legacies of slavery and colonization, JEDI initiatives aim to confront systems and structures that discriminate and dehumanize people and groups with marginalized identities while preserving and maintaining power and privilege which favor dominant identity groups and worldviews (e.g. white, male, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able bodied, Christian, educated, wealthy, etc). Consistent with the aims of many JEDI initiatives, a restorative approach aspires toward relationships and social structures that are just, fair, dignified and empowered for all.

## Decolonization Efforts

Decolonization refers to the disruption of, and resistance to, power relationships upheld by colonization, and a shifting of power, autonomy, and resources to the Indigenous peoples of the land. By many definitions, it also implies a sustained effort to end oppression in all its forms. Decolonization efforts are often consistent or synergistic with a restorative approach, which is concerned with transforming oppressive uses of power and working toward individual and community dignity, rights, healing, and self-determination.

## Restorative Inquiries

A restorative inquiry is a formal process to understand the root causes and impacts of a specific incident, situation or pattern of harm, with the aim of promoting accountability, healing, and transformation. Whereas conventional fact-finding processes are usually aimed at determining individual responsibility and recommending punitive sanctions, restorative inquiries focus on collective and institutional learning and responsibility-taking so that the harm will be prevented in the future.

## Reparations

Reparations are financial compensations for people who have experienced harm or wrongdoing. In many reparations schemes, the compensation is intended as a symbolic gesture rather than attempting to compensate for exact or actual losses resulting from the harm. While monetary reparations can be an important aspect of a restorative approach, these initiatives have restorative potential only when combined with other institutional and/or community actions (such as those listed above).

## Public Apology

Public apologies can be an important facet of a restorative approach after circumstances harm perpetrated by institutions or governments. Beyond just "saying sorry," however, restorative apologies mean "doing sorry:" acknowledging choice-making in the harmful act; recognition of the harm caused, and a demonstrated willingness toward further learning and listening; participation in working to make things right; and taking steps to prevent or minimize the likelihood of future harm.



# the promise of a Restorative Approach

A growing body of literature speaks to the positive impact of working restoratively within various social systems. Since the field began in relationship to the criminal justice system, much of the existing data focuses on those applications; however, information about the impacts for organizations is increasing. We'll start our discussion there.

## Organizational Impacts

*Restorative approaches help build or restore organizational cohesion in the aftermath of conflict and harm.*

Okimoto and Wenzel discuss a “tri-partite approach” that restorative justice offers workplaces, where three different relationship repair goals coexist: interpersonal reconciliation between parties, affected parties’ reintegration into the organizational community, and responsible parties’ reintegration into the organizational community.<sup>iv</sup> There is evidence that this approach increases cohesion between affected and responsible parties, as well as between these parties and their respective support systems.<sup>v</sup>

*Restorative approaches build trust.*

Goodstein and Aquino argue in a 2010 article that restorative justice can also prevent the likelihood of escalated conflicts by promoting stronger relationships among organizational members and a better trust in their workplace’s commitment to just relationships.<sup>vii</sup>

*Restorative approaches promote non-retributive norms.*

A 2006 article by Aquino et al. argues that a restorative justice approach in the workplace can promote an organizational culture where people tend to reconcile instead of seeking retribution, saving organizations the cost of unproductive conflicts.<sup>vi</sup>

## Data from Other Contexts

Most empirical research on the impact of restorative approaches occurs within criminal/legal contexts. This data can nevertheless be instructive to workplaces exploring alternative approaches within human resources.

*Restorative approaches increase the likelihood of responsible parties taking active steps to repair harm.*

The evidence from three highly developed, long-term RJ programs in the UK shows a documented success. Across the eight separate tests within RJ units in the Metropolitan Police, the Northumbria Police, and the Thames Valley probation and prisons services, 89% of agreements made in an RJ process were kept, at least in part. By comparison to 66% of UK fines collected, RJ does better.<sup>viii</sup> Additionally, a Canadian study found that people who experience harm (“affected parties”) seeking financial reparation through restorative justice were four times more likely to receive it than victims who went to court.<sup>ix</sup>

*Restorative approaches increase the satisfaction of affected parties.*

Affected parties in a study by Sherman and Strang experienced a 70% satisfaction rate after completing a restorative conference versus the 42% satisfaction rate of victims who were dealt with in court.<sup>x</sup> American and Australian studies demonstrated that diversion to restorative justice, in which accused persons may acknowledge responsibility without a legal admission of guilt, yields increases of 100% to 400% in cases brought to justice.<sup>xi</sup>

*Restorative approaches offer an opportunity for meaningful accountability.*

Ninety percent of all affected parties, whether assigned to court or to conference, felt they should receive an apology. In a study by Sherman and Strang, 86% of affected parties who experienced a restorative conference said the responsible party in their case had apologized, compared with 19% of affected parties assigned to court. Furthermore, more conference-assigned affected parties than court-assigned affected parties said they felt the apologies they received were sincere (77% vs 41%).<sup>xii</sup>

*Restorative approaches can reduce repeat violations.*

Sherman and Strang studied the effects of restorative justice approaches after violent crime and discovered substantial reductions in recidivism after serious and violent crime.<sup>xiv</sup>

*Restorative approaches offer participants a satisfying justice experience.*

Studies have demonstrated that responsible and affected parties participating in victim-offender dialogue report a more positive perception of the justice system than those engaged solely with traditional court prosecution.<sup>xiii</sup>



As our mentor and colleague Howard Zehr has put it, restorative approaches are more of a compass than a map. From this perspective, the goal is not to arrive at a destination of being “fully restorative” all of the time, while all other efforts outside of complete arrival are deemed a failure. Restorative processes or approaches are rarely binary, in the sense of being either fully

restorative or not restorative at all. Instead, we like to consider “restorativeness” as falling on a spectrum. Whether we’re looking at improving a particular program or policy or examining a systemic or cultural shift, the goal becomes to consistently move the needle toward being more restorative, using restorative principles as our guides.

## *spectrum of “restorativeness”*



**A** restorative approach invites us to see the world through a lens of relationships, and to act where possible to create the conditions for just relationships within our communities and organizations. There are a number of distinct practices associated with a restorative approach, which have been honed by practitioners and experts throughout the world and found to be highly beneficial for the people and systems involved. But more broadly, this approach can provide us

with a principled framework through which to understand our obligations and opportunities as community members and leaders. Since a restorative approach is always flexible and dependent on the context, it invites consistent creativity and new vision. The application of a restorative approach specifically in the workplace is an area of great importance for such creative vision, which we’ll explore in the next section.

# a Restorative Approach in the workplace

Relationships at work have powerful impacts on the lives of workers, families, and communities. Tensions and violations can create stress, divisions, absenteeism, and losses in productivity. However, working through these issues with principled and collaborative methods can be a powerful source of growth and development within businesses and organizations.

A restorative approach in the workplace means attending to the quality of interpersonal, inter-group, interdepartmental and even inter-organizational relationships. Further, as the title of this report suggests, it means thinking and acting relationally not only during times of calm, but also during times of conflict, crisis, rupture, and stress. Before we go much further, let's take a moment to think about why this topic is important in light of the impact of relational disrepair in the workplace.

## the human costs of Workplace Conflict and Harm

Over the years, we have noticed that it is common for many leading professionals – in HR or employment law for instance – to recognize the value of alternative approaches to addressing conflict and harm in the workplace. Their recognition of this, like ours, comes from years of witnessing the inefficiencies and limitations of addressing relational breaches in adversarial ways. While first-hand experience is causing more leaders to see that the cost of conflict in the workplace is high, many are not familiar with data that supports their observation. For this reason, we've provided some data demonstrating the costs of mis-managed conflict and harm in the workplace.

### Workplace Conflict is Prevalent

CPP Global's 2008 study, which surveyed 5,000 full-time employees in nine countries around Europe and the Americas, found the following regarding the cost of workplace conflict and tension:

- Employees averaged 2.1 hours every week dealing with conflict.
- 85% of surveyed employees have to deal with conflict to some extent and 29% do so "always" or "frequently."
- 51% of the HR workers questioned spend between one and five hours per week managing disagreements.
- 27% of employees have been involved in workplace conflict that led to personal attacks, and 25% have seen it result in sickness or absence.

### Workplace Conflict is Expensive

A 2021 study by Morneau Shepell reveals that workplace conflict costs Canadian businesses over two billion dollars a year.

- Conflict can drain the time and energy of top-level

employees. KPMG Germany surveyed 4,000 Germany industrial companies in 2009 and found that 30-50% of the weekly working hours of executives are spent directly or indirectly with frictional losses, conflicts, or the consequences of conflict.

- The average employee experiences harm in their workplace. Most studies on the subject report that the majority of employees have experienced some form of victimization at work (e.g. 76-96% bullying behaviors, 75% harassment, 86.2% incivility).

### Workplace Conflict Impacts Performance

A 2020 CIPD study of UK employees for HR professionals found that the consequences of conflict in the workplace included lowered productivity and performance, lost time, increased stress, and a decrease in the ability of workers to reach organizational goals.



## promising practices to address Workplace Conflict and Harm

Given the human and financial cost of adversarial workplace relationships, innovation in search of restorative alternatives is growing rapidly.

From healthcare to the social services, education, corrections, the private sector and beyond, a spectrum of workplaces are beginning to integrate restorative principles and practices into operations. Following are some examples of specific workplace arenas to watch.

### Addressing Bullying, Harassment, and Discrimination

Workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination are violations of most workplace policies, and in many jurisdictions may also constitute crimes. In the United States for example, title VII of the Civil Rights act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. But beyond breaches in rules, these types of abusive behaviours fundamentally stem from the inappropriate use of power in relationships. A restorative response focusses on building safety, dignity, voice, power and renewed belonging for affected parties. It pursues genuine accountability, learning and change for responsible parties. And maybe most importantly, it works to tackle the problem of context: i.e., seeking to address the social conditions that normalize abusive behaviours. This exploration is reaching across workplaces of all kinds: for example, [here's an article](#) about what a restorative approach to misconduct could mean within science communities. For more on this topic, you can also check out this older but [still-relevant article](#) by Margaret Thorsborne.

### Restorative Investigations

Conventional workplace investigations examining situations of misconduct are notoriously divisive. These processes, largely borrowed from the criminal justice system in their punitive ethos, are often prone to leave participants on all sides feeling disconnected, disempowered, and disoriented. Investigatory processes usually hinge on three fundamental questions: What rules were broken? Who is to blame? And what is the appropriate punishment? What if, instead, our investigation focused on question like these:

- Who has been impacted?
- What are their needs?
- Whose has obligations toward addressing these?
- Who needs to have a voice in the situation?
- What processes can help move forward toward healing?
- How do we prevent something like this from happening in the future?

A restorative approach to workplace investigation is still a novel concept for most organizations. But workers and leaders could learn a lot from initiatives like the [Restorative Inquiry – Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children](#); or the report on [Hearing and Responding to the Stories of Survivors of Surgical Mesh in New Zealand/Aotearoa](#). While the Healthcare sector is increasingly moving toward a different way of investigating misconduct and medical errors, you may be surprised to learn that another sector – the airline industry – has already been aware of the profound limitations and safety risks of a strictly blame-based approach to investigations for many years. We've written more about that topic [here!](#)

### Transforming Workplace Culture

Conflict within organizational teams is inevitable, especially when the stakes of decision-making are high. Workplaces are demonstrating a growing awareness of the need to develop conflict mitigation strategies that enhance rather than erode relationships and harness the positive potential of conflict. Mediation, for example, has become a fixture in addressing some workplace conflict. The mediation discipline has sometimes been justly critiqued for being too "settlement-driven," and failing to address the social contexts of conflict. But when relational goals such as participant empowerment and mutual recognition are prioritized in conflict mediation, these practices can help prevent workplace harms, enhance creativity and innovation, and increase trust – all important features of a restorative approach in the workplace.

### Strengthening Teams

As we have suggested in this report, a restorative approach is both proactive (i.e. building and maintaining day-to-day relationships) and responsive (i.e. intervening when relationships break down). The search for team cohesion has been a central theme for organizational development specialists for decades, and is by no means strictly the domain of a restorative approach. However, some workplaces have found distinct value in a model of team development that is deeply associated with a restorative approach: circles. Talking/sharing circles have been known to radically enhance depth, vulnerability, trust, reciprocity and transparency in workplace relationships. These relational qualities, in turn, are linked to impacts for organizational clients and service recipients. In



her 2007 article [Healing and Accountability in the Criminal Justice System: Applying Restorative Justice Processes in the Workplace](#), Kay Pranis describes how, when restorative practices were adopted among correctional officers, they were able to work more restoratively with prisoners, as well. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*, which Kay Pranis co-authored with Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge, provides a strong overview of circle processes if you're eager to learn more.

## Rebooting Decision-Making

The principles of a restorative approach invite rigorous reflection on the ways in which organizational leaders and others with authority understand and use power. The principles suggest a shift from top-down, 'power-over' relationships toward greater equity, voice, and power-sharing among all who are impacted by organizational decisions. Consensus decision-making (i.e. decisions requiring the consent of members of an empowered group before moving forward with any given proposal) is a structure that prioritizes equality of voice and influence among all participants. Unlike autocratic and 'majority rules' approaches to decisions, consensus requires that minority views be understood and accounted for. In the "organizations as living systems" model that Frederic Laloux suggests workplaces are moving toward, organizations are becoming increasingly likely to employ consensus in at least some aspects of decision-making.

A restorative approach is not only concerned with how decisions are achieved but, equally, who is involved in decision-making. Involving voices across a spectrum of lived experiences, roles, ranks and identities is paramount. For this reason, some organizations pursuing a more restorative approach have worked to diverse establish committees (reference teams, commissions, leadership teams etc.) with a mandate for specific decision-making tasks. When operating by consensus, such committees can produce creative decisions representing the widest possible array of interests within the organization while modeling new forms of power and authority in action.



## Case Study

### Developing Restorative Human Resources in a Nonprofit Workplace

UNITI is an award-winning British Columbia-based nonprofit organization that supports adults with developmental disabilities. In alignment with its guiding philosophy of Person-Centered Practices, UNITI made the decision to align its staff dispute resolution, harm intervention, and grievance procedures with a restorative approach. Just Outcomes was invited to lead a core team from across the organization in a process of developing a Restorative Practice Hub at UNITI.

We knew as soon as we were invited to guide this process that it was an organization ready to take initiative and serve as a model for other organizations wishing to make a shift toward restorative approaches.

Over a several-month period, our team worked to support an internal committee that was representative of all facets of the organization's leadership and staff. Together we generated a map of all the necessary issues for developing new programs, from confidentiality expectations, to facilitator recruitment and training, to referral parameters, and beyond. After a period of education and training by Just Outcomes, committee members took on the task of drafting program manual content in each of the identified areas. Just Outcomes provided oversight, technical expertise, editing, coordination, and facilitation along the way.

By the launch of the program, the committee had cultivated their individual and collective knowledge and capacity in remarkable ways. We had no doubt their program would succeed long after our departure – and it has!

## Transforming organizational systems

We've previously discussed the revelation from systems thinking that no part of any organizational system can be understood – or changed – in isolation.

When integrating a restorative approach in the workplace – which for many is quite a departure from business as usual – we should be ready to think wholistically and systemically, not only about how to create a new practice or program to solve presenting problems. To encourage the breadth of thinking that we believe is necessary to understand a restorative approach in the workplace, we have found it helpful to distinguish between four general facets common to all or most organizations, all of which are implicated in efforts toward a restorative approach.

### Culture and Climate

Organizational culture and climate are distinct but interconnected ideas. Organizational culture refers to the underlying values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors that guide how members of an organization interact and make decisions. Organizational climate refers to the immediate perceptions and experiences of members regarding the work environment, including aspects such as leadership styles, communication patterns, and the level of trust and support. Integrating a restorative approach means working to impact both culture and climate.

### Skills

As you can imagine from looking at the types of practices described in the previous section, working restoratively requires distinct skillsets – especially in the domains of communication, facilitation, problem-solving, trauma-informed practice, cultural agility, leadership and related areas. Not everyone in a "restorative" workplace needs the same skills; it is more helpful to think of 'who needs what skills,' depending on their role within the team or organization.

### Infrastructure

We refer to infrastructure quite broadly. First, this term encompasses systems, policies, practices and programs at the workplace. For example, what practices or programs have been established to manage conflict or respond in restorative ways to abuses of power in the workplace? What internal policies support the use of these options for leaders and workers? Second, infrastructure also includes physical structures and spaces: to what extent are buildings and meeting rooms conducive to spontaneous interaction and community-building? What private spaces exist for people and groups to address problems of a confidential nature? To what extent does the built environment help people to maintain emotional grounding and be at their best? All of this needs to be considered when we think about integrating a restorative approach in the workplace.

### Leadership

The ways in which leaders (both formal and informal) think about and enact their roles is a vital topic when it comes to a restorative approach in the workplace. Leaders hold a great deal of influence within organizations – and for better or worse, they model and regulate uses of power in relationships, which in turn can make or break any attempt at integrating a restorative approach. Through a combination of modelling personal attributes and influencing organizational changes, leaders can help foster a culture of dignity and belonging; they can model and normalize accountability and repair; and, by understanding their organizations as living systems, they can facilitate ongoing organizational learning and adaptation.

# a metaphor for *Restorative* Organizations

A metaphor we sometimes use to explore the multiple and overlapping facets of focus and change within the workplace is one of a tree. We can imagine the roots of the tree being the relational and interconnected worldview in which a restorative approach is based. Growing from these roots is the trunk of the tree, which represents the principles of a restorative approach (described above). From this trunk emerges the branches, which represent the broad categories of change: Culture and Climate, Organizational Infrastructure, Skills and Leadership - and the many

subcategories or corresponding domains within these broad areas of focus. Finally, we have the fruit of the tree, which represents the tangible or measurable benchmarks of a restorative approach in the workplace. These benchmarks cannot be standardized or imposed from outside, but are best established through collaboration among diverse voices within the workplace – sometimes with the support of outside facilitators or consultants. But while we’ve been arguing that there is no such thing as a ‘cookie cutter’ restorative approach, we are also offering a few concrete “signposts” on the following page.



**Benchmarks**

**Areas of Influence**

**Principles**

**Worldviews**

**Skills**  
**Leadership**  
**Organizational Infrastructure**  
**Culture and Climate**  
**Dignity**  
**Belonging**  
**Transformation**  
**Repair**  
**Relational**  
**Interconnected**  
**Living Systems**

## in summary: signposts of a Restorative Approach in the Workplace

### In times of calm . . . .

- Build community connections and relationships;
- Provide opportunities for continual feedback and organizational learning;
- Promote equitable relationships characterized by fairness and justice;
- Use collaboration and consensus where possible;
- Encourage direct interpersonal problem-solving where possible;
- Build skills for empathic listening and communication, problem-solving, collaborative decision-making, facilitative leadership, cultural agility and emotional intelligence; and
- Conduct business in locations conducive to connection and relationship.

### In times of storm . . . .

- Focus on harms of wrongdoing more than the rules that have been broken;
- Treat conflict as an opportunity for building mutual empowerment and recognition;
- Show equal concern and commitment to affected parties, responsible parties, and the wider affected workplace community, involving all in the processes of accountability and repair;
- Work towards the restoration of affected parties; empowering them and responding to their needs as they see them;
- Support responsible parties while encouraging them to understand, accept and carry out their obligations;
- Recognize that while obligations may be difficult for responsible parties, they should not be intended as harms and they must be achievable;
- Provide opportunities for dialogue, direct or indirect, between all impacted parties as appropriate;
- Involve and empower the affected community through the repair process, and increase its capacity to recognize and respond to harm in the organization;
- Encourage collaboration and reintegration rather than coercion and isolation; and,
- Strengthen the capacity of individuals and the workplace community to prevent future harm.

# barriers and Opportunities

**W**hile many workplaces acknowledge that more human- and relationship-centered approaches are necessary, there are several obstacles holding some back from further exploration or implementation.

Such barriers shed light on where restorative justice must grow so it can optimize impact. We have observed a few distinct barriers to restorative justice being adopted and/or thriving within workplace contexts: a lack of evidence-based research to support restorative approaches; the complexity of navigating union dynamics; addressing power differentials; resourcing organizational change; and, misconceptions about a restorative approach.

## More Evidence Needed

Experience and early research suggest that employing a restorative approach within the workplace can yield powerful results. We've also seen that there is a high human and financial cost to not functioning restoratively. Despite these insights, the application of restorative approaches within workplaces remains inadequately researched, leaving limited data to point to when making this case. As Lode Walgrave has put it, "After a first wave of projects that gave a rather unclear, but positive impression of restorative justice practice, it is time for a second generation of research that would "increase the pixels" and refine the image of what restorative justice can achieve or not."<sup>xv</sup> Over ten years after this article was written, this point still rings true. Increasing the pixels through prioritizing more long-term, collaborative research would serve to further legitimize restorative approaches within workplace contexts.

## Navigating Workers' Union Dynamics

A common theme we hear from colleagues across varied organizations is that unionized workplaces often face a unique set of challenges to adopting a more relational approach, particularly with respect to harms and grievances. Unions have seen success in advocating for workers' rights, often by employing adversarial methods. Adversarial approaches sometimes then become normative in regulating damaged relationships between workers, even in cases where collaborative approaches may also prove effective. In many instances, the relationships between unions and management – and the relationships among union-members themselves – is codified in written agreements and policies affecting thousands of workers, to a degree that makes flexibility, innovation and experimentation difficult. Therefore, this is another area that would benefit from some further research, innovation, and creative risk-taking.

## The (Sometimes Awkward) Journey of Sharing Power

Even when leaders desire the integration of restorative approaches within their workplace, it can be challenging to confront the reality of what this shift means. For example, as discussed in "Rebooting Decision-Making" above, implementation can include significant changes to decision-making structures which can lead to a redistribution of power and decision-making authority in various organizational domains. As this occurs, new questions arise:

- Are the necessary voices being included? Whose perspectives remain left out? As a participant in one of our HR trainings put it, "It matters who drives the RJ agenda in my organization. Do they reflect and include the voices of the most marginalized members of our workplace?"
- Is the invitation to participate in decision-making meaningful, or more symbolic and performative?
- What additional expectations, burdens or pressures do these changes place on those whose identities and voices have been marginalized? How are these burdens being acknowledged, alleviated, and/or compensated for?

Questions like these become important early considerations for organizational leadership. For this reason, one thing we've recently built into the early stages of our consulting partnerships is an opportunity for collaborative planning with leadership. We explore things such as project scope and leadership commitment levels and motivations. We also address decision-making expectations and explore what is on and off the table. The goal is to probe at the unspoken realities around power, to invite reflection and then move this into the tangible realm as it pertains to the design and implementation of restorative approaches in the early stages of a partnership.

## Resourcing Organizational Change

A scarcity of resources to adequately support and sustain change often emerges as a barrier in our long-term systemic change work with organizations. As mentioned, it is important that many voices are represented in, and driving, the design and implementation of restorative approaches. If restorative justice principles and practices are integrated into the design process as they should be, this often means working more

collaboratively than some organizations are used to. Consequently, it is often necessary to compensate employees involved in the design and implementation process for their time, and/or to backfill their other responsibilities to free up their schedules. We have found many organizations – from government to corporate to non-profit – struggle to come up with the resources to fund this additional cost.



## Misconceptions about a “Restorative Approach”

Exploring a restorative approach can sometimes be overlooked because it is misunderstood. In fact, in our experience, misconceptions about a restorative approach are often at the root of resistance we encounter. By the same token, a restorative approach can also be embraced based on misconceptions, which can lead to misaligned policies and practices being legitimized as “restorative.” The following distinctions aim to clarify some of the most common misunderstandings we encounter.

### A restorative approach only deals with “harm.”

It’s true that the restorative justice field originally emerged in the Western context in relationship to crime and the criminal justice system. However, perhaps in greater alignment with Wits Indigenous roots, the field has evolved to prioritize working proactively to create conditions that support right relationship and prevent harm from occurring. Thus, while restorative approaches do include tools and processes for responding to harm, they also include proactive tools and practices for building relationship based on dignity and belonging.

### A restorative approach means having a dialogue.

Since a restorative approach is participatory, relational and needs-based, many restorative-aspiring practices take the

form of facilitated dialogue between people directly involved in, or impacted by, a harmful behaviour or circumstance. But these structured dialogue processes are by no means the only expression of a restorative approach: how we communicate with one another other daily; the way we distribute power and resources; how we build and sustain a sense of community; the level of influence and involvement individuals have within groups and systems (e.g. how decisions are made); and how we acknowledge and respond to collective harms are all topics of importance too.

### “Restorative” is a catch-all for anything good.

The risk of centering restorative approaches around principles rather than prescribed practices or policies is that anything deemed “good” or “kind” can be confused as “restorative.” This can lead to many misunderstandings about restorative

justice, including the belief that “we’re already doing restorative justice” when that isn’t necessarily the case. It is important to take the principles seriously and hold them up against each other to provide a nuanced sense of what it means to lean into them with integrity and consistency.

### A restorative approach is an easy way out for responsible parties.

One of the common reasons for resistance to a restorative approach is the misunderstanding that it represents a “soft” approach; an easy way out for those that have caused harm. This is far from true. Instead, restorative approaches prioritize direct accountability, meaning that those who cause harm are expected to take action to directly repair the harm that they have caused. While restorative approaches do not include punishment as the “deliberate infliction of pain,” there is a very high standard of accountability expected of those involved.

### Restorative practices are “one-size-fits-all.”

While there is certainly a growing body of research regarding ‘best practice’ within a restorative approach, its application must remain adaptable, community-owned, and context-driven. The many successful restorative justice programs and practices that have emerged across the globe are culture- and context-bound. We can draw inspiration from them and glean learnings, but consideration to our own unique context and circumstances must always be given. For these reasons, a restorative approach cannot be prescribed. It must remain flexible and adaptive to the emergent needs of those who the process is designed to serve. As Howard Zehr reminds us in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, we are better off viewing a restorative approach as a compass, rather than a map. For a reminder of what guides a restorative approach, read our section on Restorative Principles.



# Considerations and Conclusions

Here we offer a few considerations and ideas for how we can collectively move this exploration forward. Co-conspirators in the restorative justice field, workplaces seeking out new solutions, and even the larger public all are invited to play a role in this continued evolution of ideas and practices.



## What workplace leaders can do

There are a growing number of workplaces willing to integrate more restorative approaches into their culture, practices, and policies. We have deep respect for these employees and their leaders. Aligning our organizations with human values can be a vulnerable journey that requires a commitment to listening deeply to one another, especially across lines of identity, roles and power. It may come at a short- or medium-term financial cost, a cost to the comforts of the status quo, and/or a cost to the sole authority of leaders and decision-makers.

Our invitation: try new things and learn. Start small if you need to, do it well, and pay close attention to how it's working and what improvements are needed. Our society is changing rapidly, which means that what workers expect and need to thrive is also in flux. Static, risk averse organizations aren't likely to weather these developments well, and the same can be said for individual leaders. Assume a learning mindset, and let that mindset facilitate becoming a learning organization.



## What RJ practitioners can do

More research partnerships studying the application of restorative approaches in workplace contexts will serve the larger movement, providing data to learn from and to point to when advocating. The field of restorative justice must continue to remain true to its principles (e.g. being flexible and inclusive) while growing its pool of evidence and best practices. In our experience, many of the workplaces courageous enough to integrate restorative approaches are focused on their own scope of work, leaving less capacity for tracking data. For this reason, there is an opportunity for practitioners to collaborate with academics in research to play a vital role in collecting data to move this work forward.

## What all of us can do

Conversations about a restorative approach in the workplace are – at their core – about honouring, sustaining, and transforming human relationships and reimagining our organizations to best serve this end. Recognizing this, we benefit from paying attention to, and amplifying, the voices of people and cultures who have always known how to work together in ways that centre relationship, even amid experiences of oppression and harm. Leading voices in the field of restorative justice, like Edward Valandra and Fania Davis, offer ancient but prophetic wisdom that reminds us of the importance of remaining aligned with the central principles

and goals of restorative justice and warns us against the dangers of prioritizing secondary benefits of this work – like improving an organization's productivity – above things like dignity, belonging, transformation and repair. The invitation for all of us, then, is to take a learning stance as we work to move the needle in our own contexts.

Perhaps the most vital part of this is remaining reflective and curious within ourselves as individuals. Asking ourselves how we are (or are not) in alignment with restorative approaches and embedding opportunities for learning and growth within our own practice is a crucial step toward our collective transformation.



# Endnotes

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