

Stop Playing the Blame Game and Create a Learning Culture

Career Development



We live in a “blame” culture. Watch a news program on any given night, and everyone from political pundits to sportscasters to news anchors make a living playing the “blame game.” Politicians are blamed for everything that goes wrong in their jurisdictions; police are blamed for high crime rates; sports figures are blamed for losing; one group or another is blamed for starting a war; and company leaders are blamed for their firm’s poor financial performance or ethical lapses.

Of course, it’s not just the media that plays the blame game. We all do it on occasion. I know this was the case in the household where I grew up. If the garbage was not taken out on time or the dishwasher wasn’t unloaded, a swift investigation ensued and judgment was cast on the one who failed to get the job done. This is also standard practice in the business world. Anytime something goes wrong the hunt begins for the “guilty” party.

I suppose the ubiquity of blame cultures is attributable, in part, to the fact that it provides some measure of satisfaction to have a simple, straightforward explanation of undesirable events. It just feels so good to settle the question of who was at fault and to dispense justice accordingly. But I think that there is also a less savory reason for its popularity. By pinning blame on one person (provided it is someone else), we avoid the challenging work of honestly evaluating our own or others’ contribution to the problem.

Despite the emotional satisfaction it brings, a blame culture comes at a very high price and, more often than not, results in sub-optimal business performance. By narrowing our focus to one individual,

we may get psychological closure, but miss the bigger picture of what is really happening. There is rarely one person to blame for things that go wrong at work. Business is a highly collaborative activity, and there are almost always multiple contributing factors to good and bad outcomes. Habitually blaming individuals for business failures and moving on dooms your operations to multiple failures over the long term if underlying root causes are not identified and remedied.

Let's suppose, for example, that a sales representative failed to meet his sales quota for the year. Typically, such a sales representative is blamed for this failure and may be terminated or subjected to some other lesser punishment. However, before anyone points the finger of blame, the company's interests would be best served by evaluating the factors that might have contributed to the individual's poor performance. Factors could include inadequate training, unreasonable sales targets, the company's failure to get timely regulatory approvals, unreliable technical support, an improperly designed sales territory, a failure to provide the sales representative with productive leads, bad product design, superior competitive products, excessive meetings, or other distractions that unnecessarily limited the sales representative's ability to connect with customers.

Even if such a root cause analysis concludes that poor sales resulted from the sales representative routinely violating company policies by spending many of his afternoons hanging out in bars with his friends, the analysis should not stop there. Additional questions should be asked about how the company's employee screening and hiring practices might need to be improved to avoid hiring such individuals in the future. Inquiries might also be made about the quality of management oversight and whether others were aware of what was going on and why they took no corrective action.

Another significant downside to the blame culture is that it tends to breed an atmosphere of fear. If the company engages in frequent public "floggings" and/or "executions" of employees who are unfortunate enough to be tagged "it" then employees are more likely than not to keep their heads down and not engage in candid discussions about what's working and what's not. Moreover, many employees will play "defense" rather than taking the risks necessary to perform their best work. Such toxic work cultures can significantly reduce employee engagement and induce your best and brightest to leave your firm for greener pastures.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that there should be no accountability for failure. It is right to hold employees accountable for doing their jobs and doing them competently. Instead, I think that when things go wrong, we should holster the finger of blame and take the opportunity to create a learning culture that engages in candid and open discussions regarding all contributing factors. By abandoning the blame game and building such a learning culture, you optimize your chances of improving performance by:

- Lowering worker anxiety;
- Increasing employee candor and creativity;
- Improving organizational justice; and
- Systematically reducing your failure rate.

Given how invested most of us are in the blame culture, making this paradigm shift is not easy. It requires us to resist the well-honed impulse to release the hounds and chase down the "responsible party." It also requires us to have the maturity and the courage to honestly examine and admit to our own contribution to failures. This can only happen in your organization if you — as a leader — show others the way.

So, the next time someone on your team screws up, before you wield the finger of blame, begin by

asking what role you and others may have played in things going wrong. Then, have the courage to admit your fault to your team and focus the team’s attention on how performance might be improved in the future rather than making an example of someone. Taking this approach may feel very uncomfortable at first, but the benefits you will realize over the long term will be substantial

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