

# THE BLAME GAME

## *An Organizational Challenge*

### ***The Blame Game.***

We've all been there at some time – either as the finger-pointer, the recipient of a public assault or as a silent observer.

At its core, blaming is a human interaction that is hurtful to the individual, while potentially also having significant long-term, negative consequences for an organization. This type of emotionally-charged situation is an unpleasant and disharmonious experience and, yet, it keeps happening. Why?

### **Why Blame?**

People affix blame to others for a situation or outcome for any number of reasons that might include:

- ◆ A bad use of power
- ◆ A deflection or tactical diversion
- ◆ A strong need to be seen to be right
- ◆ A perverse satisfaction in seeing others suffer
- ◆ A feeling of frustration, disappointment or anger
- ◆ A belief in superiority or simply being a bully
- ◆ A misguided sense of competitiveness
- ◆ A lack of considering impacts
- ◆ A timidity of leadership

So although the underlying motivation to mete out blame may vary, the action always is a public denouncement of an individual's performance. Blaming becomes a blunt approach for assigning responsibility; one that is both brutish and destructive in its administration and in its very nature.

### **What Are The Impacts?**

The most immediate impact is experienced by the individual being blamed. It is likely that the person will feel under attack and suddenly isolated. The person will be confused and hurt. Heightened fear and fragility often will be the outcome of feeling abandoned and defenceless. This usually results in a paralysis of action.



Those who have observed the blame scenario will feel its awkwardness and intuitively they will know that it was handled incorrectly. They may feel some empathy toward the recipient of the blame, but simultaneously, they will be relieved that the attack wasn't directed at them. That sense of relief will quickly fade, however, to be replaced by growing apprehension as images of the next blame eruption emerge.

But the biggest impact of blame is on the organization itself. As employees come to recognize that blame is being apportioned publicly and indiscriminately, they will tend to avoid situations that could prove to render themselves vulnerable. They will understand that the consequences of blame outweigh any benefits related to potential success. Thus, as employees choose to diminish their personal risk, the cumulative effect is that the organization's vitality becomes frozen.

Innovation and experimentation implicitly have a high degree of risk that could result in failed performance. The opportunity to find oneself in a situation eliciting blame is enormous. Employees respond to this much like soldiers squatting in a fox-hole – everyone has their head down and is adhering to the status quo. Their personal goal is simply to survive.

An organization that has a culture which condones blaming is an unhappy, unhealthy and unproductive place to work. Human initiative and creativity will be sublimated by the fear of receiving blame, amplifying the downward spiral of organizational inaction and ossification.

Given this type of toxic work environment, the financial impact on the organization also needs to be considered. Because employees are motivated to provide only marginal performance, overall productivity has been jeopardized. Furthermore, because creativity and innovation effectively have been discouraged, the very long-term viability of the organization may be at serious risk.

## **Eradicating Blame**

How, then, does one eradicate blame from the culture of an organization?

As always, the leader holds the ultimate responsibility for the organization and also wields the greatest influence. In order to cement sustainable change, the leader must explicitly ban blaming from the organization. This is accomplished through policies, procedures, practices, spoken words, ongoing conversations, and the repeated demonstration of reinforcing behaviours.

The leader must exercise unrelenting consistency to ensure that unacceptable behaviours, such as blaming, will not be tolerated. When consequences are repeatedly demonstrated and come to be generally understood, then the entire organization will move into alignment around the new values being promoted by the leader. Over time, these values will become embedded as the culture of the organization.



Once employees recognize that they will not be subjected to public ridicule, they will start to be more inclined to assume greater responsibilities and to be held accountable. Managers need to adjust their style and need to be seen to be actively supporting their employees and leading them to successful completion of tasks and assignments.

In those instances where performance is below the standard, rather than blaming the employee, the manager should use the situation as a coaching opportunity. Concurrent with this, the manager publicly should shoulder the responsibility for the outcome and protect the employee from any recrimination, until such time that the employee demonstrates acceptable performance.

An organization that has established a culture which:

- ◆ Treats employees with respect and purpose
- ◆ Supports the development of its employees
- ◆ Encourages innovation and creativity
- ◆ Delegates responsibility and authority

consistently will achieve high performance. These types of organizations also will become the employer-of-choice in a labour market that is becoming evermore constrained. As such, the progressive culture of the organization will serve as an essential element of its recruitment and retention strategies.

Creating vibrant, healthy, productive work environments is an act of will. It requires leadership and consensus-building around understanding and practising acceptable behaviours, while eradicating unacceptable behaviours, like blaming.

It's not rocket science and it's all within our control. So, start with a commitment to make things better. Engage others in the conversation. Demonstrate what you value by modelling appropriate behaviours. Be stalwart in your enthusiasm and passion for bringing civility to your organization.

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