

The Blame Game

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The knot in our stomachs gets tighter as we think “*This is the last straw!*”

Welcome to the first round of the blame game. It’s a sense of urgency that prompts us to regain control of a situation and reduce our vulnerability. It might happen when a coworker drops the ball and leaves us holding the bag on an important assignment. Or, it occurs when engaging in a conversation about an employee’s unacceptable performance. It puts us at a crossroads. Do we play the blame game? Chances are very high that we’ll fall into that trap - at least initially.

According to Dr. Grant Brenner, psychiatrist on the faculty of Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital, “It takes heavy lifting to do due diligence when a negative event happens – it’s tempting, and a lot easier, to blame a scapegoat...”

Brene’ Brown, a researcher at the University of Houston, is frequently featured on TED Talks about courage, vulnerability and authenticity. She indicates that blame is a negative, but typical response. It is hallmarked by signs that may sound familiar:

Fault-finding: Akin to a seek-and-destroy mission, this involves hunting down a person to blame and reactively discharging our anger.

Fast and loose: Blamers do not take time to ascertain all the facts. It’s a quick release, ignoring important leadership and team-building skills such as listening and collaboration.

Negative feedback doesn’t have to turn into a blame game and can be very constructive. Research by Zenger and Folkman, as published in a 2013 *Harvard Business Review*, affirms that negative feedback helps leaders overcome serious weaknesses. However, they also contend that only positive feedback inspires strong performers to continue excelling at what they do well. In fact, the researchers recommend a higher ratio of positive feedback to negative for all workers. Balance is the key.

Frustration is the launching pad for blaming, but it doesn’t have to escalate into ruptured relationships, distrust, defensiveness and corrosive contagion of finger-pointing. Instead, we can use this signal to slow down to ask questions, evaluate our emotional biases and clarify interpretations of a situation. We can then arrive at the truth and be better equipped to tackle the root of a problem.

Correction is a necessary part of professional growth, so we must accept and give it with grace. Not easy given our normal human inclinations, but achievable with conscientious practice and intent.

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