

The Danger of Playing the Blame Game

by Jim Nortz

Corporate Compliance Insights

We live in a blame culture. Watch a news program on any given night, and everyone from political pundits to sportscasters to anchormen will point the finger of blame at one villain or another. Politicians are blamed for everything that goes wrong in their jurisdictions, police are blamed for failure to lower 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.

Of course, it's not just the media that engage in the blame game. We all do the same, day in and day out, at work and at home. I know this was the case in the household where I grew up. If the garbage was not taken out on time or some other task was not completed, a swift investigation ensued and judgment fell on the one who had failed to get the job done. This is also standard practice in the business world. Anytime something goes wrong, the hunt begins for someone to take the blame.

I suppose we all play this blame game because it provides some measure of satisfaction to have a simple, straightforward explanation of undesirable events that happen in our lives. It just feels so good to settle the mystery of who was at fault and to dispense justice accordingly. But I think there is also a less savory reason we do this: by pinning blame on one person (provided it is someone else), we can avoid the often painful and embarrassing work of honestly evaluating our own contribution to the problem.

The blame culture that we all participate in and propagate at work comes with a very high price; more often than not, it results in sub-optimal business performance. By narrowing our focus to blame one individual, we may get psychological closure, but we miss the bigger picture of what is really going on.

Very rarely is one person to blame for things that go wrong at work. By its nature, business is a highly collaborative activity, and there are almost always multiple contributing factors. By blaming one individual and leaving it at that, you may be dooming your operations to multiple failures over the long term because doing so blinds you to the primary causes, which may persist for many years.

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 in such circumstances, the interests of the company would be best served by doing at least a cursory evaluation of factors that might have contributed to the lack of sales. These could include poor sales training, unreasonable sales targets, failure of the company to get timely regulatory approvals for the product, poor technical support, a poorly designed sales territory, a failure to provide productive leads for the sales representative, poor product design, superior competitive

products or excessive meetings that took the sales representative out of the field for extended periods of time.

Even if such a wide-ranging evaluation of root causes concludes that poor sales were the result of 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 weed out such people in the future. Inquiries should 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 ubiquitous blame culture is that it tends to breed an atmosphere of fear. If the company engages in frequent public "floggings" 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 do their best work.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting there be no accountability for failure. It is right to hold employees accountable for doing their jobs competently. Instead, what I am saying is that because running a business is such a highly collaborative activity, when things go wrong, we should avoid pointing the finger of blame for a time and take the opportunity to create a learning culture that engages in candid and open discussion about all the contributing factors.

Abandoning the blame game and building such a learning culture will increase your chances of improving performance because it will have these effects:

- Lower worker anxiety.
- Greater employee candor and creativity.
- Better organizational justice.
- Systematic reduction of 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," instead carefully considering all the likely causes. It also requires us to have the maturity and the courage to admit and honestly examine our own contributions 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 start pointing fingers, 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 everyone'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.