

From Blame To Empathy: Lessons For Leaders To Diffuse Conflict

By Anna Shields 9 September 2020

In the recent U.K. exam results fiasco, there has been finger-pointing in all directions. Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary, looked to blame Ofqual. The Chair of Ofqual demanded the Department of Education admit it was behind the grades U-turn. Then came high-level job losses, followed by Boris Johnson blaming a 'mutant algorithm'.

When something goes wrong, what commonly happens is that those involved seek to protect themselves. Blaming someone else is one way to do this. The person being blamed often feels victimized and then tries to defend themselves through counter-attack. The cycle of blame continues, with no one wishing to lose face or take responsibility.

The key to breaking this cycle is to understand blame, to move away from a victim mindset, and to focus on empathy and understanding.

Why blame is counterproductive

According to Professor Brené Brown, "Blame is simply the discharging of discomfort and pain. It has an inverse relationship with accountability."

Blame is a short-term remedy. Rather than diffusing a workplace conflict, it can escalate the situation, create bad feelings amongst colleagues, and undermine working relationships.

On an organizational level, blame reduces openness and honesty, because staff members who anticipate blame are more likely to cover up mistakes. If employees see leaders blaming others instead of taking responsibility for their actions, they are more likely to follow suit, which can lead to a 'blame culture'.

On a personal level, accepting a mistake, rather than holding others responsible, gives an opportunity to learn. In interviews, and his newly published book, 'No Rules Rules', Netflix CEO Reed Hastings talks about the benefits of admitting his errors and how he encourages employees to see mistakes as normal.

Without this accountability, the same situation can reoccur and opportunities to improve and innovate are lost. Blame can also affect health and well-being, encouraging a negative mindset, with heightened levels of anger, stress, and conflict.

Empathy – reconnecting the dots

As connection is lost between colleagues, conflict morphs and grows. People often go into victim-mode, seeing themselves as the victim and the other as the perpetrator. And this cuts both ways, with each side feeling disempowered.

To stop the vicious circle of blame and victimhood requires a deeper look at what happened, why certain actions were taken, and the reactions that followed. A crucial part of this is showing empathy.

Empathy is the ability to understand and reflect the feelings of someone else. Parties in conflict find it difficult to empathize as they usually only see the situation from one point of view – their own. If one person is able to show empathy during difficult conversations, the other person is more likely to show empathy, helping to diffuse and move forward.

Questions that help build an empathic mindset

- Is there information I am missing that might help me better understand my colleague's perspective?
- How is this situation making me feel? How is this situation making the other person feel?
- How are my actions contributing to the situation?
- Are there organizational factors that might be influencing this issue?
- What am I learning about myself in this situation?
- What can I learn about the other person in this situation?

Leaders who demonstrate empathy, rather than defaulting to blame, build trust and engagement. 'Mutant algorithms' aside, empathy will become increasingly important as both pupils and employees are encouraged back to school and work this month.