People Management

How to break the blame cycle

By Alex Efthymiades, Consensio, 8 June 2022

Blame seems to be everywhere. We see it in our politics, our newspapers, our social media feeds. Whether it's pointing the finger at an MP over lockdown party accusations, or corporate leaders in hot water for financial irregularities, blame is difficult to escape. In the corporate world, blame can be pervasive. If leaders inadvertently model finding fault with others, blame becomes contagious. This will contribute to a toxic culture, with low engagement, elevated instances of workplace conflict, and high stress. Understanding the tendency to blame, and how to minimise it, is important.

Research on blame

The temptation to blame others is so ingrained in us that we often don't realise we're doing it. According to Dr Brené Brown's research, blame is a self-protection response. Brown argues that blame gives us a semblance of control because it allows us to discharge our anger and pain elsewhere. For the 'blamer' it is an unhealthy way to repress painful emotions. For the 'blamed' they experience it as an attack, go on the defensive, and blame back. This creates a corrosive cycle where everyone ends up worse off.

Blame is damaging in other ways, too. If our instinct is to find fault, it makes it hard to objectively assess a situation. And that gets in the way of us learning from mistakes and making improvements for the future. Blame also blocks our ability to have empathy for others. Yet it's empathy that leads to connection and understanding, and this will help us break the blame cycle.

There are five key steps leaders can take to start to break the damaging cycle of blame:

Awareness

The first step is to be aware of the toxic impact of blame. When we understand that blame is unhealthy and contagious, we can become more intentional in how we speak and behave. Understanding you're a 'blamer,' and that you can stop yourself, is a critical step. Leaning into the discomfort of blame, and seeing it as a self-protective mechanism, will help us better deal with difficult situations and learn to view the blame cycle for what it is – a repression of uncomfortable emotions that gets in the way of learning and improvements within organisations.

Opportunity for learning

We then need to assess how we view mistakes. Rather than cast blame, mistakes should be seen as an opportunity for learning. This starts at the top, with leaders who can be open about their own mistakes, and openly share what they learned from them. If we view mistakes as failure, we miss out on the opportunity to learn. If we cast blame, we miss out on the opportunity to better understand why things aren't working well, and how to improve them.

Taking responsibility for mistakes and seeing them as learning opportunities needs to be modelled at the highest level, and leaders must be open to feedback, even if it's hard to hear. If leaders say "as a team, we can learn from this and do it better next time", this gives permission for others to do the same.

Psychological safety

Leaders also have a responsibility to create an environment of psychological safety. Dr Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School, who coined this term, describes it as a "shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking". This means that people feel comfortable to speak openly about their mistakes, and raise questions and concerns, without fear of punishment. Her research suggests that organisations with high levels of psychological safety perform better because employees feel comfortable flagging when something is wrong, so errors are spotted more quickly, and improvements can be made.

Empathy and open-mindedness

Showing empathy and being open-minded – key traits of workplace mediators and conflict coaches – will serve leaders well. Simply put, empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of others. This relates to asking people what is going on for them, rather than making judgements about their behaviour and jumping to conclusions. Looking at a situation with empathy and an open mind means asking:

- Why does someone consistently show up late for a team meeting? Might there be something going on for them that I don't know about?

- Why did someone in my team not deliver on a project deadline? Was there something in the way the information was communicated that wasn't clear?

These are more empathic and open-minded ways to look at a situation, rather than judging people as unmotivated or uncooperative.

Language

The language we use can inadvertently give off signals of blame. "You never submit your data on time" or "why do you always do this wrong?" place someone's actions at extremes rather than reflecting the nuances of working life. Punitive statements such as "you've let everyone down" triggers a shame response rather than 'better' behaviour, and again neglects an open discussion of what actually happened. Little shifts in language can lead to subtle movements in thinking and perception. Saying "let's discuss this together and see how we can do it better next time" rather than "you didn't do this right" places the ownership on everyone, rather than pushing blame onto someone else.

It will feel hard to tackle our tendency to blame when it's so ingrained in the world around us. But recognising it and stopping it in its tracks can lead to better outcomes – a more engaged workforce, less workplace conflict, a reduction in staff attrition, and increased wellbeing, for leaders and their teams.