

The Blame Culture

What does it look like?

1. There is no tolerance for mistakes, however minor, and those who make them are reprimanded or shamed in some way.
2. There is scant positive feedback for the things that go well but there is a swift 'negative' feedback for the smallest of errors.
3. There are no rewards or recognition for taking calculated risks; therefore, most employees shy away from more challenging, high-risk issues, minimizing their exposure to the 'fallout'.
4. There's a lack of courage among middle managers for standing up for decisions, opinions, mistakes and defending staff. Staff know this and feel vulnerable.
5. The paper trail is enormous. Several people or units sign off on every decision in order to spread the responsibility as thinly as possible.
6. No one wants to be on the hook. This can manifest itself in too many committees, excessive bureaucracy and confusing organisational structures
7. Usually the scapegoat is someone at or near the bottom of the hierarchy, as more powerful players become adept at avoiding the blame themselves.

What can we do about it?

How can we move away from a blame culture?

1. Let the small stuff slide. With tight deadlines and busy workloads, everyone will make mistakes sometime.
2. Remember to thank your staff for bringing problems to your attention when they arise.
3. Acknowledge those who are engaged in high-risk projects, and praise them for keeping the things that are on track that way.
4. Recognize that it takes great effort to accomplish those things that have been accomplished.
5. Don't take good work and effort for granted -- praise and be sincere about your praise.
6. Be realistic with ambitious ventures at the onset. Ask staff to be honest about what pitfalls may arise and what barriers stand in the way of accomplishing goals, and engage the staff in developing a mitigating strategy in order to anticipate setbacks.
7. Lead by example. Never shirk responsibility or accountability. The manager who can say "I made a mistake on this one" shows staff that it's acceptable to risk and fail and to own up to errors when they are made.
8. When things do go off track, sit down with all players and analyze how to put them back. Recognize that the lessons learned can be as valuable as the accomplishment of a goal.
9. Distinguish between the big issues and the small issues, between mistakes and wrongdoing -- and act accordingly. Introduce policies, processes and reward systems that encourage staff to continually engage in evaluating systemic issues that hinder success, and speak up about them.
10. Establish performance goals that recognize employees for identifying problems early, and suggesting improvements. These measures will facilitate a vibrant environment where individuals feel free of the fear of blame and can excel.