

Breaking Free From Blame Addiction

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Editor's note: This is an abridged version of their workshop at the Health, Work and Wellness Conference 2002 held in October at Lake Louise.

The look of resignation on Tim's face said it all, as he muttered quietly, "Great, another chance to get blamed for someone else's shortcomings! Here goes another week from hell -- so much for having a life."

Tim had just finished an all-too-common conversation with his boss, Marie, who called with her latest "drop everything" demand, the result of agreeing to fast-track a large project for one the company's biggest -- and most poorly managed -- clients. And now it was Tim's problem, and he was tired of being pushed to bring seven week projects to completion in four. What was worse was that this latest decision by his boss was also going to create a new round of personal "inconveniences" (her words) for Tim, but that didn't seem to matter much.

To make a long -- and painful -- story short, the next few days produced a familiar pattern of escalation in the tension on the already strained relationship between Tim and Marie. Tim would do his best to give Marie some of what she wanted, to show that he was serious about this crucial project, while trying to balance the normal demands of everyday life and the increasing pressures of preparing for his daughter's wedding. Oh, and then there was the presentation he'd been looking forward to making at an upcoming conference -- assuming he ever had time to develop it! Talk about stress; he felt like he was becoming the poster boy for it.

For her part, Marie's stress level was also going through the roof. After all, she'd made a promise to the client, and there wasn't any "wiggle room" in their deliverables. As she watched Tim seeming to struggle to meet her expectations, she felt that she absolutely had to push him at least a little bit. Maybe he didn't realize how important this project was.

You can probably guess where this is going. As the deadline for the first deliverable, the detailed workplan came and went. Tim and Marie's stress boiled over into some pretty nasty confrontations. The result: Marie decided that Tim just wasn't a team player, since

he was obviously trying to undermine her role as unit manager. And Tim resolved that, as soon as he had a spare minute, he was going to freshen up his resume and find a way out.

Chances are that most people reading this have been involved in a similar situation, or at least have watched it happen close at hand to a colleague, friend or family member. The term we use for these common encounters of the worst kind is "accidental adversaries". In almost every instance, a close examination of the situation reveals a simple -- but deadly -- pattern. At first, there is at least the assumption that "we're in this together", working as a team to accomplish our goals. At some point, however, one party (usually management) does something that they believe will improve performance, profitability, customer loyalty, or whatever. So, to Marie, the idea of promising to complete a project sooner was just smart customer relations. She may even have been rewarded for her bold step.

However, there are consequences for the other party in what started out as this happy partnership. Marie's "fix" was Tim's nightmare. At a time when he needed, if anything, more flexibility to balance work and life pressures, Marie took that away from him, and without even realizing it. That's why we call it "accidental" adversaries; in the beginning, there's no malice involved. There's usually not even the awareness of the emerging problem.

So, Tim comes up with his own "fix" to respond to his new problem. He decides to shortcut the usual multiple draft approach to developing the workplan, and simply dashes off a point-form email to Marie to show that he's already started. She, however, gets anxious because, in her mind, Tim isn't taking this seriously enough. So, she demands a full draft, as well as a face-to-face meeting the next morning. That's how she addresses the problem that Tim has made for her. Of course, the extra meeting just makes Tim's time crunch worse, so he decides to skip the draft and use the meeting to explain the situation to Marie. This, of course, makes her furious, thinking that he must have picked this occasion to make her look bad. In turn, she looks for ways to make Tim more accountable, and to send him a message along the way. And so it goes, with each party increasingly bent on proving the other is to blame for their failure to meet their objectives.

In our work with many different organizations, we have seen this pattern over and over again. People who start out with clear, shared goals, and a genuine commitment to working collaboratively, end up vowing that they will never work together again no matter what. And, for all the tension this generates, and all the energy that gets expended, both on the work and on dealing with the tension, there's not much to show for it all in terms of real performance. But, what is obvious, is that each of these battles further diminishes the organization's capacity to achieve excellent results. And, along the way, people's commitment to accountability gets lost in the mire of a blame-driven culture.

What, then, can be done to prevent this, and to reverse it, if it is already present? The answer to that question, by no means simple or easy, is rooted in an organization's

answer to an even more fundamental question: "Do you believe in your people or not?" Now, you may be tempted to brush this aside as being simply rhetorical. "Of course we believe in our people!", you proclaim. Well, then let's reframe the question this way: "What specific actions do you take to demonstrate that you believe in your people, and how do you know that they know you do?"

If you are honest, that second question is a lot tougher to answer. Time after time we have heard management talk about how our people are our most important resource, only to have to tell them that those people are feeling devalued, and increasingly cynical about such pronouncements. As a result, they hold back from investing themselves fully in their work, often so that they can protect themselves from what seems to be an increasingly uncaring workplace. Over time, they become less willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the organization. When that happens, it isn't typically because that's how they want things to be. It's more that they've given up hoping for something better.

So, where do you begin? What will it take to demonstrate that you really do believe in your people? And, importantly, how will that benefit the organization in ways that justify the effort to create a different culture? That is never an easy task.

Well, first let's look at why it is so important to show that you believe in your people. In a nutshell, it's all about learning, and learning can only occur in an environment where people feel safe. That's why it is essential to end the process of "blaming" that exists in many workplaces. Management needs to lead the way by being more open and supportive and by creating more of a "learning organization" where problems are seen as opportunities for individual and collective learning. That becomes the first goal.

A second key area of change is that of accountability, which we define as willingly taking ownership for one's actions, making and keeping one's promises, and working collaboratively to solve problems. Supervisors must face up to the resentment that many staff feel over being told constantly how to do their work. Setting ambitious goals is fine, but supervisors need to demonstrate that they believe in their people enough to delegate the work to them, and then provide them with the authority, support, and non-judgmental feedback they need to achieve the required results.

Implicit in this is the realization that an organization cannot hold its people accountable for their performance. Rather, people must choose to "be accountable". The former is really about holding people responsible for their work, and is more about ensuring predictable behaviour through command and control management approaches. For people to choose to be accountable, however, requires a different, more supportive, leadership approach. Only in such an environment will people be ready, willing and able to take full ownership of their work -- to do the right thing even when no one would know if they did otherwise. For this reason, only those capable of leading in this way should ever be promoted to positions of supervisory responsibility.

The third area that often requires change is your means of engaging people in planning and problem-solving. After all, if you believe in your people and what they have to contribute, it would naturally follow that you would find ways for them to contribute in these key areas of performance management. We have found, to no one's surprise, that the most common barrier here is the lack of open, honest communication, which leads to a widespread perception in organizations that managers act "in secret" and hand down their decisions for implementation. Moreover, front-line staff complain that there are few opportunities to get their ideas heard, so they don't feel their input is valued. Over time, many stop offering their insights altogether. What they really want is a chance to participate fully in truly collaborative processes -- planning, problem-solving, and long-term visioning -- to create a future in which everyone can feel a sense of prideful ownership. Tackling this requires a significant effort to improve the quality of communication at all levels.

There remains, however, one even more fundamental level of change to be addressed, one that employees are often only willing to discuss when they are convinced that management is serious about changing the culture. This has to do with basic trust in the organization's leadership, whose narrow focus on "the bottom line" is often perceived to be at the expense of staff morale and security. In short, they believe that their leaders simply didn't care about them as people, but only as inputs of production.

As evidence, employees cite everything from a lack of open, two-way communication to a lack of tolerance and support when they are dealing with the inevitable challenges of work/life balance that we all face. For example, many have shared their frustration that time spent seems to be more important than real output. Others speak of the lack of support for staff development as further evidence of this lack of caring. As a supervisor once summed it up, "It's hard to trust people who don't seem to care about your well-being, or who don't realize that you have a life outside of work. You have to wonder whether you really matter or if it's just your availability to do what you're told."

In the end, the alternative to a command and control culture -- characterized by increasing levels of blame, alienation, and fragmentation -- is what we call a "believe and support" culture, characterized by growing levels of trust, engagement, accountability, learning and, above all, productivity.

Whichever direction you take, you will have ample evidence of the truth of this statement:

"You either believe in your people or you don't
and they know it
and they act accordingly."

The choice is yours. What kind of organization do you really want to work for?