

YES! AND... CREATIVE GORILLA # 47

A blame culture is a fast way to dampen innovation and leads to a “no risk” environment. If we can learn from mistakes rather than seek someone to blame, we will have a much healthier culture ...

Avoid the Blame Culture...

“It was so much easier to blame it on Them. It was bleakly depressing to think that They were Us. If it was Them, then nothing was anyone’s fault. If it was Us, what did that make Me? After all, I’m one of Us. I must be. I’ve certainly never thought of myself as one of Them. No one ever thinks of themselves as one of Them. We’re always one of Us. It’s Them that do the bad things.” Terry Pratchett, author in “Jingo



“Admit it, you ate my dinner”

How can you reduce the impact of a blame culture that stifles innovation?

On Tuesday night I attended an Open University MBA Alumni evening. [Jo Salter](#) the speaker, was the first woman fast jet pilot in the RAF and she had some entertaining stories about her time in the service. She recounted one tale of inadvertently detonating some explosive charges on her Tornado by accidentally turning a switch the wrong way whilst preoccupied with her checks. To make matters worse, the ground crew were working on the aircraft when they detonated (the charges, not the ground crew).

This was a potentially dangerous accident and something that she might easily have covered up (“it’s an unserviceable switch, Chief”) instead of admitting her mistake to the ground crew. However, it is one thing to tell the ground crew, quite another to reveal it to your bosses and peers.

Jo mentioned that the military has a system that allows pilots to report any mistake or incident so that other pilots can learn from it.

The important point is that it is anonymous. This encourages people to report mistakes because they know that nobody is going to blame them or bring them to account. The result is more learning for everybody, potentially saving lives and perhaps a £60 million aircraft.

Her story (and I won’t reveal the punch line) appealed to me on two levels. First, as an ex RAF ground crew member, I had no such system for reporting mistakes to colleagues. Second, because it made me think about a possible counter to the blame culture in many organisations.

The idea of a “blame” culture, always seeking someone to take the blame, seems to have permeated British society and is certainly a major gripe in organisations, if we can believe anecdotal evidence. To back up the anecdotes I did some Google research and uncovered the term “blame storming” as a corporate “buzzword” that is fairly self explanatory. The fact that post project reviews in blame cultures are called “post mortems” also speaks volumes. Especially if you are the one people are dissecting.

The knock on effect of always blaming people for mistakes is that people begin to avoid taking risks. The culture then compounds this by rewarding the non risk takers because they don’t make mistakes, which reinforces the “don’t take risks” message to everybody. The result is poor

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and / or very slow innovation. The blame culture is a lame culture indeed.

SO

You may work in an organisation that seeks causes only to learn from the mistakes. However, if you work in a blame culture, how might you begin to change it? Here are three ideas in descending order of difficulty:

- Halt proceedings the next time you are in a “blame storming” session. Look for all the positive aspects that the “mistake” or “failure” has revealed. If the person responsible genuinely tried with good intent, make this clear and reward them
- Try using the “[Solutions Focus](#)” approach for post project reviews, to avoid the search for the definitive cause
- Introduce an anonymous reporting system. The down side is that it might acknowledge that you have a blame culture – but sometimes the first step in a recovery programme is to admit that you have a problem

If you work on your own, you don’t have too look too far to know whom to blame when something goes wrong, so for the freelancers out there, maybe you could stop beating yourself up about mistakes, list your key learning from each one and move on. You might even reward yourself for trying!

ACTION

Think how you might implement some of the ideas above or generate some ideas of your own to begin engineering the downfall of a blame culture.

TO CLOSE

After the talk, I went for a beer with some friends. We walked in to a pub where the Brazil v Croatia World Cup match was playing on TV. Packed with Brazilian fans the support was fervent and the noise incredible when Brazil got the ball.

In contrast, in England football is the perfect analogy for the blame culture. Certainly if you play for England you have reached the zenith of this culture (or is it the nadir?). If England has a bad match, the media and fans are looking round for a scapegoat before the final whistle sounds.

I wonder what would happen if we changed this culture? Players might relax more? Perhaps we might even win the World Cup? There, from blame culture to dream culture in one sentence. Magic!

May your mistakes bring enlightenment.

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