

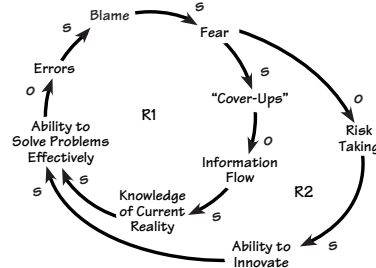
# Moving from Blame to Accountability

by Marilyn Paul, Ph.D.

When something goes wrong, the first question that we often ask is, "Whose fault is it?" Blaming seems to be a natural reflex in many organizations. Even those individuals who wish to learn from mistakes fall into naming culprits. There's a problem with this, however: Where there is blame, open minds close, inquiry tends to cease, and the desire to understand the whole system diminishes. When people work in an atmosphere of blame, they naturally cover up their errors and hide their real concerns.

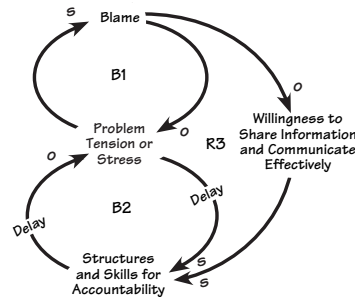
## Reinforcing Cycles of Blame

Blame causes fear, which increases cover-ups and reduces the flow of information. The lack of information hinders problem solving, creating more errors (R1). Fear also stifles risk taking and discourages innovation (R2).



## Addiction to Blame

When a problem occurs, blame is a quick fix (B1). This short-term solution undermines people's willingness to share information and communicate effectively (R3), hindering their ability to develop accountability skills (B2).



## DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN BLAME AND ACCOUNTABILITY

	Blame	Accountability
<b>Level of Problem Analysis</b>	<b>Individual</b> "Let's find out who made that mistake and point the finger at them."	<b>System</b> "Is there anything in our systems and structures that increases the likelihood of error and reduces the chances of creating the results we want?"
<b>Focus</b>	<b>Person</b> "Who did it?" "What you did was wrong."	<b>Problem</b> "What happened here?"
<b>Intent</b>	<b>Punishment</b> "It's your fault and I'll make you pay."	<b>Performance</b> "Let's see what we need to do to get the results we want."
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Cover-up No Learning</b> "I won't reveal my mistakes. It's not worth it to take risks."	<b>Openness, Learning</b> "I want to talk about this mistake so we can all learn something and do a better job next time."

## WHAT AN INDIVIDUAL CAN DO

- Remember that others are acting rationally from their own perspective.
- Recognize that your behavior may be influencing this person's behavior. Be aware of unintended effects.
- Remind yourself that judgment and criticism make it very difficult to see clearly and may interfere with learning.  
Ask yourself:
  - What information am I missing that would help me understand this person's behavior?
- Use a systems thinking perspective to explore the pressures on the players involved. There are probably larger forces at work that impact both of you.
- Be willing to be held accountable.
- Work constructively with your anger. Recognize that sustained anger may point to personal issues that have been triggered by the current situation.
  - What pressures is he or she under?
  - What systems or structure might be influencing this behavior?

## WHEN PARTNERING WITH OTHERS ON A PROJECT

- Define the nature and scope of the work to be done and discuss what to do in the event of a misunderstanding or a failure to keep an agreement.
  - Identify the pressures each of you is experiencing in the situation.
  - Own your feelings and the sources of those feelings.
  - Identify any stated or unstated expectations. If implicit agreements were not jointly understood, this is a good time to clarify and reestablish shared agreements.
  - Analyze the problem from a systems perspective. Clarify how your mutual beliefs and actions might be related and are perhaps reinforcing each other.
- Agree that, on this project, problems will be seen as learning opportunities.
  - Allow plenty of time to address the issues.
  - Reaffirm that the goal is to learn, not blame.
  - Establish confidentiality.
  - Be truly open-minded.
  - Listen hard to the other person's perspective.
- Have a conversation in which the two (or more) of you:
  - Identify the data and assumptions you may have drawn from it.
  - Identify new ways to address the problem.

## BUILDING A STRONG LEARNING COMMUNITY: MANAGING DISPUTES WITH INTEGRITY

- Agree not to talk about others behind their backs.
- Raise your concerns directly with the other people involved.
- Talk with a third party only to clarify the situation and to seek coaching on how to raise your concerns.  
Useful coaching questions:
  - How might the other person describe the situation?
  - What was your role in creating the situation?
- Let the coach know what happened.
- Outside of this framework, refrain from making negative comments about people.
  - What requests or complaints do you need to bring to the other person?
  - How will you state them in order to get the results you want?
  - What do you think your learning is from this situation?

This material is drawn from "Moving from Blame to Accountability," by Marilyn Paul, *The Systems Thinker*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (February 1997). ©1997 Marilyn Paul. Reprinted with permission.

For subscription information, contact Pegasus Communications, Inc.

Phone (781) 398-9700 • Fax (781) 894-7175 • www.pegasuscom.com