

Blame and Blame Shifting

Last month we addressed the cost of failing to face one's errors and we suggested this was the biggest error leaders make. The close relative of refusing to admit error is to shift blame and responsibility from oneself to others. Unfortunately blame shifting is usually to more junior people, who do not enjoy the power, status or influence to refute the incorrect accusations.

Nathanael J. Fast, an assistant professor at the USC Marshall School of Business, and Larissa Tiedens, a professor at Stanford, conducted four different experiments and found that publicly blaming others dramatically increased the likelihood the practice will become infectious. Blame and blaming spreads quickly because it triggers the perception that one's self-image is under assault, and that it must be protected. The study called "The Blame Contagion" found "When we see others protecting their egos, we also become defensive." - Fast. "We then try to protect our own self-image by blaming others for our mistakes, which may feel good in the moment, but in the long run, such behavior hurts one's reputation and is destructive to an organization and further to our society as a whole."

Tiedens said "Blaming becomes common when people are worried about their safety in an organization." She adds, "There is likely to be more blaming going on when people feel their jobs are threatened." Fast adds, "When public blaming becomes common practice -- especially by leaders -- its effects on an organization can be treacherous and withering: Individuals who are fearful of being blamed for something become less willing to take risks, are less innovative or creative, and are less likely to learn from their mistakes." "Blame creates a culture of fear and this leads to a host of negative consequences for individuals and for groups."

We would add the difficulty in dealing with blame shifting is that there is usually some truth in what is being said or alleged. When things go wrong it is seldom a single person or event that precipitates it. There are usually a string of factors and people that combine together to create a problem. However, blaming exaggerates the failings of others, reduces our own culpability, and therefore effectively minimizes our responsibility. Protecting our position or reputation becomes a strong cocktail that propels us into behavior that is marginally truthful and substantially dishonest.

Because blame shifting is contagious even healthy people get infected trying to secure their positions. Truth is compromised; deceit rises up and organizational infrastructures crack with subterfuge, suspicion and its associated bacteria of mistrust, doubt and uncertainty.

Perhaps this explains why in survey after survey the most admired quality that employees want of their bosses, whether they are supervisors or the CEO, is they be trustworthy. They want to sense, feel and observe integrity oozing out of every action of their seniors. The great paradox is that when leaders seek to conceal their errors they lose the thing they wished to protect: their reputation. When admitting their inadequacies they establish their credibility and reputation. It is our weaknesses, more than our strengths, which allow others to identify with us. When we pretend to be what we are not, people may not always know what deception is being woven, but they recognize the distinctive cord of truth is absent.

Until next month Yebo

