Becoming A Blame-free Organization
Gerri King, Ph.D.

Removing blame from a company's environment results in an increase in productivity and collaboration.

What's Wrong with "Blame?"

• If it works, it's a short-term solution without positive long-term effects.

• Blame often models exactly those behaviors and values we'd like employees to avoid.

• Blame is a form of punishment and tends to create followers, not leaders, because it rarely allows for feedback.

• Blame may be a "last ditch" effort by desperate supervisors or colleagues and, thus, not a thoughtful act.

• **It doesn't really matter who is to blame. What matters is that what isn't working gets fixed.**

Consider this perspective: Would you rather have an employee change her or his behavior, become more motivated, or make fewer mistakes because she or he thinks it's the right thing to do or because she or he simply wants to avoid being blamed? And, also think about the following: Do we believe that people get up in the morning saying, "I think I'll do a poor job today." "With luck, no one will like me." "How can I make sure that my boss and colleagues don't trust me?" Sound ridiculous? Indeed, it is. And, yet, when we lay blame, we're denying that it wasn't purposeful.

In fact, the reasons that employees don't do what they're supposed to do are:

- They don't clearly know what is expected of them.
- They don't know how to do it.
- They don't why they should do it.
- They think your way may not work or their way will work better.
- They realize that something else is more important.
- They anticipate future, negative consequences.
- They have personal problems or limitations.
- They lack the proper training.
- No one could do it.

Any of the above deserves attention and requires some responsible action on everyone's part.

And yet, we often resort to blame, which is a form of punishment that rarely works. It may change behavior if people care about the consequences, but is not likely to change values. Values change slowly and only when people have sufficient information that sways them and/or they are confident that they can manage the change. Further, what should concern us most is that criticizing and blaming are forms of revenge – not a practice we should model.

In a blame-free environment there is a commitment to work things out. Good communication is really the key. You may ask how you can find the time. Ask, then, do you have time not to? Time taken now will save a great deal of time down the road.

Blame festers in an authoritative environment. Yet, even with the best of intentions, supervisors and executives walk a fine line. Whenever anyone influences or exerts control over someone's life, there is a power differential, which can be unintentionally exploited. When we use power, we use force, and even with gentle force, we can expect three possible reactions: *fight*, *flight*, or *submission*. None of those encourage an equitable relationship. Nor do they foster leadership.

More importantly, employees should not be afraid. Fear rarely motivates and it promotes secrecy. Even in the most equitable companies, it's hard to eliminate intimidation. Though people may be encouraged to own up to their mistakes, supervisors play a duel role: they are supposed to help solve problems, yet they evaluate performance. If employees go to a supervisor more than once with the same issue, it may show up negatively on their performance evaluations. If their performance reviews are not primarily about the future, (i.e. what more training do you need or how can we help you grow?), then there is every reason to be less than forthcoming.

Creating a blame and punitive-free environment is a challenge, but one worth facing. It's important to remember that a work place without blame is not an environment without expectations, nor is it chaotic. In fact, it requires increased clarification, articulation, and follow-up. These preferable approaches are usually overlooked or ignored in a punitive atmosphere.

The outcomes of a truly blame-free environment can be quite extraordinary. If negatively delivered criticism is removed, and a trusting, character-building, supportive environment is created - where everyone involved takes responsibility for what went wrong - long-lasting behavioral changes are generated from within. Rather than continuing to respond to external rewards and punishments, employees internalize what they need to do, and identify expectations for themselves. When those expectations are not met or mistakes are made, people are much more willing to acknowledge the part they played and take responsibility for rectifying the situation.

Let Trust will be your guiding principle.

Gerri King, Ph.D., President of Human Dynamics Associates, Inc., is a social psychologist and organizational consultant who trains, speaks, and consults throughout the US and abroad.