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The Blame Game

How the Hidden Rules of Credit and Blame Determine Our Success or Failure

by Ben Dattner and Darren Dahl
From THE BLAME GAME by Ben Dattner with Darren Dahl
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Take-Aways

- People by nature are inclined to take too much credit and not enough blame.

- When something goes wrong, proceed patiently and analytically instead of assigning culpability to specific individuals or groups.

- Organizational dysfunction often stems from improper handling of credit and blame.

- Employees who fear unfair accusations take fewer risks and avoid hard decisions.

- Move cautiously before exposing the truth about misplaced accusations to avoid having someone make you a scapegoat.

- Human evolution influences individual attitudes toward blame.

- Dysfunctional organizations point accusatory fingers without thoughtful problem solving.

- Changing a blame-based culture isn't always possible.

- Blamers can be "extrapunitive" people who always accuse others, "impunitive" types who deflect blame, or "intropunitive" folks who blame themselves too heavily.

- Great leaders invite contrary viewpoints and do not shun criticism. They generously praise others for success and willingly accept responsibility for failure.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
9	9	8	8

Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why people care about credit and blame, 2) Why leaders are responsible for reframing blame, and 3) How to erase the "blame game" from your organization.

Recommendation
No one likes to be blamed when something goes wrong. Unfortunately, far too many people are quick to point fingers when the company misses a deadline or a project falls short of expectations. A work culture where employees hesitate to make decisions or don't believe that they receive enough credit creates dysfunction, prevents a firm from operating efficiently and stifles growth. Psychologist Ben Dattner's first-rate analysis of the dynamics of "the blame game" is pertinent reading for employees everywhere, from CEOs to receptionists. *getAbstract* believes this meaningful book will compel you to reassess your business environment, your relationships with co-workers, and, most important, your own motives and behavioral patterns. If you fail to take advantage of this bountiful knowledge, well, you have only yourself to blame.

Abstract

"Organizations greatly benefit by striving to learn from their mistakes and missteps, rather than succumbing to the temptation to blame individuals or groups."

A Damaging Combination
Many factors can cause workplaces to be dysfunctional, but misplaced blame and unfair allocation of credit may be the most damaging. Aggravation, anger and resentment often plague employees who work in this type of poisonous environment. Bosses who refuse to take responsibility when something goes wrong and insecure co-workers who insist on stealing the spotlight typically create an atmosphere of distrust, disillusionment and fear. The problem becomes magnified during difficult economic times when people worry about keeping their jobs.

The "blame game" is typically at the root of many organizational issues. The way individuals deal with credit and blame affects their productivity and relationships. Failed managers tend to handle interpersonal dealings poorly, frequently overlooking those who deserve credit while refusing to accept personal responsibility when things go amiss. Blaming other people is counterproductive, and the person placing the blame can suffer as a result. Researchers found "when individuals blamed others they were actually worse off for doing so – both emotionally and physically." A person who becomes known as a "credit hog or an unfair blamer" will lose others' respect.

"The stance a leader takes with respect to blame is...a key determinant in whether a team, department or whole organization will have a culture of learning from mistakes."

Often the distribution of credit and blame has little to do with an individual's actual abilities or accomplishments. Staffers who sense injustice may take fewer creative risks and avoid difficult decisions for fear of retribution. Those who enjoy their jobs typically feel appreciated; those who hate their jobs do not. Credit is so important that some employees attach more significance to a job title than to a hefty raise. People want fair treatment and acknowledgement of their work, even amidst general praise and approval. The members of the Beatles, arguably history's most acclaimed rock band, were upset by *Time* magazine's coverage of their *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album because they felt it gave too much credit to producer George Martin.

Human Nature

In the 1960s, behavioral psychologist John Stacey Adams developed "equity theory." It explains that employees strive to balance their professional contribution and the rewards they earn for it. Psychologist Anthony Greenwald found that the brain compels people to take more credit and less blame than they actually deserve. Being concerned about this issue is natural. Even many religions keep "close track of credit and blame."

Scientists have discovered that when it comes to food, certain species of monkeys and bats monitor their fellow creatures' generosity and stinginess. Evolutionary psychology teaches that even the perils of human development teach people to focus on self-interest. Thus, changing the dynamics of the blame game requires individuals and organizations to overcome their instincts and to use a "counterintuitive approach." That means admitting their mistakes and taking responsibility – the only ways to create a "positive culture."

Instead, for centuries, people have used scapegoating to transfer blame from humans to animals, inanimate objects or even to each other. The 1692 Salem, Massachusetts, witch trials show how – in troubled times – a society took out its frustrations on a few people the majority saw as different. Though honesty seems to be the perfect antidote to false accusations, it's not always the best policy. People who speak unpopular truths or swim against the politically correct tide risk having others treat them as scapegoats. Consider all the factors and proceed cautiously before you decide to expose the truth – you may be exposing your neck instead.

Patterns Formed Early

Perceptions about fairness form during childhood and greatly affect how you regard credit and blame as an adult because "every day is 'take your family of origin to work' day." Parents condition kids to expect praise for their achievements while also inadvertently teaching them to distribute blame whenever possible. Depending on their circumstances and influences growing up, some adults become too dependent on approval and remain risk averse for fear of failure. Office relationships often trigger deep emotions and behavioral patterns, so employees may view their boss as a parental figure and their co-workers as siblings. Re-creating family dynamics at work can occasionally foster a nurturing environment, but typically the results are negative.

Individuals who feel that others hold them culpable unfairly often react instinctively, claiming that the accusatory manager or colleague simply has an unpleasant personality. In many cases, however, specific situations or influences shape behavior and can cause people to act insensitively. Though it may be difficult, step back and try to gain some insight before retaliating. Generally, people behave according to internal and external dynamics that can shift easily depending on their situation. Three distinct, dysfunctional personality types tend to figure prominently in the assignment of blame:

1. **"Extrapunitive"** – These individuals consistently blame others. Extrapunitive bosses frequently lash out at employees and create tension. To deal with such people, approach them during calmer, quieter moments.

2. **"Impunitive"** – These folks protect themselves by deflecting blame or refusing to acknowledge their responsibilities. If you supervise someone like this, spell out your expectations clearly. If you are hiring, use a "realistic job preview" to make sure the applicant fits at your firm.

3. **"Intropunitive"** – These insecure people, who may be micromanagers or perfectionists, accept an inordinate amount of blame, and taking credit often makes

them uneasy. They require reassurance and need to learn how to evaluate an overall situation objectively. This is particularly important for people who are depressed and, thus, "are more likely to blame themselves for things that are going wrong."

Dealing with the dynamics of credit and blame is difficult, even under ideal conditions. Introspection can help you develop the self-awareness and knowledge to navigate these waters. Understanding your tendencies and recognizing your strengths and weaknesses is more challenging than trying to analyze other people. And exerting control over your behavior is easier than controlling others. Try to learn all you can about yourself first – and then about your boss, your colleagues and your situation – before taking action to solve a credit or blame issue at work. Alas, a patient, informed approach doesn't always work. You may have to change your situation if you find that your boss is too irrational or your office environment is too dysfunctional.

Step Right Up

In many workplaces, the boss immediately tries to determine who is at fault when things go wrong. This damaging process often encourages staffers to resort to accusations and denials. To help in altering this pattern, exhibit willingness to "accept some of the blame some of the time." This strategy can build trust, place a priority on solving problems and short-circuit continuation of the familiar blame cycle. Co-workers who see your unselfishness may begin to respond in a similar fashion, so together you can create a culture of mutual reliance and trustworthiness.

Dysfunctional companies often experience damaging interdepartmental hostility. For example, although managers may be able to trace the problems in, say, a marketing or sales department to several individuals, they condemn the entire group. Such attitudes perpetuate a culture of blame and cripple a firm. The 2000 merger of AOL and Time Warner disintegrated 10 years later with both parties losing millions of dollars in value. Analysts blamed the failed venture on feuding CEOs and senior executives working within mismatched corporate cultures.

Expectations and how people impose them also figure prominently in the credit and blame game. A boss who sees some staffers as indolent will tend to steer work away from them. Eventually, they'll unconsciously alter their behavior to match their manager's negative perception. Conversely, bosses who assign positive traits to staff members can inspire improved performance.

Learn, Don't Blame

Cultures of blame typically emanate from the executive level or become entrenched after being embedded for many years. Employees who must contend with these negative forces may feel that change is impossible, but a firm can make progress once its leaders understand the uselessness of blaming either individuals or groups. In fact, insightful organizations value opportunities to learn from failure. Encourage your employees to admit their mistakes without fearing for their jobs. Such a mind-set enables a firm to address potential problems without focusing on blame.

Southwest Airlines, which in 2010 had been profitable for 37 consecutive years, encourages employees to communicate about problems rather than pointing accusatory fingers, according to author Jody Hoffer Gittell, who wrote a book about the company's philosophy. On the other hand, she found that American Airlines, the industry's largest commercial carrier, struggles financially because its corporate culture encourages blame and avoidance. Companies that accept collective blame for poor performance instead of

blaming factors out of their control "achieve higher stock prices over the long term," according to a study of 21 years of annual reports from 14 public companies. Investors appreciate self-examination that results in corrective action. Organizational leaders who consistently blame external factors eventually cause investors to doubt those executives' ability to navigate the rocky economic terrain.

Effective Leaders Lead

The night before the D-Day invasion that altered the course of World War II, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower wrote a note and put it in his wallet. Even though many people planned the mission, his note said that if the invasion failed, he accepted all public blame. President Harry S. Truman, who ordered the atomic bombing of Japan, gained notoriety for the big sign on his Oval Office desk that read, "The Buck Stops Here."

All effective leaders share the trait of being willing to accept blame for failure and to give others credit for triumphs. In 1994, former Intel CEO Andrew Grove cost his company $475 million, the price of recalling Pentium processors with a flawed chip, even though users had a miniscule chance of encountering the one error that the company discovered. Grove's response to the crisis boosted Intel's value and restored customer confidence.

Good leaders don't run from constructive criticism; they seek it. Dell's founder, Michael Dell, solicits feedback about his leadership from employees at different levels instead of just from the executives in his immediate circle. When one appraisal indicated that some of his employees thought he "often acted impersonally and emotionally detached" toward his workers, Dell didn't back down. He videotaped a meeting with his top managers in which he explained that people who didn't know him could interpret his shy nature as aloofness. He promised to change, even putting "a bulldozer on his desk to remind him not to ram ideas through before testing them."

Autocratic leaders demand blind obedience and insist that no one question them. German sociologist Theodor Adorno reports in his book *The Authoritarian Personality* that World War II-era Nazi leaders in his country expected their followers to obey orders and never to challenge their authority. Leaders who intimidate and forbid dissenting opinions often find that their subordinates may heed "the letter of the law" but fail to carry out their wishes.

Humility is always admirable, especially in leaders. Xerox CEO Ursula Burns earned a reputation for speaking honestly to her superiors and colleagues alike while openly accepting feedback. As the first black female CEO of a large public company, she enjoyed global visibility. But instead of letting that inflate her ego, Burns shifted all the accolades she received back to her firm.

Thoughtful, sensitive leaders who take an even-handed approach to assigning credit and blame gain their staff's admiration and cooperation. Try to exercise patience as a manager, particularly when you investigate problems. Learn from the past, but don't dwell on it. Cultivate an optimistic attitude toward the future, and surround yourself with people who judge slowly and act openly.

About the Authors

Ben Dattner, founder of Dattner Consulting, is an adjunct professor of psychology at New York University. **Darren Dahl**, contributing editor at *Inc.* magazine, has collaborated on several business books.