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HUMAN DYNAMICS ASSOCIATES, INC.

CREATING A BLAME-FREE & GOSSIP-FREE ENVIRONMENT

© Gerri King, Ph.D.

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Blame-Free
& Gossip-Free
environments
are easy concepts
to understand
but really hard
to implement.

It takes about
a year
to achieve both,
but it's well
worth the effort!

Blame-Free

It doesn't matter who is to blame: what matters is whatever's not working gets fixed.

As soon as something goes wrong, it's important to gather everyone who can help - no matter what his or her position or status is in the organization, because each of them has something important to contribute.

Push back? People worry that being blame-free will lead to employees not being accountable. Actually, because you're creating a non-punitive environment, you'll find that they'll be much more willing to take responsibility. They come forward sooner to admit mistakes.



Gossip-Free

A gossip-free environment means that you're talking *to* people instead of *about* people.

Talking *to* someone *about* someone will not solve the problem, so creating a gossip-free environment means that we're supporting colleagues by saying, "How can I help you give feedback directly to the person?"

Push back: "Can we can talk to our supervisor about a co-worker?" No, because that is also a form of gossip. The supervisor should give the same response: "How can I help you give feedback directly to the person?"



Some Criteria For Giving Feedback In Respectful Ways



“Whaddya mean you won’t take my feed back?”

Feedback should be descriptive rather than evaluative. By describing one’s own reaction in terms of “I messages”, the individual is free to use feedback or not use it as s/he sees fit. By avoiding evaluative language, the need for the individual to react defensively is reduced.

Feedback should be specific rather than general. To be told that one has to “shape up” is not helpful. It’s more helpful to be told that *“Yesterday, when you raised your voice, I missed a lot of what you said because I tend to tune out in the presence of yelling. I respond better when told in a softer voice.”*

Feedback should take into account the needs of both the receiver *and* giver.

Feedback should be directed toward behavior which the receiver can do something about. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some short-coming over which s/he has no control.

Feedback works better when it’s solicited, rather than imposed. If it must come unsolicited, it best be put in terms of a partnership, i.e. not *“You have a problem”* but *“We have a problem.”*

Feedback is more often heard when it is well-timed. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior (depending, of course, on the person’s readiness to hear it, the support available from others, etc.)

Feedback is better understood when a “checking-out process” occurs. Everyone involved needs to know that they were heard and understood correctly.

Feedback is far more useful when it is not given as a form of control. There is a difference between being “in control” and being “controlling.” Unfortunately, when we are feeling out of control, we have a tendency to be more controlling.

Gossip in the workplace

To the extent there are rumors,
is the extent to which people
don't have information.

People hate
not having information
so when they lack it
they make things up;
speculation, then,
is often quickly perceived
as “fact.”

You can get mad at them
for gossiping
or use it as a barometer.

Gossip!

Gossip is usually any language that would cause another harm, pain, or confusion, and that is used outside the presence of the person for whom it is intended.

Gossip is "casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true - Hearsay."

Gossip is usually a very destructive, hurtful, and divisive form of communication that often permeates a workplace.

Gossiping is insidious: People often don't realize their own "gossiping" tendencies, why they engage in the behavior, or realize the impact it has on others.

Gossiping about someone may seem like an easy way to build rapport with a colleague, but keep in mind that you're endorsing the idea of people talking about *you* behind your back!

Gossip in the workplace is often insidious and destroys trust, **SO**

- **Don't encourage gossip and rumors.** If someone starts to spread gossip, true or not, don't waste your valuable time listening. Be honest about it and say "This is not something I want to hear or talk about," or, "let's not talk this way—it doesn't help matters."
- **Don't simply believe what you hear.** Just because someone said it doesn't make it so. Work hard not to believe gossip and rumors. If it's important to your business, you may feel the need to verify, but be careful not to act on rumors.
- **Don't spread it further.** We each have the opportunity to use discretion. The less we say about others, the better off we are. Think about it; whom would you feel more likely to share personal information with, someone known to gossip or someone known to be discrete?
- **Encourage regular and consistent communication** with employees about what's going on in the workplace so everyone is "in-the-know." This will minimize the influence the gossiping employee has over others.



"Don't talk to *me* about her!"

The Consequences of Gossip

- Missed and mixed communication.
- Misunderstandings that quickly lead to conflict which results in ineffective collaboration.
- Distrust
- Second-guessing
- Cliques and splinter groups
- Ineffective teamwork
- Time taken to figure out what is true and what is not
- Blaming behavior
- Inefficiency
- Toxic workspace environments
- Lower productivity
- Losing good employees
- Exhaustion
- Supervisors feel like parents

The Roots of The Gossip Problem and What to Do About Them

- **Lack of communication.** Foster an environment of open and honest communication. Keep employees informed about good and bad news to decrease their need to speculate and contribute to or rely on the office grapevine.
- **Ignorance.** Make sure employees are fully aware that starting and spreading rumors and gossip is unacceptable.
- **Lack of respect.** Managers must enforce and model workplace rules so employees understand the boundaries of bad behavior.
- **Internal competitiveness.** To get ahead, some individuals might resort to gossiping and backstabbing. Watch for managers who pit employees against each other.
- **Cliques.** Provide a lot of opportunities for cross-team communication and collaboration.
- **Reticence.** Survey employees (this should be done anonymously) about their experience with rumors. Many employees will not speak openly about the rumor mill for fear of becoming a target.

Blame-Free Workplaces

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 is therefore usually 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?

Do we really 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, but when we lay blame, it implies that whatever was done was done on purpose!

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.

Discussion

The threat of blame and punishment 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. 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 resolution.

Blame festers in an authoritative environment. 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.

Employees should not be afraid. Fear rarely motivates and it promotes secrecy.

Creating a blame and punishment-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.

Being accountable simply means being responsible for and answerable for an activity.

To be blamed for something is to be made accountable in such a way that deserves discipline, censure, or some other penalty, either explicit or tacit.

Let Trust be your guiding principle

Learning verses Punishment

To gain an understanding of why or how a failure happens helps to prevent similar failures in the future. Those accountable at the time usually have useful information and so we value their participation in the learning process or the organization. This is most often in the form of retrospectives reviews, i.e. debriefs.

If blame is going to be the goal, then real learning in the organization's activity usually stops after we have found the culprit. There is no longer a role for them in retrospective analysis.

Incidence of Fear

If you are non-punitively seeking those accountable, then fear is not a factor. Those who are accountable do not have anything to fear unless actual dishonesty or negligence is involved.

Organizational chart attitude distribution

Those who are responsible are accountable, and those who have the most responsibility are usually higher up on the organizational chart.

When we find those accountable at many levels of the organizational chart, we're more likely to be assigning accountability; when we find those accountable concentrated at the bottom of the organizational chart, chances are that we're assigning blame.

Acknowledging interdependence

Almost everything we do in an organization is a group effort; not often is only one person fully responsible for any action or decision.

If we really want to find those accountable, the result is more likely to be a list — sometimes a long list. If we seek to blame, usually one person is enough to feed the beast.

What Do We Do In The Absence of Blame?

Step 1

Start work immediately on solving the problem at hand. This way, no one spends much time feeling blamed, and defensive employees have little time to start pointing fingers. Timing is key here, so as soon as a problem occurs, try to gather as a group to work toward a solution. If you can't meet with your co-workers immediately, send an email announcing a meeting and outline the agenda of the meeting in the message.

Step 2

Focus on solutions, fixing the problem, and working together. Use terms like "we" rather than "you" so that employees don't wonder who is being implicated. If you are not the manager or person in a position to schedule a meeting, let everything you communicate convey a focus on solutions. This way, even if you are not in charge, it is clear that your goal is to work together.

Step 3

Avoid becoming defensive, walking out of a meeting, or denying your part in the equation. The more reasonable and direct your behavior is, the more these qualities will be expected of your co-workers. If you have made a mistake, apologize and move forward quickly by suggesting solutions. Be a role-model.

Step 4

Listen actively and consider the opinions of others. If you hear a rumor, confront the person spreading it directly rather than going to an external source. Odds are, if you confront the problem maturely, anyone pointing fingers without validity will back down.

Step 5

Avoid setting a new goal of "winning" or showing your co-workers that they were wrong. Instead, stay focused on working out the issue and creating an environment for productivity in the future.

Step 6

Focus on learning by pointing the team toward what can be improved in the future. This sends co-workers away with new perspectives and abilities.

Step 7

Approach a supervisor if blame impedes your team's work and you find yourself unable to communicate with co-workers because of it. Explain the situation in detail, and offer the reasons you feel a manager's intervention is necessary. The more organized and prepared you are in your approach, the more likely you are to solicit the help of a manager. But remember, you're asking the supervisor to facilitate, not punish.