

Moving from a blame culture to a learning from failure culture

A research paper just published by researchers from the Johannes Kepler Universität and the University of Applied Sciences, both in Austria, examined the process of developing what is termed as a 'constructive error culture' in organisations.

The problem with a performance culture

Most western organisational cultures display a high level of performance focus, and low levels of tolerance for uncertainty and low value levels of individual care. Additionally, the researchers found that most organisations also have a culture of zero mistakes, particularly in professional and business contexts. In almost every organisation the researchers looked at, mistakes had a heavily negative connotation.



Mistakes are usually considered by most staff as something akin to a crisis rather than an opportunity to learn. Further, the relationship between employer and employee is often based around a psychological contract and expectation that work will be carried out free from error. Further mistakes and errors are seen and very much felt as a failure. This leads to the situation where people are reluctant to admit to mistakes.

The hidden error culture

Often errors go unrecognised, unreported and remain hidden, giving the appearance of an error free work environment. This appearance has the effect further discouraging error reporting. The researchers found that the net effect is that organisational cultures become 'expert cultures' as opposed to 'learning cultures'. A blame culture springs from this assumed expert culture, where it is seen as more important to identify and blame a person rather than identifying the systemic cause of the error, correcting it and then learning.

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The opposite of a blame culture

The opposite position of the blame or expert culture is the learning or error management culture. This sees errors and mistakes as an inevitable phenomenon, particularly where people are trying new things or trying to improve things. These cultures also recognise that it is not only impossible to eliminate mistakes but they are an invaluable resource for learning and improvement. The aim here is to be solution oriented and reflective as opposed to avoidance oriented.

A good example of a learning and error management culture is the airline industry, where any and all errors are openly reported without judgement. Further the industry then sets about finding solutions to the systemic causes of the issue and then disseminating the issue and its remedy as quickly and as widely as possible.

3 main ways of developing a constructive error culture

The researchers found that there are three main drivers which help to move from a blame culture into fostering and promoting a learning culture:

1. **Act on covering up errors.** The management and leadership need to act on errors being covered up. This includes even the smallest of errors. A facilitative and non-judgemental management styles help here. This necessitates managers particularly spending time talking with employees and 'outing' errors. The researchers found that the better the quality of the conversation managers had with employees on a daily basis, the fewer error cover-ups occur.
2. **Error communication.** The researchers found, counter-intuitively, that high workloads tend to increase the chances that people will report errors in the right culture. However professional overload caused by a lack of training or low competency levels tend to decrease error reporting. The biggest factor however that encourages error reporting is peer social support. This requires an employee focused management style as opposed to a task focused management style and team trust. Additionally openness and transparency of decision making and information flows plays a significant part in the development of error reporting amongst the workforce.
3. **Social backing.** It was found that having social support from peers and managers/leaders for error reporting is critical to developing a constructive error culture. This means that people need to trust that they are not going to be blamed and that the focus will be on discovering the systemic causes of errors rather than trying to find the culprit.

Reference

Rami, U., & Gould, C. (2016). From a “Culture of Blame” to an Encouraged “Learning from Failure Culture”. Business Perspectives and Research, 2278533716642651.

The 8 steps to change a blame culture into a learning or constructive error culture

In order to move a culture from a blame culture to a constructive error culture you need:

1. To promote and foster open error reporting even for minor errors
2. Focus on error management rather than blame
3. Ensure the managers and leaders are focused on developing a constructive error culture
4. That managers and leaders stop errors being covered up
5. That managers and leaders assume a facilitative and non-judgemental approach
6. That managers focus on supporting employees and creating a culture of trust
7. The focus is on the systemic reasons for error rather than personal ones – what external factors caused the person to make the error
8. That people are trained and have the skills needed to do their work