The Blame Game

What happens in your company when something goes wrong? Perhaps a shipment goes out missing an essential item. Maybe the network goes down when payroll is being run. Perhaps you've run out of an important piece of inventory and cannot complete a crucial production run.

Do your managers look for the person who made the mistake that caused the problem? Do people who work for them assign blame to others, claiming that it was another person's fault, and not their own?

Blaming people when things go wrong only makes things worse.

When blame is prevalent, people will feel resentment and anger—whether or not they've made a mistake. When we feel angry, it is difficult to do our best work. Creativity is replaced by fear—the fear of making another mistake or even the fear of losing our jobs. When resentment sets in, we may think that our other worthwhile contributions are not recognized or valued. We focus on avoiding mistakes instead of looking for better ways to do our work.

What kinds of people do we want to have working for us? Employees paralyzed by fear—fear of losing their jobs, or of doing something wrong? People who are distracted by the thought that if they mess up again they'll be in trouble? Or those who just go through the motions and do the job they are assigned, and nothing more?

Wouldn't we rather have employees who care about our organization and want to help it grow and prosper? People who look for better ways to complete their tasks and projects? And those who are willing to go beyond the scope of their job descriptions? Using blame to curb mistakes may cause an immediate, short-term reaction, but will not foster the positive attitudes we need in order to be productive and profitable in the long term.

Employees need to feel safe, connected, and valued to be able to do their best work. Blame generates fear, causes withdrawal, and feelings of worthlessness. A culture of blame causes ongoing resentment, loss of productivity and disengagement. Problem-solving and innovation are diminished. When fear of doing something wrong takes over, people are no longer willing or able to do their best.

Here are three things we can do to prevent creating a culture of blame in our organizations, and none of them will cost us a penny!

1. When things go wrong, find cause in the process, instead of the people. Was a step in the procedure missed or misunderstood? Have both the process and the expected outcomes been clearly articulated? Have employees shared their understanding of the steps to be taken, to be sure the instructions are clear, prior to beginning the project? Do

employees have all the tools, training, and resources they need to be able to do their best work? And finally, are mistakes used as learning opportunities, rather than opportunities for reprimand and punishment?

2. Use non-blaming language to ask questions. To take blame out of the equation, eliminate the word "Why" from your vocabulary. Instead of asking, "Why did you do it that way?" or "Why did this happen?" rephrase your search for information by asking instead, "Can you explain the process?" In your after-action analysis, ask " What are some of the reasons this didn't work out as we had planned?"

3. Accentuate the positive! We get more of those behaviors we reward and reinforce, so make it a habit to acknowledge the work people do, even if it *is* part of their jobs. When people don't notice the good things we do, it's easy to wonder why we bother to do them in the first place. Catch people doing things right, and they will work harder to get things right *all* the time!

Action idea: Each week, seek out one specific thing to praise each of your employees for. The results will speak for themselves!