TechWell Insights

Is Your Culture about Responsibility or Blame?

By Steve Berczuk (/users/steve-berczuk) - December 10, 2019

Things go wrong, and when they do, it can be helpful to understand how it happened and, sometimes, who is responsible for mistakes that happened. However, all too often organizations (and the managers within) confuse responsibility with assigning blame. The former is essential for improvement. The latter works against an effective, collaborative, productive culture.

It's common for people to conflate the two meanings—for example, defining blame in terms of responsibility. But there are a few practical ways that the two are different, and the degree to which your team appreciates these differences can have an effect on how well the group addresses problems and embraces being innovative and productive.

Blame is considered negative and is often assigned, while responsibility is more positive and can be claimed.

At best, blame usually ends with placing the fault and the burden of finding a solution on a person. At worst, assigning blame without considering influencing factors makes it harder to identify root causes. On the other hand, you can be responsible even if an error happened because of circumstances beyond your control. Responsibility is about seeking root causes and how to do better.

This distinction is about more than simply the words we use; if you've been in organizations that focus on blame rather than responsibility and root cause analysis, you may have noticed that people are often reluctant to identify mistakes they made.

This dynamic is why successful retrospectives strive to create environments that are safe for people to take responsibility. When that can happen, the focus is on what happened and how to improve, rather than whom to blame.

This goal is captured in the retrospective Prime Directive (https://retrospectivewiki.org/index.php?title=The_Prime_Directive), from a book by Norm Kerth: "Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand."

As much as it is useful to step back from blame, it can be hard, especially in high-stress situations where the culture has not made the shift to a solution-seeking mindset. Still, there are positive actions you can take.

If you are a leader or team member, you can start by taking responsibility for errors you make. And we all can change our dialogue to move away from seeking someone to blame and looking toward issues and responsibility. If people insist on assigning fault, you can borrow a page from Extreme Programming Installed (https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/extreme-programming-installed/0201708426/0201708426_ch27.html) and just assume blame yourself so that the team can move on.

While assigning blame may be satisfying in the short term, it's not effective. If you are in a leadership role, knowing the difference between responsibility and blame is important, and if you find yourself or people on your team attributing blame more often than responsibility, try to understand why—and then seek to change the dynamic. Doing so will help build a more resilient, solution-seeking team.

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