

How to...

...deal with a blame culture

“What do you mean we have a blame culture? That’s terrible. Who said that?” said one senior manager. This illustrates one of the biggest problems about blame cultures – they are difficult to spot by people who are in the midst of them every working day.

Most people have worked in an organisation where it is sensible to keep your head down, cover your back and do your best to hide mistakes, or at least ensure there is someone else to share the blame. These are all symptoms of a blame culture.

Blame cultures are fundamentally about retribution and control. They stop short of fixing problems and learning from them. Bad news is buried and the finger is pointed.

Once you realise you have a blame culture, what can you do about it?

1 FIND A BUSINESS REASON TO CHANGE

Businesses don’t change because they want to be nice to people. They change because they face a business imperative – increasing staff retention, upping the rate of innovation or rolling out new products faster.

So to change a blame culture, you need to identify the consequences it has for the business: lost opportunities, extra cost, poor performance. You can talk about positive reasons to change and show managers that if they alter their behaviour, the business will benefit.

2 SET THE RIGHT EXAMPLE

If you really want to signal a change in style then talk about real, contentious issues. In one business the new managing director was widely believed to have “stabbed the previous one in the back” to get the job.

At the next company conference, as he walked on the stage, the words “Whatever happened to Clive?” appeared on the screen behind him. He addressed the issue head on, explained the real story and sent a powerful signal about the kind of culture he wanted to build. A highly productive session ensued.

3 START AT THE TOP

Like so much to do with culture, a lot depends on how the top team behaves. If people start seeing fewer heads on poles, they may begin to take a few risks. If you are trying to convince people you want to change a blame culture, staff will be scrutinising the directors to work out whether they mean it or not.

4 CHALLENGE THE “UNKNOWN PLONKER” STATEMENTS

Identify whether or not you suffer from the “unknown plonker” syndrome, whereby people blame other parts of the organisation for problems: for example, a customer service representative telling a customer “that’s Accounts’ fault – they’re useless”. Creating familiarity between departments leads to trust,

so if you want to build trust in your business, create forums for contact. Joint workshops, job rotation and process improvement teams are all good ways to break down barriers.

5 BUILD THE RIGHT SKILLS

Managers in blame cultures typically focus only on the task. They talk to people only when they need something or when there is blame to be apportioned. Organisations that don’t have a blame culture typically have managers who can make the connection between the objectives of the business and the people.

In this way, they engage and enthuse people and achieve superior performance because their team is committed. The skills for making the connection include empathy, engagement, listening, effective communication and building rapport.

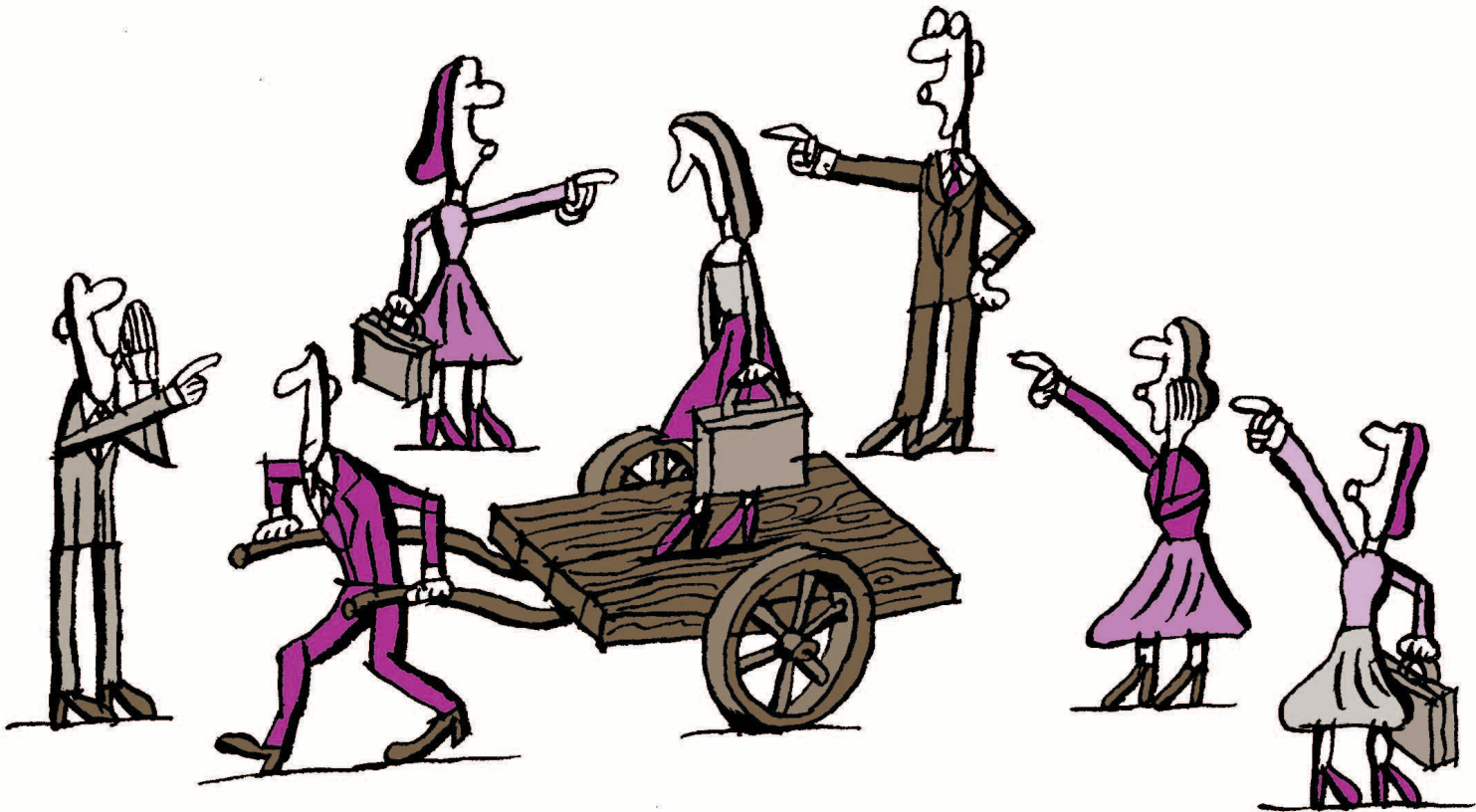
6 MAKE SURE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS WORK

Businesses without a blame culture build a “one-team” approach. They have open, effective communication channels and opportunities for contact and dialogue.

Effective companies don’t have communication overload. Instead, they target communication improvements along key processes and at points where processes cross organisational boundaries. In this way they establish effective working relationships where it really matters.

THE EXPERT

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7 MAKE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BOARDROOM AND FRONT LINE

Ensure the directors are visible and that they are not there to apportion blame but to get feedback and identify what will help the business.

Keep the style informal and, if necessary, talk to staff without managers present as a way of signalling commitment to change. One organisation has a visibility programme that ensures all sites are visited once a year by a member of the board. These visits are structured to encourage openness and keep the board in touch with real staff issues.

Every employee must have the right to speak directly to the boss if they feel they cannot make their voice heard from a lower level. In one business, the chief executive attends staff football and badminton tournaments, walks the floor and regularly asks for and receives comments about his policies on the company intranet. This can bring painful messages but it has also improved service and saved the company money.

BENOIT JACQUES

8 BUILD TRUST

Focus on five elements:

- Competence: managers must be perceived as knowing what needs to be done for the company to be successful and capable of leading the organisation in the right direction.
- Openness and honesty: tell the truth and feed back the “whole story”, not only the good news.
- Concern for employees: managers must show they understand how their staff feel and demonstrate empathy.
- Reliability: make sure commitments are followed through and that “words and figures” match.
- “In the same boat”: managers must be perceived as sharing a common identity and experience with staff.

9 REWARD THE RIGHT BEHAVIOUR

As with raising children, the trick is to catch staff doing something right and give positive feedback. Make sure that you use your internal communication channels to share examples of the behaviour you are trying to encourage and the pay-off it brought.

10 BUILD A FORMAL FEEDBACK SYSTEM

One company set staff the task of regularly submitting ideas for a business or process improvement. Rather than asking for the usual problems, they asked for something positive instead. **PM**

WHY A BLAME CULTURE SHOULD BE ELIMINATED

Blame cultures are bad news because they:

- make those in the boardroom out of touch with what’s really going on;
- cut off the flow of vital information;
- stop innovation and learning;
- destroy productivity: blame breeds back-covering and creates huge amounts of non-productive time;
- build wrong relationships between leaders and the led. In a blame culture, leaders focus on catching people out and tripping them up.