

When a worker passes the buck

"Al, I hear you're saying Wilma's to blame for the problems with the Driver account," Caitlin told her team member. "But isn't that your account? What's happening here?"

Al sighed loudly. "Caitlin, I asked Wilma to cover it when I was working on the Butcher project. I don't know what in the heck she did, but now the Driver people are on the warpath. She really fouled things up."

Now it was Caitlin's turn to sigh. Al was a good employee, but Wilma was a better one, and Caitlin found it hard to believe the Driver problems — which she'd only heard about after the customer complained to her manager — were all someone else's fault.

Managers are often maddened when employees blame co-workers when things go awry. Here's the strategy Caitlin used to deal with Al's buck-passing:

- Ask for the facts. Ignore any unsolicited assessments of others' performance or failings. Get the buck-passer's side of the story. "Al, this is the first I've heard that you weren't handling the Driver account yourself," Caitlin said. "And surely you must have some idea why things went wrong. At least you know more than I do. Tell me more." Al described how, when he had found himself overwhelmed with the Butcher project, he took Wilma up on her offer to help. "I suppose I should have let you know first," he told Caitlin.

"Well, actually, you should have asked me if it was OK first, but that's a side issue," Caitlin replied. "Let me check with Wilma to see what she knows. Between the two of you, I should have a picture of what's going on." Al didn't seem to like that idea very much, but Caitlin let it pass.

- Define responsibilities. Even when a co-worker performed below par, it's up to employees to be responsible for the work they're assigned — and not to pass the buck. "Ultimately, it doesn't really matter who's to blame," she told Al. "Because it is your account, and you're responsible for making sure that it's serviced properly — whether you do it or you ask someone else."

"I guess you're right," Al replied. "I shouldn't have bad-mouthed Wilma like that. There's things I know about handling the Driver account that she doesn't. I probably wouldn't do such a good job covering her accounts, either."

Caitlin noted that on top of Al's passing the buck, the tone of his criticism of Wilma — whatever the circumstances — verged on inappropriate. "I don't say that any of my people 'really fouled up' when things don't work out," she told Al. "And it's my job to judge your performance. If you want Wilma or someone else to help you out in the future, you probably need to rethink your attitude here." Al nodded.

- Offer your help. While you should secure agreement that buck-passers will take responsibility for their own work, you should also recognize that sometimes, buck-passing is a cover-up for genuine problems that you can help solve. "I trust I can count on you to take care of your accounts in the future, because I don't want to reassign them. Am I right?" Caitlin asked. Al nodded.

"But at the same time," she continued, "I can understand how you'd need help when you've got a big project on

your plate. That's why I say you should tell me what's going on beforehand; I can help you, and Wilma, and everyone else do our best with the time and resources we have."