

Stop the blame game at work and prevent selfish team members

When a snafu strikes, the blame game on your team can take on a life all its own if left unchecked.

Your job as manager is to redirect everyone's attention away from pointing fingers so that employees can extract positive lessons from the experience.

Follow this three-step process when responding to your team's mistakes:

1. Dig for facts. Upon learning of a serious error or bottleneck in the system, express your desire to fix what's broken. Don't feel a need to make hasty predictions of who or what's causing the mishap; keep your opinions or speculations to yourself and keep an open mind.

Say, "Our first step is to gather all the facts so that we can assess what happened. I'll need everyone's help with this."

Invite all your staffers—including those individuals who may have played a role in creating the problem—to shift into investigative mode and feed you information.

Emphasize that once you've collected the facts, you intend to learn how to prevent such problems in the future, not dwell on the past and find fault.

2. Play the czar. As you get a better idea of what happened, take charge. Don't keep asking your staff for their thoughts or suggestions about how you should handle the situation.

Managers who love consensus-building and employee participation can fall into the trap of inviting their workers to opine about what they think needs to be done to repair the damage.

While that may sound harmless or even well-intentioned, it can lead employees to put a fake "spin" on past events in an effort to hide their failings or shift the blame.

It's wiser to draw your own conclusions and then meet privately with those individuals who erred.

3. Take responsibility. Even if you determine that one or more of your employees made major mistakes, acknowledge that you're not blame-free. "Whenever someone screws up, I remind them that I'm responsible for their performance—that I'm held accountable for them," says a VP at a mortgage-servicing company. "Then they realize that I'm not scolding them as much as alerting them that we're all in this together. That makes them less defensive and more willing to improve."

Prevent the blame game on your team by banishing workers' selfishness

Apply these strategies to suppress employees' selfish sides and encourage them to make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the team:

Set an example. Model the kind of behavior you seek. Spread credit around in a vocal, visible manner. For instance, if your region is recognized at a company award banquet for producing the highest sales, let members of your crew accept the honors.

Reward cooperation, not competition. Examine your incentive program and other recognition systems. Do you reward individuals for outperforming their co-workers? If so, try a different approach that encourages cooperation. Example: Give bonuses to entire teams that exceed certain goals.

Praise selfless acts. Let's be honest: Many employees care more about themselves than any team. They're looking out for their own interests and safeguarding what's theirs. Still, you can chip away at this mindset by lavishing praise on individuals who put themselves second and make sacrifices for the good of the unit. Example: When a worker repeatedly works late (without overtime pay) to help a colleague who's ill, make sure the entire team knows how much you admire such a selfless act. Give this individual a small reward.