

CREATING THE HIGH-TRUST, BLAME FREE COMPANY

The legal philosopher Joel Feinberg says creatures use blame to “stain” things, marking them as harmful. Blaming is an essential “adaptive strategy,” he says—reflexive and “primitive.” I believe we can train ourselves to “stain” something other than our fellow workers and those who manage our work. Indeed, we need to “stain” the poor, inadequate or missing processes that fail much more than our workers.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”—Franklin D. Roosevelt. When fear and blame are allowed in the workplace, they create a concern. Some say a little fear is good, but I don't think our companies will function to their full potential with fear. According to psychologists, there is no such thing as “healthy” fear. Fear robs people of their potential and is a barrier to peak performance. Fear-based outcomes are usually negative, and affect both company and individual quality of life.

All work is a process, and process fails much more than people. People do not come to work with the desire to do wrong. They don't high five in front of the truck and say, “Let's go in today and screw up this house.” When something goes wrong, we often look for the person responsible. Instead, we must look at our process to see how it allowed the defect to happen. However, there are times when blame must fall on the people doing the work. Liability for intentional wrongdoing and assigning blame are proper actions in some cases of error. We must strive to make sure we stop and consider the intent at the time of the defect. Intent is the driver of actions we must take for the lack of following program standards, procedures, policies or deceitful representation.

High trust through a blame-free workplace is the beginning and foundation of a profitable company.

- ① **Intentional Wrongdoing:** The issue of volition is fundamental to doing wrong. Therefore, the term “error” can only be applied to intentional actions. Actions taken by people with deliberate intent to harm, defraud or deceive cannot be allowed to go unattended. Intentional error must be dealt with swiftly.
- ② **Unintentional Wrongdoing:** The failure of work to achieve its desired objective due to slips, mistakes, or lapses of attention. Unintentional wrongdoing happens with no intent to do wrong, as we all have made mistakes in our lives. Mistakes demand processes that prevent errors, such as mistake-proofing tools, quality control and quality assurance.

Preventative measures are crucial, and I hope more of our attention is spent on creating a culture of preventing unintentional actions. A culture of prevention begins at the “Gemba,” the Japanese word for “the real place” where work is done. Prevention of mistakes here is cheap and can reduce future costs. Attending to intentional wrongdoing is expensive because it occurs after the work is done. This robs us of our time, attention, profits and peace of mind.

W. Edwards Deming said, “There cannot be quality improvement where employees are afraid to tell the truth.” We need those who make the mistakes to be at the table where we all contribute to designing the prevention. Management that creates a blame-free environment will see improved employee loyalty. As employee trust increases, errors will decrease, quality will increase and we are on the path to improved customer loyalty.