Pinellas County
Human Resources
Helping U Succeed

Leadership NOTES

JUNE 2018

Move from Blame to Accountability

What is the first thought when something goes wrong? Is it "Whose fault is it"? If so, then we are blocking learning. The result is open minds begin to close, as people try to protect themselves from persecution. It becomes a survival exercise. People begin to cover up errors, point out mistakes, and deny responsibility. The trickle effect includes diminished questions, fear and less effective collaboration.

So what is the difference between healthy accountability and blame? Keeping commitments, respectful communication, curiosity and support of collective performance indicates an accountability culture. Blaming involves shaming, finding fault, insecurity, fear, judgment and self-righteousness. The behaviors indicate the level of health of the individual and the organization.

A blaming culture results in less effective problem solving, cover-ups, errors and thwarted information flow. This type of culture stymies innovation and the ability to resolve the root issues of problems. Superficial fixes ("Band-aids") become the norm, which ends up costing the organization bucket-loads in the form of lost productivity, ineffective problem-solving, and losing high performers' engagement or spurring their voluntary separation to workplaces that value innovation and new ideas.

Blame can be addictive because it feeds the feeling of power for the culprit, who has a growing need to divert attention away from their own role in the situation.

If we are to learn from mistakes and improve individually, in workgroups and in the overall organization — what are some ways to grow a healthy culture of accountability?

- Give people the benefit of the doubt. Do you really understand others' perspective before assigning meaning to what you hear and observe?

- Take inventory of your role in the situation before pointing the finger at someone else. We tend to justify our own actions and discount others' perspective.

- Don't judge. Judgment blocks our ability to see clearly and entertain new information, because we are spending energy defending our position.

- Be willing to raise issues to talk about "the elephant in the room." Misunderstandings often promote anger and blame, and — left unaddressed — they tend to fester.

- Refuse to participate in destructive conversations and assigning blame. Instead, move to owning your responsibilities in the situation and identifying how to make improvements on your part.

- Do not make negative comments about people. Identify ways to support and improve. Remember, when someone has negative personal remarks about someone else, it says more about the one communicating than the person they are criticizing. Take the healthy road, and refrain from being an audience to the negativity.

- Ask yourself, "What is my motivation in my assessment of the issue?" Is it self-preservation or is it healthy resolution to learn?

If you want to become a truly effective leader for positive change, it means going against the status quo in situations that are unhealthy. It may feel lonely when you take a stand against the norm when faced with destructive behavior patterns. As a leader, it's your responsibility to choose to be a positive change agent.