Cornerstone
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Dangerous Game

*Instead of Pointing Fingers, Try to Build Better Communication
Among the Ranks*

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Why is corporate America a thriving ground for the "blame game"? One reason is no checks and balances exist to preclude top executives and their management teams from using this detrimental approach to conduct business. Rather, it's become quite common to blame workplace ills on employees rather than consider management the source or, at the minimum, a significant contributor. Whether this is intentional or not, management is frequently ensconced in denial, and, in the end, everyone suffers.

Uncovering the root of such problems is often accomplished through the work of a seasoned executive coach. When an executive coach is engaged, he or she first works to assess and fill information gaps. Given the complexity of these situations, there can be no boundaries, limitations, "sacred cows" or other topics considered cultural taboo when investigating the corporate culture and digging for information. Using the information collected, the coach can then present different perspectives on workplace scenarios. The intent here is that managers will recognize the need to look deeper at their potential culpability when a team isn't operating productively.

Where the Blame Game Begins

In many cases, misplaced blame begins when managers are in denial about their inability to live up to the demands of a recent promotion. This is often the result of people being elevated through the ranks of management for all the wrong reasons. Climbing the ladder may be dictated, for example, by the degree to which an individual is technically competent but not necessarily management material. So, what is allegedly a reward for the promoted person can become a punishment to everyone else – sometimes even to the individual who was promoted.

Managers are known to react defensively to this job insecurity by "managing up." When an executive manages up, it means the individual effectively creates an image of him or herself in association with any projects that have been completed successfully. Yet, projects that are in limbo, in trouble or that have failed miserably are quickly and frequently blamed on subordinates. Since these managers are the conduits between their direct reports and the senior executives above them, their word is what matters, and many take advantage of it accordingly.

Effects of the Blame Game

With greater frequency than one might imagine, managers are typically clueless about the potentially destructive impact of their behavior, as well as how powerfully it impacts the people who report to them daily. Unfortunately, a manager's direct reports typically don't brush off this impact so easily; in fact, employees suffer unduly because they've been demoralized. Anyone who has experienced demoralization understands it breeds vulnerability and even contempt, especially considering the authority structure of the relationship. It becomes that much harder for subordinates to step up and call managers on any mistakes. The compounding effect of feeling vulnerable, yet compelled to stay silent, is debilitating, as well as an obstacle to any further coaching until it is resolved.

Imagine a corporate world where managers learned how to manage down as well as they manage up. Employees might just feel invigorated and inspired to get their work done. Such a scenario is exactly what executive coaches aim for – one where very little time ends up invested in/wasted on the blame game. Instead, the focus is on high performance, superior morality and extreme accountability.

Executive Coaching Challenges the Blame Game

An executive coach is rarely one of the first people privy to the suggestion that management is misplacing blame. Although the "water cooler buzz" is usually pervasive, it is the coach who tends to translate what employees want to say, acting as an objective messenger in a more direct and appropriate fashion. Regardless of the situation that follows, the coach is typically best suited and properly trained to take it on.

To borrow a quip from the real estate industry, if 'location, location, location' is a realtor's expression about what dictates a property's value, then an executive coach's measure of value and success should be 'hon-

esty, honesty, honesty.' It is certainly what sets the best apart from the pack, primarily because honesty coupled with experience is what leads to and commits them to beating the blame game. Here are some steps executive coaches consider critical to challenging the blame game:

- **Create open communication channels.** Sit down and communicate with a team about its strengths and weaknesses, individually and collectively. Preferably this takes place in an off site situation where every individual's rank is left at the door. As impossible as this may sound, it's the only way to conduct an open, honest discussion. If 'rank' sneaks its way in at any time, the discussion cannot be effective. Such meetings become the ideal place for employees to offer managers feedback about their leadership practices— or lack thereof. Honest-to-the-core is required here, meaning employees state what they believe works about a manager's approach and what doesn't.

- **Increase manager involvement sans micromanagement.** When managers play an active role as facilitators to their team of direct reports, they pave the way for a closer relationship. This alone almost always inspires and motivates employees, especially if the manager is open and respectful to the ideas of others.

- **Enforce exact expectations.** While managers don't usually have a problem making it clear how they want a given problem solved, they are frequently less clear about identifying the problem that needs solving. Any manager can direct a team as to how a problem should be solved. However, it takes a manager committed to the communication process to involve the team in problem solving from the start so perhaps they can be part of determining the best solution.

- **Capture clarity.** By involving employees in the early stages of the problem solving process, it's management's role to make sure these individuals have clarity about the essential details surrounding the problem. Only then can employees use this information to find different ways to solve a problem.

- **Realize risks.** Every time a manager takes a risk on an employee by offering autonomy and/or resources to get the job done, it sheds a positive light on the individual's management skills. It's certainly an improvement over managers who exhibit a 'command and control' style of management. In that scenario, a manager confronts employees by stating the problem in need of a solution. Then, he or she explains the solution that should be implemented, with details about how to carry it out. In the end, the team is robbed of any opportunity for out-of-the-box thinking.

Eliminate the Blame Game

Executive coaches usually dabble in detective work before they can begin real progress in an engagement. One recurring clue they find is that problem spots tend to crop up where people have been elevated through the ranks of management for the wrong reasons. A skilled and competent executive coach uncovers this scenario quickly and sets in motion the right plan for filling the gap. In many cases, the coach's involvement has been the catalyst some managers need to stop the finger pointing and get on track after back pedaling away at the blame game far too long.

Kudos to the managers who work with executive coaches to move away from the norm of always blaming subordinates or teams. Instead, these managers choose to find ways to avoid or, at least, take control of this problem, beginning with their own understanding of the imprudent effects of the blame game. ■