



Why Blame & Shame Don't Work

Shame causes different reactions in different people. For some it is acts of defiance, for others it is withdrawal and for others still it can be internal recrimination. Some people lash out or become defensive. Others end up constantly trying to please in order to counter the inner feelings that they will never be good enough.

If it is results that you are looking for, rather than blame and shame, consider a different approach - one that focuses on the solution and how you can help the employee articulate how they will reach the solution rather than an ongoing process that merely points out the problem. Human nature responds to blame and shame, criticism, judgment or threats in usual ways, such as withdrawal or, in workplace terms, lack of engagement or lack of motivation. Also, trying to justify or defend are common responses, and in the workplace this could sound like whining, arguing or hostility, none of which most of us enjoy. The response could also be a counter attack, which could sound like a verbal attack on the manager or on a co-worker. It could include the filing of a grievance or a complaint, or even an accusation against someone else.

If withdrawal, defensiveness or counter attack are the outcomes that are being looked for, blame and shame will elicit these. However, if the desired outcome is a sincere attempt at a sustainable solution, try an approach that centres on getting commitment over compliance. It involves helping the employee to develop a solution that results in the change necessary to have a healthy work experience and to produce or complete the tasks at hand...without the need to blame or shame.

Instead of accusing, blaming or shaming consider redirecting toward a solution using some of these approaches:

- How can we do this differently?
- This is what I need from you. How can I help you achieve this?
- Instead of defending another person – just listen.
- When you do not agree with their perspective – comment on how they must feel without agreeing with why they feel that way. (e.g. “Everybody hates me.” – It must be awful to feel that way.)
- What would you like to do about that?
- How can we do that in a way that is healthy for you?
- How can we change that to work better for you?
- What is a solution that you think would make this better for everyone?
- What would be helpful?
- I hear your frustration. I want to help you move forward to a work situation that is at the very least not negative. What would that take?
- And what else?...And what else?

Understand that negative thinking may be a symptom of depression and of anxiety. Gently bringing the person back to focus on a solution help them to consider other possible thoughts or ideas. It will not be easy, but it can be done.

When the worker is blaming or shaming

The other side of this concept is in avoiding encouraging blaming or shaming on the part of another person without humiliating them in the process. For example if an employee says that everyone is out to get him or her and they have the emails or voice messages to prove it, rather than gathering the evidence (unless of course this could be a criminal case of harassment) or taking sides, recognize the hurt or distress the person is experiencing and help them focus on ways to move forward using the type of language described above.

It is less about shutting them down or refuting their accusation as it is about asking “what can we do to make this right going forward?”. Resist minimizing or refuting their feelings of hurt, betrayal or humiliation and instead help find a path that allows all parties to “save face”. This means that everyone can walk away with a sense of dignity that allows them to engage in a new way of interacting.

When an employee demands an apology, you might ask the purpose of seeking an apology. It rarely makes things right and whenever an apology is demanded, it is not likely to be sincere. Instead of platitudes, the solution might be in behaviours or actions expected in the future. For example if someone was gossiping about a worker, the way forward may be to set the record straight about any untruths. This can be done in a number of ways by you or by others and should always include an agreement with stakeholders of refraining from speaking in a derogatory way about others in the future. The difference between a forced apology and an agreement to change behaviours going forward can often mean the difference between a hostile truce and a new opportunity for healthier interactions.

Self-shame, self-blame

Recognize also that some people internalize the stigma surrounding mental illness. Those who, through little fault of their own, end up experiencing depression or anxiety-related illnesses, may feel ashamed or responsible for their condition. It is for this reason that it is prudent to resist gossip or innuendo about your worker’s condition. Saying plainly that there is a health condition that requires reasonable accommodation is sufficient to justify changes in work processes. But this alone is not enough. If we do not help the individual to engage in workplace behaviours that are reasonably acceptable to others, we will not be able to stop the negativity or isolation they will face from others. When we help someone succeed at work, we are also helping others to see them as a successful contributor. And when we treat people as if they are successful and a valuable member of the team, others are much more likely to follow our lead. As they say, the speed of the leader is the speed of the gang. If you speak respectfully about all people, your team might understand this to be the expectation for their behaviour as well.

Recap

- Blame & shame usually causes us to react emotionally
- Redirect blaming or shaming talk (your own and others) toward solutions
- Where possible neither agree nor disagree – just redirect
- Resist minimizing or refuting feelings
- Avoid he said/she said traps
- Respect privacy, but address the workplace issues