# Becoming a Blame-Free Workplace

Some Questions and Answers to Understand Why We Blame and How We Can Eliminate Blame at SOMC

**Vicki A. Noel, MLHR, SHRM-SPC, SPHR**

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Creating a blame-free environment within SOMC is essential for fostering the trust and teamwork necessary to become the BEST in each of our Strategic Values. This does NOT mean that processes will never fail, or people will not make and be accountable for mistakes at SOMC. The goal in a blame-free workplace is to focus on understanding the root causes of mistakes, promoting open and honest communication with one another to FIX the issue, rather than spending our energy on attributing blame. This document is intended to ask and answer questions about blame, its impact on our team and some actions we can take toward eliminating the negative effects of blame at SOMC.

## What is Blame?

Blame is the act of holding someone or something responsible for fault or wrong. It involves attributing responsibility for an undesirable outcome or error.

## Why do I blame?

One of the main reasons we blame is to **protect ourselves** from negative consequences or feelings of guilt. By attributing fault to someone else (or something else), we can avoid taking responsibility for our actions or mistakes. We also may blame others for fear of being judged or criticized for our actions. Therefore, we deflect blame onto others to **preserve our self-image or reputation**. Blaming others allows us to **cope with feelings** of frustration, anger, or disappointment by shifting the focus away from our own discomfort. Blame is also reinforced in some cultures that prioritize individualism, competition, and perfectionism. In these environments, blaming others may be seen as a **way to maintain status** or avoid being perceived as weak.

## What are the feelings that drive me to blame?

Feelings are our brain's automatic reactions triggered by external events or internal beliefs. Some examples of feelings that may play a role in blame behaviors are as follows:

*Fear* can prompt us to shift blame onto others to protect ourselves from negative consequences, failure, or judgment.

*Shame* or embarrassment about our actions or mistakes may lead us to deflect blame on others to avoid personal accountability or preserve our image.

*Guilt*, while an internal feeling of remorse or responsibility for actions, may drive us to blame others for alleviating our internal struggles.

*Insecurity* may result in blaming others to deflect attention away from our own perceived inadequacies or vulnerabilities.

*Frustration* with a situation or lack of control can drive us to look for external sources to blame rather than confronting the complexities or uncertainties in the situation.

*Power dynamics* may be at play when we blame our team members or colleagues to assert our control or dominance.

*Victimization* plays a role in blame, prompting those who feel they are the victim of unfair treatment or circumstances to engage in blaming behaviors to seek validation or sympathy from others.

*Anger*, while thankfully not as common at SOMC as in the past, may prompt us to blame others for seeking retribution for someone's wrongdoing.

## What are some of the destructive beliefs that drive these feelings?

Our strongly held beliefs are in control when our brains incline us to blame others. Some of the common destructive beliefs that contribute to blaming are as follows:

*All-or-Nothing Thinking* – This distortion involves viewing situations in black-and-white terms with no room for context or complexity. Those of us who engage in all-or-nothing thinking may believe that if something goes wrong, it must be someone else's fault.

*Personalization* – Personalization involves attributing external events or outcomes to oneself, even if they are beyond one's control. Individuals who personalize may take responsibility for negative events and blame themselves excessively or blame others to avoid personal accountability.

*Mind Reading* – "Mind reading" involves making assumptions about what others think or feel without sufficient evidence. When this happens, we may falsely attribute negative intentions to others, leading to feelings of resentment or anger that drive blaming behaviors.

*Overgeneralization* – This belief involves drawing broad conclusions based on limited evidence or single incidents. People who overgeneralize may blame others based on past experiences or stereotypes without considering the specific context of the current situation.

*Discounting the Positive* – This distorted belief involves minimizing or dismissing the positive aspects of a situation while focusing exclusively on the negative. Individuals who discount the positive may overlook their own contributions or the efforts of others, leading them to blame rather than appreciate.

*Control Fallacies* – Control fallacies involve either feeling overly responsible for events that are beyond one's control (internal control fallacy) or feeling powerless to influence outcomes (external control fallacy). Both types can contribute to blaming behaviors, either by taking excessive responsibility or by attributing blame to external factors.

*Should-ing* – Thoughts dominated by "should statements" involve rigid rules or expectations about how oneself or others should behave. When individuals hold onto should statements, they may blame themselves or others for not living up to these unrealistic standards, leading to frustration or disappointment.

# What are some examples of blame behaviors?

Blame can take the shape of many different behaviors in our organization and personal lives. Stopping blame behaviors becomes easier when we better recognize blame "in action." Here are some blame examples that you may have observed or experienced at SOMC:

*Process Failure Blame* – After a process fails or does not meet its goals or deadlines, team members engage in a blame game, pointing at each other for the delay or failures. Instead of collaborating to analyze the root causes of the failure and finding solutions, individuals assign fault to protect their reputations.

*Customer Complaint Blame* – When a customer complains about a service, team members in different departments blame each other for the issue. Rather than taking collective responsibility for addressing the customer's concerns and improving processes, employees deflect blame onto other teams or individuals.

*Missed Deadline Blame* – A team member misses a deadline for submitting a report, blaming the delay on inadequate resources or unclear instructions from their manager. Instead of taking accountability for poor time management, the individual shifts the blame onto external factors.

*Performance Blame* – During a performance coaching conversation, an employee blames their behavior or lack of progress on their supervisor's micromanagement or lack of support. Instead of reflecting on their own contributions and areas of improvement, the employees attribute their shortcomings to external factors beyond their control.

*Over Budget Blame* - A department exceeds its budget for the month, and the leader blames the finance department for providing inaccurate projections or failing to allocate funds appropriately. Rather than examining their own spending habits or operational inefficiencies, the leader shifts blame onto the financial controls or budget methods.

*Interdepartmental Conflict Blame* – Two departments engage in a dispute over conflicting priorities, with each side blaming the other for the lack of cooperation and alignment. Instead of seeking common ground and finding mutually beneficial solutions, departments escalate tensions by assigning blame and refusing to compromise.

*Employee Turnover Blame* - High employee turnover rates prompt managers to blame HR for ineffective recruitment and retention strategies. Instead of addressing underlying issues such as poor workplace culture or inadequate professional development, managers deflect blame onto HR policies and processes.

*Leadership Failure Blame* – When a major initiative fails to deliver expected results, employees blame leadership for poor planning, decision-making, or unclear expectations. Instead of offering constructive feedback and working with leadership to identify lessons learned, team members criticize management for the perceived failure.

# What are the differences between providing constructive feedback and assigning blame?

In the simplest description, constructive feedback is intended to be positive, while blame-focused feedback is intended to be negative. The following table compares the differences in more detail:

| Comparison Element | Constructive Feedback | Assigning Blame |
|---|---|---|
| **Purpose** | Aims to help the recipient improve their performance or behaviors. It focuses on providing actionable suggestions for growth and development. | Involves negative feedback with the intention of causing harm or humiliation. It does not provide solutions for improvement. |
| **Intent** | Positive | Negative |
| **Characteristics** | • **Specific**: It pinpoints areas for improvement with clarity.<br>• **Timely**: It is delivered promptly, allowing the recipient to make necessary adjustments.<br>• **Behavior-Focused**: It addresses actions or behaviors rather than personal attributes.<br>• **Productive**: It offers solutions and actionable steps.<br>• **Goal-Oriented**: It aligns with the recipient's professional goals. | • **Blame-Focused**: It assigns fault without offering constructive solutions.<br>• **Personal Attack**: It attacks the individual rather than addressing specific actions.<br>• **Aggressive or Confrontational**: It can be hurtful and damaging.<br>• **Unhelpful**: It does not contribute to growth or development. |

# What actions can I take to stop using blame in my daily work?

To help me stop using blame in my daily work and start demonstrating a more constructive and accountable approach, I can take the following actions:

*Practice Self-Awareness* – I will become more aware of my tendencies to blame others in different situations. I will notice when I feel the impulse to assign fault and reflect on the underlying feelings and beliefs driving that behavior.

*Take Responsibility* – Instead of immediately blaming others when things go wrong, I will reflect on my role in the situation – what part of the breakdown or error I **own**. I will ask myself what I could have done differently and how I can contribute to finding a solution.

*Focus on Solutions* – I will shift my mindset from assigning blame to identifying solutions. When faced with challenges or setbacks, I will ask myself what actions I can take to address the issue constructively and prevent similar problems in the future.

*Practice Empathy* – I will try to understand the perspectives and experiences of others involved (walk a while in their shoes). I will recognize that everyone makes mistakes and faces challenges, and I will start first with the assumption that others' intentions are good rather than approaching them with judgment.

*Communicate Effectively* - I will foster open and honest communication with team members by expressing my concerns and feedback in a constructive manner. I will focus on addressing issues collaboratively rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame.

*Seek Feedback* – I will invite feedback from others on my performance and actions. I will be open to constructive feedback and use it as an opportunity for growth and self-improvement rather than becoming defensive or deflecting blame.

*Lead by Example* – I will demonstrate accountability and humility in my own actions and interactions with others. I will model a constructive problem-solving mindset and demonstrate a culture of transparency and

continuous improvement through my own behavior.

*Promote a Blame-Free Workplace* – I will encourage my team members to take ownership of their work and to approach challenges with a problem-solving mindset. I will reinforce the importance of collaboration, accountability, and mutual support to accomplish SOMC's goals.

*Address Conflict Proactively* - When conflicts arise, I will facilitate open communication and active listening to understand all perspectives involved. I will focus on finding common ground and mutually accepted solutions rather than dwelling on past mistakes or assigning blame.

*Celebrate Successes* – I will acknowledge and celebrate achievements as a team, recognizing the collective efforts and contributions of all involved. This will foster a culture of appreciation and reinforce positive behaviors and outcomes.

# When I slip and use blame behaviors at work, what steps can I take to recover from my failure?

Recovering from my blame behaviors at work (and slips WILL happen) involves self-reflection, taking accountability for what I own, and working on proactive steps to repair relationships and address the situation. Here are a few steps that will help me recover from a blame slip:

*Acknowledge My Mistake* – I will take ownership of my actions by acknowledging that I engaged in blame behavior. Admitting my mistake is the first step towards repairing any damage caused and rebuilding trust with others.

*Apologize Sincerely* – I will offer a genuine apology to anyone affected by my blaming behavior. I will express remorse for my actions and take responsibility for any harm or misunderstandings that occurred as a result.

*Reflect on the Root Causes* – I will reflect on the underlying reasons why I resorted to blame behavior in the first place. I will consider any triggers, feelings, or beliefs that may have influenced my actions and

identify areas for personal growth and improvement.

*Seek Feedback* – I will reach out to those involved in the situation and ask for their perspective on what happened. I will actively listen to their feedback and be willing to consider alternative viewpoints to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of my actions.

*Learn from Experience* - I will use the situation as a learning experience. If I am uncomfortable, then there is certainly something I can learn. I will identify strategies that might help me respond more effectively in similar situations in the future.

*Rebuild Trust* – I will demonstrate my commitment to accountability and constructive communication by consistently modeling positive behavior in my interactions with others. I will be patient and understand that rebuilding trust takes time.

*Seek Support* – If necessary, I will seek support from a mentor, coach, or trusted colleague to help me navigate the aftermath of a blame mistake and develop strategies for improvement.

*Monitor Progress* - I will regularly check my progress of overcoming blame behaviors and maintaining a positive work culture. I will celebrate my successes and continue challenging myself to grow and improve professionally.

# How can I help my teammates to resist blaming?

Creating a blame-free workplace requires proactive efforts from high-performing teams (HPTs) to hold each other accountable for their actions and foster a culture of trust, collaboration, and mutual support. Here are some strategies teams can use that will help them resist using blame:

*Establish Shared Values* – HPTs define and articulate shared values and norms that emphasize accountability, transparency, and constructive criticism. HPTs make it clear that blaming behaviors are not acceptable and every team member is responsible for upholding the culture of respect and collaboration.

*Lead by Example* – HPT leaders and members model accountable behaviors by taking responsibility for their actions, admitting mistakes, and seeking

solutions rather than assigning blame.

*Encourage Open Communication* – HPTs create a safe and inclusive environment where team members feel comfortable speaking up, sharing feedback, and addressing concerns openly. Team members listen to one another and ensure all voices are heard and respected.

*Promote a Learning Mindset* – HPTs view failures and setbacks as opportunities for improvement rather than occasions for blame or punishment. HPTs encourage experimentation, innovation, and resilience in the face of challenges.

*Establish Clear Expectations* – HPTs clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations for each other to minimize misunderstandings and promote accountability. HPTs set clear goals and milestones and regularly assess the team's progress toward achieving them.

*Provide Feedback* – HPTs create opportunities for team members to provide or receive feedback from their peers in a constructive and respectful manner. HPTs regularly check-in with one another to discuss progress, address challenges and identify areas for continuous improvement.

*Focus on Solutions* – HPTs encourage a solution-oriented approach to problem-solving, where team members collaborate to identify root causes and implement effective solutions. If a team member begins shifting toward blame, HPT members nudge one another to re-focus on solutions.

## What are the short-term benefits of blaming others?

Blaming others provides individuals with a temporary **sense of relief** by shifting responsibility away from themselves. In the short term, it may alleviate feelings of guilt, shame, or anxiety about a mistake or failure. Blame can also help **avoid accountability** by escaping the consequences of one's actions or decisions, thereby avoiding scrutiny or repercussions.

## What are some consequences of blaming others?

The most destructive outcome of blaming others is that it compromises **trust and collaboration** within the team and across the organization. When team members feel unfairly blamed or scapegoated, it damages relationships, fosters resentment, and erodes trust. Team members in a blame culture also **fear speaking up, taking risks, or making decisions**, leading to stagnation and decreased innovation. Blame culture contributes to **low morale and decreased engagement** among team members. **Poor communication** is another result, as blame creates defensiveness and self-preservation behaviors, which hinder open communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Those leaders and team members who continue a pattern of blame behaviors, even after clarified expectations and coaching, **may not be able to continue on the SOMC team.**

## How do I feel when my colleagues blame me?

Of course, everyone's experiences are different, but when I am blamed at work, I have a "whoosh" of numerous feelings, none of which are constructive. The first feeling I generate is **defensiveness**. When blamed, I often need to defend myself or my department. As a result, I may become guarded or over-explain myself to justify my actions or perspective. Blame can also incline my brain to generate feelings of **anxiety**. Being blamed can create anxiety about job security, performance evaluations, or strained relationships with team members due to fear of negative consequences. When I perceive that I have been unfairly blamed, I may feel **frustrated** or **disheartened** when I believe I have done my best, yet someone pointed the finger at me. When this happens, I get **embarrassed** and become hyper-focused on my shortcomings or withdrawn to avoid further blame. When blame happens, and it is not clarified, I can also **lose trust** in the person(s) who blame me. All of these feelings can contribute to **stress** in my workplace, which could, if unmanaged, directly affect my performance and that of my team.

# How do our patients and families feel when I blame situations or others?

Of course, mistakes happen, and unplanned or unexpectedly negative outcomes may occur. And the most unhelpful behavior we can demonstrate with our patients when this happens is to blame others. When patients experience blame directed at other departments or individuals at SOMC, they experience a mix of negative emotions:

*Frustration and Helplessness* - Patients may feel **frustrated** when they perceive that their care has been compromised due to interdepartmental or interpersonal issues. They might wonder why their well-being is affected by organizational challenges. Feelings of **helplessness** can arise when patients believe they have no control over the situation. Blaming others can exacerbate this feeling, leaving them caught in the crossfire.

*Anxiety and Uncertainty* - Patients rely on healthcare professionals to provide safe and effective care. When blame is shifted elsewhere, patients may **worry about the quality** of their treatment. **Uncertainty about the next steps** or who is truly responsible can lead to anxiety. Patients may fear that their condition will worsen due to delays or miscommunication.

*Distrust* - Blaming others **erodes trust** in the healthcare system. Patients may question whether their best interests are truly prioritized. When departments or individuals deflect responsibility, patients may wonder if anyone truly advocates for them.

*Anger and Resentment* - Patients might feel **anger** toward the system or specific individuals. They may perceive blame as an attempt to avoid accountability. **Resentment** can build if patients perceive that their concerns are dismissed or minimized due to internal conflicts.

*Emotional Impact on Recovery* - Negative emotions can **impact patients' well-being** and recovery. Stress and emotional distress can **hinder healing**. Patients may struggle to focus on their health when caught up in organizational disputes.

*Desire for Transparency and Solutions* - Rather than blame, patients often seek transparency and solutions. They want **clear communication** about what happened and **how** someone will fix it. Patients appreciate it when healthcare providers collaborate to address issues without finger-pointing. Our patients deserve empathy, open communication, and a focus on their well-being. Blaming others damages the therapeutic relationship and compromises patient outcomes. We will strive for a collaborative approach prioritizing patient care over internal conflicts.

Thank you for your commitment to creating a blame-free workplace at Southern Ohio Medical