

The Problem is People



The Russian author and philosopher Leo Tolstoy said,
"Everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to change themselves."

Have you ever noticed how we tend to blame one another when something goes wrong? This tendency to blame can be damaging and unproductive. Instead of looking for external reasons to explain our unhappiness or frustration, we should look within ourselves and acknowledge our thoughts, words, and actions in response to problems. A survey of organizations across the US found that 74% of respondents believed that blame and finger-pointing were common in their workplaces. What if, instead of blaming others, we all looked at ourselves as part of the problem?

Blame is a natural human response, and it can be tempting to find fault with others when things go wrong. However, without it being checked, it can develop a culture of blame, and this approach can be counterproductive and damaging. Blaming others keeps the focus off ourselves and prevents us from making positive changes in our own behavior. It is important to acknowledge that people are often responsible for problems, but blaming others is not the solution.

Author and speaker Wayne Dyer said, "All blame is a waste of time. No matter how much fault you find with another, and regardless of how much you blame him, it will not change you."

The only thing blame does is to keep the focus off you when you are looking for external reasons to explain the entirety of the problem. And that is a problem. We all contribute to things that go wrong, some more than others, but we ALL contribute. Human error is unavoidable but can be tempered and reined in through appropriate safeguards. These safeguards create layers of protection and usually focus on engineering controls and procedures. Unfortunately, the most important safeguard is often not in place. Most lack a process that enables all involved to see their part, their error, contributing to the problems we experience. Until we "see" that and respond appropriately, nothing will change. Pointing fingers may bring change outwardly but not real change inwardly. Problems are caused by the way we, people, think. Therefore, we need to change inwardly first, then the outward will change and last.

People are always at fault when something goes wrong within our systems,

organizations, and equipment that we have created. For example, if we design and build a bridge and it unexpectedly collapses, we can trace its causes to something someone did or did not do. Likewise, if we build hospitals to perform surgeries and administer medicines, and something goes wrong within these facilities, its causes can be traced to people. After all, since bridges and hospitals are human creations, we are ultimately responsible for anything that happens to or within them. Any other conclusion seems irresponsible and is merely another example of blaming something aside from ourselves. No matter how one looks at it, humanity is and always has been inundated with people problems. Therefore, it is not the premise that people are never responsible. On the contrary, people are almost always responsible for the things that go wrong in their lives. It is the premise that blame has turned the truth of this fact, a truth that can be one of the most liberating discoveries imaginable, into a death spiral.

Blame convinces us that it's not me, it's you, it's not us, it's them, it's not human beings, it's our systems, and on and on and on. Imagine an organization with everyone seeing problems in other people and things, everyone pointing their fingers at each other. No one would realize that they were part of the problem. Each would be too busy seeing the other person's problems. Even worse, it causes an equal and opposite reaction whenever someone blames another person. The blamed person will, in turn, blame another person. **Blame is inversely proportional to understanding.** In other words, when blame is absent, understanding thrives. When understanding is absent, blame thrives. In this respect, note that personal responsibility is at its highest when blame is absent, because when people truly see themselves as part of their problems, they will want to do something about it.

One night, a few years ago, at about 2.30 a.m., an event occurred in an industrial plant that required an immediate response from the control room operator to avoid a catastrophic incident. Unfortunately, the control room operator had fallen asleep and, therefore, did not respond, and a fire occurred, which spread rapidly. Massive physical damage occurred, firefighters were injured, and environmental damages were severe. You might think it is one thing to be understanding when a person makes a common or simple mistake, and the end result is an inconvenience. But it is quite different in a high-hazard industry where our equipment, the environment, and people can be destroyed. This person needs to be severely disciplined, even fired.

Let's think about this. Why is there more of a tendency to blame one another in these catastrophic cases than with more minor incidents? Why would it be acceptable and practical to be introspective about minor problems but unacceptable and impractical in response to a catastrophe? Should we not try to understand catastrophes to a greater degree than anything else? In a recent discussion sharing this incident with

a retired plant manager, he said, "Now, wait a minute. Sleeping on the job is never acceptable in an industrial setting and is usually a termination offense. No excuses." His comment is more like the rule than the exception. What happens to our psyche in response to catastrophe? A mass invasion of blame almost seems to occur in response to a disaster. The larger the consequence and greater the pain, the more potent the tendency to blame. Everyone points fingers at one another, and no one accepts responsibility. When this is allowed, it guarantees more finger-pointing in the future, a corresponding lack of introspection, and the eventual demise of the workforce and, eventually, the organization.

Consider what might happen if we strove to make the following a reality, a vision of what could be. First, the golden rule of things that go wrong has been ingrained in all our psyches. I will try my best to understand why people did what they did, especially if I tend to blame someone. To such an extent, I am convinced I would have done the same thing in a similar situation. Note that getting to this point will guarantee that you understand. Second, a no-blame mentality is the norm for everything and anything that goes wrong in our lives. In anticipation of big things that go wrong, an official no-blame policy is in place and strongly re-emphasized when such things occur in anticipation of a mass invasion of blame. Third, a corresponding introspection mentality is the norm for everything and anything that goes wrong within our lives. In other words, everyone tries their best to see themselves as part of every one of their problems.

The operator who fell asleep at the control panel was terminated within hours of the incident. However, upon further investigation, where introspection was required, and blame was not allowed, people admitted to the following,

Operations: "We have been sleeping at this particular control panel for years. It is not intentional. It is almost unavoidable. It's one of the most difficult assignments in the plant, especially at night."

Supervision: "We knew that our operators were sleeping at the control panel, but we never did anything to correct it. Everyone knew. No one did anything about it."

Instrument techs: "We disconnected the audible alarms that would have alerted the operators to the problem. They kept tripping prematurely, and we didn't have time to troubleshoot them."

Area management: "We had no idea any of this was occurring right under our noses. We are consumed in meetings rather than being dedicated to our people."

Each of the above issues was addressed, and the operator who was terminated was rehired. The problem is people, but the answer is also people. The difference between the two must come through understanding, learning, and growing. That operator and everyone involved now understand why they experienced that fire. They all played a part, and they all needed to learn. This is the basis for organizational performance. People are the answer, but we must take a different approach to failure.

The most helpful tool for achieving this type of understanding is the Latent Cause Analysis process. This approach helps organizations understand why things go wrong and can provide an antidote to blame. Rather than focusing solely on physical or systemic causes, it requires people at all levels to take responsibility and ask themselves: "What did I do to contribute to this problem, and what can I do to fix it?" Sincerely answering these questions will fundamentally change a person by instilling in them a desire to understand and a reluctance to blame. Failsafe believes this is the most effective way to acknowledge human error and improve the way we do business and life.

