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## Focus on Solving Problems – Set Aside Blame

Your organization should put energy into problem solving. Deming would approve.

We have developed into a blaming society. Mom blames the older siblings when problems arise in the household. Teacher finds someone to blame when things go out of control in the class room. Management and unions blame each other. Political parties use blame in the extreme, and it is disruptive, subordinating national goals under political aims. Spouses unfortunately play the blame game to the destruction of marriages and families. Experts in many realms teach that making things better should be the focus of our energies. The barrier to this is blame.

Blame is the process of assigning responsibility for an event on another. Various emotions drive the blame, and it results in loss of face, embarrassment, fear and anger. It is unpleasant for all parties concerned. The language of blame and problem solving is distinctively different, and a study of real life situations could be constructive for managers hoping to rise above the cauldron of anger and blame. A manager may assign responsibility for a task without assigning blame. And you can hold someone accountable for results without blaming. The distinction is in the language and tone of the message. Robert Bacal, consultant from Casselman, Ontario gives some helpful scenarios:

Blame &ndash; &lsquo;If you had done your work on time, we wouldn&rsquo;t be in this mess.&rsquo;

Factual statement &ndash; &lsquo;Your responsibility is to fulfill your work commitments on time. When your work wasn&rsquo;t available, I had to speak to the boss without the information I needed.&rsquo;

The factual statement is the prelude to problem solving. The blame statement is bound to cause sparks to fly. Problem solving is focused on the present and the future. The goal is fixing a present problem and seeking to prevent it in the future.

Problem solving lacks the emotions of blaming, and it is less personal and more systems oriented. The problem solving process needs an understanding of the past and an understanding of the root causes of issues. It may include:

- &bull; Clarifying the problem, goal or purpose,
- &bull; Collecting data, gain understanding,
- &bull; Diagnose, identify sources of problem,

- Formulate hypotheses for cause,
- Formulate a strategy for solution,
- Evaluate, collect more data.

Note that assigning of blame is not part of the process. Neither is there room for emotional upheavals. Problem solving is a methodical process, and Deming and his followers have provided much of the foundational on problem solving. TQM, the quality system of modern companies, provides the structure and knowledge on how to solve problems the efficient way. Whether you are pursuing continuous improvement, organizational reinforcement, or improving performance on various levels, the issue of blame vs. problem solving is critical.

When problems occur, such as lack of performance, failure to meet commitments, etc, and you need to intervene, use problem solving. Begin by trying to understand the problem and underlying issues with the employee. Poor performance can be the result of boredom, stress, limited skills or knowledge, or other systems issues such as equipment or authority. Working with the employee to attack the root problem will help avoid it in the future. The focus is on the future. Additional scenarios by Robert Bacal:

## Blame

Mgr: John, you should have let me know this work would not be ready for the meeting. We all looked stupid in front of the boss, and it's going to take us time to recover.

John: I tried to tell you, but you were on vacation. And I forgot. You are very hard to get a hold of, you know.

Mgr: You could have called me at home.

John: I didn't want to bother you. You said not to call unless it was urgent.

The manager attacks, and the employee defends. This could end up with attacks flying back and forth. The situation is not pleasant. Now look at how it could have gone:

## Problem Solving

Mgr: John, I was expecting to have the brief from you before my meeting. We need to figure out what happened and how

to make sure it doesn't happen again. Was I not clear on the date, or was there some other thing that caused us to miss the deadline?

John: Well, I might have misunderstood about the urgency, and when you went on vacation, I didn't want to bother you at home.

Mgr: OK, well, how does this sound. If I need something on an urgent basis, I'll make sure that I tell you in the future. I can also let people know when it is OK to call me at home, so it will be easier. I am also going to ask you to please keep me informed, though on projects like this we won't be embarrassed again. Does this make sense?

John: Sure, and I have a few more suggestions that might help...

You can feel the difference in the dialogues. The problem solving dialogue is neutral aimed at finding where the problem lies and works to prevent reoccurrence. Of course, it may not go this smoothly, and it is oversimplified.

Modeling problem solving in everything you do, staff meetings and other gatherings, is an excellent habit to form. When in a conference, and blame raises its ugly head, redirect with "what can we do, then, in the future?" Seek a problem solving attitude when blame is assigned during a meeting. When you start doing this you begin to create a blameless culture, a responsible culture that discourages empty complaints that will put you in the middle of other people's disputes.

Moving from blame to problem solving is a tough road because many people will not discern the difference. For some, being responsible also means to be at fault. When blame raises its head, return to the problem, ask diagnostic questions, begin to find root causes, and avoid being drawn into the blame game. In time, some people will begin to see the difference and trust that you are not blaming but attempting to fix the problem.