

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Rejecting the Blame Game

by Dr. Mike Armour

Of all the self-imposed impediments to personal growth and effectiveness, none is more crippling than defensiveness and blame. Particularly self-blame.

You've perhaps heard the adage, "It matters not whether you win or lose, but where you place the blame." Unfortunately, that's an easy game to play. It's also thoroughly unproductive.

Blaming is always "backward focused." It majors in what went wrong in the past. And that's why blame serves us so poorly. There's absolutely nothing I can change about the past. Only in the present and the future can I make things different.

Moreover, blame works hand-in-hand with negative internal states. When we start blaming ourselves, we give guilt an open field. When we start blaming others, it's usually a result of becoming defensive. In either event, we are undercutting hope and optimism. That's because we cannot feel hopeful while at the same time feeling guilty or defensive. We simply are not wired that way.

Our inner being is time-driven. Apart from moments of reverie, escapism, fantasy, and the like, we are either focused on the past or the present or the future. Hope, by its very nature, is future-focused. On the other hand guilt is focused on the past and defensiveness on the present. For that reason, whenever we are experiencing guilt or defensiveness, we are not oriented toward the future, where hope resides.

To make matters worse, guilt demoralizes us and defensiveness stokes our fear. They drain our energy. Hope, on the other hand, inspires. It infuses us with energy and chokes out fear.

Wouldn't you prefer internal states that fill you with positive energy instead of states that drain you? I would. And this means learning to short-circuit the tendency to be defensive and to blame. One way to do that is to change the way we look at our "mistakes." Refer to them instead as "unintended outcomes." Then learn to look at them as opportunities to learn. Every unintended outcome is an opportunity either to assess blame or to learn something useful for the future.

Instant Reframes

One of the most helpful habits I'm developing is the practice of reframing negative experiences at the very moment they occur. As it's name implies, "reframing" is about putting a different "frame" around an event so that we feel differently about it. We've all

reframed bad experiences long after they happened. I'm taking the process a step farther. I'm conditioning myself to effect a reframe as soon as things start going wrong. At that very instant I want to ask myself, "What can I learn from this that will benefit me in the future?"

Let me cite a recent example. A marketing call — virtually a cold call to a senior executive — went wrong from the "git-go." Less than a minute into the conversation the man curtly informed me that there was little likelihood he would do business with me. First, he had in-house people who provided the same kinds of services I offer. And second, he only brought in outsiders who were very familiar with his industry. "I don't think you have enough experience in our industry to merit my consideration."

Both his curt tone and his abrupt dismissal immediately fired off a defensive response in me. I actually knew more about his industry than he realized. But I knew that trying to counter his misgivings would likely lead to my defensiveness bleeding through in my tone of voice. If anything good was to come from this call, I needed to quell my defensiveness immediately.

So I quickly said to myself, "I may not make a sale here. But talking with this man could probably teach me a lot about marketing to executives like him in the future." Immediately my internal state became positive. Instead of running negative, defensive energy, I was suddenly curious and inquisitive.

I could hear the tone in my voice change immediately. I could feel my entire body relax. I was ready to learn, even anticipating it. In the end I didn't get his business. But I got something far more valuable. As I relaxed, he responded in kind. Before long he was talking expansively about how I could market myself more effectively to his industry. He closed by inviting me to stay in touch, an invitation that seemed genuine and sincere.

Had I allowed my defensiveness to go unchecked, I'm certain none of those benefits would have accrued. How many sales will I have in the future because of what he gave me?

The Only Ultimate Failure

In their book *The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders*, John Zenger and Joseph Folkman make this telling observation: "Our research confirms that the inability to learn from mistakes is the single greatest cause of failure." I would broaden their wording by substituting "unintended outcomes" for "mistakes."

It wasn't a mistake for me to call that executive. Nor was there a glaring faux pas in my sales pitch. But his brusque response was hardly what I anticipated. It was an unintended outcome. Had I allowed my defensiveness to hold sway, the final outcome would have been negative. Upset at his dismissive treatment, I would have cut the call short, hanging up in a negative state of mind that poisoned the rest of the day.

Instead, the unintended outcome played out positively. I had a wonderful learning experience. For the next few hours my head kept spinning with marketing ideas that his conversation evoked. And all because I chose to "reframe" in the middle of the event itself.

In sum, it's easy to blame, but enriching to learn. Whatever the negative experience, we personally choose whether to play the blame game or the learning game. I've determined to opt for learning, haven't you? Long ago someone said, "The only ultimate failure is failure to learn." Mistakes or no, let's be constantly learning.

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