

# To Encourage Innovation, Eradicate Blame

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**Leaders who take a more constructive approach to failure can begin eliminating the fear, reticence, and inertia that plagues many organizations.**



There is a big difference between identifying the cause of a negative outcome and looking for someone to blame it on. Identifying the cause of a negative outcome is productive. You can use that information to avoid the situation in the future and also help people take responsibility for fixing it and moving on.

Finding fault and assigning blame, on the other hand, creates a situation where people become stuck and paralyzed. It's a negative approach that assumes neglect or malfeasance that requires punishment. This type of attitude produces a risk-averse organization where people play it safe instead of stepping out and trying new ideas.

Now your organization takes on a culture similar to the classic arcade game, Whac-A-Mole, where most employees keep their head down except for the unsuspecting novice who pops his head up only to have the oversized mallet pound him or her back down if their initiative fails. Once an organization develops that type of culture, it is very difficult for innovation to take hold.

We know that the most innovative environments are those where people are allowed to learn from past mistakes, grow, develop, and improve. That's what evolution and innovation look like. That's how Thomas Edison was able to learn from the thousands of times he failed due to using the wrong material for his light bulb filament. Each time, he recognized that he was one step closer to finding the right material.

It's also the approach used by WD-40 Company--manufacturers of the ubiquitous "water displacement" product of the same name--whose closely guarded formula was discovered on the 40th try back in 1953.

As CEO Garry Ridge has describes it, part of WD-40's ongoing success with innovation can be traced back to a culture where employees share the positive and negative outcomes of any situation. As Ridge explains, "At WD-40 Company, we don't make mistakes. We have learning moments. We give people permission to have a conversation about things that go wrong."

### Three steps for moving forward

When people's fear of making a mistake becomes a problem, you are cutting yourself off from the necessary ingredients for learning and innovation. For leaders interested in creating a culture that sees mistakes as learning opportunities instead of fault-finding exercises, here are three ways to get started.

**Examine your current attitude toward mistakes.** As a company, what's your typical reaction to mistakes and failures? Are they seen as an opportunity to learn or to assign blame? Look at this from an individual aspect also. How are you wired internally? Are you overly critical, or do you learn from your mistakes and move on? It's important to learn from your mistakes, but don't live in the past. If you tend to dwell on negative thoughts about yourself, consider how this negativity might be spilling out into your perceptions of others. Negativity is a habit. Consider the impact.

**Consider your impact as a leader.** What you are doing to encourage people to take risks and try something truly innovative? Are you celebrating the vigor of their pursuit even though the outcome is uncertain? Keeping new ideas alive is hard work. It always takes longer than you think it will, you run into problems, and it very rarely goes as originally planned. Are you recognizing the efforts of people who take risks in spite of the threat of failure?

**Find ways to engage in positive practices as a discipline.** It's so easy for things to turn negative. That's what keeps a lid on so many organizations. As a leader, it's important to move from fault and blame to cause and responsibility. Typically, when something goes wrong, the immediate response is find out who was at fault, punish them, and then bring in someone new to be responsible for moving the organization forward. Why not give your current people the same benefit of the doubt that you would a new person? Instead of assigning blame, look to assign responsibility for moving the organization forward given what was just learned.

Leaders who take this more constructive approach can begin eliminating the fear, reticence, and inertia that plagues many organizations. Develop practices that accentuate the positive and help people feel secure in knowing the organization wants them to step forward and try new things confidently. With practice, you'll see the difference you can make in the generation, pursuit, and adoption of new ideas.

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