

# After the Teambuilding

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Tips for Maximizing Change Efforts

## The Blame Game: A Lose-Lose Proposition

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After the Teambuilding

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*Alice Morton was in a quandary about what to do. All of her training in managing people, projects and research hadn't prepared her for her current situation. She was presented with what seemed to be a simple job: to facilitate a meeting with a cross-section of the entire department. She was supposed to bring people to consensus on the intended results of a project.*

*It shouldn't be terribly difficult, except the personalities in the department seemed to be constantly at odds with each other. It seemed that no matter what happened, someone got upset, put-off, or angry. It was a no-win situation to try to work with these folks. Small groups of people got together after meetings and gossiped about other groups. People were pressured into taking sides. It was enervating to say the least and destructive to the department's goals.*

*"Did you hear what she said!" was the most common comment after a meeting. "Isn't that just like her?" "It's his fault that..." are others. Each person was categorized as belonging to one faction or another and each faction was blamed by another for all the ills of the department.*

*So where is the VP in all this? It depends on who gets to his office first and which faction he identifies with. Drawn into the gossip and backbiting, the VP only perpetuates the problem by listening to issues as they are presented by one group against another. The VP doesn't see the situation clearly (who can?) and is trying his best to remedy it by attributing the problems to one group and trying to fix them.*

*Situations like this come up every day. Everywhere in corporate America, people are blaming others for how things turn out. There are other organizational disabilities, but this one is a killer. It erodes trust, creates silos and factions, imparts*

an atmosphere of secrets, backbiting and closed door policies, and engenders turf wars. The Blame Game actually turns people against each other. It cheapens your organization and makes it less effective. And we are all pawns in this game.

Let's get one thing straight. It takes two to tango and two to play the blame game.

A friend of mine won't accept that. He just came through a divorce, a blame game if ever there was one, and he is positive he did everything he could to make it work. It is HER fault for sure. But for every domineering spouse, there is the doormat spouse. For every alcoholic, there is the enabler. For every whiner, there is an accomodator. For every philanderer, there is the long-sufferer. And not one thinks he or she is playing the game.

But it does take two to tango. Assuming that one person or group is the sole reason that problems exist is a big mistake. Both sides are ALWAYS complicit.

### The Blame Game

What are the components of this game?

1) *The modern-day "fight or flight" response.* Two hundred years ago, we needed weapons or to be fleet of foot to survive in the hunter/gatherer culture. Today, we have different things to protect. Our empires, our reputations, our positions, our dominance in a group. And we have different tools with which to protect them. We use clever language, put-downs, withholding communication, and pulling rank.

2) *Someone who threatens.* Aside from the "your money or your life!" events in which there is an actual threat of bodily harm, mostly it is our opinions, rights and judgements that are threatened. If you voice an opinion which is

ignored, if you are treated with prejudice, or if someone goes around you to get one of your decisions changed, you are likely to feel threatened. Your career, your project or your position might be at stake.

3) *The cycle.* This is the most important part of the blame game because it is where you can stop it. Here is the cycle: Something happens. A blames B for it. B

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blames A (or C) for it. Animosity is created. Something else happens. A blames B, B blames A, and so on. After a time, A is blaming B and vice versa *before* anything happens. They presume the outcome and assign blame. While this is going on, everyone involved looks for evidence supporting his or her side of the story, ignoring the rest. Never is the other side of the story presented, and those who agree on one story are called “friends”.

The worst part of this whole cycle is that everyone feels perfectly justified in doing it. Everyone feels as if someone else is to blame. Nobody says “How did I contribute to this?” But, make no mistake, even the observers play the game when they don’t intervene in this kind of situation.

As a consultant I see it all the time—people frustrated by how everyone else in their group is either self-absorbed or sloppy. When I interviewed one such organization, each group was complaining about how they were thwarted by other groups’ not doing their jobs. It was so bad that each group *expected* below par work from the others. Each group was pointing fingers at other groups and nobody was talking about how they could improve their own work.

### Stopping The Cycle

Anywhere in the cycle you can stop it. But first, it is imperative that you understand a few things.

*Nothing is actually true.* You interpret events that happen through a filter of your own. People believe that what they see or their interpretations of what they see is correct. But eye-witness testimony to the same accident has been shown to be wildly conflicting. Are people lying? No, each person

is interpreting data through his or her own filters and from his or her own perspective.<sup>1</sup>

*We add meaning.* Not only do we see things differently, but we also presume what these things mean. And then we justify our reaction to them because of the meaning we have added.

*Blame and true communication are mutually exclusive.* If people are listening carefully to each other and making sure they really understand what the other person is saying, it is hard to get enmeshed in the cycle.

We are never going to change, really. We will always be human beings which means we will always have our own filters, interpretations and predispositions. Ask any group of people if this is true and they will nod knowingly. But even so, when those same people are threatened, their filters and interpretations and predispositions come into play. They jump to conclusions and try to get everyone to agree with them. Given the automatic nature of this reflex, the blame game is hard to short circuit. Everyone in the department is part of the problem. Those who allow it to go on are just as culpable as anyone.

### What Can I Do?

To be the person who makes a difference, you need to first be clear that it is difficult, but not impossible, to be part of the culture and fight it at the same time. It is much smarter to get someone from the outside to help you. That way you have someone who can see the mechanisms at play without getting swept up in them.

But a consultant can’t be there all the time. For those times here are some simple tools that can help you stop the cycle and get back in action.

1) Figure out what result you are trying to produce with your comments or responses.

*Are you trying to get back at someone? Are you trying to clarify something? Are you trying to show how smart you are?*

2) Make your thinking and reasoning more visible to others by responding to questions and resistance by “walking back” from your statement to the assumptions that helped you to the conclusion you have drawn.

*“Let me explain why I said what I said,” or “We have differing opinions here, let me tell you what mine is based on.” or “This is what*

<sup>1</sup> Peter Senge’s *The Ladder of Inference. The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook.*

*I am trying to do with this response.”*

3) Inquire into others’ thinking and reasoning. Comments that are likely to be misinterpreted can be made clearer.

*“That comment could be taken different ways. Could you explain it more thoroughly?” or “I’m not sure how that related to what we are discussing. Am I missing something?”*

4) Answer the question that is being asked, not the one that is being implied.

*Don’t add a layer of interpretation on potentially difficult situations. When someone asks “Why?” Tell them why. (Don’t answer what you think they are asking.) For example, if you are asked “Why didn’t you do this?” You tell them why you didn’t do it. Don’t add meaning. Mostly, they will then ask the question they really want the answer to. By answering exactly what they asked, you begin to cut through the layers of innuendo and double-speak.*

5) Repeat questions and understand them before you respond. Repeat the answers, too

*Repeating questions makes ensures that the questioner knows you understand him or her. Don’t answer until you agree on the question. Repeating answers is just as useful. This technique is useful with groups and in one-on-one interactions..*

These tools can be practiced. You know what the divisive issues are. You can predict who is going to get upset in a meeting. You know when difficulties will arise. Practice defusing the issues in a controlled environment (e.g., a meeting that you have plenty of time to prepare for or a one-on-one conversation rather than a meeting of a large group). After a time, you will be more comfortable with these techniques, but even when you are a novice, they can make a difference.

### The Most Important Thing!

Have a generous nature. Nobody will ever understand the kind of stress your whole department is under, but somebody must put their personal stresses aside so the department can begin to dig itself out of its predicament.

Don’t blame people for being pulled into the Blame Game. Have compassion for the fact that they are swept up in it. Use your perspective to get people to communicate.

Wholesale culture change is very difficult, but you can affect small-scale change one meeting at a time. *Good luck!*