

Blame vs Gain Behaviours

Introduction

Blame vs Gain Behaviours is a very simple tool that can help managers reflect on their own attitudes and responses to mistakes. As stated in the ALNAP 2002 Annual Review:

“Defensive reasoning’ is one that may have particular relevance to the Humanitarian Sector, with its vocational nature and high levels of personal and professional commitment. Argyris’s work over many years has shown that individuals develop defensive routines to protect themselves from threatening situations, such as ‘critically examining their own role in the organization’. These routines limit their ability to discover ‘how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problem in its own right’. In short they block the ability to learn to see or do things differently...”

The culture of an organisation can serve to reinforce ‘defensive routines’ and inhibit learning. To quote

Argyris (1991) directly:

“... if learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behaviour, identify the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization’s problems, and then change how they act.”

Argyris demonstrated that skilled professionals were particularly good at using defensive reasoning because they had never learned how to learn from failure. At the point that mistakes happen, such people become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the ‘blame’ on anyone and everyone but themselves. This stands in clear opposition to the need for openness and self-critical analysis that is required for effective learning.

A number of ‘blame behaviours’ and ‘gain behaviours’ (Table 1) have been identified (ALNAP, 2002) which can be used by groups to examine and address defensive routines.

Detailed description of the process

- Step 1: Use a flipchart or projector to show the Blame vs Gain Behaviours to the assembled group. Read out each Blame behaviour and the corresponding Gain behaviour, and ask for comments on each one as they are read out.
- Step 2: Ask participants to volunteer examples of when they had been on the receiving end of blame behaviours or gain behaviours, and ask for their reasoning as to why this happened and with what consequences. Capture the points on flipchart sheets. Don’t worry if things build slowly – this is an inherently uncomfortable subject!
- Step 3: Repeat Step 2 for when the participants had demonstrated blame or gain behaviours. Ask for reasons.
- Step 4: Get the group to reflect collectively on whether blame behaviours are always unjustified, or if gain behaviours are always appropriate. Try and get a shared idea on what an appropriate balance would be.

- Step 5: Brainstorm ideas for taking a more balanced approach to dealing with mistakes across the organisation. Consider using Force Field Analysis (Tool 11) to reflect on the forces for and against the required changes.

Table 1: Blame vs Gain Behaviours

Blame behaviours	Gain behaviours
Judging <i>'You were wrong.'</i>	Exploring <i>'What happened?'</i>
Showing emotion <i>'I'm furious with you.'</i>	Remaining calm <i>'Try not to worry about it.'</i>
Reacting to what you think happened <i>'You should have ...'</i>	Finding out exactly what happened <i>'Let's take this one step at a time.'</i>
Blaming people for getting it wrong <i>'You should never have let this happen.'</i>	Focusing on the process that allowed the mistake <i>'What could have been done differently?'</i>
Finding fault <i>'You only have yourself to blame.'</i>	Providing support <i>'This must be difficult for you but don't forget this has happened to us all.'</i>
Focusing on effects <i>'This is going to cause enormous problems for me.'</i>	Focusing on causes <i>'What I want to focus on is all the things that enabled this to happen to us all.'</i>
Assuming the person should feel guilty/be contrite <i>'You really only have yourself to blame.'</i>	Assuming the person wants to learn <i>'What are the main lessons for us?'</i>
Seeing mistakes as something that must be avoided <i>'This must never happen again.'</i>	Seeing mistakes as part of a learning process <i>'We can learn a lot from this.'</i>

Example: Humanitarian managers as learning managers

As part of a three-day training course for an African NGO delivering healthcare services to refugees, the RAPID team facilitated an analysis of blame and gain behaviours adopted by the participants at different points in their operational work. The participants were quite slow to respond to the blame behaviours, because of the inherently uncomfortable nature of the subject matter but then slowly started to debate the issues and the organisational constraints. It was established that blame or gain within the context of the specific organisation was less important than being fair. In particular, when blame behaviour was demonstrated, it was often justified on the basis of repeated mistakes, or the seriousness of the problem that was created by the mistake. Similarly, specific situations such as staff negligence could not be dealt with through such a framework. For some participants whose work was predominantly in conflict zones, there was an admitted difficulty in maintaining a calm and rational perspective towards errors. Finally, the fear of potential donor backlash against serious mistakes was raised as a major reason for blame behaviours.

Sources and further reading

- Argyris, C. (1991) 'Teaching Smart People How To Learn' in Harvard Business Review (May – June). Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.
- Pearn, M., C. Mulrooney and T. Payne (1998) Ending the Blame Culture, Aldershot: Gower Publishing Ltd.