Shifting blame is socially contagious

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Merely observing someone publicly blame an individual in an organization for a problem - even when the target is innocent - greatly increases the odds that the practice of blaming others will spread with the tenacity of the H1N1 flu, according to new research from the USC Marshall School of Business and Stanford University.

Nathanael J. Fast, an assistant professor of management and organization at the USC Marshall School of Business and Larissa Tiedens, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford, conducted four different experiments and found that publicly blaming others dramatically increases the likelihood that the practice will become viral. The reason: blame spreads quickly because it triggers the perception that one's self-image is under assault and must be protected.

The study called "Blame Contagion: The Automatic Transmission of Self-Serving Attributions" is believed to be the first to examine whether shifting blame to others is socially contagious. The results will be published in the November issue of Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.

"When we see others protecting their egos, we become defensive too," says Fast, the study's lead author. "We then try to protect our own self-image by blaming others for our mistakes, which may feel good in the moment." He adds that in the long run, such behavior could hurt one's reputation and be destructive to an organization and further to our society as a whole.
Tiedens said the study didn't specifically look at the impact of hard
economic times, but it undoubtedly makes the problem worse. "Blaming
becomes common when people are worried about their safety in an
organization," she said. "There is likely to be more blaming going on
when people feel their jobs are threatened."

Fast says that when public blaming becomes common practice -
especially by leaders -- its effects on an organization can be insidious
and withering: Individuals who are fearful of being blamed for
something become less willing to take risks, are less innovative or
creative, and are less likely to learn from their mistakes.

"Blame creates a culture of fear," Fast said, "and this leads to a host of
negative consequences for individuals and for groups."

A manager can keep a lid on the behavior by rewarding employees who
learn from their mistakes and by making a point to acknowledge publicly
his or her own mistakes, Fast says. Managers may also want to assign
blame, when necessary, in private and offer praise in public to create a
positive attitude in the workplace.

Or, managers could follow the lead of companies such as Intuit, which
implemented a "When Learning Hurts" session where they celebrated
and learned from mistakes, rather than pointing fingers and assigning
blame. The blame contagion research provides empirical evidence that
such a practice can avoid negative effects in the culture of the
organization.

Anyone can become a blamer, Fast says, but there are some common
traits. Typically, they are more ego defensive, have a higher likelihood
of being narcissistic, and tend to feel chronically insecure.

President Richard Nixon is one example the authors point to in the
study. Nixon harbored an intense need to enhance and protect his self-image and, as a result, made a practice of blaming others for his shortcomings. His former aides reported that this ego-defensiveness pervaded his administration. It was the culture of fear and blame that ultimately led to Nixon's political downfall.

The experiments showed that individuals who watched someone blame another for mistakes went on to do the same with others. In one experiment, half of the participants were asked to read a newspaper article about a failure by Governor Schwarzenegger who blamed special interest groups for the controversial special election that failed in 2005, costing the state $250 million. A second group read an article in which the governor took full responsibility for the failure.

Those who read about the governor blaming special interest groups were more likely to blame others for their own, unrelated shortcomings, compared with those who read about Schwarzenegger shouldering the responsibility.

Another experiment found that self-affirmation inoculated participants from blame. The tendency for blame to spread was completely eliminated in a group of participants who had the opportunity to affirm their self-worth.

"By giving participants the chance to bolster their self-worth we removed their need to self protect though subsequent blaming," says Fast.

The results have particularly important implications for CEOs. Executives and leaders would be wise to learn from such examples, Fast suggests, and instead display behaviors that help to foster a culture of psychological safety, learning, and innovation.