

A R T I C L E S

MUST HEADS ROLL? A CRITIQUE OF AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO SWIFT BLAME

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When mistakes or perceived wrongdoings occur in the workplace, managers—like most human beings—demonstrate the tendency to locate someone to blame, including assigning responsibility and sanctioning perceived wrongdoers for their actions. We highlight that although this response can be motivated by organizational, legal, and psychological factors, blame can be detrimental to the organization and its employees when it occurs in a spontaneous and nondeliberative manner, which we label *swift blame*. We argue that swift blame can involve distorted perceptions and judgment, exacerbate conflict, erode employee engagement, and stifle organizational learning. We further argue that managers have a special responsibility to thoughtfully and carefully consider how they react to perceived wrongdoings. Drawing from dual processing theory of cognition, we propose that managers can respond more effectively by adopting perspectives that slow down these tendencies and promote more thoughtful reactions. To this end we highlight research opportunities for three alternatives to swift blame: (a) a no-blame approach, (b) systems of inquiry and accountability, and (c) mindfulness training.

A patient at City Hospital was given the wrong medication, causing her to go into a coma and die. Elizabeth, the nurse who administered the medication, was immediately placed on paid administrative leave. An investigation brought on by a civil lawsuit some time later revealed that the drug manufacturer that supplied the medication had used almost identical labels for very different medications, and concluded that system errors could easily have contributed to the patient's death. During her leave, Elizabeth developed severe depression and eventually went on permanent stress leave.

Scenes like this play out in different forms every day in workplaces all over the world. Although not often involving loss of life, the process typically involves an error or alleged wrongdoing by an employee that potentially results in perceived or real harm to one or more parties, the organization, or its stakeholders. In response, managers are often swift to assign blame and administer sanctions against those held responsible (Crant & Bateman, 1993). Sanctions can range from formal disciplinary actions such as warnings and dismissals to informal measures such as withholding resources and opportunities, marginalizing, or ostracizing the perceived wrongdoer (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980).

Although the process described above unfolds in a seemingly rational and logical manner, the propensity to blame when something goes wrong

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appears to be “wired” by evolution—a basic process of human social cognition designed to quickly identify and deal with threats in the environment (Cooley, 1964). According to social capital theory, because humans are inveterately social creatures our survival has depended on the ability to work together effectively with others to realize individual goals (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). As such, people have developed a keen sense for efficiently identifying individuals who hinder or frustrate those goals, and for influencing them to do otherwise. Over the ages, blame (and the social sanctions it entails) has become a critical means by which people influence one another to comply with and support their goals (Kelsen, 1943).

As part of a larger toolkit that managers have at their disposal for influencing employees to behave in desired ways, blame also serves numerous practical, legal, and psychological purposes. First, blame provides a rationale for punishing those who violate the social order or undermine organizational efficiency (Weber, 1978). Second, when blame is publicly assigned it can signal to relevant stakeholders that managers are acting in accordance with their legal obligations to do what is in the best interests of the organization by holding people accountable for their misdeeds (Bell & Tetlock, 1989). Third, blame can help managers feel better about themselves by satisfying their own needs to believe that the world is fair and just (Lerner, 1980) and that they are doing the morally right thing (Smith, 2013), and by creating the (sometimes illusory) impression that they are concerned about fairness (Alicke, 2000).

While blame can serve these and other functional ends, it can also produce adverse consequences for organizations and employees, especially when it is assigned reflexively and with little attempt to fully understand the circumstances and context surrounding a mistake or perceived harm (Alicke, 1994). In this paper we label such knee-jerk reactions *swift blame*,¹ and we describe its implications for management practice. The main problem we address in the paper is that, although blame may be a natural and unavoidable process, swift blame can have numerous downsides for organizations and employees. For example, we propose that swift blame can be especially susceptible to inaccurate judgments and distorted beliefs that can lead to

sanctions that violate canons of procedural or distributive justice. Swift blame can impede information flow and organizational learning because of a fear of failure and a resistance to understanding the causes of errors (Khatry, Brown, & Hicks, 2009). Swift blame can also cause managers to overlook alternative solutions to organizational problems (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Swift blame can further stigmatize the blamed party and generate resentment, counterproductive behavior, and disengagement among employees (Sitkin & Bies, 1994).

We highlight how characteristics of modern organizations conspire to motivate swift blame, and we draw on dual processing theory (e.g., Kahneman, 2011, 2013) to argue that spontaneous and automatic blame represents a system 1 mode of thinking. By encouraging system 2 thinking, which involves more deliberate and careful reactions (Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998), managers can potentially reduce swift blame and its drawbacks. Various models of blame exist (e.g., Alicke, 2000; Heider, 1958; Shaver, 2012; Weiner, 2010), and our purpose in this article is not to explicate a new theory of blame. Rather, we seek to highlight the motivators and potential costs of an automatic, unthinking blame response and offer theoretically driven yet actionable solutions to help managers administer blame more effectively.

Although most people will engage in swift blame when things go wrong, we focus on managers for several reasons. First, as argued above, managers can have considerable legal, organizational, and psychological motivations to blame. Second, managers can personify the organization (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). Their actions can ripple throughout the organization and come to represent its culture, which can affect such factors as employee motivation, engagement, performance, and turnover (Schein, 2010). Third, assigning responsibility and sanctioning perceived wrongdoers can trigger procedural justice concerns because managers can simultaneously play multiple roles in their organization—including disputant, judge, and enforcer. Managers can also feel the need to justify their sanctions to others (i.e., their superiors). Thus, given their multiple roles and motivations, the organizational significance of their decisions, and the procedural justice concerns that arise from their decisions, managers hold a special duty to administer blame in a careful and considered manner and respond to errors and perceived wrongdoings in the most functional way possible.

We advance our argument in three parts. First, we define the blame process and elaborate on factors

¹ We use the term *swift blame* as analogous to *swift trust* (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996), which is similarly characterized as an instinctual and reflexive response to one's environment.

present in most workplaces that motivate managerial blame. Second, we argue based on theory and empirical evidence that in most organizational settings, managers are likely to be tempted to engage in swift blame, and we highlight potential costs associated with doing so. Third, we illustrate three perspectives that have the potential to slow down the blame response, allowing space for a more thoughtful and deliberate approach and thereby lessening swift blame's negative consequences. For each perspective, we highlight suggestions for future research.

THE BLAME PROCESS

Two Components of Blame

Numerous writers (e.g., Fincham & Shultz, 1981; Heider, 1958; Shultz, Schleifer, & Altman, 1981; Weiner, 1995) have discussed blame as having two basic components: (a) assigning responsibility to someone for having caused a mistake or perceived harm and (b) holding those deemed blameworthy accountable for their perceived transgressions. Although in everyday language these concepts are used interchangeably, in this article we label the overarching topic as *blame* and its two constituent components as *assigning responsibility* and *sanctioning*, respectively.

Although the two components of blame tend to be sequentially related (i.e., sanctioning perceived wrongdoers follows the assignment of responsibility), they can also occur in reverse order. Managers can engage in a posteriori reasoning (Alicke & Davis, 1989) by assigning responsibility as a way to justify sanctioning decisions to themselves and others (Haidt, 2001; Kelley, 1967). Managers can also experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1954), in which they can deem a party to be especially blameworthy because of the high degree of punishment the party has received (Lerner, 1971).

The two factors of blame can also occur independently. Managers can—and sometimes feel pressure to—dole out harsh punishment to an employee whom they deem to be only remotely blameworthy for a mistake or perceived harm, sometimes to signal organizational norms (O'Reilly & Weitz, 1980). On the other hand, managers can respond forgivingly to an employee whom they determine is 100% responsible for a mistake or perceived harm. Moreover, sanctions can assume any number of forms, from the private and relatively benign to the public and objectively severe. In the first instance, managers can express blame by quiet

rebuke or perhaps just “making a note in the file” of the perceived wrongdoer. In the latter case, managers can issue a public reprimand or possibly even terminate the perceived wrongdoer. A panoply of options exist, and managers can have broad discretion to act in ways they think best befit the situation.

Importantly, both components of blame involve subjective perceptions, including judgments about causality, intentionality, and personal responsibility (see discussion of levels of responsibility by Heider, 1958), among other considerations. Both components are affected by factors such as the foreseeability of the perceived harm (Karlovac & Darley, 1988; Lagnado & Channon, 2008); its controllability and the intentions behind it (Alicke, 2000; Heider, 1958; Maselli & Altrocchi, 1969); the causal relationship between the impugned actions and the perceived violation (Brickman, Ryan, & Wortman, 1975; Johnson, Ogawa, Delforge, & Early, 1989); the severity of the perceived wrongdoing (Alicke & Davis, 1989; Baron & Hershey, 1988); the justifiability of the impugned actions and other mitigating circumstances (Mikula, 2003; Snyder & Higgins, 1988); and even the personal characteristics of the perceiver (Berg & Vidmar, 1975; Hamilton, 1978, 1980; Nemeth & Sosis, 1973; Sosis, 1974), the victim (Alicke, Davis, & Pezzo, 1994; Landy & Aronson, 1969), and the wrongdoer (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Efran, 1974; Sigall & Ostrove, 1975). In summary, the attribution and administration of blame is a complex process and can vary considerably according to the circumstances.

What Motivates Managerial Blame?

Numerous organizational, legal, and psychological factors can motivate managers to engage in blame.

Organizational factors. Organizations create and impose managerial role mandates as well as disciplinary policies for various mistakes and perceived infractions. Hence, managers can feel required to assign responsibility and sanction perceived wrongdoers as a result of organizational expectations (Butterfield, Trevino, & Ball, 1996). If managers fail to comply, they may themselves be subject to blame (Knobe, 2003). Moreover, as leaders of the organization, managers have an implied obligation to expediently defend and uphold the legitimacy of the rules that define it. In so doing, managers not only act to satisfy the formal expectations associated with their role, but they also send a signal to other would-be wrongdoers that continued violations of the organizational order—and

therefore challenges to its existing power structure—will not go unaddressed. Further, by assigning blame, managers create the perception that they have agency, thereby amplifying their power over the person being blamed and reinforcing their own authority in the organization (Weber, 1978). As such, blame can be an important managerial tool for maintaining structure—and stability—within an organization. Doing so promptly and efficiently can be viewed as a signal of the manager's competence.

Legal factors. Various legal factors can heighten managers' need to blame and sanction offenders. Every society that functions in accordance with the rule of law has an evolving set of statutes and regulations that formally codify the standards of behavior expected of its citizenry. These include laws and regulations across a wide range of legal domains—including criminal, employment, human rights, and environmental laws, to name a few. Such laws and regulations are highly relevant to organizations because they tell managers what they can, cannot, and sometimes must do in response to perceived violations. For example, in some jurisdictions managers have a positive legal duty under human rights legislation to take reasonable measures to respond to complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace (England, 2008). This is not a matter of managerial discretion. That which can be considered "reasonable" varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but can require that wrongdoers be identified and subjected to remedial measures. As a result, whether for good or bad, managers are sometimes legally required to engage in blame. Not complying with the law could result in the manager's professional and personal liability.

Even when blame is not formally required by law, managers can feel compelled by nonbinding legal instruments to identify and hold accountable perceived wrongdoers. For example, Agenda 21—the highly influential but nonbinding United Nations action plan for sustainable development—calls on business organizations to abide by a breathtakingly broad range of social and environmental principles (Sitarz, 1993), which can also be reflected in an organization's corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and codes of conduct. While not strictly required to do so by law, managers can feel obligated or possibly even empowered to identify and hold to account perceived violators of such principles.

Psychological factors. Assigning blame and sanctioning offenders are more than tools of organizational and legal mandate; blame is also an

"inherently psychological construct" (Alicke, 2000, p. 556). Heider's (1958) classic work, for example, viewed blame as a cognitive process by which people solve everyday problems and become more efficacious in their interactions with their environments. He described individuals as naive psychologists attempting to determine the causes of both positive and negative outcomes.

Managerial blame serves numerous other psychological functions. First, according to self-affirmation theory, blaming others is a self-serving technique by which managers can maintain a positive self-concept (Crocker & Park, 2004). Said differently, blaming others helps managers feel better about themselves. When a threat to the self-concept emerges—such as a failure in the workplace—managers are commonly motivated to assign responsibility to factors other than themselves (e.g., their subordinates) for that failure (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Second, blame is associated with negative affect (Alicke, 2000; Weiner, 1995) and can serve as a kind of emotional pressure valve by helping managers alleviate the anger they experience when perceived harms go unaddressed (Lerner et al., 1998). Third, blame and the social sanctions it entails can help restore managers' sense of social justice, which can tip out of balance when they perceive violations of the organizational order (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson 2002), and uphold the widely held yet illusory belief that the world is fair and just (Lerner, 1980). Thus, assigning responsibility and sanctioning perceived offenders serves to comfort managers by assuring them that there is a moral balance to the world they inhabit (Heider, 1958) and that they have a certain agency in upholding that balance (Kelley, 1972; Wortman et al., 1975).

In summary, organizational, legal, and psychological factors can all motivate managerial blame. These factors, however, are likely to vary in their importance to swift blame. For example, unless there is a statute or regulation that requires unusually swift action, subjectively perceived pressure and psychological factors have the potential to weigh more heavily than legal factors. Moreover, these factors are likely to interact with one another in fostering swift blame. Ask, Granhag, and Rebelius (2011), for instance, found that social norms, such as goal activation, sped up criminal investigators' information processing, leading them to overlook important information when processing criminal cases. Esnard and Dumas (2013) provided participants a scenario in which a child was sexually abused. Participants with a high need for closure perceived victims as less credible and

guiltier as compared to individuals with a low need for closure.

SWIFT BLAME AS SYSTEM 1 THINKING

Recent theorizing and research on human cognition suggests the presence of two information-processing systems in the human brain (e.g., Kahneman, 2011, 2013). System 1 thinking is characterized by thoughts, ideas, feelings, and response tendencies that are produced automatically by a particular context without any specific intent. System 1 responses are swift and involuntary. They occur with no apparent effort in spite of all the computation that can be involved in making judgments. Alicke (2000) similarly proposed that “blame attributions are influenced by relatively unconscious, spontaneous evaluations of the mental, behavioral, and consequence elements” (p. 558). These responses are believed to have aided in human survival.

System 2 thinking, in contrast, is planned, effortful, and intentional. System 2 responses involve effort, control, and inhibition, which can take time and consume resources. System 2 thinking can override system 1 responses by facilitating rule-based, rational, and analytical thought. An important characteristic of system 2, however, is that it operates by the principle of least effort. As such, whenever possible people tend to avoid system 2 thinking (Kahneman, 2011).

A drawback of system 1 processing concerns “associative coherence,” which refers to the tendency for humans to construct representations of various aspects of the world in such a way that they are consistent with one another. Associative coherence has many manifestations, including a misunderstanding of how the mind and the world work (Kahneman, 2013). For example, individuals tend to consider that their beliefs arise out of reasoning, and that their preferences, opinions, and conclusions are the result of a reasoned and rational process. Kahneman (2011) pointed out and provided considerable empirical evidence, however, that individuals commonly believe evidence and arguments because they are consistent with their a priori opinions and beliefs, not the other way around. Importantly, Kahneman (2013) argued that “unless we slow ourselves down by system 2, we are going to be incorrect” (p. 1337). We extend this reasoning to managerial blaming and elaborate on how swift blame—a manifestation of system 1 thinking—can have negative implications for managerial decision making and organizational function.

Problems With Swift Blame in Managerial Decision Making

The first component of blame—assigning responsibility for a perceived wrongdoing—involves a complex array of cognitive and affective processes that can lead to inaccurate perceptions and, in consequence, inappropriate decisions (Alicke, 1994). As explained above, this is an important concern for managers in particular because their decisions can have far-reaching impacts on the organization and its employees (relative to decisions by employees who do not have such organizational influence).

Alicke (2000, p. 558) argued that swift blame processes, which he labeled negative spontaneous evaluations, can contribute to a *blame-validation* assessment: “When a blame-validation mode is engaged, observers review structural linkage evidence in a biased manner by exaggerating the actor’s volitional or causal control, by lowering their evidential standards for blame, or by seeking information to support their blame attribution.” Inaccuracies can stem from the fact that blame often follows from a morally laden judgment that occurs automatically and unthinkingly (Alicke, 2000; Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Hepp, 2009; Lind, 2001).

Taylor (2012) argued, however, that unreflective moral judgments can be problematic for at least three reasons. First, they can lead people to make judgments about the wrongdoer’s essential character rather than his or her behavior. As a result, the wrongdoer is viewed as a bad person as opposed to a person who has behaved badly. This is an important distinction because the latter can be corrected with coaching and training but the former cannot, leaving the manager with fewer options to address the behavior (Latham, 2009). Second, moral judgments are akin to pointing a finger at the wrongdoer, thereby removing the blamer and other factors from responsibility for the wrongdoing. Again, this perspective limits the manager’s options for correcting the error. Third, consistent with system 1 thinking, moral judgments involve a primitive capacity that can be fraught with emotion, biases, and distortion. According to appraisal theory, such automatic judgments trigger affective reactions that stimulate further efforts to interpret the situation in an attempt to derive meaning from it (Lazarus, 1991). Such affect-driven efforts, in turn, can set into motion a domino trail of perceptions, judgments, actions, and reactions that are fraught with the potential for inaccuracies and even harm.

As a manifestation of system 1 thinking, swift blame can involve any number of heuristic processes.

Heuristics refer to cognitive shortcuts that simplify the task of assessing probabilities and making predictions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Heuristics are indispensable for distilling meaning from large amounts of information. Indeed, managers could not function effectively without them (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999). However, heuristics are not without limitations. Although they accommodate quick, easy, and convenient judgments, they can attenuate the search for new information (Simon, 1991), leave assumptions and preconceptions unchecked, and provide managers with a comforting illusion of certitude (Griffin & Tversky, 1992). Accordingly, when determining accountability, heuristics can prevent managers from conducting a full and proper investigation that could provide them with a fuller and more accurate view of the mistake or perceived infraction, the circumstances that led to it, the parties involved, and potential resolutions. In short, heuristics can lead managers to blame perceived wrongdoers without complete information.

Not only can heuristics and intuitive judgments result in incomplete information, but worse, they can give rise to perceptions and judgments that are distorted or outright wrong. A range of cognitive biases can influence managers' judgment. First, managers are subject to a self-serving bias by which they are more likely to blame negative events on others rather than themselves, regardless of whether or not this is appropriate (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Second, as argued above, managers can draw inferences about the personality traits of employees based on behaviors that can otherwise be explained by the contexts in which they occur (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones, 1979). This bias can lead managers to ignore contextual information that may be important in locating responsibility and administering sanctions. Third, managers can be influenced by the negativity bias, which can lead them to overestimate the gravity of a mistake or perceived harm and react accordingly (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), such as by punishing an employee too severely. Finally, managers' judgments can be warped by any number of prejudices or stereotypes (Donovan, 2007; Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010; Kerr, 1978), particularly when under time pressure (Fazio, 1990). These and other cognitive biases can lead managers to attribute undue levels of blame to employees who might only be partly (or worse, not at all) responsible for the perceived harm.

While the rationality managers deploy in assigning blame is necessarily bounded (Kahneman, 2003), their subsequent response—the decision to punish

a perceived wrongdoer—is also not a purely cognitive one. Rather, it is associated with a host of negative moral emotions including anger, contempt, and disgust (Haidt, 2003). Weiner (1995) argued that “independent of context, responsibility is affectively neutral, whereas blame conveys emotional negativity” (p. 14). Emotions can have an enduring effect on punishment decisions (Andrade & Ariely, 2009). For example, negative moral emotions can increase the perceived severity of any particular harm. This perceptual skew is problematic, as both the assignment of responsibility and the level of sanction are positively associated with the perceived severity of harm (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Accordingly, managers can treat perceived wrongdoers more harshly than might be warranted, and can choose any of a number of informal standards by which to assess blame inconsistently and at their whim.

Problems With Swift Blame for Organizational Functioning

In addition to distorting managers' perceptions and decisions, swift blame can have at least three downsides for effective organizational functioning. First, employees on the receiving end of blame can experience a host of negative emotions, including shame, guilt, fear, and anger (Sitkin & Bies, 1994). Such emotions tend to trigger rumination, aggression, and retaliation (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Tripp & Bies, 2010), especially when the accused perceives that the blame is unwarranted (Kulik & Brown, 1979). For example, in the opening vignette to this paper, City Hospital should not be surprised that Elizabeth filed a lawsuit. Theory and research also suggest that blame can inhibit or override compassion among those who make this attribution (Lazarus, 2000), which can damage relationships among organizational members (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Lilius et al., 2008). Being the victim of blame can trigger defensiveness, thereby setting off a downward spiral of incivility and interpersonal conflict that erodes trust (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Loss of trust, in turn, can threaten individual and organizational performance because of the need to expend resources to continually cover one's back (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2009; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998).

A cycle of blame and retaliation can spread beyond individuals to teams and workgroups (Stuewig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, & McCloskey, 2010). Indeed, if blame becomes endemic, it can weave its way into an organization's culture (Arvey & Ivancevich,

1980). The result can be a “blame culture,” characterized by attitudes and norms of behavior that display a marked unwillingness to take risks or assume responsibility for mistakes (Khatri et al., 2009). When things go awry in a blame culture the first goal is to find a culprit rather than constructively address the underlying issues (Dingwall & Hillier, 2015). This can be seen in such phenomena as “blamestorming,” which Branwyn (1997) described as sitting around in a group, discussing why a deadline was missed or a project failed and identifying a scapegoat—leading to fear, finger pointing, and hostility among employees as well as inefficiencies for the organization.

Not only can the negative emotions associated with swift blame harm employees’ psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and quality of work life (Catino, 2009), they can also take a toll on human resources. According to affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), negative workplace events generate unpleasant emotions, which affect employee attitudes and behaviors. Blame can lead to interpersonal conflict and hard feelings (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001; Jordan & Troth, 2004). Negative feelings in the workplace can reduce job satisfaction (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000) and increase both absenteeism (Smith & Lazarus, 1993) and turnover (Porter & Steers, 1973)—especially when the underlying conflict is with a supervisor (Frone, 2000).

High turnover can be costly on its own, but especially so when it is associated with poorly managed blame. On one hand, if poorly managed blame increases firings, an organization is more likely to be sued for wrongful dismissal. On the other hand, if blame increases “voluntary” turnover, an organization might still be sued for “constructive dismissal”—that is, for fostering a toxic work environment where no reasonable person would be expected to continue working (Vettori, 2011). Whether or not an organization successfully defends itself in any particular case, it can incur significant costs in doing so. Either way, unnecessary turnover directly increases recruitment and training costs and hurts morale (Kerr, Koppelmeier, & Sullivan, 1951).

A hidden cost of swift blame and the conflict it breeds can include potential damage to the organization’s reputation as a place of work. Reputation matters when it comes to human resource functions such as recruitment (Cable & Graham, 2000). All things being equal, if an organization develops a reputation as an unfavorable place of work, it is likely to have greater difficulty recruiting and

retaining employees. Indeed, prospective employees might well even accept lower pay to work elsewhere (Cable & Turban, 2003). In a competitive labor market in which person–organization fit is increasingly important for prospective employees and where the best candidates have other options (Cable & Judge, 1996), it makes sense for organizations to avoid a reputation as a place of work where swift blame is endemic.

Swift blame can also stifle organizational learning. As mentioned above, blame cultures tend to focus more on identifying and dealing with those who have committed a mistake or misdeed than constructively addressing the underlying issues. This in turn compromises psychological safety, diminishing learning and performance (Edmondson, 1999). Research in health care (e.g., Singer et al., 2009) and aviation (e.g., Ron, Lipshitz, & Popper, 2006) has shown that a blame culture hinders organizations’ ability to learn, improve, and overcome errors. This is in part because the tendency to blame leads employees to hide mistakes rather than openly admitting to them and seeking assistance from others (Khatri et al., 2009). This not only can deprive managers and employees of the opportunity to learn from their own as well as others’ mistakes or misdeeds, but it also can deprive the organization of ideas on how its systems might be improved.

Workplaces such as these are not conducive to the free flow of creative ideas (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008). In such finger-pointing environments, even when mistakes *are* uncovered the ensuing witch hunt can obscure the need to address deeper underlying issues. In other words, if a *person* is to blame for the mishap then it can be inferred that the *system itself* does not require modification (Haunschild & Sullivan, 2002; Perrow, 1984; Sagan, 1993). Such assumptions and practices do not befit a learning organization (Senge, 1990).

In summary, assigning responsibility and sanctioning wrongdoers is a deeply ingrained human reaction that is stimulated to greater or lesser degrees in organizations and can even be required by the environments in which they operate. While blame can serve an important and indeed valuable organizational function, swift blame is more likely to be founded on biased perceptions and lead to ill-informed decisions. As such, managers can administer blame in such a way that is far astray from what wise counsel might otherwise advise. Swift blame not only can undermine individual well-being and group cohesion, but it also can infiltrate organizational culture, which can generate considerable

strain and, by extension, negatively affect the bottom line.

ALTERNATIVES TO SWIFT BLAME

The fast pace of business might tempt organizations and managers to dismiss the downsides of swift blame as a necessary and even unavoidable cost of doing business. However, this need not be the case. What then can managers do to reduce the instinct to swiftly assign responsibility and punish perceived wrongdoers, and to better manage blame in the workplace? Because blame is the reflexive product of deeply embedded cognition, dual processing theory suggests that managers and organizations would be advised to understand system 1 thinking and its potential downfalls, and to take steps to address perceived wrongdoings in ways that foster system 2 thinking. That is, techniques and systems that suspend or at least delay snap judgments—and, conversely, that increase conscious deliberation—offer promising alternatives to swift blame. Because the pressures to blame stem from organizational, legal, and psychological factors, we propose actionable strategies to address each of these potential sources of swift blame: (a) a no-blame approach in organizations, (b) systems of inquiry and accountability from the theory and practice of law, and (c) mindfulness training for individuals. We summarize how each approach addresses each factor in Table 1 and identify opportunities for future research associated with each approach.

No-Blame Approach in Organizations

As noted above, numerous organizational factors can contribute to swift blame, which we view as system 1 thinking. A “no-blame” approach is one way to foster system 2 thinking (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Originally adopted by “high-reliability organizations,” where errors can be disastrous or even fatal (e.g., emergency response units, aeronautics firms, and health-care organizations), a no-blame approach is characterized by a constructive attitude toward error that shifts the focus away from identifying and correcting individual mistakes or wrongdoing to identifying and correcting systemic flaws that contributed to the error in the first place (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003). In short, organizations with a no-blame approach view errors not as reasons to discipline and punish but rather as opportunities to learn and grow.

TABLE 1
Summary of How Each Perspective Addresses the Factors That Motivate Swift Blame

Motivation for swift blame	Perspective
Organizational factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job requirements • Formal policies • Codes of conduct • Performance pressures 	No-blame approach Reduces the perceived need for swift blame by formally requiring that mistakes and perceived harms be studied and addressed in a fundamentally different way. The goal is to learn about system errors by studying mistakes to prevent them and other errors from occurring in the future.
Legal factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws and regulations • Normative standards 	Legal systems of inquiry Do not change legal duties per se, but can help ensure that violations of normative standards are managed in a more thoughtful, less biased manner. Help increase procedural and restorative justice.
Psychological factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive self-concept • Emotion regulation • Fairness concerns • Sense of agency 	Mindfulness training Diminishes the need to bolster self-concept by enhancing self-esteem and core self-evaluations. Reduces defensiveness and emotional reactivity. Attenuates retaliation to perceived injustice.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2011) described three key aspects of a no-blame approach. First, managers encourage employees and reward them for reporting errors (see also Provera, Montefusco, & Canato, 2010). Employees who report errors are shielded from blame, especially if the organization avoids adverse consequences as a result. By way of example, in some health-care organizations nurses are not penalized for certain errors provided that they report the errors themselves within a specified period (Taylor, 2004). Second, the reports employees generate trigger investigations and analyses into the circumstances surrounding the mistakes and possible contributing causes. Those who are implicated in an error are actively involved. Third, managers identify subsequent actions to remedy the problem, circulate guidelines for the prevention of similar errors in the future, and consistently communicate to employees how these steps reinforce the organization’s objectives (Roberts, Bea, & Bartles, 2001).

A no-blame approach reduces swift blame by altering the organizational culture away from the tendency to blame toward one of striving to learn how mistakes occur. Although a no-blame approach can

have benefits, it is not without limitations. For example, a no-blame approach can require significant resources to implement in terms of added time for teams to collectively make sense of errors (Reason, 1997). Also, even in high-reliability organizations with adequate resources, in certain instances blaming individuals for their mistakes might be appropriate—such as when specific individuals exhibit particularly egregious behaviors within an already well-defined system. A no-blame environment does not endorse the notion that all mistakes are permitted as long as they are declared (Catino, 2008). For example, it would not necessarily be appropriate to absolve a hospital worker of responsibility for negligent disregard of hand sanitization rules after years of intensive efforts to improve hand sanitization policies, procedures, and resources (Wachter & Pronovost, 2009). A certain tension always exists between improving the quality of the system and upholding standards of behavior of the individuals within that system (Walton, 2004). Thus, a no-blame approach might not be appropriate in all contexts.

In terms of future research, we propose that a no-blame approach can be adapted and applied to a wider range of organizational settings than is currently the case. Although managers might not view their organizations as functioning in a high-reliability context, factors such as the increased pace of work, the goal of providing an error-free product or service, and the enhanced role of social media in disciplining organizations all conspire to create conditions where errors can affect an organization's success and even threaten its survival. Hence, under these conditions, a no-blame approach could be more important than ever to effective management.

A second avenue for future research would be the efficacy of managers applying a no-blame approach to units within their organizations where mistakes occur frequently or are especially costly. For example, in light of the \$50 million packaged meat recall at Maple Leaf Foods in 2008 (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009), meat-packaging companies might consider applying a no-blame approach to quality control operations. A no-blame approach might not be required for other parts of an organization with less potential for disaster, such as office administration.

Systems of Inquiry and Accountability From the Theory and Practice of Law

In terms of addressing the tendency to engage in swift blame to satisfy legal requirements, we propose

that system 2 thinking can be fostered via legal systems of inquiry and accountability when perceived wrongdoing occurs. Systems of inquiry and accountability are guidelines and principles that can help managers systematically assign responsibility and determine appropriate sanctions (e.g., Leventhal, 1980). This perspective is intended to give people a fair hearing before blame is allocated, and hence can slow down the blaming process by systematically considering criteria that contribute to a person's being held accountable for a wrongdoing. Such principles and practices have been developed and refined in legal systems over time, in part to encourage greater analysis and deliberation of the issues at play.

Assessing responsibility for a mistake or perceived harm can be improved, for instance, by establishing guidelines founded in the law of tort and negligence (Osborne, 2015). Such systems of inquiry consider whether or not a perceived wrongdoer should be deemed blameworthy in the first place, and can include the following actionable considerations:

- **Foreseeability:** Was the mistake or harm a reasonably foreseeable result of the actions (or omissions) of the perceived wrongdoer?
- **Caution:** Did the perceived wrongdoer exercise the reasonable caution that a prudent person would have exercised under similar circumstances?
- **Causation:** But for the actions (or omissions) of the perceived wrongdoer, would the mistake or harm have occurred in any event?
- **Contribution:** Did another party (including the aggrieved) contribute to the mistake or harm in such a way that it was a reasonably foreseeable result of his or her actions (or omissions)?
- **Defenses:** Are there any reasonable grounds on which to excuse the actions (or omissions) of the perceived wrongdoer? For example, were the impugned actions (or omissions) necessary for some important and legitimate reason?

We propose, however, that care must be taken from the outset to examine the legal implications of the mistake or perceived harm itself. For example, while an infringement of an organization's internal rules (e.g., dress code violations, tardiness, improper expense submissions, etc.) should initiate an investigation by managers themselves, violations of public laws and/or regulations (e.g., physical assault, environmental despoliation, securities fraud, etc.) might trigger the need to alert and consult relevant public authorities or regulatory agencies. The more

a mistake or perceived harm implicates statutory or regulatory requirements, the more constrained managers are in deploying their internal systems of inquiry, and the more they will have to adhere to external regulatory systems.

Once managers determine that an employee is blameworthy, they then need to decide on an appropriate remedy. We propose that managers can draw on the purposes and principles of sentencing from criminal law. While these can vary by jurisdiction, it is widely accepted that the goals of sentencing include (a) denunciation, (b) deterrence, (c) protection of society, (d) rehabilitation, and (e) reparation (Ruby, Chan, & Hasan, 2012). The remedial measures managers apply to employees whom they have deemed blameworthy should serve similar purposes. That is, a remedial measure should seek to (a) denounce the mistake or infraction as contrary to the organization's values and policies; (b) deter employees from making similar mistakes or violations in the future; (c) protect other employees, the organization, and indeed society at large from the consequences of similar mistakes or infractions in the future; (d) help employees recover from their mistakes or misdeeds and avoid future violations; and (e) encourage employees to repair, to the extent possible, the damage they have caused.

In addition to such considerations, we propose that managers can apply key principles of sentencing adopted by advanced criminal legal systems (Ruby et al., 2012), adapted to an employment context. These include the following:

- Proportionality: A remedy should be proportionate to the gravity of the mistake or infraction, as well as the degree of responsibility of the wrongdoer.
- Parity: A remedy should be similar to other measures taken for similar mistakes or infractions made by others under similar circumstances.
- Step-up: A remedy should be more serious than previous measures given to the same employee for the same or a substantially similar mistake or infraction.
- Restraint: Any and all alternatives to dismissal that are reasonable under the circumstances should be considered. Dismissal should be an option of last resort.
- Intentionality: A remedy should be less severe if the mistake or violation was committed unintentionally and more severe if it was deliberate.
- Breach of trust: A remedy should be more severe if the employee was in a special position of power or trust within the organization.
- Training: If the mistake or infraction was attributable to ignorance, substance abuse, or mental health issues, the remedy should involve appropriate training, counseling, or treatment to mitigate the risk that the same mistake will be repeated.
- Mitigating factors: If the employee (a) accepted responsibility through word or deed, (b) demonstrated meaningful insight into the mistake or wrongdoing, and/or (c) expressed an attitude of genuine contrition or remorse, the remedy should be less severe.

In terms of future research, we propose that these steps are likely to result in higher perceived fairness not only among those accused, but also among third-party observers, such as the co-workers of the accused party. Future research might identify which of these steps explains the most variance in fairness perceptions among the accused and third parties. We also propose that the more serious the mistake or infraction, the more managers are likely to resort to swift blame as a way to deal with a perceived infraction. This is because larger threats tend to trigger a stronger fight or flight response (Kahneman, 2011). Moreover, the more serious the potential consequences to the employee, the more earnestly managers should take such considerations into account.

A straightforward way for organizations to encourage their managers to do so might be to create a checklist with the aforementioned considerations to ensure that managers more systematically consider a perceived wrongdoing from multiple perspectives before ascribing responsibility. If it is determined that sanctions are warranted, organizations could ask their managers to respond to a series of open-ended questions adopted from the principles of sentencing to encourage a deliberate, reasoned, transparent, and well-balanced response. Such a system would not only slow down swift blame, but it would also create a paper trail that—should a dispute go to the courts—evidences a decision-making process that reflects the same considerations the courts themselves use in their own deliberations. These processes are also likely to enhance employee perceptions of procedural justice and assure employees that their mistakes will not be judged hastily and that their rights will be protected.

Mindfulness Training for Individuals

A way to address the psychological factors underlying swift blame, foster system 2 thinking, and encourage more thoughtful responses to workplace errors is to consider mindfulness training for managers and employees (for a review, see Kay & Skarlicki, 2017). Mindfulness is the self-regulation of attention on present-moment experience with an open, curious, and accepting attitude (Bishop et al., 2004). Research shows that organizations and their employees can avail themselves of the benefits of mindfulness through training (e.g., Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013) as well as employee selection (Reb, Narayanan, & Chaturvedi, 2014).

Empirical research highlights a number of reasons why mindfulness training is likely to buffer managers from the perils of swift blame. First, mindfulness is positively associated with self-esteem (Randal, Pratt, & Bucci, 2015), favorable core self-evaluations (Kong, Wang, & Zhao, 2014), and psychological well-being, which entails a healthy measure of self-acceptance (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, to the extent that swift blame can be triggered by the need to preserve or enhance managers' self-concept, mindfulness and the positive self-concept associated with it might serve to attenuate the inclination to engage in swift blame from the outset.

Second, mindfulness has broadly beneficial effects on one's emotional experience. This is important because, as explained above, blame is often associated with and preceded by anger (Weiner, 1986). Mindfulness dampens the onset of emotions and shortens the time they take to run their course (Williams, 2010). Researchers have found that mindfulness training stimulates neurological changes that can help managers better deal with emotions under stress (Davidson et al., 2003). Even short periods of mindfulness training have been shown to result in less affective reactivity and emotional volatility (Arch & Craske, 2006). Accordingly, mindfulness training could be helpful in managing the affective and emotional reactions that can lead to swift blame.

Third, mindfulness also has the potential to reduce some of the cognitive biases that characterize swift blame. For example, trait mindfulness has been associated with less susceptibility to the impact bias, which is the tendency to overestimate the emotional impact of a future event (Emanuel,

Updegraff, Kalmbach, & Ciesla, 2010). Mindfulness training can also reduce the negativity bias, defined as the tendency to give more psychological weight to negative than positive experiences (Kiken & Shook, 2011). Therefore, mindfulness has the potential to help managers avoid overestimating the gravity of a mistake or perceived harm and reacting accordingly. Mindfulness-based training can also reduce in-group bias (Kang, Gray, & Dovidio, 2014; Tincher, Lebois, & Barsalou, 2016), which is the tendency to exhibit favoritism toward members of one's in-group. Accordingly, mindfulness might help buffer managers from the us-versus-them mentality that can arise when blame threatens to escalate from the individual to the group level.

Fourth, mindfulness training can help reduce or soften swift blame by stimulating emotions and behaviors that nurture healthy interpersonal relationships. A large body of evidence shows that mindfulness is especially helpful for improving relationship quality (Karremans, Schellekens, & Kappen, 2015). Trait mindfulness, for example, is associated with empathy (Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2007), which in turn is linked to relationship satisfaction (Davis & Oathout, 1987). Mindfulness training has also been shown to result in more compassionate (Condon, Desbordes, Miller, & DeSteno, 2013) and altruistic responses to others' suffering (Weng et al., 2013). Accordingly, mindfulness has been associated with helpfulness (Weng, Fox, Hesselthaler, Stodola, & Davidson, 2015), such as through interpersonal organizational citizenship behaviors (Reb et al., 2014). Mindfulness further reduces defensiveness and aggression (Heppner et al., 2008) as well as retaliation for perceived injustice (Long & Christian, 2015). As such, mindfulness has been negatively associated with punishing others (Weng et al., 2015) and counterproductive workplace behaviors (Krishnakumar & Robinson, 2015).

Given the growing evidence of the psychologically beneficial implications of mindfulness, future research needs to explore not only whether mindfulness lessens the impulse to engage in swift blame and the emotions it entails, but also whether mindfulness helps stem the reactive behaviors that can escalate the conflict that blame can provoke. Specifically, future research needs to explore whether and how (i.e., through what mechanisms) mindfulness reduces the tendency to engage in swift blame.

CONCLUSIONS

Evolution has ingrained into human behavior the instinct for swift blame—for hastily assigning responsibility and sanctioning wrongdoers when things go wrong. This tendency can have considerable downsides for organizations and their employees. Our goal in this paper has been to argue that a more thoughtful approach to addressing mistakes and perceived wrongdoings can be achieved by harnessing techniques and systems designed to slow down swift blame and potentially foster higher quality responses at the organizational, legal, and psychological levels. These include a no-blame approach, systems of inquiry and accountability, and mindfulness training. We have identified future research opportunities relevant to each of these approaches and called for research not only to test the efficacy of these interventions in reducing swift blame, but also to (a) determine the conditions under which these approaches will or will not work and (b) explore the mechanisms that can explain how and why they work. Our list of approaches to reduce swift blame is intended to be illustrative rather than complete. We encourage researchers to explore, and managers to consider, these and other approaches to administering blame more deliberately and constructively.

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