

## THE BLAME GAME

Here's the best way to think about the relationship between shame and blame: If blame is driving, shame is riding shotgun. In organizations, schools, and families, blaming and finger-pointing are often symptoms of shame. Shame researchers June Tangney and Ronda Dearing explain that in shame-bound relationships, people "measure carefully, weigh, and assign blame." They write, "In the face of any negative outcome, large or small, *someone* or *something* must be found responsible (and held accountable). There's no notion of 'water under the bridge.'" They go on to say, "After all, if *someone* must be to blame and it's not me, it must be you! From blame comes shame. And then hurt, denial, anger, and retaliation."

Blame is simply the discharging of pain and discomfort. We blame when we're uncomfortable and experience pain—when we're vulnerable, angry, hurt, in shame, grieving. There's nothing productive about blame, and it often involves shaming someone or just being mean. If blame is a pattern in your culture, then shame needs to be addressed as an issue.

## **COVER-UP CULTURE**

Related to blame is the issue of cover-ups. Just like blame is a sign of shame-based organizations, cover-up cultures depend on shame to keep folks quiet. When the culture of an organization mandates that it is more important to protect the reputation of a system and those in power than it is to protect the basic human dignity of individuals or communities, you can be certain that shame is systemic, money drives ethics, and accountability is dead. This is true in all systems, from corporations, nonprofits, universities, and governments, to churches, schools, families, and sports programs. If you think back on any major incidents fueled by cover-ups, you'll see this pattern.

In an organizational culture where respect and the dignity of individuals are held as the highest values, shame and blame don't work as management styles. There is no leading by fear. Empathy is a valued asset, accountability is an expectation rather than an exception, and the primal human need for belonging is not used as leverage and social control. We can't control the behavior of individuals; however, we can cultivate organizational cultures where behaviors are not tolerated and people are held accountable for protecting what matters most: human beings.

We won't solve the complex issues that we're facing today without creativity, innovation, and engaged learning. We can't afford to let our discomfort with the topic of shame get in the way of recognizing and combating it in our schools and workplaces. The four best strategies for building shame-resilient organizations are:

1. Supporting leaders who are willing to dare greatly and facilitate honest conversations about shame and cultivate shame-resilient cultures.
2. Facilitating a conscientious effort to see where shame might be functioning in the organization and how it might even be creeping into the way we engage with our co-workers and students.
3. Normalizing is a critical shame-resilience strategy. Leaders and managers can cultivate engagement by helping people know what to expect. What are common struggles? How have other people dealt with them? What have your experiences been?
4. Training all employees on the differences between shame and guilt, and teaching them how to give and receive feedback in a way that fosters growth and engagement.

## MINDING THE GAP WITH FEEDBACK

A *daring greatly* culture is a culture of honest, constructive, and engaged feedback. This is true in organizations, schools, and families. I know families struggle with this issue; however, I was shocked to see “lack of feedback” emerge as a primary concern in the interviews that focused on work experiences. Today’s organizations are so metric-focused in their evaluation of performance that giving, receiving, and soliciting valuable feedback ironically has become rare. It’s even a rarity in schools where learning depends on feedback, which is infinitely more effective than grades scribbled on the top of a page or computer-generated, standardized test scores.

The problem is straightforward: Without feedback there can be no transformative change. When we don’t talk to the people we’re leading about their strengths and their opportunities for growth, they begin to question their contributions and our commitment. Disengagement follows.

When I asked people why there was such a lack of feedback in their organizations and schools, they used different language, but the two major issues were the same:

1. We’re not comfortable with hard conversations.
2. We don’t know how to give and receive feedback in a way that moves people and processes forward.

The good news is that these are very fixable problems. If an organization makes the creation of a feedback culture a priority and a practice, rather than an aspirational value, it can happen. People are desperate for feedback—we all want to grow. We just need to learn how to give feedback in a way that inspires growth and engagement.

Right off the bat, I believe that feedback thrives in cultures where the goal is not “getting comfortable with hard conversations” but *normalizing discomfort*. If leaders expect real learning, critical thinking, and change, then discomfort should be normalized: “We believe growth and learning are uncomfortable so it’s going to happen here—you’re going to feel that way. We want you to know that it’s normal and it’s an expectation here. You’re not alone and we ask that you stay open and lean into it.” This is true at all levels and in all organizations, schools, faith communities, and even families. I’ve observed this pattern of normalized discomfort in the Wholehearted organizations I’ve researched and

I've lived it in my classroom and with my family.

I learned to teach by immersing myself in books on engaged and critical pedagogy by writers like bell hooks and Paulo Freire. At first, I was terrified by the idea that if education is going to be transformative, it's going to be uncomfortable and unpredictable. Now, as I begin my fifteenth year of teaching at the University of Houston, I always tell my students, "If you're comfortable, I'm not teaching and you're not learning. It's going to get uncomfortable in here and that's okay. It's normal and it's part of the process."

The simple and honest process of letting people know that discomfort is normal, it's going to happen, why it happens, and why it's important, reduces anxiety, fear, and shame. Periods of discomfort become an expectation and a norm. In fact, most semesters I have students who approach me after class and say, "I haven't been uncomfortable yet. I'm concerned." These exchanges often lead to critically important conversations and feedback about their engagement and my teaching. The big challenge for leaders is getting our heads and hearts around the fact that we need to cultivate the courage to be uncomfortable and to teach the people around us how to accept discomfort as a part of growth.

For the best guidance on how to give feedback that moves people and processes forward, I turn to my social work roots. In my experience the heart of valuable feedback is taking the "strengths perspective." According to social work educator Dennis Saleebey, viewing performance from the strengths perspective offers us the opportunity to examine our struggles in light of our capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes. This perspective doesn't dismiss the serious nature of our struggles; however, it does require us to consider our positive qualities as potential resources. Dr. Saleebey proposes, "It is as wrong to deny the possible as it is to deny the problem."

One effective method for understanding our strengths is to examine the relationship between strengths and limitations. If we look at what we do best as well as what we want to change the most, we will often find that the two are varying degrees of the same core behavior. Most of us can go through the majority of our "faults" or "limitations" and find strengths lurking within.

For example, I can beat myself up for being too controlling and micromanaging, or I can recognize that I'm very responsible, dependable, and committed to quality work. The micromanaging issues don't go away, but by viewing them from a strengths perspective, I have the confidence to look at myself and assess the behaviors I'd like to change.

I want to emphasize that the strengths perspective is not a tool to simply allow us to put a positive spin on a problem and consider it solved. But by first enabling us to inventory our strengths, it suggests ways we can use those

strengths to address the related challenges. One way I teach this perspective to students is by requiring them to give and receive feedback on their classroom presentations. When a student presents, s/he receives feedback from every one of his or her classmates. The students in the audience have to identify three observable strengths and one opportunity for growth. The trick is that they have to use their assessment of the strengths to make a suggestion on how the individual might address the specified opportunity. For example:

## Strengths

1. You captured my interest right away with your emotional personal story.
2. You used examples that are relevant to my life.
3. You concluded with actionable strategies that tied in with our learning in the class.

## Opportunity

Your stories and examples made me feel connected to you and what you were saying, but I sometimes struggled to read the PowerPoint and listen to you at the same time. I didn't want to miss anything you were saying, but I worried about not following the slides. You might experiment with fewer words on the slides—or maybe even no slides. You had me without them.

The research has made this clear: **Vulnerability is at the heart of the feedback process.** This is true whether we give, receive, or solicit feedback. And the vulnerability doesn't go away even if we're trained and experienced in offering and getting feedback. Experience does, however, give us the advantage of knowing that we can survive the exposure and uncertainty, and that it's worth the risk.

One of the greatest mistakes that I see people make in the feedback process is “armoring up.” To protect ourselves from the vulnerability of giving or receiving feedback, we get ready to rumble (cue *Jock Jams*). It's easy to assume that the feedback process only feels vulnerable for the person receiving the feedback, but that's not true. Honest engagement around expectations and behavior is always fraught with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure for everyone involved. Here's an example. Susan, the principal of a large high school, has to talk to one of her teachers about several parent complaints. The parents have voiced concerns about the teacher's cursing during class and making personal calls on her cell phone while she allows her students to leave the class, goof off, and make their own calls. In this situation “armoring up” can take several forms.

One is that Susan can fill out the probation form and have it sitting on her desk when the teacher comes in. She'll simply say, “Here's the complaint. I've

written you up for the following offenses. Sign here and don't let it happen again." She's knocked out the meeting in three minutes flat. There's no feedback, no growth, no learning, but it's over. The odds of the teacher changing her behaviors are slim.

Another way we armor up is by convincing ourselves that the other person deserves to be hurt or put down. Like most of us, Susan is more comfortable with anger than vulnerability, so she ratchets up her confidence with a little self-righteousness. "I'm so sick of this. If these teachers respected me, they'd never do stuff like this. I've had it. She's been a problem since the first day I met her. *You want to jack around in class—go for it. I'll show you exactly how this works.*" The opportunity for constructive feedback and relationship building turns into a smackdown. Again, it's over but there is no feedback, no growth, no learning and, more than likely, no change.

I'll admit that I've got a lot of "bring it on" in me. I'm scrappy, I think fast on my feet, and I like my emotions with a little agency. I'm good at anger and only so-so at vulnerability, so armoring up before a vulnerable experience is attractive to me. Luckily, this work has taught me that when I feel self-righteous, it means I'm afraid. It's a way to puff up and protect myself when I'm afraid of being wrong, making someone angry, or getting blamed.

## SITTING ON THE SAME SIDE OF THE TABLE

In my social work training, a lot of attention was paid to how we talk to people, even down to where and how we sit. For example, I would never talk to a client across a desk; I would walk around my desk and sit in a chair across from the client so there was nothing big and bulky between us. I remember the first time I went in to see one of my social work professors about a grade. She got up from behind her desk and asked me to take a seat at a small round table she had in her office. She pulled up a chair and sat next to me.

In armoring up for that conversation, I had pictured her sitting behind her big metal desk and me defiantly sliding my paper across it and demanding an explanation for my grade. After she sat down next to me, I put the paper on the table. As she said, “I’m so glad that you came in to talk to me about your paper. You did a great job on this; I loved your conclusion,” and patted me on the back, I awkwardly realized that we were on the same side of the table.

Totally discombobulated, I blurted, “Thank you. I worked really hard on it.”

She nodded and said, “I can tell. Thank you. I took some points off for your APA formatting. I’d like for you to focus on that and get it cleaned up. You could submit this for publication, and I don’t want the reference formatting to hold you back.”

I was still confused. *She thinks it’s publishable? She liked it?*

“Do you need some help with the APA formatting? It’s tricky and it took me years to get it down,” she asked. *(A great example of normalizing.)*

I told her that I’d fix the references and I asked her if she’d look at my revisions. She happily agreed and gave me a few tips on the process. I thanked her for her time and left, grateful for my grade and for a teacher who cared as much as she did.

Today, “Sitting on the same side of the table” is my metaphor for feedback. I used it to create my *Engaged Feedback Checklist*:

I know I’m ready to give feedback when:

I’m ready to sit next to you rather than across from you;

I’m willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you);

I’m ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue;

I want to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes;

I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges;

I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming you;

I'm willing to own my part;

I can genuinely thank you for your efforts rather than criticize you for your failings;

I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to your growth and opportunity; and

I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.

You can find a printed copy of this checklist on my website ([www.brenebrown.com](http://www.brenebrown.com)).

How would education be different if students, teachers, and parents sat on the same side of the table? How would engagement change if leaders sat down next to folks and said, “Thank you for your contributions. Here’s how you’re making a difference. This issue is getting in the way of your growth, and I think we can tackle it together. What ideas do you have about moving forward? What role do you think I’m playing in the problem? What can I do differently to support you?”

Let’s go back to the example with Susan, the principal who was armoring up for a smackdown. If she read through this checklist she’d realize that she’s not in a place to give feedback, to be a leader. But with parenting complaints stacking up on her desk, time is an issue for her and she knows the situation needs to be addressed. It can be very difficult to move into the right head and heart space to give feedback when we’re under pressure.

So, how do we create a safe space for vulnerability and growth when we’re not feeling open? Armored feedback doesn’t facilitate lasting and meaningful change—I don’t know a single person who can be open to accepting feedback or owning responsibility for something when they’re being hammered. Our hardwiring takes over and we self-protect.

Susan’s best bet is to model the openness that she hopes to see, and solicit feedback from one of her colleagues. When I interviewed participants who valued feedback and worked at it, they talked about the necessity of soliciting feedback from their peers, asking for advice, and even role-playing difficult situations. If we’re not willing to ask for feedback and receive it, we’ll never be good at giving it. If Susan can work through her own feelings so that she can be present with her employee, she’s much more likely to see the change that she’s requesting.

Some of you might be wondering, “Susan’s employee problem is pretty straightforward and small. Why would she need to spend time soliciting feedback from one of her colleagues for a problem like that?” It’s a good question with an important answer: The size, severity, or complexity of a

problem doesn't always reflect our emotional reactivity to it. If Susan can't get to the same side of the table with this teacher, it doesn't matter how simple the problem is or how clear the violation is. What Susan might learn from her peer is that she's really triggered by this particular teacher or that she's armoring up because unprofessional behavior is becoming a dangerous norm among this cluster of teachers. Giving and soliciting feedback is about learning and growth, and understanding who we are and how we respond to the people around us is the foundation in this process.

Again, there's no question that feedback may be one of the most difficult arenas to negotiate in our lives. We should remember, though, that victory is not getting good feedback, avoiding giving difficult feedback, or avoiding the need for feedback. Instead it's taking off the armor, showing up, and engaging.