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Developing Interdependent Leadership

Upturning Performance in Downturn Times
- Tame the Blame -

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- Tame the Blame -

At a time when more than ever before businesses are running lean and trying to survive, leaders can't afford to not focus their attention on those things that produce the highest return-on-investment of time, energy, and resources. This report is designed to help you do just that. Its purpose is to synthesize important research that reveals a major factor that is undermining the energy and performance of more than 83% of all employees and leaders today. This will help you focus your attention on a significant root cause of poor performance and prevent expensive, time wasting approaches to transforming it. It will help you better see crucial levers of energy and growth that are especially relevant in today's new economy.

This report comes out of a recent research study involving 1,800 people in seven different countries around the globe. The purpose of the study was to find individual patterns of behavior that are linked to these key business performance drivers:

- **Employee engagement** – the enthusiastic voluntary contribution of excellent work
- **Teamwork** – the creation of strong complementary high-trust relationships and strong collaboration
- **Proactivity** – the elimination of time-wasting problems and interactions through preventive efforts and self-initiative.

These drivers were selected after completing a lengthy pre-work review of two-hundred best-selling leadership and business books, over two-hundred academic articles focused on leadership and organizational performance, and annual reports from top-rated firms such as Bersin, Corn Ferry, Watson Wyatt, Gallup. A brief sampling of key significant justifications for choosing these specific factors is shown here:

FACTOR	IMPACT
Engagement	From Gallup's research – *"When engagement is high: profitability is 22% higher, productivity is 21% higher, customer ratings are 12% higher, absenteeism is 67% less, turnover is 37% less."*
Teamwork	From a Salesforce study of 1,400 executives and employees: *86% of employees and executives cite lack of collaboration or ineffective communication (teamwork) for workplace failures.*
Proactivity	From the findings of an Integro Leadership Institute research study of 582 leaders: *"More proactivity equals better productivity... better productivity means improved financial performance."*

In connection with this research, our team also conducted over 9,000 qualitative interviews and/or focus groups with managers and leaders in thirty-two countries in an effort to identify key patterns that are most related to individual, team, and organizational energy and performance.

Discovering a Major Barrier to Performance

If you're like most people, reading all the statistical information and background of any formal research project feels a bit like being stuck in a college calculus class where the teacher, it seems, is speaking Greek. To avoid that experience here, we will summarize the two most critical findings and then offer some deeper exploration behind them to help you see how the patterns relate to your people and business.

Of the twenty-four patterns and behaviors we were measuring, there was one that was significantly highly correlated to all three of our performance factors, more highly than any of the others. It involved an exploration of the degree to which blame was present in the day-to-day interactions of individuals at work.

When we say blame, we are referring to:

- The opposite of praise, or lack of appreciative acuity of others, or
- The act of attributing a personal failure to another person or event,[1] or
- A deflection of responsibility, or
- The act of censuring, holding responsible, or making negative statements about an individual or group.[2]

You might be as startled as we were not just by the extensive prevalence of blame in organizations today, but also by the direct impact it appears to have on significant predictors of performance.

Key Finding #1: 83% of all employees are part of moderate or high blame organizations.

You might be interested to know that 50% of the 1,800 individuals in the study identified their organizations as having the highest possible blame levels. These individuals used a "10" on a scale of 1-10 to reflect their strong agreement about the presence of blame in the organization. We were surprised to learn that only 17% identified their organizations as having low blame, with the remaining 33% being part of moderate blame organizations, as shown here.

% or Low Blame Organizations	17%
% of Moderate Blame Organizations	33%
% of High Blame Organizations	50%
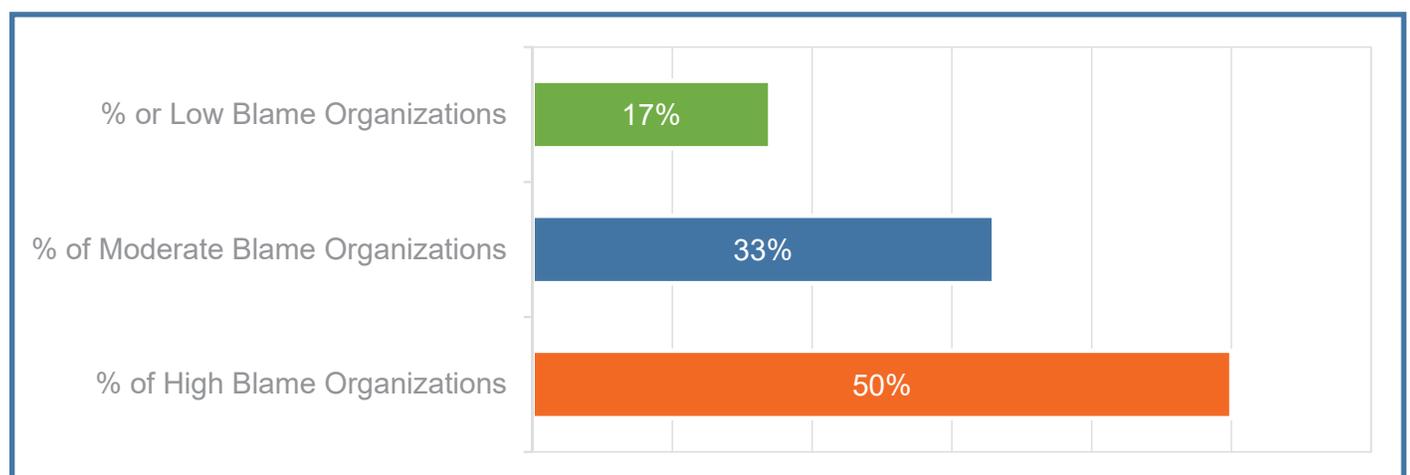
Key Finding #2: blame is a major barrier to the achievement of high performance.

We also found that when blame was high, it seemed to literally cut off Engagement, Teamwork and Proactivity. We coined the phrase "Blame Barrier" to describe this remarkable phenomenon. You can see how blame interferes with these key performance indicators as you examine the contrast between low and high blame organizations in the graph below.
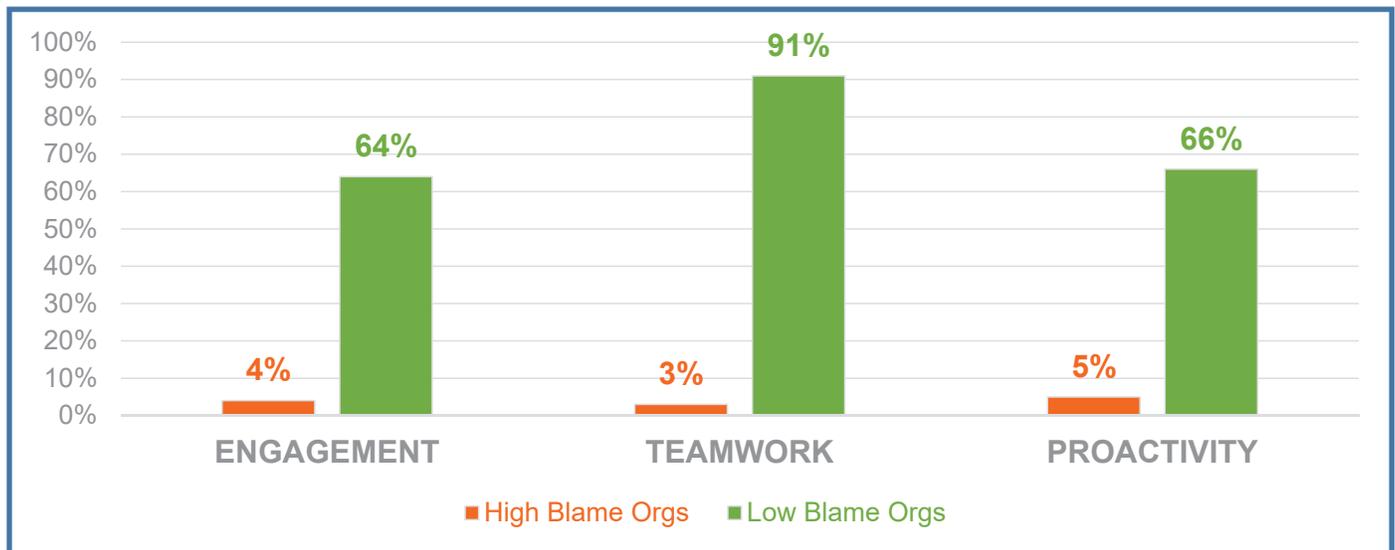
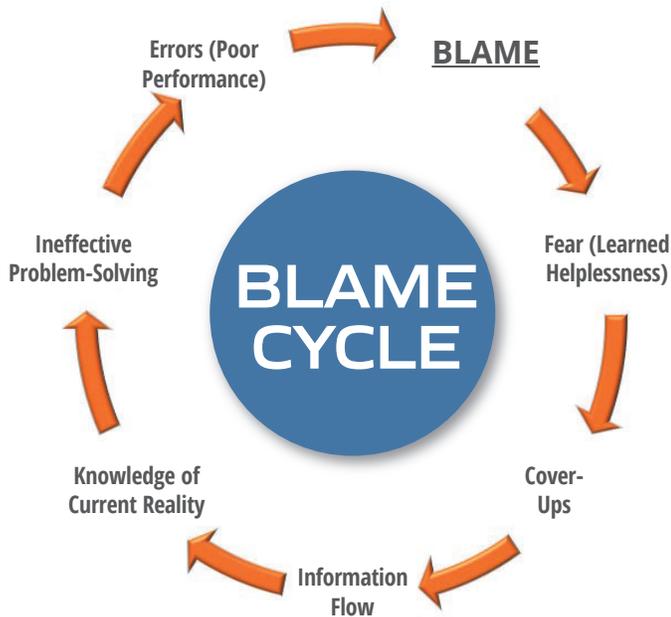**As you can see, if you are in a high blame organization:**

- The likelihood that you would have high engagement is only 4% – versus 64% if you are in a low blame organization).

- The chances of having strong teamwork is only 3% as compared to 91% in a low blame organization.

- The likelihood of individuals taking proactive initiative to try to help the situation is only 5%, as compared to 66% in low blame organizations.

Blame is indeed a huge barrier to employee and team performance.

How Blame Plays Out in Organizations Today

These findings were startling, but they were validated again and again as we visited with managers, leaders, and employees in organizations all around the world. For example, in one business where we conducted interviews, we discovered that in four separate offices on the very same day, four key leaders who were part of an 18-person senior team were preparing their letters of resignation. We wanted to understand why they were so driven to leave. Not surprisingly, they described familiar blame-related patterns that we also heard repeatedly from others around the globe. Here is a summary of some of the most prevalent patterns.

Errors (Poor Performance)

BLAME

Fear (Learned Helplessness)

Cover-Ups

Information Flow

Knowledge of Current Reality

Ineffective Problem-Solving

BLAME CYCLE

The Blame Cycle

One of the patterns that emerged from the qualitative data is a phenomenon we've come to call the Blame Cycle. It is a cycle we often see in low performing teams and companies where people live in fear of being caught in errors. When this happens transparency and self-initiative disappear. As failure becomes increasingly common, cover-ups become more and more the norm. This means that individuals making decisions don't have access to the best information or accurate knowledge of what the current reality is. It perpetuates poor problem-solving and performance, which starts the whole negative cycle again.

Blame Contagion

Another pattern that emerged from the qualitative data is a pattern we describe as Blame Contagion. When blame becomes a part of the normal social behavior of groups, people are more likely to blame. When blame becomes the standard, people slip into it without realizing it.[3]

Here is a closer look at what it often looks like in many high-blame organizations:

Senior Leaders	In high blame organizations, blame and shame are often used by senior leaders as a strategy for controlling, influencing or modifying others' behavior through negative reinforcement. This can sometimes include accusing individuals in front of others, swearing at them, or criticizing them in a way that feels humiliating.
Middle Managers	In high-blame organizations, many managers get mixed messages like being told that they are important, only to have senior leaders bypass them to intervene directly in projects, or change the rules (which managers then blame senior leaders for). Also, managers punish employees and approach performance challenges punitively.
Individual Contributors	In high-blame organizations, employees are inclined toward fear, discontent, mistakes, and passive-aggressive behavior. It often looks like learned helplessness or entitlement. They point at leaders and managers as the cause of their feelings and actions and have little willingness to take self-iniative to fix the underlying problem(s).

Why People Blame

Given how destructive blame is, and how significantly it factors into poor performance, we wanted to dig a little deeper to understand the reasons why people blame. As we tracked answers in our qualitative research, we tried to get beyond the surface issues and uncovered five patterns that seemed to emerge most frequently. Some of them may be familiar to you.

People blame others when they are not at their best. When this one emerged in the qualitative data, we recognized it as something that social scientists refer to as the *fundamental attribution error*. Simply put, you blame others for the very things that you, yourself, are guilty of. Blame is a way of deflecting the self-judgment on to others.[4]

People blame because of "you should" beliefs about others, expectations that are unmet. If you are like most people, when the situation or interaction with someone doesn't align with your view of the world, you might blame another person for failing to do what "should" be done.

People blame as a strategy to protect their identity or sense of value. Society's tendency to make a person's value equal to their performance, popularity, and external indicators of success (including others' opinions of the person) is one reason blame happens. Blame is a natural response when people's value or self-identity is threatened in some way. Generally, when people are concerned about being seen as "enough" (based on their performance), and especially if they believe their performance wasn't good enough, blame might be the reaction.[5]

People blame more when they are facing uncertainty. One of the most interesting patterns that appeared in the qualitative data was that uncertainty seems to be a universal negativity trigger. When people don't know what to do or how to respond, they feel stress and self-doubt that can quickly turn to an "I should" (self-blame) experience. Self-blame increases blame of others.

People blame as a strategy to manipulate others to act in certain ways. This behavior is particularly prevalent in high-blame organizations where leaders use blame as part of a carrot-and-stick strategy. Blame becomes the stick. While this is not a particularly effective strategy, you might have seen someone trying to use blame as a backward way to make others behave. In truth, the unpleasantness of being blamed typically makes people want to avoid any behavior that might cause it.

If you'd like to reduce blame and increase performance of others, you must know that it is possible! In fact, wherever you are in the organization the blame game can stop with you. You can insulate against it and choose differently. You can be the difference maker! Let's examine three strategies that are working effectively in low-blame organizations.

BlameBuster Strategies

In low-blame organizations three clear approaches seem to emerge that are not present in high-blame organizations. We reference them as BlameBuster Strategies because of their ability to activate high energy and performance and significantly mitigate blame. The three strategies seem to work together to help individuals SEE differently and avoid getting caught in the trap of blame. They include:

- **S**ynergize Through Interdependence
- **E**nergize Through Strengths Use
- **E**ngage Through Purpose.

#BLAMEBUSTER

Upturning Performance in Downturn Times

Synergize Through Interdependence

As we listened to countless individuals, we came to recognize a pattern that can only be described as Synergize through Interdependence. This pattern is one of working together to co-create an environment where everyone can bring their best, where no one is judged, and where the strengths of the group offset the weaknesses of individuals. It includes learning how to see weakness, mistakes, and failures differently, and letting go of the shame associated with them.

Energizing Through Strengths Use

Energizing through Strengths Use, we discovered, goes way beyond merely knowing about your strengths and includes learning how to strategically use them in ways that dramatically reduce blame. This includes discovering how to use strengths to:

- Manage triggers and toxicity, including mitigating individual weakness. This insulates against self-judgment and blaming.

- Create optimal individual conditions for high performance and growth, including taking self-responsibility for needs. This insulates against blaming others for not knowing or meeting them.

- Give meaningful service to others. This increasingly happens as blame and toxicity diminish, and as more energy becomes available to apply strengths to benefit others.

Low-blame organizations statistically had higher strengths use than high-blame organizations.

Engage Through Purpose

In low-blame organizations, we found that there was a clear line of sight between individual and organizational purpose. One HR leader described this as the key to having employees "switched on." People who had this working for them were clear what their differentiating value was and how they impacted others, and they wanted to do it on purpose every day. No micro-management is necessary, and individuals are quick to take initiative, own their own behavior, and support others in doing the same.

Conclusion

In a day when there is more blame flying around than seemingly has ever existed before, we need to understand its debilitating impact on people and performance – and stop it. Blame traps people into the Blame Cycle and depletes their energy. It activates Blame Contagion, which seems to spread faster and in a more lethal way than COVID-19. It's easy to blame someone or something for the tendency to blame, but that will never produce the power that is needed to activate high performance needed to thrive in these challenging times.

More than ever before, we need BlameBuster strategies. We need Synergize Through Interdependence as a way to bring people together, to multiply strength and stand against the social and economic riptide of our day. We need Energize Through Strengths Use as a way to focus attention on where we are individually and collectively strong – and use our strengths as springboards to awaken new possibilities. We also need the steadying power of Engage Through Purpose to keep us anchored when the riptide is strong, and when our resolve is weakened by the fear that naturally accompanies huge uncertainty.

These Blame Buster strategies fundamentally alter the blame game because they change the rules of engagement. Instead of looking for others to meet certain expectations, and blaming them when they don't, we look for ways to benefit them using our talents. Instead of expecting others to be like us and do what seems so easy and natural, we see them appreciatively, for their unique gifts. Instead of feeling ashamed of our weaknesses, mistakes, and failures, we see them as opportunities for learning, for authentic connection, and for making others feel valued.

These strategies can help us all have a gentler, kinder view of ourselves and more effective ways of influencing others. They can help us avoid blaming and accelerate energy and performance at a time when this is more desperately needed than ever before.

Notes:

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If you would like to ignite others in your organization to activate high energy and performance and reduce blame, email info@peopleacuity.com to set up a free 2-hour virtual workshop, where you will learn the first tools Self-Leaders apply to increase their energy and performance, and their own Engagement, Teamwork, and Proactivity

People Acuity offers leading-edge leadership development services in thirty-two countries across the globe. Their mission is to lift business performance by empowering leaders with crucial skills for today's new world, including Proactive Accountability, Coach-like Engagement, Interdependent Collaboration, and Transformative Innovation. They provide measurable behavior change and a multi-modality learning approach, including globally-acclaimed virtual, live, and online learning supported by coaching.

This report has been written by **DeAnna Murphy** – the founder and CEO of **People Acuity** and principal author of *Shift Up! Strengths Strategies for Optimal Living and Choose to See You* – in collaboration with co-thought leaders, **Lisa Gregory,** and **Steve Jeffs**. DeAnna is a Top 100 Global Coaching Leader who has provided keynotes and leadership development experiences to leaders and teams all across the globe.

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[1] Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Tennen & Affleck, 1990

[2] Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blame

[3] see https://www.livescience.com/8018-workplace-blame-contagious-detrimental.html

[4] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103109002601

[5] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103109002601

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