

# Credit and blame at work

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# Definition

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**The process of assigning causal responsibility to oneself and others, for either positive or negative outcomes in the workplace, is a very important cause and effect of many other variables at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis**

# Credit and blame at work

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## ➤ Introduction

- Individual factors
- Group factors
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# Introduction

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## In the workplace, credit and blame is an integral part of:

- Job satisfaction
- Turnover
- Lawsuits
- Organizational commitment and morale
- Work relationships and conflicts
- Learning and development
- Performance appraisals
- Safety and violence
- Promotions and raises
- Stock price and financing
- Legislation
- Government intervention

# The six stages of a project...

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1. **Enthusiasm**
2. **Disillusionment**
3. **Panic**
4. **Search for the guilty**
5. **Punishment of the innocent**
6. **Rewards for the uninvolved**

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# Individual factors

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- Introduction
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## Benefits of inaccurate attribution

- **Minimize embarrassment, guilt, remorse, and anxiety**
- **Boost confidence, self-esteem, and sense of control**
- **Maintain one's status, rank, and reputation in the organization**
- **Avoid punishment for failures, shortcomings, and mistakes**
- **Create a simpler, more acceptable explanation for why things are the way they are**

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Risks of accurate attribution

- Diminished confidence in one's knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Risks of diminished pride, status, rank, and reputation
- Threatening vested interests and the power structure within the organization
- Empowering rival individuals or groups within the organization
- Having to grapple with complexity, ambiguity, and responsibility

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Risks of inaccurate attribution

- **Diminished sense of one's own integrity and true capabilities**
- **Inability to build on strengths and remedy weaknesses**
- **Reputation as being unfair, political, or agenda-driven**
- **Attrition, performance, commitment, and morale issues for peers and subordinates**
- **Unjustified focus on people rather than problems**
- **Counterproductive organizational behavior and/or retributive justice in reaction to unfair credit or blame**

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Benefits of accurate attribution

- **Better assessment of one's own true talents and capabilities**
- **Individual performance can be improved over time**
- **Individual learning and development can be accelerated and new challenges can be met more effectively**
- **One can gain the trust, respect, and loyalty of others**

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Individual variables that affect credit and blame processes

**Self-serving bias:** most individuals tend to take credit for their successes and blame external causes for failure

**Actor-Observer effect:** most individuals attribute others' behavior to personal or dispositional factors and their own behavior to situational factors

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Individual variables that affect credit and blame processes

- People who are narcissistic are more susceptible to self-serving biases, taking credit for good outcomes and blaming others for bad outcomes
- People who are open to experience and agreeable are less prone to inaccurate or self-serving biases in terms of credit and blame
- People who are depressed are more likely to attribute failures to internal, stable, and global factors

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Levers for change

- **Recognize that trying to change the dynamics of credit and blame in an organization is complex and can be very risky**
- **Consider your own role in the credit and blame dynamics and ways that you might be inadvertently helping to maintain the status quo**
- **Explore strategies for soliciting and responding to more feedback in a non-defensive manner**
- **Explore strategies for holding yourself more clearly accountable to criteria that are as objective and transparent as possible**
- **“Look in the mirror and out the window”**

# Individual factors (continued)

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## Levers for change

- **Recognizing that there will be risk involved, explore strategies for giving more honest and candid feedback to others**
  - **Try to assign blame and credit more accurately while balancing the need to be sensitive**
  - **Carefully consider the timing and the venue when communicating credit or blame**
  - **Attempt to frame things positively when possible and change the focus from the past to the future**
- **Work to institute more objective and transparent systems for the analysis of individual, team, and organizational performance**

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# Group factors

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## Benefits of inaccurate attribution

- **Preservation of group stability, power structure, and cohesiveness**
- **Minimize anxiety about questioning assumptions or people**
- **Maintenance of internal group pride and commitment**
- **Maintenance of group status and reputation in the organization**
- **The group avoids punishment for failures, shortcomings, and mistakes**

# Group factors (continued)

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## Risks of accurate attribution

- **Diminished confidence in the group's capabilities**
- **Risks of hurting the self-esteem of members of the group**
- **Risks of challenging the established power structure of the group**
- **Diminished support or rewards from the rest of the organization**
- **Transparency to other groups can lead to vulnerabilities**

# Group factors (continued)

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## Risks of inaccurate attribution

- **The group is not able to accurately assess its internal capabilities and limitations**
- **Team performance and learning can both be adversely impacted**
- **Power and rewards can be unfairly allocated, leading to more dissatisfaction and higher turnover**
- **The group can suffer from internal and external suspicion and mistrust**
- **There can be unnecessary symbolic and substantive conflicts with other groups**

# Group factors (continued)

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## Benefits of accurate attribution

- **Better assessments of what the group can and cannot accomplish**
- **More efficient and effective team learning**
- **Increased trust, communication, and cohesion within the group**
- **The alignment of power and rewards with actual expertise and contributions**
- **Better communication with other groups**
- **Enhanced reputation in the rest of the organization**

# Group factors (continued)

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## Group variables

- **Level of motivation to constantly align and realign internal structures and processes to meet external challenges**
- **Norms for candid communication, risk taking, asking for help, admitting mistakes, and learning**
- **Norms of transparency and a commitment to maintaining trust**
- **Not necessarily a comfortable environment, but a “safe” one**
- **The style and approach of the leader or leaders of the group**
- **The style and approach of the members of the group**

# Group factors (continued)

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## Levers for change

- **Teams should take both an adaptive and a technical approach to challenges**
- **Select team leaders and members based on their ability to thrive in and foster a learning environment**
- **Teams should assess and improve their ability to be constructively self-critical**
- **Stop for comprehensive process checks at key intervals**

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# Organizational factors

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## Benefits of inaccurate attribution

- **Can help the organization maintain its prestige and standing in the community**
- **Can help maintain the power structure in organizations**
- **Convince investors to support the organization and management**
- **Prevent the government or regulators from intervening**
- **Protects the pride and self-esteem of members of the organization**

# Organizational factors (continued)

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## Risks of accurate attribution

- **Having to confront hard facts about the quality of products or services**
- **Diminished support and/or rewards from external stakeholders, i.e.: Wall Street and investors**
- **Can challenge the power structure in the organization**
- **Lawsuits and/or government/regulatory intervention**
- **The self-esteem and status of organizational members can be negatively impacted**

# Organizational factors (continued)

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## Risks of inaccurate attribution

- **Organizational learning is prevented or slowed down**
- **Leadership roles filled with those who are most politically connected rather than those who are most capable**
- **The organization loses focus on ensuring that internal capabilities will be configured to meet changing external demands**
- **Widespread anxiety as people fear that they might be unfairly rewarded and/or punished**
- **Less organizational citizenship behavior and discretionary effort**
- **Violence, revenge, and sabotage in response to injustices**

# Organizational factors (continued)

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## Benefits of accurate attribution

- **Organizational performance and learning increase**
- **Power and rewards accrue due to merit rather than politics**
- **The organization unleashes more of its employees' discretionary efforts**
- **Social bonds and trust within the organization are stronger**
- **The organization can develop better relationships with external entities when it holds itself responsible**

# Organizational factors (continued)

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## Benefits of accurate attribution

- **Increased levels of organizational commitment, performance, job satisfaction, focus, and good citizenship behavior**
- **Increased levels of justice and fairness**
- **Resources spent understanding business drivers and developing strategies rather than building alliances and playing politics**
- **Relevant and realistic appraisals of individual and team performance for development, rewards, and role assignments**

# Organizational factors (continued)

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## Organizational variables

- **Organizational history and the degree and kinds of organizational politics**
- **The culture of the organization- i.e.: the level of participation and openness, tolerance for innovation and risk taking, etc.**
- **The style and approach of leaders of the organization**
- **The style and approach of members of the organization**
- **The balance of power both within the organization and between the organization and external entities/stakeholders**

# Organizational factors (continued)

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## Levers for change

- **Consider the ways that inaccurate assignment of credit and blame is both a cause and an effect of other issues**
- **Select organizational leaders for their ability to foster an open, fair environment**
- **Select organizational members based on their likelihood of being able to solicit, receive, appreciate, and give candid feedback**
- **Develop cultural norms regarding credit and blame**
- **Establish the right criteria for what does and does not merit credit/blame and periodically reevaluate these criteria**

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- **The processes by which credit and blame are assigned are at the very center of organizational behavior**
- **Individuals, groups, and organizations that attempt to change the ways in which credit and blame are assigned must take risks in the short term in order to do so**
- **Individuals, groups, and organizations that monitor and improve the processes by which credit and blame are assigned on an ongoing basis are likely to be more successful over time**

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