

Winning The Blame Game



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Call it What You Want, Finding Blame is Still a Shell Game

The shell game (also known as Thimblrig) is centuries old. Consisting of three cups, or shells, and a small pea or ball, even children enjoy this simple past-time.

The object of the game is to place the pea under a “shell,” shuffle the shells around and then have a player determine which shell now covers the pea.

It’s typically portrayed as an innocent gambling or guessing game by those who promote it.

But in reality it’s a fraud, a confidence trick. It is such a simple and famous swindle it’s known as “the short-con” because it is so easy to pull off.

Finding Blame is another version of the old shell game. Employees play it. Managers play it. But the only one who suffers from it is the business. And if your employees are playing the blame game - then it’s your business that’s suffering.

How do you stop your employees from playing the blame game? Through coaching, one-on-one instruction, keynote talks, and instruction in everything from communication skills to interpersonal skills. But first let’s look at how the shell game, and the blame game, works.

How The Game Works

The traditional shell game requires three shells. Anything can be a shell - bottle caps, plastic cups, or actual walnut shells.

A small, soft round ball, about the size of a pea, and often referred to as such, is also used. Any flat surface, such as a box or tabletop, may be used. The person conducting the game is called the operator, or shell man.

The shell man begins the game by placing the pea under one of the shells and then quickly shuffling the shells around so the person playing the game must guess which shell the pea is under.

Before revealing which shell the pea is under, the operator takes bets from those watching as to the location of the pea. If the player wins, the audience wins.

The thing is the audience members are most likely in on the fraud, helping the shell man. Called “shills,” their role is multi-faceted.

They act as lookouts for the police or they intimidate

marks who suddenly realize they’re the victims in a fraud. Shills may also pretend to play the game and entice the mark into betting.

Once marks enter this circle of seemingly friendly players, these shills will surround them to keep them from leaving. They act as both mental and physical enforcers, but their role is larger.

Both the shell man and the shills will try to get the players into a heightened state of anger or greed. Once the players get angry a shill pretends to tip them off to the real secret of winning and urges them to get their money back with their new knowledge.

Angry players are easily pushed into an emotional decision to place a large bet. When they lose, they are pushed out of the circle while the operator and shills wait for the next victims to appear.

The shills have a talent, but so does the shell man. His asset is his sleight of hand. A skilled operator can place, remove or hide the pea anywhere he wants.



Once the shell has been picked, the pea is placed under another shell and the player loses his money. The rules are pretty clear. You have to find the pea under the right shell to win.

No spectators are allowed. If you're not playing, or you seem to know how the fraud is played, you're quickly forced out of the circle where you can't warn those who don't know how the game is played.

Watching the shell's movements doesn't matter.

The pea is never where it appears to be, only where the shell man places it.

Once the shells have been moved, the shell man will ask the player if he wants to bet on the play.

If he does, he has to place his money down before he can point to a shell.

The tools are simple and when authorities approach the con is quickly hidden – making it difficult to “prove” anything.

Even if the player knows how it is played, he cannot beat a good shell man.

The “blame game” is very much like a good shell game. Instead of finding a pea, players shuffle around the shells, in this case - people, events or policies.

How The Game Works - Continued

The game is to “find the blame.” Sadly enough, blame does exist, but not where people think.

I work with a lot of organizations. I’ve learned that there are three places where blame can be placed – on an event, on a person or persons, or on a policy or rule.

Guess what? People almost never point to the shell where the ball, or in this case, the blame, really rests – with themselves.

They will point to other people. They will blame management; they will blame policies, the economy, society and even Saturday morning cartoons.

But they almost never find the ball (blame) and win the game. They just keep shuffling the shells around. Those who see what’s going on perpetuate the game.

They may pretend to play simply to avoid being victims themselves, or to avoid having to play “find the blame” themselves - knowing that no matter where they point the finger, blame will shift according to who is playing.

If you’re in human resources, or a manager, or even an employee, you’ve probably asked yourself, “Why are people so reluctant to take an honest look at themselves? Why are we so willing to play the blame game?”

I’ve studied and taught human behavior for years. And I can tell you that people play the blame game for the same reason people play the shell game.

They think that if they play it often enough they’ll figure it all out. No one wants to admit they’re wrong. No one wants to look foolish.

Blaming someone or something else is a short-term fix to keep the attention off of people who don’t want to appear foolish, or who don’t believe they contributed to the problem, or that it wasn’t their job, their responsibility or their fault.

Not only do those beliefs not work, they ultimately tear your workplace apart.

How The Game Works - Continued



I've learned that when people look at things from their own perspective they can honestly believe that someone or something else is to blame – that they are powerless in the face of outside forces acting on them.

Part of exposing the fraud in the shell game involves explaining how the blame game is played. Showing people why there are no winners, then teaching them the skills they need to play well where they can win makes all the difference.

There is no easy fix, but there are solutions and long-term resolutions that work. We begin by taking people out of their comfort zones, showing them what the issues are and where to find that magic ball of blame.

And as you'll see, blame often rests with our own decisions, our own perceptions, our own thoughts and how we respond to people around us.

Ouch. Yes, it hurts to be ripped out of your comfort zone, but we have fun doing it. And in the process we improve relationships in the workplace, increase your productivity and build the loyalty of your staff members.

Remember, the blame game like the common shell game, is really insidious. There are players, and there are those who aren't really aware of what's going on.

Some people are in on the game and are benefiting at the expense of others. There are people who don't know what is going on and feel a loss of trust or safety after "losing" the game.

No matter how fun or funny the game seems, people do get hurt - emotionally and psychologically. The blame game can damage relationships and tear a workplace apart. So how does the blame game get started? Well, let's take a look at where blame originated.

Where It All Started



We come by our blaming tendencies naturally. It's in our DNA. The blame game is as old as mankind. Don't take my word for it, though. Open the Old Testament. Remember the story of Adam and Eve?

Here are the only two people in the world. They live in a lush, rich garden. Life is perfect. They have all they can eat, no time clock to punch, no neighbors to fight with, no kids keeping them up all night. According to all we can tell from the biblical account, they're living well and life is good.

They have a perfect life - until the serpent comes along and tempts Eve into eating the apple. She, of course, does what everyone does when they find a good thing they aren't supposed to have. They share it.

The problem is, they've done something they weren't supposed to do and now they're caught. Sure enough, God figures it out and confronts them in the garden later that afternoon guess what Adam's response is? When God confronted Adam and Eve in the garden after they had eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam blames

God; then he blames Eve for his decision to eat the apple!

He says, "The woman you gave me (Adam blames God), she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate (Adam blamed Eve)." Then God turned to Eve for her side of the story. Not to be outdone, Eve blamed the serpent! She says, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Since that moment in time, this tendency to shift the blame has become an integral part of human behaviour.

This is the same dynamic we see in the workplace.

□ Blame is catching. When one person starts blaming others, those watching follow suit. Pretty soon everyone is blaming everyone else. The entire workplace goes on alert.

Where It All Started - Continued

Everyone becomes reluctant to take a risk or stand out, or be wrong for fear of becoming the company scapegoat. Productivity goes down. Innovation dies.

Creative juices dry up. Trust is destroyed. The blame game can kill a team and eventually a company.

So the blame game has been around for quite a while. People have had lots of time to perfect their excuses and finger-pointing.

But blame is more than just finger-pointing. Blame plays a critical role in the workplace and in society because blame can be a social control technique, inducing fear in those being blamed.

So blame is much more than an annoying behaviour. A workplace where blame runs rampant can destroy morale and motivation.

Through consistent blaming of a person, a process or a policy, blame can be utilized to objectify people, groups and departments.

Objectifying someone or something typically influences the opinions and minds of those who are listening.

This can negatively influence them - leading to a lack of trust, objectivity and credibility within the team or group.

By blaming co-workers, corporate policies, vendors, or one's boss, blamers transfer or displace responsibility for their feelings of guilt, aggression and suffering to their target. This helps them meet their unconscious drive to avoid their bad feelings.

It sounds evil and calculating, but it's usually not so conscious.



Where It All Started - Continued

People have just learned that blaming makes them feel better by directing the heat and responsibility away from themselves. They don't know how else to cope with criticism.

So why do people blame others? One reason is none of us like to be at fault or criticized, especially if it's not clear that it's our fault.

It often feels safer to blame negative events on someone or something else so we can avoid being harmed, blamed or criticized again.

A second reason is that unexpected events are difficult to predict. And unpredictable things, or things we don't understand, can be scary or frustrating.

Whatever the reason for blame, experts know playing the blame game never works.

Research shows that people who blame others for their mistakes lose status, learn less and perform worse than those who own their mistakes and don't rely on blame to avoid consequences.

The results are the same for organizations. Groups and organizations with a rampant culture of blame have a serious disadvantage.

Their work force suffers a loss of creativity, learning, innovation and productive risk-taking on all levels.

Creating a culture of psychological safety is one of the most important things a leader can do and for most companies that safety begins by eliminating a culture of blame.

The Blame Game In Action

“Chris, have you finished up that report yet?”
Kathleen looked around Chris’s cubicle. ”

“I want to look it over before the meeting this afternoon.”

Chris froze. He’d forgotten the report was due today. He had been waiting, hoping Alison would finish it up for him.

“Alison has it, let me check with her,” he smiled up at his boss. She hesitated. She knew what was coming, but she hoped she was wrong.

After Kathleen left, Chris went down the hall to Alison’s office.

“Hi, Alison, just checking to see if that report is done,” he smiled.

“What report?” Alison asked.

“You said you’d clear up the figures and finish the report.”

“No, Chris. I said I’d send you the figures so you could finish the report. It’s not my job to finish your reports.” Alison could feel her temper building.

“You’re really making me look bad to Kathleen .

“You should have let me know. Alison turned on him,
“Chris, What part of Its not my job to write your reports isn’t clear?”

Chris shrugged and went back down the hall to tell Kathleen that Alison hadn’t been able to complete her part of the report in time.

Kathleen went into her meeting without the report, and blamed its absence on Chris and Alison.

She noticed Jim, the CEO, frown when she said that, but she shrugged it off. She couldn't do her job if they couldn't do theirs.

Down the hall in another office Alison was talking to her boss. She was blaming Chris and Kathleen for her not getting her work done. Blame was making the rounds, as it always does.



it excuses us from whatever it is we've done, we don't have to accept the consequences of our actions and it's easy to do. Too easy.

It's not only easy to do, it's easy to justify. Once blame starts rolling through the hallways of your company it's hard to eradicate without focused, conscious efforts.

Remember! Blaming results in less innovation and reduction in productivity and profits.



Blaming is also highly contagious.

A study conducted in collaboration with Larissa Tiedens, of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, showed that just watching or hearing about someone else blaming someone or something else for a mistake was enough to cause people to turn around and blame others for completely unrelated failures.

When no one “owns” a failure it’s hard to get others to contribute to finding solutions for the problem(s) the failure causes.

When people know that failure is a path to success they’re less likely to blame and more likely to own their actions.



Fortunately for Kathleen, Chris, Alison and the rest of the team, Jim, the company CEO, recognized what was happening. After the meeting with his top managers he asked Kathleen to join him for lunch to confirm his suspicions.

He didn't have to wait long.

"I'm sorry Jim. I don't know what's wrong with my team lately. They're just not delivering like they have in the past."

Jim nodded and reached for a glass of water. "Tell me what you think is going on," he encouraged her.

She hesitated. "Well, my team is making me crazy," she laughed nervously.

"They're good, but lately Chris has been reluctant to finish anything. He always has an excuse, or someone to blame for not finishing his work."

"I don't know what's going on with him. It's like he just doesn't care anymore."

Jim nodded.

"I've tried everything I know how to do. I've talked to him privately, critiqued his team in meetings, and told him he can't keep making mistakes. It's killing us."

Kathleen spent most of their lunch talking while Jim listened. It wasn't until dessert that Jim spoke up.

"I think you do a great job, Kathleen. You wouldn't be one of my top managers if I didn't believe that. I see a lot of myself in you."

Kathleen blushed. But her swelling pride didn't last long.

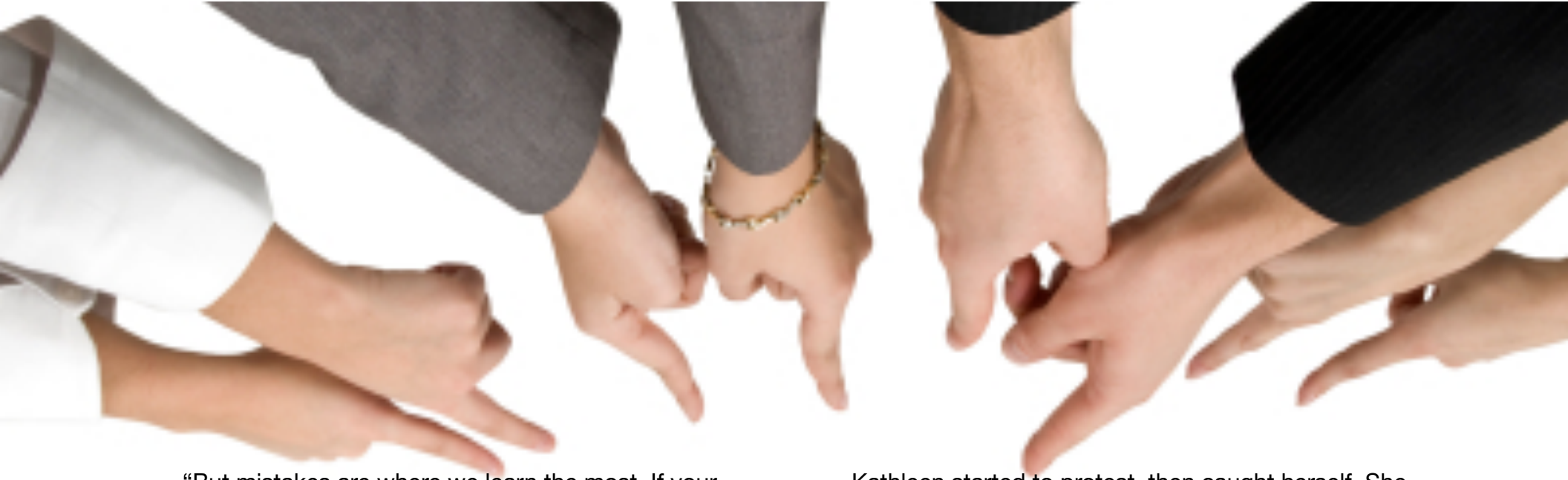
"One of the things I see happening in your department is that people aren't feeling safe making mistakes."

Kathleen frowned.

"Safe to make mistakes? I don't understand. We shouldn't be making mistakes. Why would I want them to feel safe?"

Jim laughed.

"I used to feel the same way," he said.



“But mistakes are where we learn the most. If your team isn’t making mistakes, they’re not learning. They won’t make mistakes if it’s not safe to make them.

“I don’t mean mistakes because they’re not paying attention. I mean mistakes because they’re trying something different - mistakes because they’re trying to find a better way to do things. You know, mistakes that teach us what won’t work and what might work better.

“The thing is, Kathleen, if they’re not learning, they’re not growing. And if they’re not growing then your department is stagnating. They’re bored. I think what’s happening is your department is playing the blame game because they’re afraid to fail.”

Kathleen started to protest, then caught herself. She was about to blame her team - as she had been doing for the past hour. She sighed.

“You’re right. We didn’t used to be like that, but we are now.”

“Good,” Jim said, leaning back in his chair. “Let’s start brainstorming. No blame!”

Kathleen sighed and smiled, relieved. “Great! Let’s get started!”

Kathleen and her team were the lucky ones. They had a CEO who understood the value of failure. The blame game destroys the value and potential that mistakes can bring.



CEO's, janitors, mailroom workers, supervisors, kids, parents, teachers, coaches, the list goes on. Blamers come in all shapes, sizes, ages and careers.

Status, job, career choice, age and income don't matter. Surprise! We're all susceptible. However, there is one particular characteristic found among chronic blamers. They feel chronically insecure.

All of us feel uncertain or insecure in new situations, or around certain situations. But blamers feel insecure in most or all areas of their lives.

Blamers also tend to be more ego-defensive and have a higher likelihood of being narcissistic. Blame can escalate from simple finger-pointing to bullying, scapegoating and destruction of team and department morale.

One blamer in your team or workplace can quickly disrupt a department. If you're not paying attention you



won't see your employees playing this game. It's not the sort of thing people want to be discovered doing or condoning.

The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology demonstrated that blame spreads when people are intent on protecting their self-image. People who are protecting their self-image aren't going to admit they're scapegoating, blaming or bullying.

When people see others protecting their egos, they do the same. The study ruled out mood and social learning as alternative explanations.

So the message is pretty clear - if the blame game is going to be stopped, it has to come from the top. Stopping the blame involves changing the culture, teaching people how to own their mistakes and learn from them. It can be scary and difficult without a plan and understanding the dynamics of blame.

How to Stop the Blame-storming

What Can You Do to Stop the Blame-storming?

Create a culture of psychological safety. People who feel secure in their environment and don't worry about losing face, losing their job or losing credibility because of failure, don't blame.

Encourage and support your employees. Appreciate, support and empower your employees. Make sure they know their accomplishments are appreciated and their failures are opportunities to learn.

Have a zero tolerance for blame. When you hear someone blaming someone or something else, address the issue. Help employees see the value in owning their mistakes and learning from them.

Set an example. Don't blame others for mistakes. Make sure you and your managers lead by example. Blame is highly contagious and the urge to point the finger can feel overwhelming. Resist it. Create a culture of support and prevent a culture of blame.

Reward people for making mistakes. Offer incentives and rewards to encourage risktaking. Risks that lead to innovation and teach lessons are to be valued. Encourage a climate that recognizes the value of smart mistakes.

If you must place blame, do so constructively. Some mistakes require public acknowledgement and blame. Place the blame in a way that stresses learning from the mistake, not in a way that humiliates the person or people involved.

Focus on feeling strong. Being psychologically secure inoculates people from blame. The more confident and secure people feel, the less likely they are to lash out at others or point a finger.

Always focus on learning. Create a culture where learning — rather than avoiding mistakes — is the top priority. People who feel free to fail feel free to innovate.

Summary

It takes more than tips and inspiring quotes to change a workplace. It takes instruction, coaching, mentoring and practice.

Kathleen and Jim may have been able to brainstorm some ideas for Kathleen's department, but implementing the best ideas takes more than sending out a company memo. It requires followup, re-enforcement and a tr change in the company culture.

People blame others because they don't feel safe. Companies with a climate of intolerance for mistakes and errors only exacerbate the culture of fear.

To stop the blame requires a combination of education on a managerial level as well as an employee level.

Creating a supportive, innovative workplace involves understanding the complex blend of personality analysis, culture and practices in a workplace, then coming up with a plan that your managers and employees cannot only implement, but are motivated to implement.

That's where Faith comes in. Faith Wood is an accomplished trainer, coach and mentor. By utilizing her background in law enforcement, handwriting analysis, mediation and NLP, Faith can help you stop the blame game in its tracks.

Call: (403) 461-3498 or
Email: info@imind.ca

About Faith Wood



Faith knows people from the inside out. She is the mother of four, a grandmother and a wife. Call her stubborn, ambitious and strong-willed, and she'll smile because she is exactly all those things and more. She's been calling "Foul!" on the blame game for decades. She's seen the blame game in a variety of jobs. She's been an administrator, rescue worker and peace officer.

While working in the medical field she routinely saw people at their most vulnerable and frightened. When she left to pursue a second career she stayed in a human services field, but took a look at the darker side of humanity and became a peace officer. She got to know people at their worst, as well as at their most stress-filled times.

Along the way Faith became a handwriting analysis expert, a hypnotherapist and an NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) expert. She drew on her optimism, sense of humor and highly honed people skills to become more than your average life coach or speaker.

Using the strength, the power and the amazing abilities of the subconscious, Faith taps into the 90 per cent of the brain that rests beneath the surface - truly controlling our actions, beliefs and personalities.

Interested in booking Faith for an interview, a speaking engagement or training session or as a coach on this topic or any other?

Call: (403) 461-3498 or

Email: info@imind.ca

Testimonials



ALBERTA SPECIAL CONSTABLE ASSOCIATION

Faith Wood, through her company Inspiring Minds, has provided training to many members of our association. She has provided many opportunities for our members to enhance their skills through courses like *"Influencing with Integrity"*, *"NLP Basic Practitioner"*. This training has allowed us to excel in how we communicate with clients, with each other and how we defuse conflict. These skills certainly benefit the officers who have them by providing another "tool" that they can use daily in lives.

Faith's training and assistance in the area of guided imagery has tremendously helped the association members as they enhance their own training. Whether it be in helping others master the skills needed to conduct guided imagery, helping officers to have greater focus on self-defence training, overcoming the effects of pepper spray, enhancing their driving abilities, or working on personal issues, Faith has used her skills to help members overcome obstacles.

Faith conducts herself and her business in a highly professional manner. She is able to relate to anyone and draws relevant examples and thoroughly explain the concepts she is teaching. I feel fortunate to know someone like Faith who has the skills and expertise to help others through practical application and training!

Garry Roth
ASCA Past President

Testimonials

Faith is inspiring, energetic and wildly entertaining. I've listened to many professional speakers over the years, but Faith Wood is among the best.

I've known some professional speakers to just talk the talk and when it comes to walking the walk - most don't even take a single step in the direction they speak of. Faith is very different, her life experiences have put things into a very unique perspective. The delivery is thought-provoking, full of charisma and wit. She would be a welcome addition to any public speaking event. Plus, her skills in handwriting analysis are astounding.

*Tish Bell (Boyчук)
BizBox TV*



BizBOXTV.com is a leading Calgary & Edmonton video production & social media marketing agency. Tish Bell is one of its premier and passionate storytellers!

Professional Storyteller Passionista Tish is a BizBOXTV Team-prenuer! A media and video passion-ista, Tish has spent the last 12 years developing her skills in front and behind the television camera lens. Her experience started when she was a teenager in radio and television news; she also spent time as a sports reporter, hockey colour commentator, videographer, editor, executive producer and weather anchor, most recently at one of the major networks in Calgary. Today Tish likes to be known as a professional storyteller, using her reporting skills to find the story within every business and business owner.

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