Blame game is "contagious"

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Don't blame the messenger for these unpleasant findings, but the mere sight of someone in an organization blamed for a problem – correctly or not – greatly increases the odds that the blame game will spread like a flu.

So say management and organization experts Nathanael Fast at the University of Southern California and Larissa Tiedens of Stanford University in California. They conducted four different experiments and found blame spreads quickly because it makes people think their self-image is under assault.

The findings are to be published in the November issue of *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

"When we see others protecting their egos, we become defensive too," said Fast, the lead author. "We then try to protect our own self-image by blaming others for our mistakes." He adds that in the long run, such behavior could hurt one's reputation and be destructive to an organization and further to our society as a whole.

Tiedens said the study didn't specifically look at the impact of hard economic times, but it undoubtedly makes the problem worse. "Blaming becomes common when people are worried about their safety in an organization," she said. "There is likely to be more blaming going on when people feel their jobs are threatened."

Fast said that when public blaming becomes common practice — especially by leaders — its effects on an organization can be insidious and withering: Individuals who are fearful of being blamed for something become less willing to take risks, are less innovative or creative, and are less likely to learn from their mistakes.

"Blame creates a culture of fear," Fast said, "and this leads to a host of negative consequences for individuals and for groups."

A manager can keep a lid on the behavior by rewarding employees who learn from their mistakes and by making a point to acknowledge publicly his or her own mistakes, Fast said. Managers may also want to assign blame, when necessary, in private and offer praise in public to create a positive attitude in the workplace.

Or, managers could follow the lead of companies such as Intuit, which implemented a "When Learning Hurts" session where they celebrated and learned from mistakes, rather than pointing fingers and assigning blame. The blame contagion research provides evidence that such a practice can avoid negative effects, the researchers argued.

Anyone can become a blamer, Fast said, but there are some common traits. Typically, they are more ego defensive, have a higher likelihood of being narcissistic, and tend to feel chronically insecure.

President Richard Nixon is one example the authors point to in the study. Nixon is chronicled to have harbored an intense need to enhance and protect his self-image and, as a result, made a

practice of blaming others for his shortcomings. His former aides reported that that this ego-defensiveness pervaded his administration. It was the culture of fear and blame that ultimately led to Nixon's political downfall, Fast and Tiedens say.

The experiments showed that those who watched someone blame another for mistakes went on to do the same thing, according to Fast and Tiedens.

In one experiment, half the participants were asked to read a newspaper article about state Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger blaming special interest groups for a controversial special election that failed in 2005, costing California $250 million. A second group read an article in which the governor took full responsibility for the failure. Those who read the first piece were found more likely to blame others for their own, unrelated shortcomings.

Another experiment found that self-affirmation inoculated participants from blame. The tendency for blame to spread vanished in a group of participants who had the opportunity to affirm their self-worth. "By giving participants the chance to bolster their self-worth we removed their need to self-protect though subsequent blaming," said Fast.

The message from Fast and Tiedens to CEO's: don't be lame. Leave the blame game to others.