

Responding to blame by blamectomy and blamotomy

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In response to the myriad of problems that confront people today, there is a widespread and insidious tendency to blame others. The tendency to fan the flames of blame is so pervasive that it directly and indirectly affects everyone who is a member of the veterinary community. Consider the following examples of titles of articles written for our profession: 1) "Dog's vision impaired, client blames Dr. Y."¹; 2) "Who's to blame for inappropriate use of drugs?"²; 3) "Why are veterinarians taking the blame (for misuse of antibiotics)?"³; 4) "Liability for animal bites and attacks: who's to blame?"⁴; and 5) "California man busted for transporting firearms; blames veterinarian for dog's death."⁵ Herein lies part of the problem. By assignment of blame, the terminology chosen by journalists often fosters faulty reasoning about cause and effect relationships. However, the problem does not rest only with individuals who create and edit reports about various newsworthy events. Isn't it true that many of us blame newspaper and magazine journalists by accusing them of printing half-truths and for quoting statements out of context? For example, we often blame them for careless or inaccurate reporting of new medical developments resulting in false hope of miraculous cures at one extreme and unwarranted fears about potential health hazards on the other.⁶ The examples of blame related to the veterinary profession mirror those that citizens of the world encounter on a daily basis in television, radio, newspaper, and magazine news reports (Appendix).

What Is Blame?

A version of Webster's Dictionary defines blame as "to put the responsibility of an error, fault, etc on someone or something."⁷ Blame is derived from the Latin root word *blasphemer*, meaning to speak evil of. Blame is not a synonym for shame (meaning dishonor or disgrace), although these descriptive terms are often linked together. Likewise, blame is not a synonym for accountability or responsibility. Both of these words contain the suffix *ability*. The word *accountability* literally means to stand forth and be counted and implies personal acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. According to Webster's dictionary,⁷ *responsibility* is defined as "able to distinguish between right and wrong and to think and act rationally and, hence,

accountable for one's behavior." The word *responsibility* connotes that ability is required to consider available options to respond in a constructive way. In contrast, blameful responses are often more destructive than the original problem.

Although destructive criticism is closely linked to blame, according to Webster's Dictionary,⁷ the word *criticism* originally meant "discernment or separation based on fair and sound judgment." Thus, constructive criticism is not a synonym for blame, censure, or condemnation.

It is apparent that blaming is usually a reactive judgmental response to perceived wrongdoing. Blame is a negative force in that it tends to polarize opinions. By blaming others, we often convey the self-righteous impression that I'm right; you're wrong. In this context, it is not surprising that blame often becomes a major component of arguments. When individuals or groups blame each other for an undesirable event, blame often is accompanied by a desire for retribution. Blamers often want blamees to suffer consequences as a result of their alleged error.

Responding to problems by blaming others rarely provides effective long-term solutions. Why not? The reason is that blaming is often based on the faulty premise that getting others to change their behavior or getting others to change the situation to meet our desires will resolve problems. In my experiences at the University of Minnesota, my desire that others change in accord with my expectations often does not occur. When I hold fast to a blaming mode of response, I'm denying the fact that by doing so, I may be personally perpetuating the problem. In this situation, blaming may become an excuse for my not contributing to a constructive solution. In essence, I'm saying that rather than take action to improve the situation, I prefer to live with the past and blame somebody else for my anger.

Blamosis, Blamomas, and Blamoblastomas

Who doesn't make mistakes? Don't we all occasionally err in our daily interactions with hospital staff and clients? Yet, how do we respond when the consequences of someone else's error adversely affects us? As emphasized in the news headlines, the initial response is to fix blame on others. In contrast, how do we respond when someone else blames us for problems that we have caused? Have you ever responded to being blamed by saying, "Hey, it's not my fault; I'm not

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to blame” or “Nobody told me?” How often do we weigh our associates’ and clients’ shortcomings with the same scale that we use for ourselves?

Why is it we tend to blame others for their mistakes but are typically lenient with ourselves when we make the same mistakes? I submit that one major reason behind our tendency to blame other people or events for problems is our desire to avoid our own accountability for the cause and consequences of the problems. For example, the phrase “Now look at what you made me do” is a classic cliché used to shift blame. Some youths blame the adversity they have created in their lives on their parents’ genes or how their parents raised them. Some veterinary students blame their teachers’ impatience and strict expectations for their poor performance in school. Some hospital staff point at a critical boss as an excuse for their lack of work ethic. In veterinary medicine, accusations of negligence and malpractice are often rooted in a culture of blame.

When we blame others for problems with the intent of holding them unilaterally accountable, we may be denying our own accountability for how we respond to the problems. If we don’t try to recognize the root causes of blame with the goal of taking corrective action, a psychologic dysfunctional disorder symbolically called “blamosis” may develop in which the “blame reflex” becomes a habit. If blamosis persists unchecked by behavioral norms, it can progress to a state analogous to neoplasia in which uncontrolled growth leads to formation of “blamomas.” If blame is sensationalized by negative gossip, benign blamomas may progress to malignant “blamoblastomas” characterized by metastasis of the popular themes of blame to entire groups of individuals such as those comprising the hospital staff or even the membership of veterinary organizations.

Because none of us is perfect (eg, we are not blameless), various degrees and combinations of signs of blamosis occur in all of us, as expressed by our thoughts, speech, and actions. Blamosis has multiple and, sometimes, interacting causes associated with various risk and protective factors. However, the good news is that blamosis, blamomas, and blamoblastomas are potentially reversible and even preventable.

How Can We Respond To Blame?

The fundamental answer to this question is not difficult. It is making wise choices based on the knowledge that each of us has the freedom to accept or deny personal accountability for our actions. We can choose whether to blame others. Likewise, we can choose to accept or deny blame placed on us by others. But, we cannot always choose the consequences of our actions, especially if our initial responses to problems are negatively couched in blame.

How can we best use our freedom to make choices in context of responding to blame? In answer to this question, please consider the aspects of blame related to errors made by others and our own errors.

Responding To The Errors Of Others With Blamectomies

Depending on the roles we are filling in life, whether it be a parent or child, a student or teacher, an

employee or an employer, or a patient or doctor, we all have the opportunity to receive and give discipline. Discipline can be beneficial or harmful. How can discipline be beneficial? The term discipline is derived from the Latin term *disciple*, meaning learner.⁷ To be beneficial, discipline must be given with the intent of teaching and received with the intent of learning. Contrast this educational view of discipline to that of discipline designed to punish others for their perceived errors. What are the likely consequences of this kind of disciplinary action? Often, the effect of discipline designed to punish rather than to teach is like an anvil repelling a striking hammer. It causes anger, is very divisive, and may destroy relationships in the workplace and at home.

How can we respond to our tendency to blame others for real or perceived problems? I recommend a “blamectomy.” What is a blamectomy? The Greek suffix *-ectomy* means to cut out, as in appendectomy. A blamectomy symbolizes our determination to try to cut out our human tendency to blame others for their errors when our intent is to shame or vindictively punish them rather than to constructively teach them.

How can we perform a blamectomy? While the actual procedure used must be adapted to individual circumstances, please consider the following 10 key steps:

1) Feelings are everywhere; therefore, be kind and gentle. Shouldn’t we try to deal with the faults of others as gently as we deal with our own? This would include offering reproof in private (and commendation in public). A mild and gentle demeanor will help protect us from making damaging remarks and errors to our colleagues and our clients and will also help others try to understand our viewpoint.

2) Try to give others the benefit of the doubt. How can we put this step into practice? When problems occur, we should avoid the impulse to quickly blame others. Why? Because reactive finger-pointing usually results in use of an enormous amount of negative emotional energy. Instead of the knee-jerk who-dun-it approach characterized by subjectively judging who was wrong, why not objectively ask what went wrong? Ask yourself if you have all the facts. Placing fact-finding first rather than fault-finding is a fundamental step toward conflict resolution.

3) Avoid putting others in a corner so that they become defensive. Why? Because thoughtless or intolerant blaming almost always causes people to react defensively, even when they know they have made errors. Instead of destructively criticizing and condemning, wouldn’t it be better to empathically listen and understand the other person’s position? Empathy will also help us offer advice with a spirit of mildness characterized by being considerate, gentle, and helpful. What have you found most effective when you are on the receiving end of criticism: gentle persuasion or screaming and finger-pointing?

4) When the actions of others harm us, we should resist the desire to retaliate. Acting on feelings of “Just as he did to me, so I’m going to do to him” or “I don’t get mad, I get even” are a negative application of the golden rule. Therefore, they will not induce positive results.

5) When others make mistakes, we should try to

focus on the intent of their actions and not just on the difficulties that resulted. Why? Because it is the intent rather than the result that reflects the underlying motive of others' actions.

6) Before blaming another, we should reflect on our intent for doing so. In poetic verse, this step might be expressed as follows:

*When within ourselves,
the urge to blame we find,
these four questions bring to mind:
Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it helpful? Is it kind?*

7) If someone hurts us, it's natural to hope for an apology. But, if an apology is slow to come, what is likely to occur if we continue to dwell on our negative feelings? If we are determined to wait for an apology that never comes, we may become even more frustrated. In effect, we may be allowing the offending person to control our emotions in a negative way. The cost in terms of loss of energy and negative feelings can be enormous.

8) What about our legal rights? Although the answer to this question varies with circumstances, recall that civil law is not synonymous with morality.⁸ Just because we have the legal right to exact reparation from another person doesn't always mean we have the moral right to do so. If others express sincere sorrow for their improper actions, why not try to forgive and forget?

How can we forgive? We can forgive in terms of letting go of resentment. By withholding forgiveness, we often are choosing to be unhappy, perhaps even more so than the person we are blaming. How can we forget? We can forget in the sense of not holding the error against another in association with future disagreements. The wise person who can forgive and forget saves the expense of anger, the cost of hate, the price of misery, and the waste of time.

9) We should avoid damaging others' reputations by not spreading harmful gossip about their perceived error to others.⁹ We shouldn't reveal what may hurt another, unless it is of greater harm to someone else to conceal their error. The Judicial Council of the American Veterinary Medical Association made the following statement about ethical behavior: "Veterinarians should not slander, or injure the professional standing or reputation of other veterinarians..."¹⁰

10) So far, we have considered nine steps that will help us to constructively control our impulse to harmfully blame others. There is a common theme in all nine of these steps. Please review the following with the goal of finding it.

- ▶ Be kind and gentle.
- ▶ Get all the facts before assigning blame.
- ▶ Be an empathic listener and be empathic when offering corrective counsel.
- ▶ Overcome the desire to retaliate.
- ▶ Balance the harmful effect of others' errors with the intent of their actions.
- ▶ Consider your intent for pursuing the faults of others.
- ▶ If necessary, accept the situation and overcome negative feelings, even without an apology.
- ▶ When circumstances allow, forgive in terms of letting go of resentment, and forget in terms of not holding the error against an individual in the future.

- ▶ Avoid the tendency to spread harmful gossip about others' errors.

The common theme in all nine of these steps is the golden rule. The tenth step in performing a blamectomy is also a direct application of the golden rule. To paraphrase, respond to the errors and mistakes of others as you want them respond to yours.

Responding To Our Own Errors With Blamotomies

Have you ever been blamed for problems associated with your work? Perhaps a client blamed you because of unmet expectations regarding the medical care of one of your patients. Or, perhaps finger-pointing from a colleague occurred in association with referral of a patient. Perhaps the hospital director expressed frustration to you about a drop in the hospital's income attributed to the fees you have been charging clients. Whether or not you were responsible for these problems, have you ever responded defensively by saying, "It is not my fault; don't blame me?" Did your defensive response make the situation better or worse? How may we more positively respond when we are on the receiving end of blame?

Again, the answer is to make wise choices. One choice is to perform a "blamotomy." What is a blamotomy? The Greek suffix -otomy means to cut into, like, for example, a cystotomy to remove bladder stones. Recall that we all suffer from varying degrees of blamosis and blamomas that have multiple causes. The term blamotomy symbolizes our desire to cut into or diagnose the underlying causes of errors for which we are to blame so as to eliminate them and prevent them from recurring.

How can we perform a blamotomy? Please consider the following 10 key steps:

1) We should accept responsibility and accountability for our choices and actions. If we accept credit for successes in our lives, why shouldn't we be willing to accept responsibility for our mistakes?

2) Be truthful. Why? What is your response when you learn that others have been untruthful to you? Isn't it true that whatever they say thereafter may be suspected as false however true it may be? Therefore, our response to criticism of our mistakes should be governed by the desire to be honest.¹¹

3) Be humble. Why? Because humility will help us admit a mistake and apologize to others for it. Isn't it true that making poor choices gets us into trouble whereas egotistical pride often keeps us there? Being humble is not synonymous with being weak. It takes great strength to be humble when under provocation. Humility is especially required for a person in a position of authority to apologize to those who are responsible to that person. But, a humble apology often will restore peace.

4) Avoid defensively justifying errors to others in order to save face. Trying to save face does not change the facts. In fact, in trying to deceive others, we may succeed in deceiving ourselves. Making the choice to save face usually results in the situation becoming worse. Why? Because saving face is based on an ethically faulty premise. It assumes that a person's reputa-

tion is of paramount importance at any cost, even the cost of that person's relationship with others. That premise is not correct; we must earn a good reputation!

5) We should avoid misrepresenting ourselves by intentionally covering up or hiding mistakes. Why? Because as exemplified by the Watergate scandal involving President Richard Nixon, when our errors are exposed, our choice to cover them reveals our intent. In addition, cover-ups consume a great deal of negative energy. Aren't we more likely to receive a just response if we openly admit a fault and shoulder the blame than if we try to get out from under it?

6) Avoid shifting the blame to others. This choice is clearly selfish and dishonest. Once we fabricate the truth, we may find ourselves telling additional lies to cover lies. On the other hand, by admitting our error and accepting responsibility for it, right-thinking people will usually respect our honesty.

7) Avoid blaming an innocent messenger obliged to bring us the message about our errors. Wise King Solomon stated, "Do not hurry to become offended, because the taking of offense rests in the bosom of foolish ones" (Ecclesiastes 7:9). Although we have no direct control over the content of the message delivered by a third party, we do have direct control over how we respond to it. If we feel that we are being unfairly blamed, we should concentrate on the principle that the best defense against misrepresentation is fine conduct.

8) We should strive to learn from our mistakes. When we are on the receiving end of blame and criticism, even if we think it is unfair, we must train ourselves to rise above all that is petty and to accept and use what is true and worthwhile. Those who learn from criticism are sometimes wiser than those who give it. We must be big enough to admit our mistakes, smart enough to profit from them, and strong enough to correct them.

9) For the sake of peace and unity, at times it may be advisable for us to shoulder blame for something we did not do so long as no great issue or ethical or moral principle is involved. Isn't it better to endure wrong than to do wrong? In context of personal relationships, some things are more important than proving who is right and who is wrong.

10) So far, we have considered nine steps that will constructively help us deal with our own faults. There is a common theme in all nine steps. Please review the following with the objective of finding it.

- We should be responsible and accountable for our choices.
- We should be truthful.
- We should be humble and not puffed up with self-pride.
- We should try to avoid being defensive.
- We should avoid cover-ups.
- We shouldn't blame the messenger for the message.
- We shouldn't shift the blame for our own mistakes onto someone else.
- We should try to learn from our mistakes.
- To promote unity, we should consider shouldering the blame for the mistakes of others, provided an ethical or moral principle is not compromised.

Did you recognize the common theme in all nine steps? Again, it is the golden rule. The tenth step in performing a blamotomy is a direct application of the golden rule. To paraphrase, recognize and accept accountability for your errors as you want others to recognize and accept accountability for theirs.

Epilogue

Between stimulus and response is a space. In this space lies our freedom to choose our response. Knowledge of the underlying causes of blame, self-awareness of our freedom to choose not to blame others, and the desire to constructively respond to being blamed by others are key components in controlling blamosis and blamomas. But, having knowledge of these principles is not enough. We must put them into practice. With timely and consistent application of blamectomies and blamotomies designed in harmony with the time-tested principles of the golden rule, the frustration, loss of precious energy, distrust, and disunity caused by the flames of blame will be replaced with enthusiasm, accomplishment, appreciation, trust, and unity.

Appendix

Examples of blame in the news

- **Who do we blame for increased violence?**
Saint Paul Pioneer Press, Monday, May 24, 1999;6A.
- **California killer blamed former supervisor for having him fired.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Saturday, Dec 20, 1997;6A.
- **Who's to blame for Diana's death?**
US News and World Report, Sep 15, 1997;123:22-26.
- **Low male self-esteem? Blame GI Joe.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Wednesday, Jun 2, 1999;21A.
- **Blaming others for tobacco use is the ultimate smoke screen.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Friday, Jul 31 1998;27A.
- **Blame God for the fumble?**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Friday, Jan 15, 1999;20A.
- **Recent human-cloning hype blamed on media.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Sunday, Jan 25, 1998;8A.
- **Clinton says world shares blame in Rwanda genocide.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Thursday, Mar 26, 1998;1A.
- **Rwanda lays blame without looking inward.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Sunday, May 10, 1998;5A.
- **What's next? Blaming farmers because we're fat?**
Saint Paul Pioneer Press, Tuesday, Jul 21, 1998;6A.
- **In the blame game, fingers are pointing at El Nino for most things.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Sunday, Mar 8, 1998;7A.
- **Italian premier demands that US fix blame for cable accident.**
Saint Paul Pioneer Press, Saturday, Mar 6, 1999;2A.
- **For the shallowness of public debate, blame candidates' reliance on political consultants.**
Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Monday, Sep 6, 1999;10A.

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