

Is this the most cowardly of boss behaviour?

By Rhea Wessel

[Careers](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers) (<http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers>) [Leadership](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/leadership) (<http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/leadership>) [Managing](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/managing) (<http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/managing>)

[Psychology](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/20150401-psychology) (<http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/20150401-psychology>) [Workplace](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/workplace) (<http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/workplace>)



(Credit: Thinkstock)

Starting a new job should be exciting, but when Debbie Baute began a role at a company in 2007, it was more than she bargained for. After just four months in strategic human resources at Procter & Gamble in Brussels, where Baute oversaw a department of 65 people, the company decided to move the unit to Geneva, forcing staff to choose between moving or potentially losing their jobs.

Baute, now 36, became the go-to person to answer questions and soothe the nerves of consternated staff. The news, she said, had come as a blow, particularly as the executive responsible for orchestrating the decision flew into town, announced the department's move, and then promptly caught a plane back to his own office.

"I found it hard to face angry people," she said. "I could feel what they were going through, but at the same time I felt it was my duty to be there. That sense of duty was stronger, and that took over," Baute said. Just two of her team made the move to Switzerland.

These days, Baute works as an executive coach and managing partner of Confidant, a consultancy for leadership and organisational development in Brussels. Looking back, she said, "When you don't have all the answers to the questions, taking responsibility means being there and facing up to that... that makes a big difference in how people feel."

Why shirk responsibilities?

Experts say it's a cowardly act to avoid responsibility and blame others or outside events for unfavourable circumstances.

Angela Negro, a life and leadership coach, said, "At some stage, we have all felt like absolving ourselves of responsibility, especially if we stand to lose face, favour, standing or will incur someone's wrath. Kids do it all the time. 'It wasn't me, it was her! She made me do it!'"

The key word in Negro's analysis is "lose", which circles back to the fear of being faulted. When we are at fault, we face disconnection, rejection or exposure of a particular incompetence or weakness.

Indeed, it's easy to point the finger since we have an innate human need to be right. Some are masters of the tactic, whether a colleague, sibling or partner. For any question that might lead to fault-finding, the respondent is primed to insist that something was not her fault — because it wasn't her responsibility in the first place.

In corporations, the blame game is "quite prevalent" and "quite destructive" for the company culture and performance, said John Almandoz, a professor who lectures on managing people in organisations at IESE Business School in New York and Barcelona.

Acknowledging that some degree of failure is acceptable — and even important — is one way to move ahead. Just ask innovation experts, who accept and even want failure as part of the product development process because there is something to be learned.

"Empowered and optimistic leaders remain firm in their values, have the humility and the courage to admit when they've made a mistake without blaming others, and seek to make amends or learn from their failure," Negro said.

Your piece of the pie

The tendency to shift responsibility to someone or something else at work may stem from a lack of shared mission, some experts say. Feeling responsible is often directly linked to employee engagement.

"Company missions are effective to the degree that people are motivated and want to contribute to the company's mission," said Almandoz. "If they believe in the mission and share it, they feel ashamed and embarrassed if they're not contributing — if others in their team think less of them because they're not doing their work well."

Another way to boost responsibility is to make sure employees understand the importance of their contribution. Staff members should understand what they do as part of the whole, Almandoz said. On the factory line, for example, a worker who is responsible for creating an entire car part — as opposed to one who is responsible for welding multiple parts — identifies with that part and how it makes the car drive.

"Knowing your contribution ultimately creates a culture in the organisation where everybody feels responsible," Almandoz said. "People are not blaming each other when things go bad."

Doing the right thing

Fessing up to mistakes is also crucial, said Marie-Anne Reynell, the director of development at the School of Education and Psychology at the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain.

While working at another European university nine years ago, she took the blame for an error her supervisor had made, even though Reynell had brought it to the supervisor's attention that a calculation was incorrect.

"As I expected, what we had done was wrong," Reynell said. "I was a minor person in the team. My superior, who should have been there when the auditors arrived, didn't turn up on the day and made me responsible for the mistake. She basically made out that I was a beginner and a newcomer, and it was my fault."

Reynell assumed the mistake in front of the auditors and defended the project as best she could. "I never forgot that," she said. Since she took responsibility for the calculation mistake, the auditors had been lenient. A few months later, her supervisor was moved to a different department and demoted, while Reynell was promoted.

After her boss failed to take responsibility for the mistake, Reynell vowed always to do so herself. "If you take responsibility, your team will, too. The team has to trust you," she said.

Doing the right thing comes with psychological pay-offs, too. "Taking responsibility means being part of something bigger than yourself. You act in the interest of the organisation," Baute said. "You're part of a bigger group."

To comment on this story or anything else you have seen on BBC Capital, head over to our Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/BBCCapital>) page or message us on Twitter (https://twitter.com/BBC_Capital).