

HBR.ORG

Harvard Business Review



JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2014
REPRINT F1401F

COLUMN

Blame Me

by Kevin Sharer



Kevin Sharer is the former CEO of Amgen and is currently a senior lecturer at Harvard Business School.

blame

My hunch is that, at some point in your career, your reliance on someone else to get a job done has left you angry, confused, frustrated, and maybe even deeply concerned for your own professional standing. Especially when the stakes are high in a complex, troubling situation, depending on colleagues to make the right moves is stressful—and when things aren't going well, it can be maddening.

The darkest hour in my last job had all those elements. The company where I served as CEO had a product and financial crisis that was playing out on the front pages of the newspapers. Our major regulator was publicly excoriating us; the stock price was plummeting. My two most capable, trusted colleagues were in charge of our day-to-day response. But it became apparent that, for the first time in their six-year partnership—which until then had been ideal—they were not working effectively as a team. In some ways they were making things worse.

My state of mind wasn't pretty. If you'd had a view into it, you'd have seen disgust, fury, fear, and indignation. It was standing room only in the psychological basement.

In the midst of it all I found myself sitting alone at a restaurant table, waiting for dinner companions who'd been delayed by

L.A. traffic. With a blank white paper tablecloth spread in front of me, I pulled out a pen and tried to organize my thoughts. The question occurred to me: How much of my colleagues' performance problem did I actually own?

Call it an epiphany, but that question inspired me to start scribbling. Soon I had a long list of things I could and should have done differently, all the way from resource allocation and long-term capability building to my engagement in the immediate crisis. I want to be clear that this was not an exercise in self-loathing or defeatism; it was an authentic, honest, and complete analysis of how I had failed to do my part.

The following Monday, when the three of us met to review where we stood, I ar-

rived with a different attitude. I started the meeting by describing, calmly and with total candor, how decisions I had made in the past had landed us where we were, and what I was prepared to change. In short, I owned the problem. We then decided together how we would not only manage the immediate situation but also change capabilities, priorities, and processes to strengthen the company in the long run.

I will admit that one reason my new approach allowed us to make better progress was that it stunned my colleagues. Whatever defensiveness they were feeling was swept away. But just as important, reviewing how I had helped create the problem gave me more clarity and conviction about what I could fairly ask of them.

Now when issues arise at work—or in personal relationships, for that matter—I know it is fundamental for me to look deeply and objectively at my own contribution to them before expecting others to change and improve. In case I need a reminder, there is a picture of my two colleagues on my office wall, showing what a good team looks like. At the end of the crisis, we and our company emerged better than ever—and that's something we owned, too. ♥

**The question occurred to me:
How much of my colleagues'
performance problem did
I actually own?**

HBR Reprint F1401F

ILLUSTRATION: TOPOS GRAPHICS