

STOP THE BELLYYACHING

BY JUNE A. HALPER

"Eradicating victim mindset and behavior is not an overnight job. It takes real fortitude on the part of leaders to encourage candor, create high levels of accountability, and hold themselves to the same standards as their employees."

GERALD STORCH, chief executive officer of Toys-"R"Us, is facing the monumental task of turning around the once leading-edge retailer that has been dethroned by discounters such as Wal-Mart and Target. In speaking with a workforce that has been, according to *The New York Times*, "badly shaken by its misfortunes," Storch, a former top executive at Target Corp., uncovered an organizational dynamic that he feels is undermining the company's chances for success if left unchanged. "He crusades against what he calls the company's 'victim culture,' that is, the pervasive mentality through-

out the company which ‘blamed others for its problems rather than facing its own mistakes.’” In outlining the many ways in which Toys“R”Us missed the boat, Storch’s bottom-line message to employees is, “We did it to ourselves.”

The victim mentality is not unique to Toys“R”Us. We all have worked with self-perceived victims. They either are griping constantly—they are overworked and underpaid; no one asks their opinion; the promotion they deserved went to someone else; they could not make their numbers because of the economy, the competition, other departments, etc.—or they pretend that everything is fine, while holding their resentment inside.

Taking responsibility

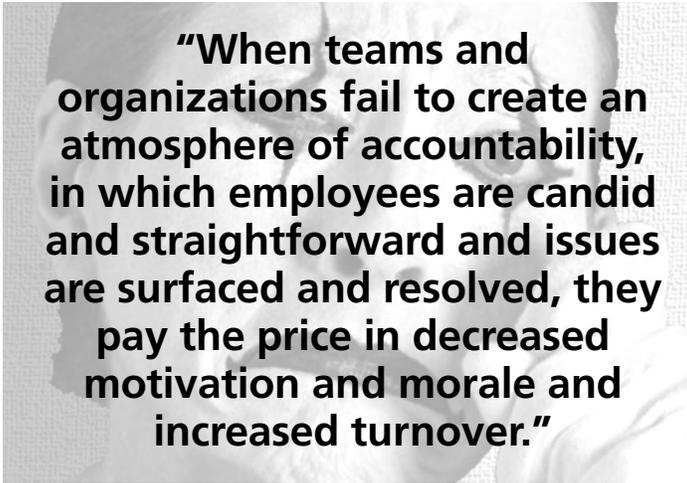
These self-created victims are frustrated and unhappy with aspects of their job or the company they work for, but they rarely, if ever, voice their grievances in productive ways or to those who can help. Forever disgruntled and grumbling, they wallow in their martyrdom. Whether their grievances are real or, as Storch professes, imagined, such victims have one thing in common: They refuse to take responsibility for their situation and persist in maintaining the mindset that nothing they can do will make a difference, even if they have not ever tried. When they do “try,” they make half-hearted attempts that only reinforce their belief that trying yields little or no result.

Victims exist in all types of organizations and at all organizational levels. They are an insidious underground army that has a huge negative impact on productivity, the ability to compete, and morale. There are more underground “victims” in the workplace than you might imagine. To assess the extent of this mentality in various corporate cultures, I looked at a sample of data collected in the last five years from business teams in 12 Fortune 1000 companies with which I have consulted. This sampling of 225 executives completed a questionnaire prior to beginning team development sessions that we facilitated. Two of these questions—“What is the working atmosphere within your team?” and “How are conflicts within the team handled?”—address the victim problem, as they deal with lack of candor and unresolved issues. Responses either will constitute high levels of performance or varying degrees of covert or dysfunctional behavior. The teams ranged from senior-level—the CEO and his or her staff—down to director, manager, and professional levels. Some startling statistics emerged. On question one, 69% provided negative responses. On question two, 80% of the responses revealed problems. All told, three-quarters of all team members exhibited

degrees of underground behavior, ranging from mild to predominant, and failed to surface issues that existed between them and their peers. If you multiply the findings by the number of organizations with which our other 17 consultants work, the quantity of “victims” that populate the workplace is astonishing.

Here are some written comments from the employees surveyed:

- “People feel there are hidden agendas, from the VPs on down.”
- “We are guarded and wary in large meetings. People are careful of every word they say. Some see it as dangerous and punishing to be candid, as they are seeking [the leader’s] approval.”
- “We are more concerned with who’s right than with what’s right for the business.”
- “The issues between [the two leaders] affect many in the organization—mixed messages, changing priorities, time wasted.”
- “Issues are swept under the rug. The team looks to avoid confrontation around touchy issues.”
- “Issues may be raised, but are not discussed



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in a safe and open environment. Speed to closure is not achieved and issues are continually recycled.”

In today’s fiercely competitive business world, speed is a key competitive advantage. The rate at which a company can implement a new strategy, move new products through the pipeline, or respond to competitive threats separates the high performers from the rest of the pack. When teams and organizations fail to create an atmosphere of accountability, in which employees are candid and straightforward and issues are surfaced and resolved, they pay the price in decreased motivation and morale and increased turnover. People become disenfranchised; decisionmaking is delayed; it is hard to get things done. Employees end up marking time—just doing the minimum expected of them. This hardly is the way to stay ahead of the competition.

Playing the victim is common in personal and business situations. Consider the husband or wife who tolerates abusive behavior from a

spouse, or the student who fails a course and, rather than taking it over, drops out of school, or the employee who vows never to make another suggestion after management ignores his first one. In each of these examples, the victim’s behavior is less a result of the reality of a situation than it is of his or her mindset. We cannot always control what happens to us, but we can control how we react to it. In any given set of circumstances, whether we emerge as victor or victim depends on our reactions.

Here is how the dynamic works. As a result of our experience and perceptions in life, we often approach situations with preconceived notions. For instance, if you disagreed with a superior in a previous job or organization, and there were negative consequences, you might tend to tread carefully before disagreeing again, even many years later, in a completely different situation. If you believe that dealing with issues directly will cause others to dislike you, you either might suppress issues or—when you no longer can rein in your frustration—act out in unproductive ways. When individuals react to a situation based on their—others’—past experience, without determining what is true in the current situation, they are reacting to a “story” or perception, rather than to reality. When the story is negative, it can stop employees from taking actions that might be to their benefit or that of the organization.

Here are some typical, disempowering stories that underlie victim mentality: Challenging authority can be a career-limiting move. We do not confront people directly here; we are a “nice” organization. If I confront someone, it will damage our relationship. Management just does not get it and does not care, so why bother? I have tried that and it just does not work. I could not because they (boss/peers/the environment) would not let me.

In my years of consulting, I have heard these stories and dozens more, over and over again. What all of them have in common are the individuals’ rationalizations and justifications for playing it safe and refusing to become accountable for their situation.

Victim behavior, to be eradicated from the workplace, must be attacked at three levels:

- **Mindset**—raising the bar on accountability. Victims need help in distinguishing fact from fiction. They have to separate what really is happening from their reactions to it. They have to identify and challenge their beliefs, or stories, about what can or cannot be said or done to resolve issues. Most importantly, these employees must recognize how their own behavior might have contributed to the situation and whether they have accepted accountability for resolving it—or have they just complained, hoping that someone else would come to the rescue?

One way to help victims shift their mindset is to have them examine the payoffs and costs of maintaining their stories. What payoffs do they get from their belief that it is best to play it safe and not rock the boat—perhaps a perceived sense of job security?; the possibility of a promotion?; how about the admiration of fellow malcontents? Victims often fail to recognize the costs they are paying for holding on to their beliefs: not just increasing dissatisfaction, but also stress, low self-esteem, poor performance, and the longer-term potential for physical and emotional illness.

Victims frequently subscribe to the story that there are no choices open to them. What they need help in seeing is that, no matter what the situation, they always have a choice. They can confront a situation directly in an effort to change it, or simply let it go, accepting it as it is but not allow it to affect them. If they really believe that a person or issue cannot be changed, they can shift their perception so that, while the person's behavior or issue still exists, they no longer allow it to perturb them. Finally, they can leave the person or situation—change their job or move to another company.

All three are assertive choices in which the individual takes action toward some type of resolution and, therefore, feels in control. A fourth choice exists, but it is the one that has created the victim mentality in the first place—going underground. Victims need to know that they may not always like the choices they have, but that they always have them. They are far better off making a choice, which will empower them, than doing nothing and prolonging their own inevitable downward spiral.

- Skill set—teaching employees how to have direct and productive conversations that result in effective solutions, and providing them with a range of options to take when issues arise. Shifting mindset creates the willingness to change behavior; imparting the right skill set creates the ability to do so. In today's matrix organizations, most work teams are made up of representatives from a wide range of functional areas. Because those responsible for results often depend on individuals over whom they have no direct authority, possessing influencing and conflict management skills is more important than ever before. They include the ability to make assertive and clear requests; listen and understand others' concerns when they disagree, become defensive, or resist; depersonalize feedback; and attain collaborative solutions wherever possible.

Most individuals in business today do not learn these skills in traditional educational settings. Many companies have internal training groups that conduct such programs or send employees to external training organizations that offer these programs regularly.

- Protocols—helping employees agree upon, and hold one another accountable for, following productive rules of engagement. In other words, this entails the creation of ground rules that employees agree upon and follow without exception. These rules govern how work

HOW MANY VICTIMS DO YOU WORK WITH?



Your organization, like many others, may be harboring an underground army of employees who are contributing to their own dissatisfaction and keeping you from achieving your goals. Think about your supervisors, peers, and the people who report to you. How many of them exhibit some or all of these victim behaviors:

They whine and complain about “how awful it is around here”; claim to have no say in things, and not to care anyway; seek to enroll others, people of like mind with whom they can commiserate; tend to be full of righteous indignation, pointing out other “victims” of the organization to strengthen their case; rarely deal directly with a person or an issue and, if they attempt to do so and are unsuccessful, they walk away and continue to voice their frustration and anger. Moreover, they spread their negativity to anyone who will listen, infecting their environment with the victim virus, or they say nothing at all, either pretending that everything is fine or acting out in passive-aggressive ways.

When human resources or management gives them an opportunity to air their concerns, they refuse to express them directly or to participate in healthy problem resolution. They blame others—other departments, peers, management, the culture—for their failures.

teams—whether departmental, cross-functional, or multi-level—will resolve conflict, make decisions, conduct meetings, and otherwise interact between and among themselves.

Once the rules have been established, leaders and employees are accountable for holding each other to them and for “calling out” those who break them. When it comes to protocols, remember, the leader is treated just like any other team member, and any person has the right—actually, the obligation—to point it out if the leader is the one who breaks the rules.

A number of protocols that teams and organizations have created work well to eliminate victim behavior. First and foremost is candor. On high-performing teams, each member has license to say anything about any area of the team and the critique is interpreted as being in support of the team's “winning.” If a person has issues, and leaving is not an option, he or she is expected either to confront the issues directly or let them go. Many teams choose a period of time, such as 48 hours, in which an issue must be addressed (or at the least put on the relevant parties' calendars to address) so that they know resolution will be reached.

There also are ground rules for when conflict cannot be resolved and must be escalated. Receptivity—listening to another's viewpoint, even if you disagree—often is a requirement. Depersonalization is expected when giving and receiving feedback. Feedback always is treated as a business issue, even when it focuses on behavior.

When these and other ground rules are clear and agreed to, team members know that value is placed upon these behaviors, and they are not just platitudes. Those who unflinchingly follow and enforce the ground rules are respected and rewarded by the team and the organization—in some companies, it is one of the criteria in performance reviews.

In our consulting work, we often combine all three elements in a process known as “team alignment.” These sessions are real-life interventions made to accelerate a team or organization's ability to work through issues and to produce outstanding business results. Changing mindsets and establishing protocols are part of all alignment sessions. Between alignment sessions, training in the appropriate skill sets is provided, so that a victim mentality is not condoned and high-performance ways of working are internalized.

Eradicating victim mindset and behavior is not an overnight job. It takes real fortitude on the part of leaders to encourage candor, create high levels of accountability, and hold themselves to the same standards as their employees. Difficult as it may be, it can be accomplished, and the rewards are great: personal freedom, greater speed to market, increased performance and competitiveness, and stronger bottom-line results. ★

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