

The blame-taker's dilemma: Actions and reactions in the wake of organizational failure

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Abstract

Rudolph Giuliani once said: “It is in times of crisis that good leaders emerge.” His observation echoes the widely-held view that crises create conditions rife for leadership. Yet, systematic evidence on what leaders—recognized and emergent—should do after an organizational failure remains sparse. An obvious and often-prescribed recommendation is to apologize. However, “apologies” communicate two, distinct messages: responsibility (they take blame) and regret (they express remorse). Though theoretically and practically distinguishable, taking blame and expressing remorse, independently, have not received much research attention. This leaves an important gap, as organizational actors often do one without the other. My research focuses on blame-taking, examining its independent incidence and effectiveness after an organizational failure. Study 1 investigated incidence, asking consultants to reflect on a failure that they had personally experienced. Their responses suggested that recognized leaders took blame more often than others, but that blame-taking was still quite rare overall. Study 2 sampled separate consultants from the same firm; they reacted to someone who took blame or expressed remorse for the Study 1 stories. Notwithstanding its scarcity, blame-taking was roundly preferred to remorse. Study 3 replicated these effects and documented a reason: blame-taking establishes an actor's character more than remorse does. Overall, this research highlights a disconnect between what organizational actors do and what others want them to do. People appear reluctant to take blame, even though doing so could help to demonstrate or confirm their leadership potential.