Falling on the sword: Whether, when, and why to take blame

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Many organizational failures are diffuse: several people share the responsibility. My research investigates the post hoc statements of the partially-responsible parties. My presentation summarizes several studies from two papers (one under review and one in-progress) that collectively examine whether, when, and why it is advisable for the responsible parties to take blame, as opposed to expressing remorse or evading. At a high level, these studies suggest that taking blame is advisable when talking to the other responsible parties, who prefer and reward blame-taking because it protects them, but less advisable when talking to a variety of non-responsible parties, for whom blame-taking offers only a confirmation of culpability. Thus, blame-taking appears to offer a potent, post-failure response, but only for a particular audience: the other responsible parties. People outside the team, outside the organization, or outside the realm of suspicion have a reduced appetite for blame-taking.