THE BLAME BIAS: FORGOING THE BENEFITS OF BLAME-TAKING

ABSTRACT

Many organizational failures are diffuse: several people share the responsibility. By examining the responsible parties’ post-failure statements to one another, the current research documented a blame bias: the responsible parties’ reluctance to take blame, even while the other responsible parties reward blame-taking more than remorse or evasion. Studies 1 and 2 revealed the infrequency of blame-taking in a major consulting firm and a laboratory setting, respectively. Studies 3 and 4 showed that parallel groups of consultants and laboratory participants, in parallel situations, reward blame-taking more than remorse or evasion; Study 4 also suggested a mediator (perceived character) and moderator (non-diffuse, i.e., concentrated failures) of this effect. Overall, the findings highlight a disconnect between actual and preferred behavior after diffuse failures, suggesting that the responsible parties could benefit themselves by taking more blame.

Key words: blame, remorse, apology, failure
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It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you place the blame.
---Oscar Wilde

In 2006, a group of Morgan Stanley traders bet billions of dollars on the subprime mortgage market. Senior management supported their strategy until the subprime market collapsed, costing the firm $9 billion and leading it to the brink of bankruptcy (Lewis, 2010). Unlike a concentrated failure, for which one person is responsible, this was a diffuse failure: several people shared the responsibility.

Diffuse failures, though common during the financial crisis, are hardly confined to Wall Street. Many organizational outcomes arise from the behavior of several, interdependent people, so many organizational failures are diffuse. Consider just a few of the most prominent and severe examples: the Challenger explosion, Enron implosion, and Bay of Pigs decision. Since diffuse failures are ubiquitous, and since recovery may depend on the responses of the responsible individual(s) (Edmondson, 1999; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004), it is surprising that research on post-failure responses has mainly considered concentrated failures (Goodman et al., 2011). By asking what the parties who are responsible for a diffuse failure say to one another post hoc, as well as how they react to these statements, the current research sought theoretical insight that could help organizations recover from diffuse failures.

Since many of the diffuse failures and post hoc statements that actually happen in organizations are hidden from view, prominent failures and public statements offer an analytical starting point. In the months following Morgan Stanley’s $9 billion blunder, the CEO offered three, distinct statements: “I take responsibility for our performance”; “I am especially sorry for what’s happened”; and “I’ll be very happy to get back to you on that” (e.g., Lewis, 2010). The first statement communicated responsibility but little regret; the second communicated regret but little responsibility; and the third communicated little of either. The current research investigated these same types of statements, which respectively took
blame, expressed remorse, and evaded. It focused on the first because the act of taking blame (i.e., blame-taking) may help to resolve the responsibility questions that dominate diffuse failures.

Previous research, on concentrated failures, has tended to regard blame-taking and remorse as elements of an apology (e.g., Kim et al., 2004; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Scher & Darley, 1997). Based on theory, data, and a plethora of real-world examples, the current research contends that—at least in diffuse failure situations where responsibility is a dominating concern—people can take blame as an independent statement. That they can take blame, however, does not imply that they often do. Indeed, shared responsibility introduces considerable ambiguity about who, if anyone, should take blame for a diffuse failure, so the current research first sought descriptive data on whether and when the responsible parties take blame (blame-taking’s incidence).

Previous research has also shown that, after a concentrated failure, the responsible party can generate more favorable reactions from others by apologizing (via both blame-taking and remorse) than by evading (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004)—and that blame-taking and remorse, considered separately, generate comparably positive reactions (Scher & Darley, 1997). Theory, data, and real-world examples, however, lead to the prediction that the other parties who are responsible for a diffuse failure may have a pronounced preference for blame-taking because it resolves their dominant concern: their own culpability. Thus, the current research also sought to document how the responsible parties react to blame-taking, versus remorse and evasion (blame-taking’s effectiveness). The joint investigation of incidence and effectiveness facilitated a contrast of what people do and what others want them to do, post-failure.

In sum, the current research was designed to theoretically disentangle diffuse failures from concentrated failures, and, for diffuse failures, to empirically disentangle blame-taking from remorse and evasion. Blame-taking “can be an exercise in loyalty, although it is never without risk” (Jackall,
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1988: 86). The current research suggests that people overestimate its risks and underestimate its benefits, leading to a blame bias in which they take less blame than their own interests suggest that they should.

FAILING AND RESPONDING

Organizational Failures

Organizational failures clearly conflict with an organization’s goals and clearly result, at least in part, from its employees’ behavior (e.g., Crant & Bateman, 1993; Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004; Staw, Mckechnie, & Puffer, 1983). Morgan Stanley’s $9 billion loss, for example, clearly conflicted with its performance goals and clearly resulted from its traders’ decisions. As noted, organizational failures can be diffuse or concentrated. Diffuse failures, the current focus, result from the behavior of two or more people who share the responsibility (e.g., Coan, 2002; Edmondson, 1999; Goodman et al., 2011; Reason, 2000) and are ubiquitous because “a central feature of modern organizations is interdependence, where no one has complete autonomy, where most employees are tied to many others” (Kotter, 2001: 90). Concentrated failures, the primary focus of prior research (Kim et al., 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981), result from the behavior of a single person (e.g., a lone embezzler) in whom the responsibility “concentrates.” Since the responsibility for failures tends to be continuous rather than categorical (Heider, 1958), diffuse and concentrated failures are best conceptualized as polarities rather than categories. Thus, the current research compares relatively diffuse to relatively concentrated failures.

Organizational failures also tend to concern competence (i.e., ability/effort) or integrity (i.e., moral awareness/concern). Concentrated integrity failures often elicit harsher judgments than concentrated competence failures (e.g., Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009; Kim et al., 2004; Reeder & Brewer, 1979; Snyder & Stukas, 1999). Since people often see high ability as an aspiration, they tend to construe competence failures as an unfortunate but non-damning indication of the transgressor’s inability (Kim et al., 2004). Since they often see morality as a duty, however, they tend to view integrity
failures as a damning indication of the transgressor’s immorality (Kim et al., 2004). The current research casts a broad net by exploring diffuse failures of both competence and integrity.

**Responses to Diffuse Failure**

Following a failure, people naturally seek to assign blame (Shaver, 1985). Since blame implies both causality (a scientific fact) and responsibility (a social ascription), people who have knowingly, intentionally, and freely caused negative consequences without any acceptable excuses or justifications should receive the most blame (Heider, 1958; Shaver, 1985; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). Even ambiguous failures, however, can prompt considerable blaming (Alicke, 2000; Malle & Knobe, 1997). Thus, organizational blame “has little to do with the actual merits of the case; it is a matter of social definition” (Jackall, 1988: 85).

The current research focuses on the post-failure behavior of the responsible parties (i.e., the “involved actors”): the people whose behavior clearly contributed to a diffuse failure, and who thus share the responsibility, i.e., could get blamed. Specifically, it focuses on 1) the post-failure statements made by one involved actor to the other involved actors, and 2) the other involved actors’ reactions. It excludes the actions or reactions of people who bear no responsibility, e.g., members of other departments, the general public, or victims.

As noted, the actors involved in diffuse failures have several response options, including blame-taking, remorse, and evasion. As also noted, apologies tend to include elements of both blame-taking and remorse: an apology “acknowledges both responsibility and regret for a trust violation” (Kim et al., 2009: 411); and an apologizer “must acknowledge responsibility…and express regret…these are the definitional qualities of apologies” (Scher & Darley, 1997: 129). The Morgan Stanley blunder and many other failures (e.g., the Gulf oil spill), however, suggest that organizational actors often make more
differentiated statements, i.e., taking blame or expressing remorse, not both. Thus, the current research investigates ideal forms (Weber, 1928) of each statement, made proactively to the others involved.

Since people often play “the blame game” following organizational failure (Jackall, 1988), getting blamed sometimes seems more familiar than taking blame. Yet, some organizations promote a culture of blame-taking. U.S. Navy SEALs, for example, learn to “take the hit” rather than “shirk or run away” (Cannon & Cannon, 2003: 92); they know that “someone has to be able to take the blame when things go wrong” (p. 87). Taking blame, then, clearly differs from getting blamed. I define taking blame as primarily ascribing the responsibility for a failure to the self, e.g., “I take the blame for this outcome.”

In its ideal form, taking blame is distinct from statements that blame others, blame the situation, or send a mixed message by both taking and dispensing blame, e.g., “our fault.” Since blame-takers proactively say “I did that” in the presence of their colleagues, taking blame also differs from internal attributions, which people can make on their own or in response to questions. Like justifications, blame-taking admits responsibility; unlike justifications, however, it does not attempt to mitigate the blame-taker’s blameworthiness (e.g., Folkes & Whang, 2003; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Shaw et al., 2003). Finally, the ideal form of blame-taking provides no information about regret: it does not indicate that the blame-taker does not regret the failure (which could seem gleeful); nor does it indicate that the blame-taker does regret it (constituting a full apology). Instead, blame-taking simply ascribes responsibility to the self, as Morgan Stanley’s CEO did by saying, “I take responsibility for our performance.”

In contrast, expressing remorse conveys regret that a failure has happened (e.g., "I am sorry that this outcome occurred"; Kim et al., 2009; Scher & Darley, 1997). Like blame-taking, expressions of remorse are ubiquitous. Many physicians, for example, are trained to say “I’m sorry that this happened to you” to the victims of a medical error (Truog, Browning, Johnson, Gallagher, & Leape, 2011). Since expressions of remorse acknowledge harm, they resemble an excuse; unlike an excuse, however,
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remorse provides no exonerating information. Indeed, remorse provides no information about responsibility: it does not say that the focal actor bears no responsibility, nor does it say that the focal is responsible. Instead, expressions of remorse simply indicate that the focal actor regrets the failure’s occurrence, e.g., “I am especially sorry for what’s happened.”

Both blame-taking and remorse differ markedly from evasion, which can include a variety of statements that actively or passively deny responsibility and regret. Thus, evasion can resemble active denial (Scott & Lyman, 1968) or passive obstruction, e.g., “I’ll be very happy to get back to you on that.” Blame-taking, remorse, and evasion may elicit a variety of perceptual and behavioral reactions from the other involved actors, with important organizational consequences (e.g., Edmondson, 1999). Since perceptions need not correspond to behaviors (Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009), the current research investigates an array of perceptions and behaviors, especially perceived character (Yamagishi, 2001) and organizational rewards (e.g., bonuses).

THE INCIDENCE OF BLAME-TAKING

The attribution literature indicates that people frequently and readily make statements about their own responsibility for positive and negative events (e.g., Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Miller & Ross, 1975; Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Zuckerman, 1979). For negative events, they sometimes make internal attributions by admitting their own responsibility (Lee et al., 2004; Salancik & Meindl, 1984), but often exhibit a self-serving attributional pattern: they report less responsibility than objective metrics suggest that they should (e.g., Zuckerman, 1979). For example, people tend to blame poor test performance on unfair tests (Zuckerman, 1979), and their own, self-initiated lies on economic pressures (Gunia, Wang, Huang, Wang, & Murnighan, 2012). Since organizational evaluations focus on performance (e.g., Gioia & Sims, 1985), organizations may subtly and implicitly reinforce people’s tendencies to avoid responsibility for failures. Organizational cultures may also foster scapegoating
(e.g., Jackall, 1988), possibly through blame contagion (the spread of scapegoating norms; Fast & Tiedens, 2010). Thus, although taking is a viable behavioral option, organizational actors may feel little responsibility for diffuse failures, and thus feel disinclined to do so. Although this expectation is relatively straightforward, the undocumented incidence of organizational blame-taking makes a test of its incidence important. In addition, understanding the frequency of blame-taking provides an important backdrop for understanding its effectiveness. Thus:

**Hypothesis 1:** A majority of the actors involved in diffuse failures will not take blame.

The blame-taking that does occur may be confined to particular people and situations. As the primary representatives and presumed leaders of their organizations, for example, senior managers tend to get blamed for their organization’s failures (e.g., Gibson & Schroeder, 2003; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Salancik & Meindl, 1984; Zemba, Young, & Morris, 2006). Expecting to get blamed, senior managers may preemptively take blame to deflect, diffuse, and deal with the blame on their own terms. Individuals who are considering whether to take blame may also assess and evaluate the situation before they act. Since competence failures are seen as unfortunate and integrity failures are seen as damning (e.g., Kim et al., 2004), those who anticipate these reactions should take more blame for competence than integrity failures—even or especially when they are concentrated. Indeed, the more that a failure concentrates within a particular individual, the more difficult that individual should find it to evade (Gunia et al., 2012). Thus, the blame-taking that does occur should be confined:

**Hypothesis 2:** Blame-taking will be primarily confined to a) senior rather than junior employees; b) competence rather than integrity failures; and c) concentrated rather than diffuse failures.

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BLAME-TAKING**

Despite a general reluctance to take blame themselves, the involved actors are likely to especially appreciate when someone else takes the blame. Research consistently suggests, for instance,
that apologies which include both blame-taking and remorse tend to generate positive reactions (e.g., Greenberg & Elliot, 2009; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008; Scher & Darley, 1997). After a concentrated failure, for example, the transgressor can elicit warmer reactions from victims and observers by apologizing rather than by evading (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Schmitt et al., 2004). Studies that have disentangled blame-taking from remorse trace these effects to the fit between concentrated failures, blame-taking, and remorse (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schmitt et al., 2004): because concentrated failures raise both responsibility and relationship concerns, and because blame-taking acknowledges responsibility while remorse repairs broken relationships, victims and observers of concentrated failures seem to appreciate both messages about the same (Scher & Darley, 1997).

It is important to note that apologies may not be as effective for concentrated integrity failures (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002; Kim et al., 2004; Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008; Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006; Shapiro, 1991). In a series of experiments by Kim and his colleagues (e.g., Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim et al., 2004; e.g., Maddux, Kim, Okumura, & Brett, 2011), for example, participants watched a video of a hiring manager questioning a prospective employee about a (concentrated) competence- or integrity-related accounting error in a prior job. The employee either apologized, by taking blame and expressing remorse, or denied responsibility; participants appreciated apologies more than denials for competence failures, but denials more than apologies for integrity failures. This pattern was attributed to the separate contributions of blame-taking and remorse: remorse repaired the relationship with the hiring manager, but blame-taking signaled a lack of competence or integrity, with the latter so damning that it outweighed the benefits of remorse. Because the apologies contained both blame-taking and remorse, however, their separate contributions remain difficult to determine.
In sum, the victims and observers of concentrated failures (except matters of integrity) seem to appreciate apologies both for their blame-taking and their remorse. Research on diffuse failures has reached similar conclusions, as the public victims of an organizational crisis have often reported appreciating apologies (e.g., Conlon & Murray, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Greenberg & Elliot, 2009). Likewise, the organizational survivors of traumatic events (e.g., layoffs) often appreciate adequate and interpersonally-sensitive explanations (e.g., Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Brockner, Dewitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990; Shapiro, Buttner, & Barry, 1994). Finally, the members of victimized groups typically appreciate when offending groups issue an apology (e.g., Brown, Wohl, & Exline, 2008; Leonard, Mackie, & Smith, 2011; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008).

Although this research has not generally disentangled blame-taking and remorse (or competence and integrity), the accumulated findings agree with the findings above, suggesting that both types of messages are important to victims and observers of concentrated and diffuse failures. The current research examines whether the people who are involved in diffuse failures share those preferences. Unlike the victims or observers in prior research, the involved actors share the responsibility for a failure. As a result, their concerns may revolve around responsibility rather than remorse. Morgan Stanley’s traders, for example, were probably quite concerned about who would shoulder the responsibility for their blunder.

Because the people involved in diffuse failures face the prospect of being blamed or at least stigmatized, they should especially appreciate when someone takes the blame. Blame-taking not only resolves the responsibility issues, it also absolves the others involved. Indeed, the more severe or damning the failure, the more they may welcome the absolution. Even though the admission of culpability may damage their perceptions of the blame-taker’s competence or integrity, as Kim and his colleagues (Kim et al., 2004) suggest, the involved actors may strongly appreciate blame-taking,
conferring rewards accordingly, even for relatively serious and damning failures. Since expressions of remorse do more to mend the relationship than locate the responsibility, and since the involved actors probably care most about responsibility, remorse may elicit lukewarm reactions. Since evasion addresses neither responsibility nor relationships, it should elicit particularly poor reactions. Thus:

_Hypothesis 3: Involved actors will reward blame-takers more than colleagues who express remorse, whom they will reward more than colleagues who evade._

Because rewards do not always align with perceptions (Dirks et al., 2009), the involved actors could theoretically reward but stigmatize blame-takers. Since they contributed to the same failure as the blame-taker, however, stigmatizing the blame-taker would essentially and vicariously stigmatize themselves. Thus, the involved actors’ perceptions should be supportive rather than harsh. In particular—and implicit in the act of protecting others from blame—they may see indications of both benevolence and integrity, two attributes that are often associated with character-based (as opposed to competence-based) trust (Gabarro, 1978; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011; Yamagishi, 2001). They should see benevolence because the blame-taker protects them from the failure’s fallout, suggesting a genuine concern for the welfare. They should see integrity because choosing to admit responsibility is an honest and courageous act, suggesting that the blame-taker holds strong moral values and strives for consistency between word and deed (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In sum, the act of taking blame and thereby protecting others should convey a combination of benevolence and integrity, which the current and prior research has called “character” (Yamagishi, 2001). By saying little about responsibility, expressions of remorse should signal less character. Since remorse does convey regret, however, it may signal at least some level of concern (i.e., benevolence) for the other involved actors, leading to stronger character perceptions for remorse than evasion:
Hypothesis 4: Taking blame will signal more character than expressing remorse, which will signal more character than evasion.

Since character-based trust perceptions tend to precede and often motivate behaviors toward actors (Mayer et al., 1995), they may be a primary force behind the positive effects of blame-taking. Specifically, watching someone else take the blame may inspire positive perceptions of the blame-taker’s character, which may motivate any subsequent organizational rewards. Thus:

Hypothesis 5: Perceived character will mediate the positive effects of blame-taking on the reactions of other organizational actors.

The efficacy of blame-taking is bound to have limits. In particular, the benefits of blame-taking may not extend to concentrated failures, for which one person is clearly responsible. Since no one but the transgressor would have gotten blamed for a concentrated failure, no one else needs protection. Thus, blame-taking relieves no one’s fears of reprisal and may signal more culpability than character (e.g., Kim et al., 2004).

Hypothesis 6: As failures become more concentrated in the blame-taker, blame-taking will generate fewer rewards.

In contrast—and within limits—neither integrity failures nor moderately severe failures should reduce the efficacy of blame-taking: as noted, the other involved actors should especially appreciate protection from these more egregious failures. Likewise, although junior employees could appreciate blame-taking more than senior employees because juniors naturally see seniors as blameworthy (Meindl et al., 1985), it is also possible that senior employees could appreciate a junior employee who takes blame and thus prevents the blame from rising. In sum, it is not clear that integrity failures, moderately severe failures, or organizational position should moderate the benefits of blame-taking. Nevertheless, all three variables were included in the following studies to cast a broad net.
THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Studies 1 and 2 examined the incidence of blame-taking; Studies 3 and 4 examined its effectiveness using parallel samples and procedures. Study 1 investigated how often junior and senior employees in a consulting firm took blame for diffuse and concentrated failures of competence and integrity (Hypotheses 1 and 2). Study 2 examined these same issues in the lab. Study 3, which was conducted in the Study 1 consulting firm and used the Study 1 failures as stimuli, tested employees’ reactions to a team member who took blame, expressed remorse, or evaded (Hypothesis 3). Study 4 used Study 2’s laboratory procedures to examine the effectiveness of blame-taking (Hypothesis 3) and test whether perceived character acted as a mediator (Hypotheses 4-5) and whether concentrated failures acted as a moderator (Hypothesis 6). These four studies provided general support for all six hypotheses, indicating that blame-taking is infrequent but frequently rewarded.

STUDY 1

Study 1 used mixed methods to qualitatively explore blame-taking in an organization and to quantitatively test Hypotheses 1 and 2. Experienced consultants reflected on a diffuse failure that they had actually experienced. They then answered a series of questions about the failure, blame-taking, and blame-taker, if one had emerged. Thus, Study 1’s purpose was to explore the occurrence of diffuse competence and integrity failures and employees’ common responses.

Method

Respondents. Respondents were 62 consultants [69.39 percent men, averaging 38.05 years of age (SD = 11.42) and 14.23 years of experience (SD = 10.37); 55.6 percent managerial; response rate 40.9 percent] in the US Midwest division of a major management consulting firm.

Procedure. Respondents received an email from their managing partner. It explained the study’s purpose, requested their voluntary participation, assured them of anonymity, and directed them to a
survey link. After clicking the link, respondents were first prompted to describe a positive event involving solidarity that occurred on one of their client service teams. This was intended as a warm-up and a mask for the survey’s focus on failure.

**Failure event.** Respondents were then directed to a competence or integrity survey. They were asked to “recall a negative event that called into question the client service team’s competence (integrity).” To prompt recollection of diffuse failures, events that threatened the whole team were requested\(^1\). To avoid constraining recall, competence and integrity were not formally defined. Pretesting revealed that members of this organization had experienced diffuse failures, and their understanding of competence and integrity was consistent with my definitions. Because of the sensitivity associated with failures, especially integrity failures, I did not expect all respondents to follow these instructions. Thus, the stories were independently coded as concerning competence or integrity (see below).

**Questions.** After describing an event, respondents answered a series of questions (see Appendix A). All respondents first indicated whether any other team members took blame, who was responsible, and how serious and negative the failure was (averaged to form a severity index; \(\alpha = 85\)). The subset of respondents who indicated that someone took blame then proceeded to an open-ended question asking what the person said. Close-ended questions then probed the blame-taker’s responsibility for the failure, level in the organization, and reporting relationship vis-à-vis themselves. Finally, these respondents proceeded to a page that asked about their own responsibility and whether they took blame. Respondents who had indicated that no one else took blame proceeded directly to the page about their own responsibility and blame-taking. All respondents concluded the survey by answering basic demographic questions. (At the request of the consulting firm, these last two sets of questions were optional.)

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\(^1\) It should be noted that the study’s methodology could not guarantee that respondents would describe diffuse failures.
**Coding.** To obtain a reliable categorization of the failure stories and the post-failure blame-taking, two trained coders—blind to the hypotheses, instructions, and nature of the study—read and classified them. The coders indicated whether each failure story was “a matter of competence or integrity,” with competence failures caused by a “lack of skills” and integrity failures by a “lack of moral principles.” The coders also indicated whether and how much the reported blame-taking statements conveyed “responsibility” and “remorse” (two questions; 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so). The coders individually rated 15, randomly-ordered stories and statements and then met to reconcile and re-rate disagreements. They each then coded the remaining responses individually, achieving substantial reliability (story $\kappa = .80$, responsibility $\alpha = .84$, remorse $\alpha = .995$). Because the respondents did not always follow the instructions (e.g., several people in the integrity condition described failures that were coded as competence failures), I tested Hypothesis 2b (concerning competence and integrity) using the story coding. The coding also provided an opportunity to determine whether blame-taking and remorse were correlated.

**Pretesting for all studies.** Two, independent sets of participants from an Eastern US university were asked to pretest the manipulations in this and the other studies. A sample of 51 MBA students (62.7 percent men; average age = 27.7, $SD = 4.52$) was employed in Studies 1 and 2, and a sample of 89 undergraduate students (34.8 percent men; average age = 22.2, $SD = 7.5$), further divided into subgroups of 55 and 34 students, was employed in Studies 2-4.

**Results**

**Failure stories.** Before testing the hypotheses, I first provide basic, descriptive data on the failures. Two of the 62 stories were blank and thus not analyzed. Most respondents in the competence condition told stories that the coders classified as competence (26 of 34; 76.47 percent); this was less

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2 To make the consultants’ blame-taking statements comparable, I corrected any spelling mistakes and put all of them in first-person, present-tense (e.g., “The person took responsibility” became “I take responsibility”). Four of 24 statements were not comprehensible to the author, and the coders were thus not asked to code them.
true in the integrity condition (15 of 26; 57.69 percent). This suggests that respondents were more reluctant to describe integrity failures, possibly to distance themselves from these failures. Alternatively, respondents may have had more difficulty recalling integrity failures. Respondents did not differ, however, in the time they took to recall a story in the competence and integrity conditions [overall $M = 25$ seconds, $t(58) = 1.51, p = .14$], or for stories coded as competence and integrity, $t(56) = .22, p = .83$. Respondents did, however, take longer to recall their failure stories ($M = 24.59, SD = 23.42$) than their success stories ($M = 14.26, SD = 13.11$; $t(59) = 3.01, p = .004$). This suggests that failures were either less common or less salient in respondents’ minds.

Independently, I read and iteratively extracted common categories for the failure stories, classifying each into one of the six categories that emerged: 1) mistakes/poor quality, 2) communication/coordination, 3) project billing, 4) client engagement, 5) qualifications/project staffing, and 6) other. (See Table 1 for the categories, definitions, and sample stories.) After classifying each failure into a category, I explored the relationship between my categories and the independently coded competence/integrity categories. As Table 1 shows, “mistakes” were always classified as competence failures and “billing” and “other” stories as integrity failures. The remaining categories—especially “communication” and “qualifications”—were sometimes classified in each category. (Study 3 extracted stories from these two categories for that reason.)

Responsibility. Most respondents indicated that they were not particularly responsible for the failures in their stories (coded competence $M = 2.67, SD = 1.58$; integrity $M = 1.17, SD = .38$; both means are below the scale midpoint, $p’s < .001$ in each case), and that they were even less responsible for integrity than competence failures, $t(46) = 3.94, p < .001$. One, possible explanation is that the
competence failures were more diffuse than the integrity failures: only 27.03 percent of the former but 60.87 percent of the latter were caused by one, specific person. Nevertheless, the data suggest that diffuse failures are common, even for integrity, as only 40 percent of all failures had a single owner.

**Post-failure statements.** Consistent with the idea that blame-taking and remorse are conceptually distinct, the coding indicated that the responsibility and remorse in the reported blame-taking statements were not correlated, $r(25) = -.03, p = .91$. In addition, the mean amounts of responsibility ($M = 3.04, SD = 2.27$) and remorse ($M = 2.22, SD = 2.39$) were relatively low, as both were significantly less than the scale midpoint ($t's = 2.12$ and $3.72, p's = .045$ and $.001$).

**Hypothesis tests.** Hypothesis 1 predicted that a majority of people would not take blame. Because deciding whether to take blame is ultimately a dichotomous, individual choice, I used 50 percent of individuals as a baseline. Only 14 respondents (23.33 percent) said that they took blame, which was significantly less than half, $t(48) = 3.29, p = .002$ (see Figure 1). Of these respondents, only four (6.67 percent) indicated that they were the sole blame-takers; in the other cases, someone else had also taken blame. In an additional 14 cases (23.33 percent), someone else on the team was the sole blame-taker. This leaves 32 respondents (53.33 percent) who said that no one took blame. Thus, although someone on 28 of 60 teams took blame (46.67 percent), which did not differ from 50 percent [$t(59) = .51, p = n.s.$], far fewer than 50 percent of individuals took blame. Since teams in this organization include no fewer than three members, no more than 21.11 percent of the individuals on these teams (38 blame-takers out of at least 180 team members) took blame, which was significantly different from 50 percent [$t(179) = 9.47, p < .001$; and also from 33 percent, $t(179) = 4.03, p < .001$]. Further evidence for the scarcity of blame-taking comes from the blame-taking statements reported by respondents. The MBA pretest sample read these statements and indicated whether the consultant who made each statement was blaming “themself,” “their own team,” or “someone/something outside their
own team,” (checking all that applied). Consistent with the coders’ low ratings of responsibility in these statements, only six (30 percent) of the statements were classified as taking blame by a majority (≥ 50 percent) of the respondents, whereas eight (40 percent) were classified as blaming the team or something else. For example, only nine percent of these respondents classified “I acknowledge that there are some questions around what is going on” as blame-taking. In addition, 33.48 percent of the time that respondents classified a statement as blame-taking, they also classified it as blaming the team or something else. This all suggests that blame-taking was infrequent.

The data also supported Hypothesis 2a, which predicted that blame-taking would be largely confined to senior employees. Among all blame-takers, including respondents or someone else, 78.57 percent were managers, senior managers, or partners, the three highest levels in the organization (see Figure 2). Thus, the mean organizational level of the blame-taker (averaged when there were several; $M = 4.88$ of 6; $SD = 1.00$) was significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (3.5), $t(26) = 7.04, p < .001$. Also, all six of the people whom a majority of the MBA sample classified as taking blame were at one of these three levels. Finally, older respondents, $r(41) = .31, p < .05$, and those with more work experience, $r(49) = .28, p = .05$, said that they took blame more often. The blame-taker’s level did not differ for competence and integrity failures, $\chi^2 = 3.80, p = .44$, nor relate to the blame-taker’s rated responsibility, $r(25) = -.07, p = .74$, or the failure’s severity, $r(25) = .29, p = .16$. This all suggests that blame-taking is confined to senior employees.

Although blame-taking was not confined to minor failures, as it was not correlated with the failure’s severity, $r(62) = .15, p = .23$, it was largely confined to competence failures (in support of Hypothesis 2b; see Figure 1). Coded competence and integrity failures did not differ in severity, $t(26) = -.66, p = .52$, nor in the extent to which the blame-taker was rated as responsible, $r(25) = .10, p = .65$, suggesting that these failures were comparable. Yet, respondents took blame for 32.43 percent of the
competence failures, but only 8.70 percent of the integrity failures, $\chi^2 = 4.47, p = .04$. Overall, someone on the team (including respondents) took the blame for 56.76 percent of the competence failures, but only 30.43 percent of the integrity failures; put differently, 21 of the 28 failures for which someone took blame were matters of competence, $\chi^2 = 3.95, p < .05$. Also, five of the six statements (83.33 percent) that were classified as taking blame came from competence failures. This all suggests that blame-taking was primarily confined to competence failures.

The data also supported Hypothesis 2c, which predicted that people would take more blame for their own concentrated failures. Respondents themselves took more blame when they were more responsible, $r(48) = .46, p = .001$, even though they claimed responsibility infrequently. Also, when someone else took blame, that person was rated as moderately responsible for the failure, $M = 4.45, SD = 2.18$, although not significantly more than the scale midpoint, $t(22) = .98, p = .34$.

Discussion

This study suggests that professional consultants have experienced diffuse competence and integrity failures and that, when pressed to describe them, they are more likely to talk about the former than the latter. Although one organization is not enough to draw strong conclusions about the types of failures that people experience, the data suggested that this sample of respondents took little blame for the failures that they recalled, possibly because they rarely felt responsible. When someone did take blame for a diffuse failure, their blame-taking tended to convey little remorse. Blame-takers were usually senior employees and their reported failures more often concerned competence than integrity. Blame-taking in these stories was also more common for more concentrated/less diffuse failures.

These results suggest that organizational actors can and do take blame without expressing remorse, but they do neither for a substantial portion of the failures that they experience. One limitation
of this study is that the data are based on the self-selected and self-described experiences of active, professional consultants, i.e., their responses were susceptible to recall biases. The failures that people remember do not necessarily represent the failures that they have experienced. Also, respondents may have been inclined to recall failures for which they were not particularly responsible. Thus, Study 2 took a different methodological approach by investigating a standardized, diffuse failure in the laboratory.

**STUDY 2**

Study 2 provided a more controlled test of Hypotheses 1, 2b, and 2c, in a context designed to vary participants’ feelings of responsibility for a failure. Each participant acted as the supervisor of an employee who performed poorly on an interdependent task for a variety of reasons, including the supervisor’s poor instructions and the employee’s bad intentions. These manipulations were intended to make participants feel relatively more or less responsible for a failure that was always somewhat diffuse. The study increased participants’ feelings of responsibility by preventing them from providing adequate instructions. By limiting the time available to instruct their employee, it limited the quality of their instructions, making their causal role in the eventual failure seem larger (Heider, 1958). The study decreased participants’ feelings of responsibility by making the interdependent employee look more responsible. The more intentional the employee’s counterproductive behaviors, the more responsible that the employee would appear and the less responsible that the participant should feel (Heider, 1958).

A note on intentionality: as described above, many integrity failures reflect an intentional violation of duty, and many competence failures reflect an unintentional inability to succeed (Hamilton, Blumenfeld, Akoh, & Miura, 1990; Kim et al., 2004). However, integrity failures that stem from a lack of moral awareness are less intentional (Bazerman & Banaji, 2004; Jones, 1991), and competence failures that stem from a lack of effort are more intentional (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Weiner & Peter, 1973). Thus, this study investigated competence and integrity failures (Hypothesis 2b).
and crossed them with intentionality to investigate a fuller range of failures. Employee intentionality and participant instruction time provided a relatively rich set of circumstances to examine Hypothesis 2c.

Method

Participants. Participants were 156 undergraduates enrolled in a business school subject pool at a Midwest US university. The use of undergraduates in laboratory experiments is a methodological choice to make carefully. Because of the open-ended nature of Study 1, an experiment afforded the control necessary to explore causal processes. In addition, blame-taking has the basic elements of a value-oriented decision, and moral reasoning research suggests that most people have completed their moral development by adolescence, making stable value-oriented decisions thereafter (Kohlberg, 1958). Thus, both undergraduates and an experiment seemed appropriate for the current study.

Participants received an $8 participation fee and were told that they could receive up to $20 more in bonus money. Actually, everyone received $8 plus a $5 bonus. The data from several participants ($N = 21; 13.5\%$) who expressed suspicion that the videotaped confederate was not real were excluded from the analyses. Thus, the final $N$ was 135 ($34.1\%$ men; 19.8 years old, $SD = 1.4$).

Design. The design was a $2(\text{competence vs. integrity failure}) \times 2(\text{short vs. moderate instruction time}) \times 2(\text{intentional vs. unintentional employee behavior})$ between-subjects factorial, with the last two factors intended to manipulate participants’ feelings of responsibility.

Procedure. After arriving at the lab, participants were immediately escorted to a breakout room or private cubicle and asked to complete a consent form. A computer presented them with a series of demographic questions, and then notified them that they were randomly assigned to act as the leader in a two-party, two-part experiment on spatial skills. The leader would instruct and evaluate an employee in another room (Participant #60951), whom they would not meet but would see via video feed; the
employee was actually a videotaped confederate. In both stages, the two would work together on a similar task; each time, they could earn up to $10. Actually, they completed one stage and earned $5.

The participant/leaders had detailed information and construction rules for the task, a 16-piece puzzle (the Tanagram Task; Kellogg Teams and Groups Center, 2010) that the employee would be asked to assemble. One of the rules was that neither party could use a “writing implement” (see below). Employees had no information or rules and depended entirely on instructions that participants would send via email. After sending this information, participants ostensibly watched their employee work on the task. Actually, participants watched one of four videotapes of a confederate failing to perform well.

**Manipulation: time.** To make participants feel more or less responsible for the puzzle construction failure that they would ultimately witness, they had either 2.5 or 5 minutes (the short and moderate time conditions) to read the rules and type instructions. A timer on the computer screen displayed the remaining time. Pretests indicated that neither amount of time was sufficient for participants to type adequate instructions, ensuring that the upcoming failure would always be somewhat diffuse. Pretesting also indicated that, because 2.5 minutes allowed for some instruction and 5 minutes allowed for better instruction, the task was not seen as impossible. Instead, the times were seen as creating a diffuse failure for which participants would feel more (2.5 minutes) or less responsible (5 minutes)—more in the former because the employee’s performance would reflect their own instructions.

When the timer reached zero, the computer automatically sent participants’ emails. Participants were then told that they would watch their employee’s performance through the video camera in their room. The video showed an undergraduate female confederate reading the email and then sitting at a table with her back to the camera to build the puzzle.

**Manipulation: competence versus integrity.** The employee had 90 seconds. In the competence conditions, the video showed her making little progress on the task but did not show a pen. In the
integrity conditions, it showed her making reasonable progress on the task but also retrieving and using a pen to transcribe participants’ instructions, in violation of the rules.

**Manipulation: unintentional versus intentional.** The videos also portrayed the employee’s poor progress (competence) or pen usage (integrity) as more or less intentional. In the unintentional-competence condition, the employee’s poor progress was caused by low skill: she repeatedly tried but failed to assemble the puzzle pieces. In the intentional-competence condition, the poor progress was attributable to low effort: she yawned and looked around lackadaisically without really attempting the puzzle. In the unintentional-integrity condition, the employee’s pen usage was caused by low moral awareness: she mindlessly retrieved a pen, used it, and left it out for the experimenter to see, suggesting unawareness of the rule. In the intentional-integrity condition, the pen usage was attributable to low moral concern, as she suspiciously looked for a camera and, seeing none, used and then hid the pen.

After the employee had worked on the puzzle for 90 seconds, the experimenter (an undergraduate male) entered the scene, checked the pieces, and said, “Ok, well, you didn’t get many right.” To reinforce the manipulations, he then said “…and it seems like it’s [a skills problem; an effort problem; an accidental rule violation; a deliberate rule violation]. So you only earned $5 out of $10, to split between you and the leader.”

**Questions.** Participants then answered a series of questions (see Appendix B). The first, open-ended question asked them to describe what happened and informed them that the employee and experimenter would see their answer; this was an opportunity to take blame. They then answered a series of closed-ended questions. Two asked them about who was responsible; these items provided a manipulation check of the time and intentionality manipulations. Responses were highly correlated ($r = .94$) and were averaged to form a responsibility index ($\alpha = .89$). Twelve items asked participants to record whether they agreed with a series of randomly-ordered statements, which indicated that they took
blame (e.g., “I take blame for the outcome”) or blamed the employee (e.g., “I blame my employee for
the outcome”). A factor analysis, using Varimax rotation, indicated that all 12 items loaded onto a single
factor that explained 80.39 percent of the variance. Thus, their responses to these items were averaged to
form a blame-taking index ($\alpha = .98$).

Participants answered three final questions that allowed them to express any suspicions they had
about the procedures (see Appendix B). The computer then directed them to meet the experimenter, who
conducted an in-depth suspicion probe starting with a broad and innocuous question (i.e., “What did you
think of the experiment?”) and proceeding through a series of increasingly specific questions (e.g.,
“What did you think of your employee?”). Participants who expressed any suspicion in the written
questions or verbal debriefing were noted and excluded. Finally, they were thanked and paid.

**Coding.** Two trained coders, blind to the hypotheses, read participants’ open-ended responses
and indicated (using yes-no scales) whether they took blame and/or blamed the employee. After coding
37, randomly-selected responses and achieving substantial reliability ($\kappa$’s $>.83$), they met to discuss and
re-rate disagreements. Then, each coder individually rated half of the remaining responses.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.** The MBA pretest sample watched one of the four videos and indicated
how much the event was a matter of “competence” and “integrity” (two questions; 1 = not at all to 7 =
very much so): the competence videos were rated higher in competence ($M = 5.56, SD = 1.64$) and lower
in integrity ($M = 3.80, SD = 2.38$) than the integrity videos ($M$’s = 3.42 and 6.38, $SD$’s = 1.84 and 1.39;
both $p$’s $< .001$). In addition, the 89 members of the undergraduate pretest sample indicated whether “the
event in the video cast more doubt on her knowledge/skills/effort (1) or ethics/principles/morality (7)”.
Integrity failures were rated higher ($M = 5.56, SD = 2.01$) than competence failures [$M = 3.16, SD =
2.27; t(87) = 5.21, p < .001$], suggesting that the competence/integrity manipulations were successful.
In addition, 55 of these undergraduates rated how intentional the failure was and how responsible the employee was. Supporting the manipulations, the failure was more intentional ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.90$), and she was more responsible ($M = 6.20, SD = 1.24$) in the intentional than in the unintentional conditions ($M's = 3.28, 5.04, SD's = 2.30, 1.81; all p's < .01$). They also evaluated how interesting and realistic the videos were, revealing no effects of the experimental conditions (all $p$’s n.s.).

To check whether increased employee intentionality and increased participant instruction time made participants feel less responsible, I examined the personal responsibility index across conditions. Supporting the manipulations, participants’ responses indicated that they felt less responsible when their employee acted intentionally ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.68$) rather than unintentionally [$M = 3.61, SD = 2.00$, $t(133) = 3.17, p = .002$] and when they had more ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.76$) rather than less time to type instructions [$M = 3.78, SD = 1.88, t(133) = 3.98, p < .001$]. Thus, as expected, intentionality and time both influenced participants’ felt responsibility. Unexpectedly, participants also expressed feeling more responsibility for competence ($M = 3.76, SD = 1.85$) than for integrity failures [$M = 2.41, SD = 1.74$, $t(133) = 4.37, p < .001$].

**Hypothesis testing.** As in Study 1, blame-taking was infrequent, supporting Hypothesis 1. The blame-taking that did occur was largely confined to competence failures and failures for which the blame-taker felt responsible (supporting Hypotheses 2b and 2c). Table 2 lists the study correlations.

Significantly less than half of the participants (37.80 percent) had a blame-taking index score that was higher than the midpoint of the 7-point scale, ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.70; t(163) = 3.21, p = .002$; see Figure 3). This supports Hypothesis 1 and suggests that participants were disinclined to take blame. In addition, 42.22 percent of their open-ended responses were coded as taking blame, marginally less than half, $t(134) = 1.82, p = .07$, and significantly less than the 69.63 percent who blamed their employee,
Coding of the open-ended responses indicated that people more often took blame for competence failures (54.93 percent) than for integrity failures (28.13 percent; $\chi^2 = 9.91, p = .002$). In addition, a 2(time) x 2(competence/integrity) x 2(intentionality) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the blame-taking index led to a main effect for competence/integrity, $F(1,127) = 11.48, p = .001$ (see Figure 3), all of which supports Hypothesis 2b.

Coding of the open-ended responses also indicated that people more often took blame when they had a short amount of time to deliver instructions (54.69 percent) than when they had a moderate amount of time (30.99 percent, $\chi^2 = 7.75, p = .005$). Conversely, they less often took blame when the employee’s behavior was intentional (32.81 percent) than when it was unintentional (50.77 percent, $\chi^2 = 4.42, p = .04$). The ANOVA yielded parallel main effects for time, $F(1,127) = 15.23, p < .001$, and intentionality, $F(1,127) = 22.82, p < .001$ (and no other effects; see Figure 3). Also as expected, the people who took blame were those who indicated stronger feelings of responsibility on the personal responsibility index, [open-ended: $r(135) = .41, p < .001$; closed-ended: $r(135) = .91, p < .001$; see Table 2]. This all supports Hypothesis 2c.

Discussion

This study provided converging evidence that, after a diffuse failure, blame-taking is far from universal, and that the blame-taking that does occur seems to follow failures that are either competence-based or less diffuse in the first place. The fact that undergraduates experiencing a standardized laboratory failure took as little blame as consultants recalling real organizational failures suggests that
people may have a general aversion to blame-taking. More generally, blame-taking’s infrequency suggests that prospective blame-takers may anticipate negative reactions from others. If others do punish blame-taking, then a reluctance to take blame is understandable. If, in contrast, people reward blame-taking, then organizational actors may be doing themselves a disservice by not taking blame.

**STUDY 3**

To investigate how people react to blame-taking, Study 3 was yoked to Study 1. A new set of consultants from the same firm read (sanitized versions of) several failure stories told by the Study 1 participants. They were asked to take the role of someone involved in the failure, for which another team member took blame, expressed remorse, or evaded. An analysis of their reactions tested Hypothesis 3, which predicted that reactions would be most positive for blame-taking and least positive for evasion. Failure severity and individuals’ positions within the organization, as well as competence and integrity, were manipulated to test the robustness of the predicted preference for blame-taking.

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were 124 consultants [72.3 percent men, averaging 34.1 years of age (SD = 10.7) and 12.9 years of experience (SD = 9.5); 56.0 percent managerial; response rate 41.1 percent] in the Study 1 consulting firm. They had no knowledge of Study 1 or its results; their participation was voluntary.

**Procedure and design.** Participants received an email from their managing partner. It explained the study’s purpose, requested their voluntary participation, assured them of anonymity, and directed them to a survey link. After clicking the link, participants read one of two scenarios about a diffuse failure said to occur on their team (see Appendix C). The failures came from Study 1’s communication and qualification categories because failures in those categories could be interpreted as either competence- or integrity-related. In one scenario, the team made questionable comments about the
client, revealing a lack of knowledge (competence) or principles (integrity); in the other scenario, they fell behind as a result of disorganization (competence) or deception (integrity). Both stories were stripped of identifying details and written to be parallel; both also varied in severity, as the failure reduced either the client’s regard for the team (mild) or willingness to continue working with them (severe). Because no significant differences emerged for this variable or for the two different scenarios, the data were collapsed across these variables for all of the analyses.

After each failure scenario, a senior consultant took blame (“I take the blame for this”), expressed remorse (“I am sorry for this”), or evaded (“I don’t have anything to say about this”). The senior consultant was someone “to whom you report” (i.e., participants were subordinates) or someone “who reports to you” (i.e., participants were superiors). This manipulation of participants’ relative position in the organization was not random because it reflected their actual role in the firm: people in the firm’s lowest (highest) three levels always acted as subordinates (superiors).

After reading each of the senior consultant’s statements, participants indicated the salary and performance rating that they felt the senior consultant deserved (see Appendix C). (During the time of the survey, the firm was reducing salaries and making ratings-based layoffs, so these measures were particularly meaningful.) Over the entire design, participants’ responses to these two questions were not correlated, $r = -.02, p = .86$, and were thus analyzed separately. After answering these questions for one scenario, participants repeated the process for the other scenario. If they had read a competence failure scenario first, they read an integrity failure scenario second, and vice-versa. Thus, the final, factorial design included three factors: $2(\text{competence/integrity failure}) \times 3(\text{take blame/express remorse/evade}) \times 2(\text{superior/subordinate})$. The first two factors were within-subjects, and the last was between-subjects.

Results

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3 So that everyone would react to someone above or below, real senior consultants reacted to a manager (the level above). There were no differences between senior consultants and other subordinates, so the data were collapsed.
Manipulation checks. The full undergraduate pretest sample read the two versions of the two scenarios and used 7-point scales to indicate whether they “cast more doubt on the consultants’ knowledge/skills/effort (1) or their ethics/principles/morality (7)?” The integrity scenarios (overall $M = 4.18$, $SD = 2.07$) were rated significantly higher than the competence scenarios (overall $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.88$; all $p’s < .02$), suggesting that the competence/integrity manipulation was successful.

Of these undergraduates, 34 also read the senior consultant’s statements and indicated how much they communicated “responsibility” and “regret” (1 = not at all to 7 = very much so). For each scenario separately and for both together, blame-taking was seen as communicating more responsibility (overall $M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.60$) than regret (overall $M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.40$; $p’s$ for all comparisons $< .001$). The blame-taking was also seen as communicating more responsibility than the expression of remorse ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.48$), which was seen as primarily communicating regret ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.30$). Evasion was seen as communicating little responsibility ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .95$) or regret ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.28$). In addition, ratings of responsibility and regret for blame-taking and expressions of remorse were not correlated ($p’s > .11$ and .94 respectively) for either scenario. Since evasion seems to have communicated neither responsibility nor regret, however, the two ratings for evasion were positively correlated across both scenarios ($p’s > .03$). Thus, the senior consultant’s three responses to failure were clearly viewed as different and seemed to successfully manipulate blame-taking, remorse, and evasion.

The 55 members of the undergraduate pretest sample who did not rate these statements instead rated how “realistic” and “interesting” the scenarios were. The competence and integrity scenarios did not significantly differ in these ratings ($p’s > .16$). They also answered the question: “If the consulting team had five members, how many of them were probably responsible for the outcome?” (0 to 5). Their responses also did not differ between the competence (overall $M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.24$) and integrity scenarios [overall $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.05$, $t(108) = .74$, $p = .46$] but were significantly greater than one,
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t(109) = 20.85, p < .001, which would have signified a concentrated failure. This suggests that the competence and integrity failures were (similarly) diffuse.

**Hypothesis testing.** The consultants expressed a general preference for blame-taking versus remorse, and for remorse versus evasion, across subordinates and superiors and across competence and integrity failures. This supports Hypothesis 3. A mixed ANOVA on the salary variable yielded a single main effect, for the consultant’s statement, $F(2,196) = 58.16, p < .001$. Planned comparisons indicated that the blame-taking consultant was awarded a higher salary than the consultant who expressed remorse, $t(123) = 4.45, p < .001$, who was awarded higher salary than the consultant who evaded, $t(123) = 8.50, p < .001$ (see Figure 4 and Table 3). Despite admitting responsibility for a failure, blame-takers earned a slight salary increase (+.23 percent), $t(123) = 2.87, p = .005$, whereas remorse led to no change (-.02 percent), $t(123) = .27, p = .79$, and evasion led to a decrease (-.87 percent), $t(123) = 8.05, p < .001$.

A mixed ANOVA on performance ratings produced an unexpected main effect, as subordinates awarded higher ratings than superiors did across all three statements, $F(1,98) = 6.73, p = .01$. Like the salary variable, however, a statement main effect also emerged, $F(1,196) = 35.86, p < .001$ (see Figure 4). Planned comparisons indicated that blame-takers earned higher performance ratings than consultants who expressed remorse, $t(123) = 2.38, p = .02$, who earned higher ratings than consultants who evaded, $t(123) = 7.36, p < .001$. Restricting the analysis to the first scenario only (to ignore its potential contamination of participants’ subsequent responses) led to identical results.

Discussion

This study provided initial evidence that people prefer blame-taking to expressions of remorse, and remorse to evasion (in support of Hypothesis 3). Consultants from the same organization as in Study
I reacted to statements about failures that had occurred within their own firm, indicating that consultants who took blame deserved a higher salary and a higher performance rating—particularly important metrics in this organization—than consultants who expressed remorse or evaded. As expected, these reactions were consistent across competence and integrity failures, mild and severe failures, and superiors and subordinates. Thus, these data provide initial evidence of a general preference for blame-taking after diffuse failure. They also suggest that the Study 1 consultants, who infrequently took blame, may have misread their colleagues’ preferences, foregoing the potential for better evaluations.

**STUDY 4**

Study 4, modeled after Study 2, was designed to investigate the benefits of blame-taking in a controlled, behavioral context (Hypothesis 3); to test the character mediator and mediation (Hypotheses 4-5); and to test for moderation by concentrated failures (Hypothesis 6). This study differed from Study 2 in two, important respects: current participants always had 5 (never 2.5) minutes to provide instructions, and the employee (not participants) made one of three possible post-failure statements: taking blame, expressing remorse, or evading. Thus, rather than having the opportunity to explain the failure themselves, Study 4 participants evaluated a colleague who explained the failure.

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were 194 undergraduates from the same subject pool as in Study 2. They were paid $8 for participating. Suspicions were less frequent in this study: 18 participants (9.3 percent) were excluded, leaving a final sample of \( N = 176 \) (39.2 percent men; 19.8 years old, SD = 1.2).

**Design.** The design was a: 2(intentional/unintentional employee behavior) x 2(competence/integrity failure) x 3(take blame/express remorse/evade) between-subjects factorial.

**Procedure and statement manipulation.** The current procedure was essentially the same as Study 2’s 5-minute instruction time condition. After watching the same video of the employee failing for
one of four reasons [(competence or integrity) x (unintentional or intentional)], participants now heard the experimenter on the video ask: “Do you have anything to say to the leader?” The employee made one of three statements, taking blame (“Well, I take the blame for this”), expressing remorse (“Well, I’m sorry for this”) or evading (“Well, I’m not to blame for this”), always in the same tone-of-voice. These statements were dubbed on top of the same video, as the camera angle prevented participants from reading the employee’s lips. After the employee’s statement, the experimenter responded by saying “OK”; that ended the video feed. To ensure that participants heard the statement, the next screen indicated that the computer had archived the video and allowed participants to review it if they wished (14 did, almost evenly distributed across the conditions).

Questions. Participants were prompted to answer three questions about the employee’s perceived character: “Please rate the employee’s [character/integrity/desire to treat you well].” Their responses were averaged to form a character index, $\alpha = .93$. They then answered two, behavioral questions:

- We are collecting nominations for the award of ‘Top Employee in Study 11011.’ The Top Employee will receive a $20 bonus at the end of the month. Do you want to recommend your employee for this award? (1=Definitely not to 7=Definitely)
- In a moment, you will proceed to the second round. Today only, we are giving leaders the opportunity to switch to another employee if they choose. What do you want to do? (Work with the same employee; Switch to another employee)

Similar to Study 3, the first question gauged participants’ desire to reward the employee. The second gauged their desire to retain the employee’s services in the longer-term (with possible financial consequences for both).

Results
Manipulation check. To assess the impact of the employee’s three post-failure statements, 34 members of the undergraduate pretest sample watched one of the videos, read the employee’s statements, and indicated how much they communicated “responsibility” and “regret” (1 = not at all to 7 = very much so). They rated blame-taking as communicating more responsibility ($M = 4.94, SD = 2.09$) than regret ($M = 2.44, SD = 1.56; p’s for all comparisons < .001$). They also rated blame-taking as communicating more responsibility than the expression of remorse ($M = 2.65, SD = 1.23$), which they rated as primarily communicating regret ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.58$). They rated evasion as communicating little responsibility ($M = 1.26, SD = .67$) or regret ($M = 1.74, SD = 1.44$). Like Study 3, ratings of responsibility and regret were not correlated ($p’s > .21$) for either the blame-taking or the remorse; they were also not correlated for the evasion, $r(34) = .17, p = .34$. This suggests that the statement manipulations were generally successful.

Hypothesis testing. These data provided an opportunity to test: Hypothesis 3, that people prefer blame-taking to remorse to evasion; Hypothesis 4, that blame-taking signals more character than remorse, which signals more character than evasion; Hypothesis 5, that perceptions of character mediate blame-taking’s positive effects; and Hypothesis 6, that blame-taking is less effective for concentrated failures. The findings supported each of these hypotheses. (See Table 4 for the correlations among the independent and dependent variables.)

An overall, multivariate ANOVA revealed significant effects for both statements, $F(4,328) = 6.73, p < .001$, and intentionality, $F(2,163) = 20.54, p < .001$, and no other effects. Thus, as in Study 3, the competence or integrity nature of the failure had no effect. Separate analyses of each of the dependent variables probed the two significant effects.

With respect to Hypothesis 3, an ANOVA on the employee award variable led to a main effect for statements, $F(2,164) = 6.99, p = .001$ (see Figure 5); planned comparisons indicated that blame-
taking led to stronger award nominations than did remorse, $t(119) = 2.23, p = .03$, or evasion, $t(112) = 3.56, p = .001$; the difference between remorse and evasion was not significant, $t(115) = 1.38, p = .17$.

The data on employee retention also supported Hypothesis 3, as 59.32 percent of the blame-takers, 40.32 percent of the employees who expressed remorse, and 18.18 percent of the evasive employees were retained (see Figure 5). Comparisons of blame-taking and remorse, $\chi^2 = 4.37, p = .04$, as well as remorse and evasion, $\chi^2 = 6.82, p = .009$ were significant. This all supports Hypothesis 3.

With respect to Hypothesis 4, an ANOVA on the character index yielded a main effect of statements, $F(2,164) = 61.43, p < .001$ (see Figure 5); planned comparisons indicated that blame-taking led to higher character ratings than did expressions of remorse, $t(119) = 4.99, p < .001$, which led to higher character ratings than evasion, $t(115) = 4.29, p < .001$. This supports Hypothesis 4.

To test for mediation (Hypothesis 5), statements and character perceptions were entered into two, separate regressions: one for the employee award and the other for the retention decision (see Figure 6). To be conservative, only blame-taking and remorse were considered. (The results were stronger with all three statements included.) Statements ($\beta = .20$) and character perceptions ($\beta = .56$) each predicted award nominations (see Figure 6); when both were included in the regression, however, the effect of statements became non-significant ($\beta = .04$), suggesting that perceived character acts a mediator. Similarly, statements ($\beta = -.19$) and character perceptions ($\beta = -.43$) each predicted retention; when both were included in the regression, the effect of statements again became non-significant ($\beta = -.01$). Bootstrap tests with 5000 iterations yielded 95 percent confidence intervals that did not include zero for both the award (.55 to 1.43) and retention variables (-1.50 to -.40), supporting full mediation.

Finally, Hypothesis 6 suggested that blame-taking would be less effective for concentrated failures. The most concentrated failures occurred when the employee acted intentionally, as the responsibility for those failures concentrated in her. An ANOVA on award nominations led to a main
effect for intentionality, $F(1,164) = 39.15$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 5); a planned comparison indicated that concentrated failures led to weaker nominations than diffuse failures did, $t(174) = 6.20$, $p < .001$. In addition, intentional transgressors were retained less often than unintentional transgressors were, $\chi^2 = 10.30$, $p = .001$. The interaction with statements was not significant. Thus, these findings support Hypothesis 6. They also support prior research (e.g., Scher & Darley, 1997) suggesting that blame-taking and remorse become equally effective after a concentrated failure. Indeed, taking blame and expressing remorse did not differentially influence award nominations, $t(57) = 1.19$, $p = .24$. At the same time, taking blame still increased retention, $\chi^2 = 4.21$, $p = .04$. Thus, blame-taking may have some positive effects, even after concentrated failures.

Discussion

This study provided general support for Hypotheses 3-6. It produced converging evidence—in an engaging behavioral context, with a real blame-taker and real financial consequences—that the involved actors clearly prefer blame-taking to other responses. Indeed, for award nominations, blame-taking was preferred to remorse and to evasion, but remorse was seen as no better than evasion. For blame-takers, this preference produced tangible rewards.

The data also suggested that people prefer blame-taking because it signals character, even as blame-taking admits culpability and even after an integrity failure (Hypothesis 4). Thus, character may be more salient or important than culpability, even for an integrity failure. Perceived character, in turn, mediated the benefits of blame-taking (Hypothesis 5), which extended across diffuse competence and integrity failures but did not extend to concentrated failures (Hypothesis 6). Thus, this study suggested both the benefits of blame-taking for diffuse failures and its limits for concentrated failures.
GENERAL DISCUSSION

In 2001, the University of Michigan implemented a new approach to medical malpractice: “Apologize and learn when we’re wrong, explain and vigorously defend when we’re right, and view court as a last resort.” This approach, oriented toward the victims of a failure, has reduced their litigation by 62 percent. The current research suggests that a similar approach, oriented toward the actors involved in a failure, could reduce their barriers to recovery. By taking blame, the involved actors may help themselves and their teams move on.

The results of Studies 1 and 2 suggested that organizational actors do not necessarily realize this, as they often avoid blame for diffuse failures—especially matters of integrity and especially when they are junior. The results of Studies 3 and 4, however, suggested that these responses are not especially effective, as other organizational actors facing the same diffuse failures consistently prefer blame-taking to remorse and evasion—even for matters of integrity and even from junior employees. Thus, the people in the current studies did not appear to take as much blame as their colleagues wanted them to. Indeed, in one instance when they did take blame—concentrated failures—their colleagues did not particularly appreciate it. Thus, the results suggest a critical disconnect between what people do and what other people would like them to do. Because organizational actors seem to misunderstand their colleagues’ preferences, they may miss opportunities to overcome some of the fallout from failure.

Theoretical Implications

Organizational failures are inevitable (Goodman et al., 2011). Because organizational actors are interdependent, many of their failures are diffuse; several people share the responsibility. The current research suggested that these people might be tempted to evade blame even as they disapprove of others’ evasion. Four studies supported these predictions. Since post-failure statements represent only one type
of response (Bottom et al., 2002), however, the current findings may represent the tip of an iceberg, opening the door to considerable future research on how people respond to diffuse failures.

Prior to the current research, studies on post-failure statements tended to focus on concentrated failures. They suggested that the victims and observers of concentrated failures appreciate both elements of an apology (i.e., blame-taking and remorse) about the same (Scher & Darley, 1997). The current findings suggest that people who are involved in diffuse failures appreciate blame-taking more than remorse. Blame-taking shields the involved actors from stigma and from collateral blame, revealing the blame-taker’s benevolence and integrity (i.e., character), even as it acknowledges their culpability.

At a theoretical level, this suggests that the effectiveness of apologies may be an interactive function of how much blame they accept and how diffuse the failure was. Since diffusion is a continuum, different kinds of apologies may be more or less effective for different kinds of failures. Alternatively, different apologies may be appropriate for different audiences, depending on their involvement. In other words, apologies appear to be bundles of separate messages, each of which becomes more or less important as the failure varies in diffusion and the audience varies in involvement. Matching apologies with failures and audiences represents substantial opportunity for theoretical and empirical development.

At least for diffuse failures and involved audiences, apologies’ blame-taking appeared to be critical. Although truly egregious failures are likely to limit the benefits of blame-taking, the severe failures and integrity failures in the current studies did not impose a limit, possibly because the involved actors particularly appreciated protection from serious failures’ fallout. In other words, both of blame-taking’s signals—positive character and negative culpability—may increase as failures become more severe, thereby negating one another. Consistent with this logic, blame-taking lost much of its efficacy for more concentrated failures. Since no one but the transgressor can reasonably get blamed for a
concentrated failure, the transgressor’s blame-taking has considerably less impact and signals considerably less character. Since intentionality, more than integrity, was the critical concentrating factor in these studies, an increasing focus on intentionality may offer additional opportunities for theoretical development.

**Organizational Implications**

The primary message of this research is straightforward. Organizational actors seem to display a blame bias: when involved in a diffuse failure, they take little blame even though doing so would personally benefit them. In essence, it appears that people aggravate the consequences of their failures by responding sub-optimally. Blame-taking’s confinement to senior employees, competence situations, and concentrated failures leaves many people with many more opportunities to take blame, beneficially. Yet, some of the most consistent blame-taking comes after concentrated failures, the precise situation in which blame-taking is less appreciated.

Put differently, the blame bias highlights a clear disconnect between what organizational actors do and what their counterparts want them to do. The people involved in a diffuse failure seem to face a choice between their own preferences to avoid blame and their colleagues’ preferences to the contrary. The choice is a mirage, however, as the current data suggest that people can serve their own interests by satisfying their colleagues’ preferences. The implication, then, is clear: when involved in a diffuse failure and when talking to the other people involved, organizational actors should more often take blame. Implementing this lesson, however, may require ingenuity, as infrequent blame-taking may prevent people from observing its rewards. Whether people who are not involved or not talking to the involved should still take blame is precise direction of the author’s ongoing research.

**Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusion**
The current studies have limitations that future research could remedy. In particular, several boundary conditions of the documented effects remain to be documented. Whether the members of an individualistic organization or a collectivistic national culture would react as people did here, for example, are important, open questions. Although individualistic organizations may suppress positive reactions to blame-taking, they might also suppress the incidence of blame-taking. Thus, even if the extremity of actions and reactions varies in these organizations, the blame bias may remain. A different set of issues may arise in collectivistic cultures: Although collectivists generally blame senior managers more than individualists do (Zemba et al., 2006), their reactions to an individual who independently takes blame for a collectively-caused outcome remain unclear. Cross-cultural research that tackles this issue remains a priority, as does research that explores dispositional correlates of blame-taking.

Future research might also explore the proximal, situational limits of blame-taking’s effectiveness more thoroughly than the current research could. As suggested above, less involved audiences watching less diffuse failures may be less impressed with blame-taking. In those cases, blame-taking does less to protect the audience than it does to confirm culpability. Future research could also investigate responses to less ideal forms of blame-taking that implicate several people (e.g., “We take blame”), that blend various levels of responsibility and regret (e.g., "I am sorry that I did this"; Schmitt et al., 2004), or that include additional elements (e.g., penance; Bottom et al., 2002). Finally, research could explore whether blame-taking sends positive signals other than character (e.g., power; Lee & Tiedens, 2001) and whether the benefits of blame-taking end with the blame-taker or extend to others.

As these topics suggest, it is certainly premature to conclude that blame-taking offers the single best response to diffuse failure: unexplored statements might generate even better reactions, and a variety of personal and situational factors could moderate blame-taking’s efficacy. In essence, the current research suggests that blame-taking is better than two, common alternatives. Future research that
considers other alternatives and contingencies, moving from better to best, is particularly welcome. Nevertheless, the current research does begin to chart a path in that direction.

A final issue for future research relates to the blame bias itself: Why does it persist? If blame-taking elicits positive reactions, why are people still so disinclined to do it? Documenting the ultimate sources of evasion could be especially revealing. Actors facing a diffuse failure may hold inaccurate lay theories about the riskiness of blame-taking, for instance, or they may just freeze. They may also transfer strategies that are more appropriate for the general public inside of their own organizations.

Awaiting future data, the current research suggests that diffuse failures are distinctly different from concentrated failures, that blame-taking is distinctly different from remorse, and that blame-taking is generally superior to remorse when talking to the other people involved. Blame-taking, though infrequent, offers a potent, intra-organizational response—protecting others and signaling character, even as it admits culpability. Exploring the boundaries of these benefits may offer a fruitful direction for both researchers and practitioners attempting to cope with organizational failure.
REFERENCES


*Kellogg Teams and Groups Center*. (2010).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th># Coded as Competence</th>
<th># Coded as Integrity</th>
<th>Story</th>
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<td>Mistakes/poor quality</td>
<td>Problems with the quality and/or timeliness of the work product</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>We were attempting to solve a difficult growth problem, and our datasets were extremely limited. As a result, we had to make some extremely vague assumptions. Our assumptions had little backing and were quickly challenged by the client, damaging our credibility.</td>
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<td>Communication/coordination</td>
<td>Problems with intra- and/or team-client communication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Our team was taking a conference call and forgot to mute the phone. None of us knew, and the manager on the project accidentally commented on the abilities of one of the clients, which could have been interpreted negatively.</td>
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<td>Project billing</td>
<td>Problems with charging billable hours to the client</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>We spent billable client time on sales-focused activities that did not benefit the client.</td>
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<td>Client engagement</td>
<td>Problems with getting the client’s support for the team and/or work product</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One of our workshops went very badly: the client was disengaged, it felt like they were questioning our direction, and at the end the partner described it as a &quot;near-death experience&quot; in terms of client service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualifications/project staffing</td>
<td>Problems with having the right people on the team</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Resources were staffed in positions for which they were not qualified (e.g., training developer role staffed with someone that had little to no relevant experience).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Any other problems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A Partner was thought to be having an affair with a Manager on the team.</td>
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Table 2: Study 2 Correlations

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<th>Personal Resp. Index</th>
<th>Blame-Taking Index</th>
<th>Open-Ended Blame-Taking</th>
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*p ≤ .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
Table 3: Study 3 Correlations

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* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001; TB = Take Blame, ER = Express Remorse, EV = Evade
### Table 4: Study 4 Correlations

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<th>Retain Employee</th>
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*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*
Figure 1: Incidence of Blame-Taking in Study 1

Who, if anyone, took blame?

- Me
- Me and someone else
- Just someone else

Coded as:
- Competence
- Integrity

Chart showing the percentage of blame-taking for Competence and Integrity.
Figure 2: Blame-Takers’ Positions in the Firm in Study 1
Figure 3: Incidence of Blame-Taking in Study 2
Figure 4: Effectiveness of Blame-Taking in Study 3

**Salary**

**Performance Rating**
Figure 5: Effectiveness of Blame-Taking in Study 4

Employee Award Nominations

Retention

Perceived Character
Figure 6: Mediation in Study 4

- **Character**
  - 0.56*** (0.57***)
  - 0.42***
  - 0.20*
  - 0.04 NS

- **Top Employee Award**
  - 0.42***
  - 0.56*** (0.57***)

- **Character**
  - -0.43*** (-0.42***)
  - -0.19*
  - -0.01 NS

- **Fire?**
  - 1 = No
  - 2 = Yes

**Statement**
1 = Express Remorse
2 = Take Blame
Appendix A: Study 1 Questions

- Please recall a positive event that demonstrated the client service team’s solidarity (i.e., their camaraderie or cohesion).
- Please recall a negative event that called into question the client service team’s [competence/integrity]. Although such events may be rare and/or sensitive, we ask for your consideration and candor, and we assure you of complete anonymity.
- Who did you originally think was responsible for this event? (one specific person; one person, unclear who; several specific people; several people, unclear who; completely unclear)
- How serious was this event? (1=not at all, 7=very much so)
- How negative was this event? (1=not at all, 7=very much so)
- Did any member of the [Firm] team, other than you, take blame for this event? (yes, no)
- What did they say? (open-ended)
- Was this the person who was most responsible for the event? (1=definitely not, 7=definitely)
- What was this person’s level at the time? (1=analyst, 2=consultant, 3=senior consultant, 4=manager, 5=senior manager, 6=partner)
- What was your level at the time? (1=analyst, 2=consultant, 3=senior consultant, 4=manager, 5=senior manager, 6=partner)
- What was this person’s relationship to you? (they directly reported to me, they indirectly reported to me, I directly reported to them, I indirectly reported to them, we had no reporting relationship)
- Did you also take blame for this event (optional)? (yes, no)
- Were you at all responsible for this event (optional)? (1=not at all, 7=very much so)
Appendix B: Study 2 Questions

- Your job is to summarize what happened in this task. The employee and experimenters will see your answer. Please describe what happened, focusing on WHO OR WHAT caused the outcome that you saw. (open-ended)
- Who was responsible for this outcome? (1=my employee, 7= me)
- Who caused this outcome? (1=my employee, 7= me)
- Now, instead of describing what happened, you will decide whether the following statements, selected to correspond to your outcome, accurately REPRESENT what happened. Again, the employee and the experimenters will see your answers. Please indicate whether you agree with each statement. (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
  o I am mostly responsible for the outcome.
  o My employee is mostly responsible for the outcome.
  o I take responsibility for the outcome.
  o I give my employee responsibility for the outcome.
  o I take blame for the outcome.
  o I blame my employee for the outcome.
  o I was at-fault here.
  o My employee was at-fault here.
  o The outcome has a lot to do with me.
  o The outcome has a lot to do with my employee.
  o I am more responsible for the outcome than my employee is.
  o My employee is more responsible for the outcome than I am.
- Before watching the video, had you ever seen your employee?
- Where had you seen your employee prior to the video?
- Is there anything else that you'd like to tell the experimenters about your experience in this round? If not, type “no.”
Appendix C: Study 3 Scenario Excerpts and Questions

- Scenario 1: While talking amongst themselves, they make some highly [situation: inaccurate/inappropriate] comments about the client’s company, calling their [situation: competence/integrity] into question. A senior client leader, also working late, overhears the comments and comes into the team room, asking the team to be more [situation: careful with their facts/cognizant of their clients], if they want him to [severity: respect their advice/retain their services].

- Scenario 2: While presenting their initial findings to client leaders, it becomes apparent that the team members are not as [situation: organized/qualified] as promised during the kickoff meeting, calling their [situation: competence/integrity] into question. After the presentation, a senior client leader comes into the team room, asking the team to [situation: get their act together/get their story straight], if they want him to [severity: respect their advice/retain their services].

- Question 1: How should this person’s salary change at year-end (-3% to +3%, 7-point scale)?
- Question 2: What performance rating does this person deserve at the end of the project (1 to 5, 5-point scale)?