

America's Best Magazine Out of Whack

Marx's book discusses the troubling way that society acts when people make mistakes.

In his book, *Whack-a-Mole*, author David Marx uses the popular game as a metaphor for something we all do: Punish imperfection. "It's a game we play with each other—particularly here in the U.S. It is how we respond to predictable human fallibility. It is how we set expectations of each other, how we respond when our fellow human being makes a mistake." He explores how and why people make mistakes, and why the way we respond to those mistakes is wrong.

Flawed Systems and Human Fallibility

Take the Challenger disaster as an example of a flawed system. On January 26th, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger launched into the clear Florida sky. Seventy-three seconds after lift-off, the spaceship exploded. The problem was a faulty rubber O-ring. According to Marx, the problem was not totally unexpected. "At least one design-risk assessment put loss of the space shuttle, principally on take-off, at one catastrophic accident in every 212 missions. And that's not including any human error or more blameworthy human behavior. It is simply the risk of catastrophic equipment failure."

In other words, if everyone did their jobs to absolute perfection, there was still a 1 in 212 chance of a fatal shuttle accident. The system itself was good, but was never meant to be perfect. That is the point. We cannot eliminate risk. We can reduce it, but it is always there. Why? Because systems are created by flawed human beings. We can learn from experience—or the experience of others—and we can mitigate systemic risks that way, but we cannot keep from making mistakes. We don't want to make these errors, we don't mean to make them, but we do and the consequences range from benign to tragic.

Outcomes Decide Response

According to Marx, severity of harm is the standard of accountability, with nothing being said about the cause of that harm: Simple human error, at-risk behavior and reckless behavior. "Look at the outcome, turn a blind eye to bad system design and risky behavioral choices until that mole, that undesirable outcome surfaces, then whack 'em." If a drunk driver doesn't hurt anyone, the punishment for this reckless action is one thing. If he kills someone, the consequences can be drastic. Either way, he has committed the same reckless act and Marx holds that this simply does not work. What we need is a way to address the causes, not merely the outcomes that allows for learning while, at the same time, holding people accountable for their actions.

Console, Coach, Punish

Knowing that there are really only two components to risk: The system and the behavior of those working within that system, the question is, if you have three levels of human fallibility, error, at-risk, and recklessness, how do you approach them, rather than merely their outcomes? Marx suggests that different causes deserve different responses.

Console Human Error

No one goes out to make a mistake. You may have an employee who miscounted a cash drawer, for example. Did he want to do that? No, certainly not. So, what happened that led him to make that error? Perhaps something in the store distracted him. Maybe it was just a simple mistake, a transposition of numbers on the written report or he momentarily lost his place while counting. As much trouble as this might be, Marx does not see this as a punishing offense. You should support this employee, knowing that they feel bad enough already, and do what you can to help them minimize the chances of making that same mistake again.

Coach At-Risk Behavior

Unlike a simple mistake, at-risk behavior is a choice, though often an unconscious one. We have the same employee counting the same money, but he does something that puts the day's income at risk, yet he thinks it is perfectly safe. Here you can educate your employee in proper cash handling or improve the system to minimize the risk and it is followed. Again, this requires correction, not punishment per se.

Punish Recklessness

Again we return to the money-counting employee, but now he is doing things that, assuming a minimal level of competence and awareness, can only be seen as reckless choices made by the employee with a callous disregard for the security—financial and otherwise—of the business. There may be reasons given for this behavior, but still it cannot be tolerated and is deserving of punishment such as termination.

Stop Whacking the Mole

You can see that, with the exception of recklessness, there is really no fault to be assigned. Marx offers a more proactive way of dealing with human and systemic fallibility that is potentially far more effective than the post-catastrophe blame-game we tend to play now. The goal is, after all, to recover, learn, revise things so history

does not repeat itself, and move on.

While Whack-a-Mole is not, per se, a business book, the lessons contained in it could give you an entirely new take on the system of discipline within your organization. It is an easy and interesting read and it holds a lesson that every leader—from the floor supervisor to the CEO—should learn. Whack-a-Mole is published by Your Side Studios. —Charles Cooper

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