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DURHAM, N.H. - With more companies struggling during the economic downturn, employees may be more prone to blame someone else for problems they have caused, according to a management professor who studies behavior in the workplace.

"We're pretty obsessed with assigning blame in our culture. In the workplace, there usually are more challenges and failures during tough economic times, and because of self-serving attitudes, it's common to want to make sure the blame is on someone else," says Paul Harvey, assistant professor of management at the University of New Hampshire.

"It's a common human tendency for people to convince themselves that they are the cause of the good things but try to assign blame to others when things go wrong," Harvey says. "It's an ego defense mechanism that helps people feel good about themselves."

Being targeted as a scapegoat can be devastating, whether or not the allegations are true. Once you have been made the scapegoat, Harvey says it can be difficult to fix the situation. Trying to explain the real cause of and responsibility for the problem may appear as desperate excuses or, ironically, attempts to blame someone else.

And if the person throwing you under the bus happens to be your boss, the situation becomes even more complicated. "When that happens people usually have to stand their ground and hope that, over time, the facts help to vindicate them," Harvey says.

According to the professor, the better approach is to avoid being made a scapegoat by proactively making sure everyone knows your responsibilities and structural limitations beforehand when you see a problem developing.

"For example, FEMA probably could have avoided some criticism if, before Hurricane Katrina, they had said, 'we're going to do our best once this thing hits, but we've got a city that technically should already be underwater and there's only so much we can do,' " Harvey says.

The bottom line is scapegoating behavior is bad for business.
"Scapegoating is a leadership behavior called abusive supervision, which includes things like spreading rumors about employees, insulting them, withholding information, and pretty much everything short of actual physical abuse. Behaviors such as scapegoating have been linked to a number of undesirable outcomes, including emotional stress and strain for employees, reduced performance levels, and a higher likelihood of employees quitting. So, managers and employees risk harming the entire organization when they scapegoat others. Not the best way to protect your ego," Harvey says.

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