

Who Takes the Blame When a Team Makes a Mistake?

Working with a team of people comes with several benefits, especially while working on important projects. Tackling work is easier when tasks can be divided among several people and when multiple employees get to share their opinions.

When a team succeeds, all members are eager to take credit. But who takes the responsibility when a team messes up? That question is a difficult, yet important one to answer, said Benjamin Jones, professor of strategy at Kellogg, during a Kellogg Insight podcast, [When Teams Mess Up, Who Takes the Fall?](#) “Because we see the output of a team, but it’s very hard to see in many settings who exactly did what on the team,” he added.

According to Jones and Brian Uzzi, professor of management and organizations at Kellogg, placing blame comes down mostly to reputation. They found that the same people on a team who are celebrated when things go right are often not the ones who get criticism when things go wrong.

“That double standard should make us question how we give credit and how we give blame,” Uzzi said. “What typically happens is, they assign the most credit to the most eminent person on the team.”

This phenomenon is something they call *the Matthew Effect*. It essentially means those who have a positive reputation only improve their reputation in other people’s eyes over time. For example, if two people are writing a book together, the senior author is more likely to get most of the credit even if they only did 5% of the work, Uzzi explained. “Because the false credit that was assigned to you just adds to your eminence, which only makes it more likely that next time you’re going to get more,” he added.

When a team makes a mistake, there are three ways this scenario usually unfolds. One, everyone on the team takes equal responsibility. Two, those who usually get the positive feedback also take the criticism. Or three, those who do not generally take credit when things go right take the heat for a mistake.

Uzzi and Jones put this to the test to see which scenario was most likely. They looked at retractions of books as an example. “What we found was that when there’s a retraction, the lion’s share of the blame lands on the junior author,” Uzzi said. “Which is interesting because when the paper does well, we credit the senior author.”

Jones said this may happen because human nature is to trust a more well-known person than someone who is newer, even though an original team member can mess up just as easily as someone more junior. “If you have one person who you feel pretty clear about because you’ve seen a lot of their prior work and you’re confident in that person and you see other people on the team who you aren’t confident about because they don’t really have much of a reputation yet, it’s more likely to be the case that the people you haven’t seen before are more likely to be the source of the problem,” Jones explained.

Since placing incorrect blame while working on a team can happen so easily, it is crucial to be aware of any power dynamic that might be at play. “If you’re charting your own career path, working with powerful eminent people poses risks,” Jones said. “It says that you’re probably less likely to get credit for a good outcome and you’re more likely to get discredited for a bad outcome. So, you might want to be choosy about who you hitch your own reputation to.”