Shame In the Workplace

Shame is a biological reaction akin to the fright/flight response NOT an emotional response

Shame does not tell the truth about you. It tells the truth about someone else - the Shamer. We are a herd/social species. Truth is, the whole concept of independence and striving for that as the dream of self actualization is an illusion. Our entire nervous system is wired for connection since birth. So, the human species primary motive in existence is CLOSENESS. Where does shame play into this? When another of the pack has disapproval of something we represent, that disapproval creates the "push away" which becomes a subconscious red zone where our internal dialogue goes straight to. It sounds something like this: (Cue inner dialogue voice) 'In order to be accepted and gain closeness to this person (boss, parent, child, etc), it is to the exclusion of the trait they saw in me that they rejected.' It is a subconscious, intrinsic assault that we respond to biologically!

Why shame? The Shamer, was trying to protect him/herself from something in their own inner world, that long before meeting you had taken up residence in their patterning. In shaming you and your beliefs or your trait, they sacrificed you for their own need to be met. When we biologically internalize that, we take that sacrifice and mirror it, intentionally sacrificing ourselves and our truth and trait for that person. So they sacrifice us and we then mirror it, on steroids, continuing to sacrifice ourselves for some invisible motive we may never know. As social beings, we gain closeness with another through the exclusion of that "trait" they rejected. It's simple. Not easy to avoid the pitfalls of, but simple.

Some of the actions that can cause shame include but are not limited to the following:

- Comments about your physical or intellectual attributes

- Physical violence

- Hurtful teasing or jibing

- Derogatory name calling or nicknames

- Excessive or inappropriate punishment or consequences

- Insults about your gender, race, religion, nationality, appearance or personality

- Inequitable distribution of favors or reinforcement

- Critical remarks

- Negative response about something that brought you joy, achievement or award

Situation	Shame-Provoking Thoughts	Shame-Driven Actions	Shame-Moderating Thoughts
A manager thoughtlessly utters what he sees could be perceived as an insensitive comment. People in the room become silent and stare at the manager.	Mental image of a parent or teacher shaking her head in disapproval. "*Oh no, now everyone is going to think I'm just an insensitive jerk. Maybe I am. I'm so flawed. I cannot bear to be stared at any longer.*"	Apologize profusely. Try to explain that it's a misunderstanding. Avoid eye contact.	"*I had no intention to be inappropriate. People know me and know that I don't usually make questionable comments.*"
There is a team meeting about progress on a project. Most workers have worked overtime to finish their contributions. The manager reports that she has not gotten around to starting her component.	"*I'm a bad leader. I'm irresponsible and lazy.*"	Talk defensively, make excuses.	"*I haven't started my part but I know what my responsibility is and I will get it done, just as I usually do.*"

Source: Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace

Sample Workplace Shame Examples

Situation	Shame-Provoking Thoughts	Shame-Driven Actions	Shame-Moderating Thoughts
During a meeting, a worker of less seniority answers a question that the manager couldn't answer.	"*She totally upstaged me. I look like an idiot.*"	Try to redeem the situation by acting like the answer was clear all along. Try to be more vocal during the rest of the meeting.	"*No one I've ever met always knows the answer to everything. No reasonable person is going to expect me to always know.*"
A manager starts to stammer at a very difficult meeting with fellow managers and workers.	"*They've probably lost respect for me. I look like a fool.*"	Stay quiet throughout the rest of the meeting to avoid drawing attention.	"*I probably came across as nervous and upset – which is exactly how I felt. I've never myself seen someone stammer and thought they must be a fool.*"
The annual sales report just came out and a manager's departmental results are the lowest in the company.	Mental image of an old boss or teacher frowning at a failure. "*I'm a terrible manager. I better spend extra effort, time, or whatever it takes to boost sales so I don't lose face again.*"	Do not tell others about poor performance. Work overtime, sacrifice personal resources to recruit customers.	"*I do need to dedicate more attention to increasing sales next quarter. Someone had to come in last, and it feels terrible for it to be me, but I will get through this. The best I can do is try harder.*"

There are likely organizational factors that instigate shame in employees (i.e., unintentional shame triggers and purposeful shaming behaviors) as well as behavior outcomes important to organizations (i.e., prosocial, withdrawal and aggressive behaviors) that provide insights regarding overall organizational impact. To that end, it is important to understand the source, means, and underlying mechanism of the shaming.

Joseph Burgo, author of the 2018 penned "Shame: Free Yourself, Find Joy, and Build True Self-Esteem," writes of 4 types of shame.

1. Rejection/Unrequited "love"
2. Unwanted Exposure

3. Disappointed Expectation

4. Exclusion

Observing and identifying that the shaming itself is foundational to being part of the social norm of being accepted is the first step. Understanding the category is the second step. Processing and eliminating is priority in the workplace and inherently related to the culture, values and vision for the organization's community.

At *Inspired Action At Work* we have developed the tools to identify, uncover and process shame. Identifying the source of the engagement that causes this biological response is imperative to maintaining the organization's value system and cultural infrastructure and is the underlying priority after processing the shame itself.

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