

***The Insightful Leader* Podcast Transcript**

When Teams Mess Up, Who Takes the Fall?

Jessica LOVE: Imagine that you're overseeing a team that's been working on a big project. They spend weeks putting together lots of data, analyzing their work, and writing a report about what it all means. And in that report, they end up revealing a unique insight that your organization had been missing. The team presents this report to the senior leadership, who think it's phenomenal. There's talk about developing a new initiative based on this new insight.

But then something terrible happens. Someone realizes that the report had a major flaw in it. Say, the analysis was totally wrong for the situation, and so the big takeaway that the team had shown to senior leadership, it was just not true. And, because you're the one who's overseeing this team, the CEO asks you who on the team is responsible for this mistake.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: These days, more and more work is happening in teams, in science, in technology, and in business. And for leaders, that poses an interesting challenge: When a team messes up, how do we decide who was responsible? As Kellogg professor Ben Jones explains, it's a bit of a guessing game.

Benjamin JONES: 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.

LOVE: Yet nonetheless, we still frequently have to make judgements about who is responsible for a mistake. So Jones and a colleague wanted to know more about how, exactly, people make those judgments. And what they found is, it often comes down to reputation.

Welcome to *The Insightful Leader*, from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Today on the podcast: It turns out, certain people *are* more likely to receive the blame when things go wrong—and not necessarily because they're guilty. We'll hear about a study from Ben Jones and fellow Kellogg professor Brian Uzzi. They find that the people who are left holding the bag are often *not* the same people who get the credit when things go right. And as Uzzi sees it...

Brian UZZI: That double standard should make us question how we give credit and how we give blame.

LOVE: We'll look at why this double standard might exist, and what you can do to make sure everyone is truly held accountable when things go wrong.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: The question of who gets the credit for a team project is something that scholars have been studying for a long time. And what they've found is a phenomenon that's known as "The Matthew Effect." The name comes from the Bible, a verse in the book of Matthew, which says, "For to everyone who has, more shall be given." And, essentially, the Matthew Effect says that the rich in reputation only get richer over time. You actually see this phenomenon play out in a

lot of situations, from professional baseball to the inside of a classroom. But in teamwork, here's what it looks like.

UZZI: What typically happens is, they assign the most credit to the most eminent person on the team.

LOVE: "Most eminent" typically just means the better known, or more established member. Either they're more senior, or higher up on the org chart, or they've done more high-profile work. For instance, a typical example from academia:

UZZI: So two people will write a book together. The junior author may do 95% of the work on the team. The senior author does 5% of the work. But many people will refer to the entire book as the work of the senior member. And it also tends to be cumulative. So, once you're seen as eminent, you get credit that isn't technically due to you, it only increases your chances of getting credit the next time you do something. 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.

LOVE: This is a well-established idea in academia. But as Jones explains, it's only half of the "credit" story.

JONES: What we don't really know about is what happens in terms of credit sharing when things go wrong.

LOVE: So what he and Uzzi wanted to look at was the reverse of the Matthew Effect: When things didn't go well, whose career suffered the most?

The way they saw it, there were a few stories that could be true. Story number one is that everyone on the team would share the blame equally. Story number two is that more eminent people—the same people who get the credit for a success—would also shoulder the blame for a failure. And story number three was just the opposite: the lesser-known team members would suffer when things go wrong.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Uzzi and Jones decided to test which of these stories held up by looking at mistakes in the world of academic research. Specifically, they looked at what are called retractions. A retraction is when the journal that published a paper essentially says, "We shouldn't have published this, and we're taking it down."

JONES: So if your paper is retracted, people might no longer believe your work is that good.

LOVE: Retractions are fairly rare. They typically only happen when there's a *big* mistake in the paper or accusations of fraud. So, as Jones explains, among academics, having a paper retracted is a big deal.

JONES: A very embarrassing, potentially very career damaging event for the authors of that paper. And that provided a setting for us to study who seems to get the blame.

UZZI: You know, we collected gobs and gobs of bibliographic data on scientists and retractions from around the world, and analyzed what happens to the reputation of an author if their paper has a retraction.

LOVE: In all, they found about 500 retracted papers that had been authored by a team with people at different levels of eminence. A more eminent author was a person who had published a lot of papers that were highly cited. A less eminent author was just the opposite: someone who hadn't published as much, and probably wasn't as well known in the field. For each author, Uzzi and Jones looked at, after the retraction, did other people keep citing this person? The idea was, if the community blamed a particular author for the retraction, they would probably stop citing them as a reliable source.

UZZI: And what we found was that when there's a retraction, the lion's share of the blame lands on the junior author. Which is interesting because when the paper does well, we credit the senior author, which would suggest that we believe that the senior author was the person who came up with most of the ideas and was the person who did most of the work and, therefore, deserves most of the credit. But if you're going to give someone credit for positive work, they should also receive the blame for the negative work. And we find that there's this asymmetry that's there.

LOVE: In other words, when it comes to reputation, the rich get richer and the poor *also* get poorer.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: So why does this happen? The authors say there are two possible explanations, each of which offers a lesson for those who lead and evaluate teams. The first explanation is that people might be using someone's eminence as a proxy for who actually made the mistake. Jones explains.

JONES: 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.

LOVE: They only looked at academia, though you can imagine how people in all kinds of organizations use this same logic. But the thing is, this logic doesn't always lead to the right conclusion. Just because someone is less well known, doesn't actually mean that they screwed anything up. So the first takeaway for leaders: If you're trying to diagnose what went wrong on a team project, be careful about making assumptions based on, say, people's seniority, or their position in the org chart. You could inadvertently end up pointing the finger at the wrong person.

But there's also a second possible explanation for Uzzi and Jones' findings.

JONES: You know, the senior author is powerful and can basically deflect blame onto underlings. That's sort of the scapegoating concept where the person in charge, rather than saying, "The buck stops with me," they're actually able to use their power to scapegoat an underling, basically.

LOVE: The authors say that scapegoating of this kind is likely part of the reason that the careers of less eminent researchers suffer more.

So the takeaway for leaders: When you're evaluating a team of people with varying experience levels, be sure to think about the power dynamics that might be at play. Are the more senior people shunting blame onto others, or letting them take the fall a collective mistake? By staying vigilant about who might be at greater risk of being scapegoated, you can help establish a culture of real accountability in your organization.

Uzzi and Jones suspect that similar dynamics may be at play in other fields.

JONES: Another, of course, important one from a business context is entrepreneurial teams, right? You know, most entrepreneurial teams fail. If they do fail, potential funders may be updating about the quality of the founders and whether they should take a bet on them again. And you can imagine doing exactly the same study in terms of whether they're able to get funding or whether it works out based on a failure, a prior failure, and particularly on a team-based failure.

LOVE: But regardless of what field you're in, Jones says, the paper adds an interesting wrinkle to some common career advice: the notion that you should always "network up," and try to work with people who are more senior and more experienced than you. In reality, he says, you may want to do so with caution.

JONES: If you're charting your own career path, working with powerful eminent people poses risks. 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.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith, and edited by Michael Spikes. Special thanks to Brian Uzzi and Ben Jones.

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We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.