



Group Punishment

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

If you have siblings, you remember the drill very well. Your mother comes in and says, "Who knocked over the lamp in the living room?" Of course, nobody knows. She looks around at the children, and each of them is playing dumb. Since she cannot determine whom to blame, she announces the punishment, "Then none of you will get dessert for the rest of the week."

Group punishments for the sins of a single individual are more common than we think. It happens in the military on a daily basis. If nobody owns up to a misdeed, the entire platoon is penalized with the same punishment as the single guilty soldier would have received. The logic is that one person really is guilty, and the remaining people are guilty of covering up for him, so everyone suffers equally. The leverage is that it puts peer pressure on the guilty person to fess up. In some cases the ploy works, but in others the group solidarity is strong. In the end, the group will find other ways to punish the guilty individual that are not always obvious.

In our society, government has a similar tendency to punish the masses for the sins of the few. It has led to numerous infringements on privacy, like red light cameras, the TSA ordeal we all undergo when trying to get on a plane, gun control, and countless other well-meaning laws and policies that are meant to save the many from the excesses of the few.

Here is another example of the government punishing everyone for the sins of a few. Every publicly-owned company has been forced to spend large sums of money in order to comply with the Sarbanes Oxley Act. This extra cost is a direct result of some high profile unethical corporate abuses by a few corporations over a decade ago. All publicly-owned companies suffer for the prior sins of a few defective organizations and their leaders. This suffering is a lot more than meets the eye, because organizations outside the USA are not saddled with a Sarbanes Oxley Act, and have a competitive cost advantage.

You can see the same pattern in organizations. The boss notices that an individual is leaving work early a couple times a week, so he issues a reminder of hours of work for the whole organization. This leads one cynical employee to blow a bugle at quitting time to let people know when it is time to go home.

It is natural to want to fix the problem when trust has been broken, but we need to ask what price we pay when so many aspects of daily life are regimented and people are forced to pay for the mistakes of others. Does it make people want to be less accountable for their own actions? Does it demotivate them by stifling creative instincts? Does it discourage them from taking risks? Is it fair?

I think of what the world would be like if we did not have a tendency to punish the many for the sins of a few. What would happen if we encouraged personal responsibility and building trust and transparency by reinforcing candor. It would be a different place for sure. When you ask your children who broke the lamp in the other room, one of them would say, "I did, Mommy, and I am sorry." It would be a kinder, gentler world with far fewer dumb rules we have to follow because a few unscrupulous people cannot be trusted to do the right things.

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