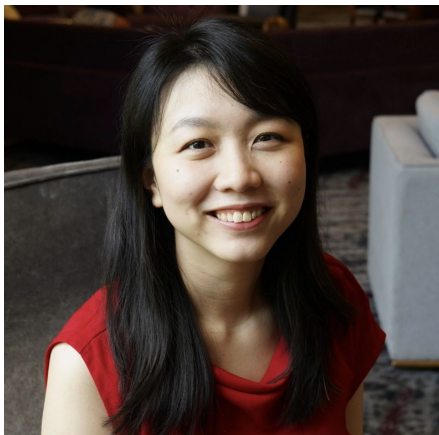# The Elephant in the Blameless War Room
Accountability

Christina Tan
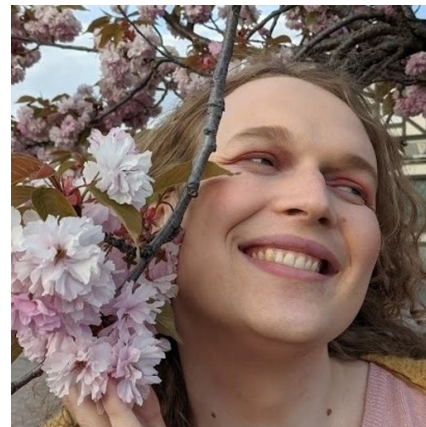**Strategy**

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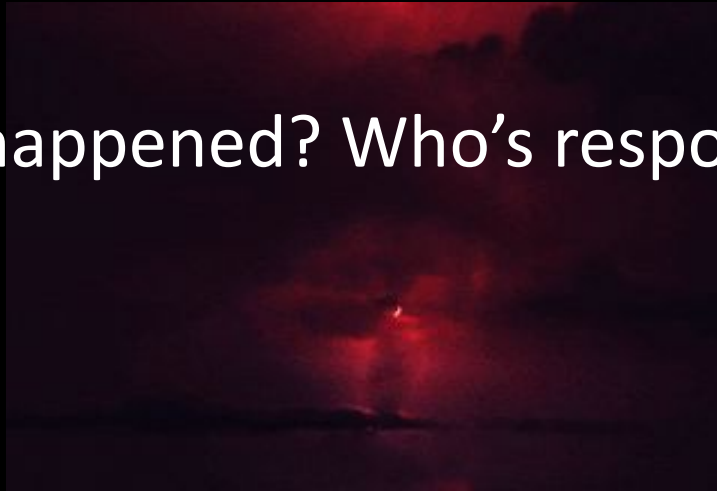
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Blameless Culture & Developer Velocity

McKinsey, Apr. 2020

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Production Environment

"What happened? Who's responsible?"

Interpreting Chaos

Leadership's Reality

Shared Reality

Engineering Team's Reality

Leadership:
"What happened?
Who's responsible?"

Resolving the incident
Preventing recurrence
Restoring trust with stakeholders

Forehead furrowed
Voice raised
Speaking faster
Physically hovering

Feel blamed, frustrated, or afraid
Anticipating repercussions
Difficulty focusing on resolution

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Agenda

Empathy for leadership

Understanding Leadership Perspective & Addressing their Concerns about:

- **The incident**

- **The engineer**

- **Stakeholders' trust**

How to be blamelessly accountable

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Given these assumptions...

Assumptions about the **Incident**
- It should never have happened
- Punishment will deter others from making the same error

Assumptions about the **Engineer**
- A skilled engineer would never make this mistake
- Removing the engineer removes the problem
- Without punishment the engineer won't fully understand the impact of their mistake

Assumptions about the **Stakeholders**
- Singling out an individual at fault is the most persuasive way to restore trust
- Stakeholders may expect punishment to maintain fairness

But we know that this isn't how things will play out

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Understanding Leadership Perspective on the Incident

Assumptions about the incident:

- It should never have happened
- Punishment will deter others from making the same error

How to uncover perspective differences:

- Is 100% reliability possible and/or worth the cost?
- What is the desired tradeoff between preventative vs. reactive work given finite engineering capacity?
- Is punishment effective in making people more careful?

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Addressing Leadership Concerns about the Incident

What to say about the **incident:**

- Systemic changes are more enduring and beneficial

- Complex system failures are inevitable

- Engineers don't problem solve well in fight or flight mode

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Understanding Leadership Perspective on the Engineer

Assumptions about the engineer:

- A skilled engineer would never make this mistake
- Removing the engineer removes the problem
- Without punishment the engineer won't fully understand the impact of their mistake

How to uncover perspective differences:

- Are there deeper causes of incidents beyond individuals?
- Do engineers understand the business impact of incidents?

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Addressing Leadership Concerns about the Engineer

What to say about the engineer:

- Anyone in that position could have made that mistake

- No one wanted this outcome, least of all the engineer

- It's more costly to hire someone new than to train the existing team

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Addressing Leadership Concerns about Stakeholder Trust

What to say about **stakeholder trust:**

- Our action plan will inspire confidence

- We hear and acknowledge your pain

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Production Environment

"What happened? Who's responsible?"

Immediate Response:

- Answer directly and succinctly
- Build Common Ground
- Create psychological safety & alleviate rush to blame if there is any
- Articulate shared desired outcomes
- Give visibility of next steps

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Production Environment

Follow up Investigation:

- Why do the admin panels for the production and testing environment look so similar?
- Should production have a big flashing banner?
- Should a single person be able to make changes to admin in the production environment?
- Should we be selective about engineers who can make changes on the production admin panel?

Follow up Conversation:
When the leader is calm after incident resolution, uncover perspective differences and address leadership concerns

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Production Environment

Follow up Planning:

- **People -** How do incidents inform headcount planning?

- **Process -** Update runbooks, production readiness checklists, etc.

- **Tooling -** Consider investment in tools

When can we hold someone accountable?

Questions to ask yourself:

- Were expectations for the job clear, realistic, and documented?

- Were the mistakes of the incident a result of their lack of skill, good intentions, or honest effort?

- Have you shared feedback about gaps in their performance on a consistent basis?

- Have you accounted for all other contributing factors?

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Blamelessly Accountable

- Accountability faces forward, full ownership of improving reliability

- Separate reliability outcomes from performance management

- Not at the cost of in-depth contributing factor analysis

There is no tradeoff between blamelessness and accountability

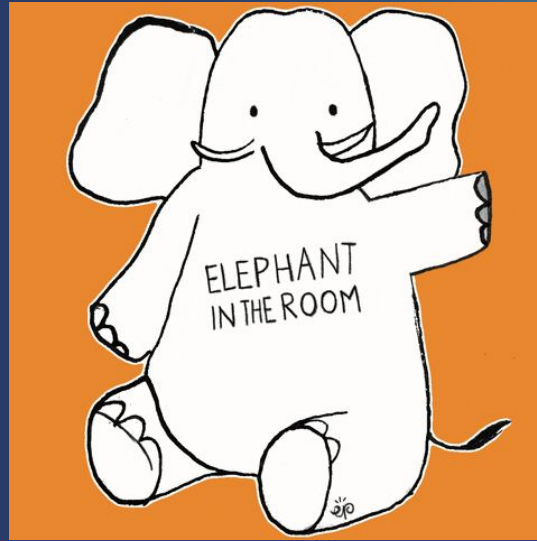BLAMELESS

Additional Resources

Carole Robin: Feedback is a Gift, https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/carole-robin-feedback-gift

Stella Report, **SNAFUcatchers,** https://snafucatchers.github.io/

Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well, by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

Twitter's Reliability Journey

Conflict resolution, Betty Pries

Why Every Company can Benefit from a Blameless Culture

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