



## Introducing Professional Practice

*A Culture of Blame: Changing Climate of Social Work*

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The notions of a 'learning culture' and a 'learning organisation' are a bit like mother's milk and apple pie. They're more or less universally accepted as being desirable. Everyone endorses them and says they're working towards achieving them. If you look at the mission statement of virtually any social care organisation, you'll find them listed there. But, you have to ask yourself if they really go much farther than being pious hopes, how far are they realised in practice? The idea of a learning culture depends crucially on being able to put more emphasis on future improvement than on past blame. And the sad reality is that, whatever their rhetoric, most social care organisations are addicted to blame and they are finding it a very hard habit to break.

People learn best from critical review of past events when they're not afraid, and they typically have two kinds of fear in this area of work. First, a very, very immediate one, which is concerned with the possibility of actually losing your job, or losing your reputation. It's a very real fear in the area of child protection, because if you actually review what happens in these cases, whenever there's a serious child abuse enquiry, whenever there's been a tragedy, and a public enquiry, the director of social services always stands up in front of the media to explain why things went wrong. If you just ask yourself, how often is that director of social services the one who was in post when the tragedy actually happened? It's very, very seldom the same person, normally the person's had to move on, they've retired because of ill health, or taken early retirement, or moved on to a Consultancy post. The likelihood that your career's going to be seriously adversely affected by something that happens, is a very serious one, and one that actually affects the way people function in the child protection arena. The other fear people have is a slightly more subtle one, it's to do with a fear of losing self-respect, and self esteem. If you're confident in yourself, and your confident in the service you provide, and if that confidence is reflected in the way that people interact with you, the people in other services that you work with, day in, day out, then it's easy to take criticism, and it's easy to look at yourself reflectively, and consider whether you've done well, or could have done better. However if you feel you live your life under constant scrutiny, where any small mistake you make will be seized on and used against you, you're much more likely to be resistant to change.

The relentless scrutiny, to which child protection services have been exposed over recent decades, has really had quite a severe cumulative impact on the culture within which the services operate. In particular I suggest that we've tended to create a climate of fear, a climate of blame, and a climate of mistrust. Child protection work feels a very professionally hazardous area of activity to be involved in, and people working in a dangerous environment tend to adopt one of two possible strategies. One strategy is to band together in a close-knit, supportive, closely integrated group, and stick together through thick and thin. An army going to war might be a good example of that kind of strategy. The other strategy is, every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost, where everyone protects their own position, even when this might be to the detriment of the overall effort.

The pressures in the child protection system make the second of those possibilities more likely unfortunately. Workers and managers close to the front line have been made to feel a profound lack of trust in them, and working in this kind of environment is bound to make it increasingly difficult for them to trust each other. Effective child protection work depends crucially on services being truly joined up, effective communication and high levels of trust between the people who are engaged in the work.