What is a blameless postmortem?

3 November 2026 · 4 min read · blogs.iictp.org/what-is-a-blameless-postmortem

A blameless postmortem is a written review of an incident that looks for how the system and its processes allowed the failure, instead of who made the mistake. The goal is to learn and prevent a repeat, and people share what happened more honestly when they are not afraid of punishment.

TL;DR The short version

- A blameless postmortem reviews an incident by asking how the system allowed the failure, not who made the mistake.
- Punishing mistakes makes people hide them, and the organisation loses what it needs to improve.
- Good actions are specific, owned and dated and change the system; blameless does not mean no accountability.

Read online, listen to it, or change the text size: https://blogs.iictp.org/what-is-a-blameless-postmortem

Why blameless?

If people are punished for mistakes, they hide them, and the organisation loses the information it needs to improve. Assuming that people acted sensibly with what they knew at the time moves the question from “who” to “what made this easy to do”.

What goes in a postmortem?

- A short summary and the impact on users.
- A timeline of events, with times.
- The causes and contributing factors.
- What went well and what was lucky.
- Action items, each with an owner and a due date.

How do you run the meeting?

Share the draft timeline beforehand, ask open questions such as “what did you see at that point?”, and keep the focus on conditions and decisions rather than individuals. Someone should keep the conversation off blame when it drifts.

What makes a good action item?

It is specific, has one owner and a date, and changes the system, for example adding an alert, a guard or an automated check. “Be more careful” is not an action item, because it relies on memory.

Does blameless mean no accountability?

No. People are still accountable for acting in good faith and for following up on actions. What changes is that the review explains the failure instead of assigning fault. See also SLIs, SLOs and error budgets.

Related credential: Associate Technical Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Beyer, B., Jones, C., Petoff, J. and Murphy, N. R. (eds.) (2016). Site Reliability Engineering, chapter 15, “Postmortem Culture: Learning from Failure”. O’Reilly Media.
2. Allspaw, J. (2012). “Blameless PostMortems and a Just Culture”. Etsy Code as Craft.

Published by IICTP, an independent technical credential body, on 3 November 2026. The current version of this post is at https://blogs.iictp.org/what-is-a-blameless-postmortem. More guides: blogs.iictp.org.