



The Only One To Blame is Yourself

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Blame has the perverse effect of backfiring and being a primary obstacle towards obtaining a lasting solution¹. “So, if I am not going to blame that idiot who caused all the problems, who am I to blame?” you ask. Since that last question suggests that blaming is a ‘need’ somewhere in the chain of relating, then may I suggest you blame yourself. Why?

1. Nobody likes to be blamed. It is quite simple. When someone blames us, we become reactive, defensive and offer excuses and justifications. We do this because we do not like others thinking poorly of us – and blame instils that feeling. Even if we are blamed for a trivial event and even if we know we are at fault we become defensive: E.g. “You’re late, again.” “I know, but you wouldn’t be able to get through that horrific traffic along Bronson either.” If we did not care about being blamed we would not bother to offer an excuse.

2. Blaming someone else is done usually to give a subconscious lift to our own ego. As soon as you blame someone else, it makes you blame-free regarding the incident and lifts you by absence of culpability. As well, those who accuse put themselves on a pedestal of superiority to the one being blamed. “Because I am blaming you, I am better than you.” While such words are not used, they are implied. And they elicit the frequent response: “What makes you think you’re so great?”

3. Blaming works against arriving at a solution. For two reasons: (a) When someone is blamed, it focuses the cause of the problem at one point, the person being blamed. That means that you cease to look at yourself or other parties, when in fact most problems have a multiplicity of sources. For example most car crashes have several causes: the other car was in the wrong lane (and therefore considered at blame), but it could have been prevented by you if you allowed more distance between cars, had been driving a bit more slowly or weren’t diverted by a glance at that good-looking blonde crossing the street. (b) When people are blamed they don’t like the blamer; they sulk; and they do not enthusiastically help the blamer with the solution. It is this latter point that destroys our chance of success.

Since Tom, the person you are blaming has to be a key actor in the scenario in question (oth-

erwise you wouldn’t be blaming him), you need Tom’s full cooperation to get to a solution. When a person is struck, they do not view the striker favourably. They become defensive, uncooperative and may react violently, by striking back. Blaming is a verbal strike – just as devastating for many people as a physical strike. That is, blaming sets you on a path of escalating emotions or hostilities. How can you get the cooperation of someone who is hostile towards you? You can’t.

The point of this paper is how to get a quicker solution to a problem. And if you want to get the fastest and most complete solution possible, you have to stop blaming.

Let us use a simple example of blaming yourself. Last week I had an appointment missed by a client. It was in both my paper agenda and my electronic agenda. With my full daily agenda the chance of that appointment being at some other time would have meant I had two appointments wrong. The usual tendency would have been to say: “You missed your appointment. Where were you?” That is, I would have put the blame squarely on her. Instead I sent the note: “My calendar showed an appointment with you for 3 pm today, Darlene. Did I get my wires crossed?” Besides deflecting the blame away from her, this also allows the possibility that I may have been wrong as well. But the main point is to treat this as a mystery that has to be solved jointly. The response came immediately with apologies and asking to reschedule. The person is now willing to cooperate, no wasted time in counter accusations.

Conclusion: If your goal is to get a quick solution, stop blaming. And if you want to blame, have the courage and the cleverness to blame yourself.

¹ The Perversity of Blame, CCCC Newsletter, January 2003