

De-Blaming Difficult Discussions

...how to avoid
bogging-down in
finger-pointing
and fault-finding



by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching clinic on Dealing with Difficult Discussions © Bill Cropper 2003-17

Difficult discussions often bog-down in blame. Wheels spin. Mud gets splattered. There's lots of huffing and puffing, but little forward movement. *Sound like some talks you've had lately?*

Blame is one of the most common errors we make as we try to tip-toe our way through those minefields of contentious conversations and troublesome topics. We raise issues in a blaming way, saying things that spark defensiveness, and before you know it, you're both committed more to blame-blasting and fault-finding than to finding solutions. A great diversion for some!

In my conversational coaching clinics, we devote a good deal of time to tips on learning how to de-blame Difficult Discussions. So I thought I'd share a few de-blaming ideas with you, to help avoid getting bogged down in so much feckless finger-pointing and fault-finding...

Rules of The Blame Game

No-one likes being blamed. Period. Yet, let's face it – we all indulge in it from time to time. Blame-gaming is a pretty popular pastime in workplaces, society in general, and it's absolutely obligatory in loftier professions like the media and politics. Watching TV on any given night provides a vivid impression of the voracious appetite we have for it. It's a great participant and spectator sport.

So when we say “*don't do blame*” in your difficult discussions, we're actually rowing up-stream against some pretty powerful cultural currents.

The rules of blame-gaming are simple and well-known. First, you must assume that everything you do is all right, while everything ‘*they*’ do is all wrong. Second, whatever you do, never ever look at yourself in terms of accountability, and staunchly deny any responsibility or contribution. Third, you must pin all the blame on the opposing player whilst ensuring you refute and avoid any blame sticking to you.

What drives blaming behaviour? We do it for many reasons:



- To rigidly reinforce our right to be right.
- To conceal our own mistake-making or contribution.
- To avoid punishment or consequences.
- To make others feel guilty.
- Or to 'take one for the team' (instead of us).

We also use it as a stick to correct what we see as bad behaviour, to get others to do things our way, or get them to admit they were wrong all along.

Drawbacks of Blame

While blame is an alarmingly widespread workplace habit, it's counter to constructive problem-solving and a big sticking point for many difficult discussions. Much wasted time in difficult discussions is taken up with blame – trying to find out who's at fault. We mentally play judge-and-jury instead of listening to the other person or trying to see other perspectives. **Here's some of the big drawbacks of blame:**

- Blame never solves anything. Focusing on blame blinds us to seeing what's really going on or what's causing the problem between us. It obstructs us being able to locate the root cause of a conflict.
- Fault-finding follows closely on the heels of blame. We swap accusations on who's more at fault rather than find mutually agreeable solutions that move us forward. Confronted with a difficult situation, it's easy to blame others and harder to see how we might be part of the problem too.
- Once blame, fault-finding and corrosive feelings that come with them, come into play, the escalated emotional nature of the conflict clouds our even-mindedness and objectivity.
- Blame is a great distracter in difficult discussions – a wicked way to avoid talking about real feelings, or ignore inconvenient facts and truths we either don't know about, or don't want to know about.
- Blame throws up walls up between us coming together to jointly seek a solution. It escalates conflict instead of helping us to step past blame and focus on the issue at hand together
- Blame breeds blame. When we blame, people retreat, or retaliate with blame-back. Blame brings on strong feelings of defensiveness. When someone blames me, I naturally tend to defend myself (*especially since I have a different story that no doubt exonerates me from blame*).
- Blaming corrodes relationships. There's two 'Rs' to aim for in any difficult discussion. The first is you want to *resolve the issue* once and for all. But difficult discussions are also about *retaining/regaining relationships*. That's the second 'R'. It can take years to build bridges with someone and blame can blow them up in moments.

De-blaming Difficult Discussions

Here are some ideas for 'de-blaming' difficult discussions:

De-blamer #1: Don't use 'Blaming-YOUS'

One type of caustic character we all commonly encounter is the 'blame-blaster'. Blame-blasters begin belligerently - thinking "*Whose fault is this?*" It clearly isn't theirs. Every discussion starts with a full-blown, berating volley of blame statements – nagging verbal formulas that usually start with "*You always (or never)....*", "*But you should have....*", "*Did you....?*" or "*I told you that....*"



- We all slip 'Blaming-YOUs' into difficult discussions from time to time. They inflame. Others get defensive and mutual understanding is the first casualty. They're a sure signal your finger's already on the trigger of your blame blaster.
- Substitute 'I' instead (eg. Not *"You just don't attend to the detail"* – try *"I wonder if this needed a bit more detail?"*). Or describe the situation neutrally without the 'You' blame-statement. For example: *"A lot of the planning details seemed to be missing and I wonder what happened with that."*

De-blamer #2: Think Contribution not Blame

Blame looks backwards. It's about judging and feeling as if you have the right to reprimand and condemn other's actions while not considering or excusing the impact of your own. Contribution looks forward. It's about acknowledging how we've both created this situation that's arisen between us.

- Admitting your contribution if someone blames you, or pre-empting blame by choosing to say how you've contributed first, can often defuse the blame-game. If you catch yourself blame-blasting, retract it (eg *"It's not fair to blame you like I was just then. I guess I've contributed to this too by..."*).
- This is more than a re-phrase. It requires a change of mind-set to replace blame with 'contribution' - making a mental shift to embrace the concept of contribution and shrug off the blame mentality.

De-blamer #3: If someone blames Don't do Blame-back

This just escalates conflict. Acknowledging your contribution can defuse a blame-blast and focuses us both back on solutions. This means using the contribution formula again.



- Take a bit of blame aimed at you and turn it into a contribution statement (eg *"I suppose I should have asked whether this was detailed enough..."* or *"I guess I've contributed to this by not checking with you first about how much detail was wanted"*).
- Then refocus the discussion in the direction of solution-seeking (*"Anyway, I was wondering what you'd suggest to make sure we get an agreed level of detail next time?"*).

De-blamer #4: Find the Feeling behind the Blame

What accompanies blame? That's right – heightened, often out-of-control emotions. When we blame, our feelings are right in there fuelling us, especially rowdy ones that tend to escalate conflict, like disdain, self-righteousness, intolerance, impatience, indignation, anger or outrage. Use the urge to blame as a compass to find your true feelings – and express those instead.

- Behind every piece of blame there's feelings. Saying *"You're so self-absorbed"* masks feelings of being 'unsupported'. And it's cleaner to express those instead of judgement or blame (eg *"I feel anxious about the time-line"* not *"This is a hopeless situation you got us into"*). If you don't, the other person is more likely to focus on the fact you're blaming them rather than on your true feelings.
- On the other side, if someone blames you, connect with feelings you sense fuel their blame and side-step the accusation. Don't correct or confront. (For example, not *"That's not fair. You should have taken more responsibility for it yourself"* try *"Seems like you're worried I won't meet the deadline."*)

De-blamer #5: Mind your Absolutes and Escalators

Remove 'always', 'never' and such words. 'Always' and 'never' comments *never* defuse a difficult discussion and are *always* a great way to heat one up. They're 'absolutes' – and instead of getting the person to focus on the event you want to talk about, you shift the focus to them finding the one time they did do this something! Other absolute phrases include '*certainly, clearly*' and of course '*absolutely*'.

Make yourself more aware of escalating phrases you might use that can cause conflict to rapidly inflame. All words have emotional-charges attached, and some are what I call 'blame-barbs' - words that intensify rather than temper conflict.

Intensifiers can be 'you' statements, but also other 'dismissives' such as: "*Stop over-reacting*", "*Don't get defensive*", "*Now calm down*", "*Don't take this personally*" etc. We often load up messages with implied blame and criticism – then act surprised when others react adversely and say we're 'blaming'.

De-blamer #6: Give up the "I'm always right" addiction

I spotted someone at my local market last weekend wearing a t-shirt that said "*I may not always be right but I'm never wrong*", which I think neatly sums-up our addiction to rightness (or aversion to wrongness) We all like to be right. Distinguishing between right and wrong is a human cultural hallmark. But when we take this into the arena of difficult discussions, it can quickly get tricky because we both believe we're right – and the other person is wrong.

- When we play judge, smugly comparing their 'wrong' rendition to our 'right' one, we're seeking a conviction, not a connection. We launch into a difficult discussion with opinions loaded, cast aside understanding, and focus our energy on demonstrating how right we are and how wrong they are (in my clinic I call this the 'Am so – am not' argument).
- It's conversational combat. It leads us into thinking win/lose – victory or capitulation. And blaming is one weapon in our arsenal (eg "*How can you think that? That's not right!*", "*I can't agree with that...*", "*What you've overlooked is...*").
- The way out is to stop asking 'who's right?' Explore how you can both be right and wrong at the same time. Don't disagree – say how you see it *differently*. And start with what you agree on. Small shifts yet they can create a much better climate to explore differences without blaming or 'wronging'.



De-blamer #7: Stay even-minded and seek to understand

Blame also comes from being overly-attached to your own position, tied-up in your own woes and closed to the emotional perspective of others. 'Positionalism' in difficult discussions means you're unbudging. Rather than see the other person as the bane of your existence or a proverbial pain in the rear-end, it may be better to extend them your understanding and cultivate a bit of compassion.

- Compassion can be a blame-buster. From a brain view-point, we know compassion can calm both of you – and if you're courageous enough to take a compassionate stance in a difficult discussion, there's no room left to want to blame someone.
- Instead of self-affirming your right to blame, challenge it. For example, remind yourself you can only blame if you have remained blameless yourself – and since that's entirely unlikely,



your next best choice is to deal with difficult discussions from a state of even-mindedness, emotional balance and compassion for the plight of others and the foibles and frustrations they may cause us.

- Instead of thinking only of yourself, extend your thoughts to what they may feel and what they may be going through. "*Empathy is a balm for anger*," Daniel Goleman once said, and it's a powerful prelude to compassion.

De-blaming difficult discussions may not be a problem-solving panacea for your next difficult discussion but I think I can guarantee that keeping it blame-free can make it a little less difficult to make some headway and control defensiveness and negatively charged emotions a bit better.

Our 2-day ***Dealing with Difficult Discussions*** clinic and 1-day fast-track alternative ***Tackling Tough Talks***, show you tools and formulas to help apply these kinds of tips in your conversations, to build better understanding and hopefully achieve more constructive and mutually agreeable resolutions.

More on *Dealing with Difficult Discussions*, *Tackling Tough Talks* and other conversational mastery and emotional intelligence programs on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

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