

Is It Ever OK to Blame?

by Ellen Kandell

Blame is frequently used, whether consciously or unconsciously, in an attempt to assign responsibility for something gone awry. To blame is to “[assign responsibility for a fault or wrong](#).” My colleague, Cinnie Noble, [tweeted a thought-provoking question](#): “When is it alright to blame?” This article will explore in brief the nature of blame and when it’s acceptable to blame, if ever.

The act of blaming, more often than not, [is counterproductive to conflict resolution](#). Assigning blame allows the blamer to avoid taking any responsibility for their own actions and say the conflict is entirely the responsibility of the other person. However, conflict is rarely found to be the fault of solely one person. Blame does not change the argument or the facts of the situation. What it may do instead is put your colleague, friend, spouse, or teammate on the defensive, which in turn is likely to make them less receptive to your message.



[Each of us has played the blame game at some point](#). The first reaction for many people is to find someone else to identify when things have gone wrong. We want to identify a person or situation outside of ourselves in order to avoid holding ourselves accountable for the negative situation or occurrence that has taken place. Sometimes we attempt to assign out blame in order to [avoid punishment or avoid damage to personal self-esteem](#). This blame game allows us to divorce ourselves from our actions and shut down meaningful, insightful and constructive communication.

When Is It Acceptable to Blame?

Having said all of that, is it ever acceptable to blame? It depends entirely on the situation. Blame is negative the majority of the time, whether it’s blaming someone else or using [negative self-talk](#) and blaming yourself. However, there is an instance in which it may be acceptable to blame. If “blaming yourself”, helps you to recognize and admit a mistake you’ve made, [then this blame is helping you learn](#). You have made a mistake and taken responsibility for it. You have held yourself accountable, and now you can move forward. This applies to both professional and personal situations or relationships. But in applying blame to yourself, it’s crucial to avoid the negative self-talk that often accompanies the blame. Beating up on yourself while

holding yourself accountable for a mistake undermines the positive effects of taking responsibility and learning from a past mistake.

Blaming others is much trickier, and I can think of no instance in which it would be appropriate to do so unless it initiates a conversation in which *all* parties step up and take responsibility for their own part in the conflict or for their own mistakes.

Is There a Place for Blame in Conflict Resolution?

The act of blaming is more likely to occur in the early stages of conflict. Because blame tends to cause a person to become defensive or even antagonistic, it is considered [defensive communication](#). Blaming is more likely to [cause or escalate a conflict](#) than it is to resolve it. Once one person in the conflict becomes defensive, the other person is also likely to react in a similar fashion. Neither party is able to hear what the other is saying, thereby extending the conflict.

In [mediation](#), blame is counterproductive. By blaming the other person, you remove yourself from any responsibility or accountability for your part in the dispute. This causes the other person to get angry and likely shut down. If you are the one on the receiving end of blame, you are likely to become defensive and antagonistic. No one wins. As a mediator I start by asking open-ended questions about the nature of the dispute. While mediation is a forward thinking process issues about causation and responsibility often surface early. Once that is openly discussed parties in a mediation may take ownership of their role in causing the misunderstandings that fed the dispute. Only then can you more likely to find resolution and avoid a lengthy and [costly conflict](#).

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