



How to Fix the Blame and Make it Stick

We at Soma spend a lot of our time developing effective collaborative relationships in large project and company environments. We research the best ways of building effective business partners and work hard to bringing the best available approaches and skills to our clients. However, sometimes we come across such brilliant examples of good practice in other areas that feel we just have to share them. This one – how to fix the blame and really make it stick – has nothing whatsoever to do with good collaborative relationships but even so we felt compelled to share it.

Some people and organisations are so good at blame fixing that it is for them a way of life. The tools and techniques they use are sophisticated in their very simplicity and, even better, work just as well at home as in the work place – and there are not very many examples of where it is a good idea to apply work skills wholesale at home.

Like good consultants and researchers we have boiled down centuries of knowledge and experience to three simple steps that anyone can apply. Unusually we are not offering to support clients in this area because frankly, it is so simple anyone can do it without support – once you are armed with our powerful 3 step process. Just follow the steps in order and see how easy it is.

Step 1 – Get the Facts straight – or nearly straight

One of the great things about fixing the blame is that it is easy to get started. There is no special effort and no difficult hump to get over before seeing results. “Components International are late with their deliveries again!” for example. Note that it is not important to be too specific. It is enough to know that the components delivery is not there when it was needed – no need to let details like you were late confirming the order get in the way of the essential fact. What is important is the way you feel about the issue and the best facts to dwell on are the ones that reinforce that feeling.

So at home for example: “You have left the kitchen in a real mess” does not want to be contaminated with the need to rush off to pick up an errant child. A mess is a mess and that is what you have left the kitchen in!

Step 2 – Fit the facts to a general pattern of behaviour

Step 2 is just as easy. All you need to do is relate the facts to an underlying pattern of behaviour. “Components International is *always* late.” This of course adds validity to your fact. If Components International is always late then it is no surprise that they are late again. And next time they are late they will obviously be late because they always have been. The key word here is “always” – You need to move from the specific example to establish a general truth and you can guarantee this by using the construct: “They/you always.....” It also works if you turn it around using “They/you never” and you can use both at once for emphasis.

(Well, you *always* leave the kitchen in a mess and you *never* tidy up, do you?)



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Step 3 – Establish the motive behind the facts

This is really important to attach importance to the blame. There is no benefit to be had banging on about the kitchen being in a mess unless you can demonstrate how much it matters. Establishing a motive that may or may not fit the facts but nevertheless you feel strongly about is the key to the satisfying sense of injustice and righteousness that comes with expert blame fixing.

To help you there exists a very useful technique known as the Ladder of Inference which is all about how we attribute meaning to what we observe. For example, I observe an old lady in the street who I see peering through the curtains in my direction every morning and frankly it is getting on my nerves. Why does she do this? She must be a nosy interfering busy body that's why! Yes that must be the *meaning* of what I *observe* so I don't think I'll be bidding her a polite good morning as I rush by on my way to do something useful like go to work! In this way my interpretation of the meaning behind what I observe has had an effect on my behaviour. And no doubt my behaviour as I stroll past with my nose in the air will have an impact on her behaviour to me. See now the power of the ladder of abstraction.

Of course there could be other meanings that fit the observable data. It could be, for example that the old lady has a daughter in Australia whose letters, when they come, brighten up her day to such an extent that she always looks out for the postman. However, do not be swayed by others' interpretations of the facts, better yet do not even allow their existence. The only meaning that matters here is yours. So why are International Components always late? – "Because they do not value and respect us as customers. That's why and that is really why it matters so much that they were late this time!"

(And, by the way, you always leave the kitchen in a mess because you don't really care that I have to do all the work around here!)

Finally

Truly great blame fixers are adept at avoiding in-depth discussion. They just stick to the facts as they see them. Above all remember not at any time to be tempted – or tricked into - discussing the contribution you or anyone else played in the misdemeanour. That can only distract from the power of your accusation and spoil the purity of your blaming process. Especially do not get sucked into how to work together to avoid the problem next time. If you do this you will dilute the blame and probably lose the opportunity to fix it on someone next time.

Instead, stick to the bold unassailable fact, the way the fact fits a general pattern of things you/they *always* or *never* do and give it weight by pointing to the evil motive that must lie behind it all and you will be an expert. Furthermore the better you get at it the more opportunities you will get to feel the full satisfaction of fixing the blame and make it stick because things will continue to go increasingly wrong you will find more and more occasions where someone needs to take the blame. And you don't want it to be you. Behaviour does breed behaviour as we say.

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