
Responsibility vs. Blame

In any given situation you are either taking responsibility or you are blaming. Responsibility is about giving up on the chance of different past and focussing on choosing the future.

When we are blaming someone or something else, we are actually giving away our power and positioning ourselves as the victim. If every situation is *completely* the fault of someone or something else, then our hands are tied. We have given ourselves no choices.

If instead, we decide that every situation involves something we created, then we can put ourselves back in control. We can make choices, which will change or at least modify the situation. When we choose to take responsibility, we choose freedom.

Responsibility is not about blaming yourself. Responsibility is not about feeling bad or wrong. Responsibility is about accepting that you have choices ahead of you in the future. Your past choices are gone. They no longer matter. They are never worth blaming yourself for.

When you notice you are blaming, you can immediately choose responsibility and gain new freedom in any area of your life. Whether you are blaming others, or simply fate, you can reframe your perspective from blame to responsibility and experience true freedom.

Responsibility Leads to Freedom

Some people hear the word *responsibility* and immediately associate it with a burden or having to carry a load. In actuality, it is exactly the opposite. When you take on the perspective that you created a situation, you have the ability to change or modify it. With this realisation comes a feeling of power and freedom. However, if you take on the perspective that someone or something else caused the situation, then you have NO ability to change it and you are left feeling powerless and resentful.

Responsibility = Freedom + Empowerment

Blame = Loss of Freedom + Disempowerment.

Responsibility is not just a way to act; it is a way to view our entire lives. It is a perspective that we can choose to empower us. Often we think that a situation just is. It is either our fault, or someone else's or maybe even just fate. It may not occur to us that this is a perspective we are choosing. Our view of the situation appears to be the "truth". However, by shifting perspective from blame to responsibility, we can alter the "truth" of the situation. We can change the situation from one where we are powerless, to one where we are powerful.

Self Application

The Blame Game

There are many reasons why we blame others for the way things are in our lives. Perhaps we are fearful that if we take responsibility it will be our fault or failure if things go wrong. Or we don't fully understand our power and blame seems the easiest way to respond.

Blame is extremely seductive. When you play the Blame Game, you do not have to take responsibility for your life. Decisions are left up to everyone else. Life becomes easier (but only in the short term!) because there are no choices to make - everyone else makes them for you.

Playing the Blame Game can become addictive. If a person persists in maintaining that someone else is to blame for their problems, this perception can radically distort their view of reality. This further limits their choices, making them want to play the Blame Game even more. After a time the Blame Game becomes a habit, with the same disempowering thoughts supporting more disempowering thoughts. People who play the Blame Game may then unknowingly mentor others in the Blame Game. Families, workplaces and even whole societies can become infected and then trapped in a culture of blame.

How to play the Blame Game

- Always look outside of yourself for those responsible for doing "it" to you.
- Believe that you are powerless to change anything.
- Accept that others are stronger, smarter and more resourceful than you.

How to stop playing the Blame Game

- Know that no one can make you feel anything without your permission.
- Understand that responsibility is a privilege and start becoming responsible.
- Accept that you are human and will make mistakes and this is okay.
- Realize that not making a choice is making a choice.

As long as we blame other people or external conditions for what is happening to us, we have no control over our own lives. We become victims of circumstance. Blame keeps us from fully enjoying and engaging in our lives. When we view responsibility as a privilege, instead of as a burden, we awaken many possibilities for change and growth.

Forgiveness

Letting go of blame often involves forgiveness. Forgiving others, and ourselves doesn't mean that we make whatever happened *right*. It simply means that we let go and embrace the present. Forgiveness has very little to do with the other person, and everything to do with us. When we forgive someone, we release ourselves and free ourselves from the burden of blame. As soon as we stop blaming and decide to forgive, we can let go of that which brings us pain and embrace the possibility of something else.

Forgiving Ourselves

Before you can end the Blame Game you have to learn not to blame yourself. Often we are our own harshest critics. If we make a mistake, instead of accepting that this is a normal part of the human journey, we tell ourselves that we have failed because we are bad or wrong. Others may have trained us in this mode of thinking. Unwittingly, parents, teachers and others in authority can mentor us into the Blame Game. However, we developed this habit, our desire to avoid feeling bad or wrong makes us look for other things or people to blame.

When something goes wrong, the Blame Game offers us three options:

- We are bad and wrong, or
- Someone else is bad or wrong, or
- The situation is out of our control.

The first option can be so uncomfortable or painful that our tendency is to look to the other two. This becomes easy to do because most situations involve other people and when we can't blame other people we can blame circumstances or the situation.

Here's an example:

Stan agreed to meet his adult daughter for dinner. He had not seen her for a long time and their relationship was not strong. Stan rushed out to meet her into a blinding snowstorm and became stuck in the snow.

If Stan were playing the Blame Game, he could either

- **Blame himself:** He could feel bad or wrong for being foolish enough to drive into a snowstorm. He could feel guilty for neglecting his daughter to the point where he didn't feel as though he could cancel their dinner, even as the bad weather closed in. In short, he could feel bad and wrong, even guilty.
- **Blame others:** He could be angry with his daughter for not organising the dinner in a more convenient location or for not cancelling when the weather turned bad. He could sit and think about all the things she has done in the past that strained their relationship. In short, he could blame her for the situation.
- **Blame circumstances:** He could blame the car or the weather. He could blame the strained relationship with his daughter on the bad weather and/or his unreliable car.

The problem with all three of these options is that they leave Stan stuck. Not just stuck in the snow drift but stuck in his poor relationship with his daughter and stuck in his feelings of powerlessness. The problem with the Blame Game is that it is useless in providing Stan with a way forward.

If Stan chose responsibility, however, a range of options would open up. Stan could decide never to drive out in bad weather again, not because he was bad or wrong for doing so, but because taking responsibility gives him the possibility of a different future. Stan could decide

to take responsibility for the performance of his car so that it is better able to handle poor conditions. Stan could also choose to take responsibility for his relationship with his daughter to ensure that he never ends up in the heightened state of anxiety again.

Everyone makes mistakes. We are human. When we make a mistake we need to forgive ourselves for it, so that we can move on and take responsibility. Taking responsibility for our own actions can be freeing and energizing because we don't waste time making excuses. By taking responsibility we build character and self-esteem. We build integrity and clarity.

Language

When we chose responsibility we use different language than when we are blaming. This helps us to initiate even the most difficult conversations. When we take responsibility we use "I" messages or language. We let the other person know how we feel and what we are thinking. We avoid blaming them for how we feel or think.

Here are some examples of using the I-message format:

When _____ happens	When _____	When _____
The impact on me is _____	I feel _____	Happens I feel _____
What I would like to happen now is _____	Because _____	And what I need is _____
	Would you be willing to _____	Can we talk about it? _____

Heading Letting Go and Moving On

When choosing responsibility we let go of anger. Anger is created when you have no choices, when your path is blocked, and when another person has power over you. If you choose responsibility, then you DO have choices and YOU have power over your own life. There is no need for anger. There is also no TIME for anger, as you have the power now to act.

Reflection

1. What are three things for which you are taking responsibility in your life? What effect is taking responsibility for having in your life?
2. What are some things for which you blame other people or other circumstances? What would it look like if you were to choose responsibility for blame?
3. What are the three ways you could have contributed to or caused a given situation in your life?
4. Why do we need to forgive ourselves in order to take responsibility?

Coaching Application

Accomplice

Often people have trouble taking on the perspective that they are 100 percent responsible. However, people can often see how they contributed to a situation, or at least went along with it. So by asking a client to consider their role in the situation or how they were an “accomplice” in the matter, you are supporting them in taking a big step towards becoming responsible.

Extreme Perspective

This is a great technique that allows a client to feel the power of responsibility. Have the client describe how they are not the tiniest bit responsible for a situation. How it was all someone else’s fault. Then have them describe how they are 100 percent responsible. How they may have - on some level - caused or attracted everything to happen. Have them feel the difference between both extreme points of view. Then ask them which of the viewpoints will allow them to move forward.

Reflection

1. As a coach, what are you responsible for in the coaching relationship?
2. What are some questions you could ask your client to shift their perspective from blame to responsibility?

Resource

Goleman, Daniel, Boyatzis, Richard & McKee, Annie, 2002. Primal Leadership. Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence, Harvard Business School Press, U.S.A.