

Improve Business Relationships: Get Curious!

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When something goes wrong in a professional relationship, we ask ourselves, "What happened?" and then we answer internally, from our own point of view. Most often the answer takes a form of blame, like, "He didn't live up to his commitment" or "She came to the client meeting unprepared."

No one likes to be blamed, so the person who receives judgment, no matter how subtle, is inclined to self-defense. Chances are that from the other person's viewpoint, things are complicated, and it might look like you bear part of the blame, too.

Stone, Patton and Heen, authors of *Difficult Conversations*, remind us that the blame game is ineffectual. It creates negative feelings and decreases the cooperation we need to succeed. Things go better, claim the authors, if you initiate a curiosity or learning conversation.

To see if this advice applies to you, ask yourself this question: When I participate in a difficult conversation, is my intent to give the other person a piece of my mind (however graciously or subtly you do it) or is it to genuinely explore different points of view?

When you enter a conversation with a learning or exploring stance, you invite a two-way conversation about what happened. You explore questions like these:

- What is each person's interpretation of what went wrong?
- How did values or differing priorities contribute to the problem?
- What were each person's intentions?
- What was each person feeling, then and now?
- How does each person think we can solve the problem?

When you approach a situation with curiosity rather than blame, you often gain both insight and empathy, two things that can go a long way to fix a problem. Curiosity also often leads to discoveries about yourself and what you have done to contribute to a problem. You can use that information to avoid problems in the future.

When things go wrong, it can be satisfying in the short term to blame the other person. That satisfaction comes with a price tag of distant and uncooperative relationships. None of us can afford to work alone as we try to accomplish more with fewer resources. Face it, we need to get curious.

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