

Abandon Blame: Map the Contribution System

The ad agency you work for flies you to Boulder to pitch executives at *ExtremeSport*, a burgeoning sportswear company and a potentially important client. You turn to begin your presentation, only to discover that you've got the wrong storyboards. Right client, wrong campaign. Shaken, you stumble through an unfocused talk. With one slip, your assistant, who packs your briefcase, has undermined weeks of hard work.

In Our Story, Blame Seems Clear

You blame your assistant, not just because she's a convenient target for your frustration or because letting others know it was she and not you who screwed up may help salvage your reputation, but because it is the simple truth: this was her fault.

When you and your assistant finally discuss what went wrong, you can take one of two approaches. You can blame her explicitly, saying something like "I don't know how you could have let this happen!" Or, if you tend to be less confrontational (or have been taught that blaming people isn't helpful), you can blame her implicitly, with something less threatening, like "Let's do better next time." Either way, she'll get the message: she's to blame.

We're Caught in Blame's Web

Blame is a prominent issue in many difficult conversations. Whether on the surface or below, the conversation revolves around the question of who is to blame. Who is the bad person in this relationship? Who made the mistake? Who should apologize? Who gets to be righteously indignant?

Focusing on blame is a bad idea. *Not* because it's hard to talk about. *Nor* because it can injure relationships and cause pain and anxiety. Many subjects are hard to discuss and have potentially negative side effects and are nonetheless important to address.

Focusing on blame is a bad idea because *it inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it.* And because blame is often irrelevant and unfair. The urge to blame is based, quite literally, on a misunderstanding of what has given rise to the issues between you and the other person, and on the fear of *being* blamed. Too often, blaming also serves as a bad proxy for talking directly about hurt feelings.

But the advice "Don't blame others" is no answer. You can't move away from blame until you understand what blame is, what motivates us to want to blame each other, and how to move toward something else that will better serve your purposes in difficult conversations. That something else is the concept of *contribution*. The distinction between blame and contribution is not always easy to grasp, but it is essential to improving your ability to handle difficult conversations well.

Distinguish Blame from Contribution

At heart, blame is about *judging* and contribution is about *understanding*.

Blame Is About Judging, and Looks Backward

When we ask the question "Who is to blame?" we are really asking three questions in one. First, did this person cause the problem? Did your assistant's actions (or inaction) cause you to have the wrong storyboards? Second, if so, how should her actions be judged against some standard of conduct? Was she incompetent, unreasonable, unethical? And third, if the judgment is negative, how should she be punished? Will she be yelled at? Warned? Perhaps even fired?

When we say "This was your fault," it is shorthand for giving condemning answers to all three questions. We mean not only that you caused this, but that you did something bad and should be punished. It's no wonder that blame is such a loaded issue, and that we are quick to defend ourselves when we sense its approach.

When blame is in play, you can expect defensiveness, strong emotion, interruptions, and arguments about what "good assistants," "loving spouses," or "any reasonable person" should or shouldn't do. When we blame someone, we are offering them the role of "the accused," so they do what accused people do: they defend themselves any way they can. Given what's at stake, it's easy to see why the dance of mutual finger-pointing often turns nasty.

Contribution Is About Understanding, and Looks Forward

Contribution asks a related but different set of questions. The first question is "How did we *each* contribute to bringing about the current situation?" Or put another way: "What did we each do or not do to get ourselves into this mess?" The second question is "Having identified the contribution system, how can we change it? What can we do about it as we go forward?" In short, contribution is useful when our goal is to understand what actually happened so that we can improve how we work together in the future. In the worlds of both business and personal relationships, too often we deal in blame when our real goals are understanding and change.

To illustrate, let's return to the *ExtremeSport* story and imagine two contrasting conversations between you and your assistant. The first conversation focuses on blame, the second on contribution.

You: I wanted to talk to you about my presentation at *ExtremeSport*. You packed the wrong storyboards. The situation was unbelievably awkward, and made me look terrible. We simply can't work this way.

ASSISTANT: I heard. I'm so sorry. I just, well, you probably don't want to hear my excuses.

You: I just don't understand how you could let this happen.

ASSISTANT: I'm *really* sorry.

You: I know you didn't do it on purpose, and I know you feel bad, but I don't want this to happen again. You understand what I'm saying?

ASSISTANT: It won't. I promise you.

All three elements of blame are present: you caused this, I'm judging you negatively, and implicit in what I am saying is that one way or another you will be punished, especially if it happens again.

In contrast, a conversation about contribution might sound like this:

You: I wanted to talk to you about my presentation at *ExtremeSport*. When I arrived I found the wrong storyboards in my briefcase.

ASSISTANT: I heard. I'm so sorry. I feel terrible.

You: I appreciate that. I'm feeling bad too. Let's retrace our steps and think about how this happened. I suspect we may each have contributed to the problem. From your point of view, did I do anything differently this time?

ASSISTANT: I'm not sure. We were working on three accounts at once, and on the one just before this one, when I asked about which boards you wanted packed, you got angry. I know it is my responsibility to know which boards you want, but sometimes when things get hectic, it can get confusing.

You: If you're unsure, you should always ask. But it sounds like you're saying I don't always make it easy to do that.

ASSISTANT: Well, I do feel intimidated sometimes. When you get really busy, it's like you don't want to be bothered. The day you left you were in that kind of mood. I was trying to stay out of your way, because I didn't want to add to your frustration. I had planned to double-check which boards you wanted when you got off the phone, but then I had to run to the copy center. After you left I remembered, but I knew you usually double-checked your briefcase, so I figured it was okay.

You: Yeah, I do usually double-check, but this time I was so overwhelmed I forgot. I think we'd both better double-check every time. And I do get in those moods. I know it can be hard to interact with me when I'm like that. I need to work on being less impatient and abrupt. But if you're unsure, I need you to ask questions no matter what kind of mood I'm in.

ASSISTANT: So you want me to ask questions even if I think it will annoy you?

You: Yes, although I'll try to be less irritable. Can you do that?

ASSISTANT: Well, talking about it like this makes it easier. I realize it's important.

You: You can even refer to this conversation. You can say, "I know you're under pressure, but you made me promise I'd ask this . . ." Or just say, "Hey, you promised not to be such a jerk!"

ASSISTANT: [laughs] Okay, that works for me.

You: And we might also think about how you could track better which appointments are going to be for which campaigns . . .

In the second conversation, you and your assistant have begun to identify the contributions that you each brought to the problem, and the ways in which each of your reactions are part of an overall pattern: You feel anxious and distracted about an upcoming presenta-

tion, and snap at your assistant. She assumes you want her out of your way, and withdraws. Something falls through the cracks, and then you are even more annoyed and worried the next time you are preparing, since you're no longer sure you can trust your assistant to help you. So you become more abrupt, increasingly unapproachable, and the communication between you continues to erode. Mistakes multiply.

As you get a handle on the interactive system the two of you have created, you can see what you each need to do to avoid or alter that system in the future. As a result, this second conversation is much more likely than the first to produce lasting change in the way you work together. Indeed, the first conversation runs the risk of reinforcing the problem. Since part of the system is that your assistant feels discouraged from talking to you because she fears provoking your anger, a conversation about blame is likely to make that tendency worse, not better. If you go that way, she'll eventually conclude that you're impossible to work with, and you'll report that she's incompetent.

Contribution Is Joint and Interactive

Focusing on the contributions of both the boss and the assistant — seeking understanding rather than judgment — is critical. This is not just good practice, it accords more closely with reality. As a rule, when things go wrong in human relationships, everyone has contributed in some important way.

Of course, this is not how we usually *experience* contribution. A common distortion is to see contribution as singular — that what has gone wrong is either entirely our fault or (more often) entirely theirs. Only in a B movie is it that simple. In real life causation is almost always more complex. A contribution *system* is present, and that system includes inputs from both people. Think about a baseball pitcher facing a batter. If the batter strikes out in a crucial situation, he might explain that he wasn't seeing well, that his wrist injury was still bothering him, or perhaps that he simply failed to come through

in the clutch. The pitcher, however, might describe the strikeout by saying, "I knew he was thinking curve, so I came in with a high fastball" or, "I was in a zone. I knew I had him before he even got in the batter's box."

Who is right, the batter or the pitcher? Of course, the answer is both, at least in part. Whether the batter strikes out or hits a home run is a result of the interaction between the batter and the pitcher. Depending on your perspective, you might focus on the actions of one or the other, but the actions of both are required for the outcome.

It's the same in difficult conversations. Other than in extreme cases, such as child abuse, almost every situation that gives rise to a conversation is the result of a joint contribution system. Focusing on only one or the other of the contributors obscures rather than illuminates that system.

The Costs of the Blame Frame

There *are* situations in which focusing on blame is not only important, but essential. Our legal system is set up to apportion blame, both in the criminal and civil courts. Assigning blame publicly, against clearly articulated legal or moral standards, tells people what is expected of them and allows society to exercise justice.

When Blame Is the Goal, Understanding Is the Casualty

But even in situations that require a clear assignment of blame, there is a cost. Once the specter of punishment — legal or otherwise — is raised, learning the truth about what happened becomes more difficult. People are understandably less forthcoming, less open, less willing to apologize. After a car accident, for example, an automaker expecting to be sued may resist making safety improvements for fear it will seem an admission that the company should have done something *before* the accident.

"Truth commissions" often are created because of this trade-off between assigning blame and gaining an understanding of what really happened. A truth commission offers clemency in return for honesty. In South Africa, for example, it is unlikely that so much would now be known about past abuses under the apartheid system if criminal investigations and trials had been the only means of discovery.

Focusing on Blame Hinders Problem-Solving

When the dog disappears, who's to blame? The person who opened the gate or the one who failed to grab her collar? Should we argue about that or look for the dog? When the tub overflows and ruins the living room ceiling below, should we blame the forgetful bather? The spouse who called the bather downstairs? The manufacturer who designed an overflow drain that is too small? The plumber who failed to mention it? The answer to who *contributed* to the problem is all of the above. When your real goal is finding the dog, fixing the ceiling, and preventing such incidents in the future, focusing on blame is a waste of time. It neither helps you understand the problem looking back, nor helps you fix it going forward.

Blame Can Leave a Bad System Undiscovered

Even if punishment seems appropriate, using it as a substitute for really figuring out what went wrong and why is a disaster. The VP of Commodity Corp. championed the decision to build a new manufacturing plant as a way to increase profits. However, not only did the plant fail to increase profits, but the resulting increase in market supply actually brought profits down. At the time of the original decision to build the plant, several people privately predicted this, but didn't speak up.

To address the situation, the VP was fired and a new strategic planner was brought on board. By removing the person who made

the bad decision and replacing him with someone "better," it was assumed that the management issue was now fixed. But while the company had changed one "part" in the contribution system, it had failed to look at the system as a whole. Why did those who predicted failure keep silent? Were there implicit incentives that encouraged this? What structures, policies, and processes continue to allow poor decisions, and what would it take to change them?

Removing one player in a system is sometimes warranted. But the cost of doing so as a substitute for the hard work of examining the larger contribution system is often surprisingly high.

The Benefits of Understanding Contribution

Fundamentally, using the blame frame makes conversations more difficult, while understanding the contribution system makes a difficult conversation easier and more likely to be productive.

Contribution Is Easier to Raise

Joseph runs an overseas office for a multinational corporation. His greatest frustration comes from headquarters' unwillingness or inability to communicate with him effectively. Joseph doesn't hear about policy changes until after they're made, and is often informed by clients (or in one case, the newspaper!) about work his own firm is doing in his region. Joseph decides to raise the matter with the home office.

Before he does, one of Joseph's managers points out Joseph's own role in the problem. Joseph installed a computer system incompatible with the one at headquarters. And he rarely takes the initiative to ask the kinds of questions he probably should. Unfortunately, instead of seeing his own contributions as part of the whole system, Joseph falls into the blame frame and begins to wonder whether the fault really lies with him rather than with headquarters. He doesn't raise the issue after all, and his frustration continues.

The blame frame creates a difficult burden. You have to feel confident that others are at fault, and that you aren't, to feel justified in raising an issue. And since, as we've described, there are always ways in which you've contributed, you're likely to end up failing to raise important issues. That would be a shame, because you'll lose the opportunity to understand why communication between you isn't working well, and how it might be improved.

Contribution Encourages Learning and Change

Imagine a couple confronting the wife's infidelity. Accusations fly as questions of blame are raised. After much anguish, the husband chooses to stay in the marriage under the condition that such infidelity never happen again. There is an apparent resolution, but what has each person learned from the experience?

As one-sided as an affair may seem, it often involves some contribution from both partners. Unless these contributions are sorted out, the problems and patterns in the marriage that gave rise to the affair will continue to cause difficulty. Some questions need to be asked: Does the husband listen to his wife? Does he stay at work late? Was his wife feeling sad, lonely, undesirable? If so, why?

And to understand the *system*, the couple then needs to follow up with more questions: If the husband doesn't listen to his wife, what's she doing to contribute to that? What does she say or do that encourages him to shut down or withdraw? Does she work every weekend, or withdraw when she's feeling upset? How does their relationship work? If the factors that contributed to the infidelity are to be understood and addressed, these questions must be explored — the contribution system must be mapped.

Three Misconceptions About Contribution

Three common misunderstandings can keep people from fully embracing or benefiting from the concept of contribution.

Misconception #1: I Should Focus Only on My Contribution

Advice that you should search for joint contribution to a problem is sometimes heard as “You should overlook the other person’s contribution and focus on your own.” This is a mistake. *Finding your contribution doesn’t in any way negate the other person’s contribution.* It has taken both of you to get into this mess. It will probably take both of you to get out.

Recognizing that everyone involved in a situation has contributed to the problem doesn’t mean that everyone has contributed equally. You can be 5 percent responsible or 95 percent responsible — there is still joint contribution. Of course, quantifying contribution is not easy, and in most cases not very helpful. Understanding is the goal, not assigning percentages.

Misconception #2: Putting Aside Blame Means Putting Aside My Feelings

Seeking to understand the contribution system rather than focusing on blame doesn’t mean putting aside strong emotions. Quite the contrary. As you and the other person look at how you have each contributed to the problem, sharing your feelings is essential.

Indeed, the very impulse to blame is often stimulated by strong emotions that lie unexpressed. When you learn of your wife’s infidelity, you want to say, “You are responsible for ruining our marriage! How could you do something so stupid and hurtful?” Here, you are focusing on blame as a proxy for your feelings. Speaking more directly about your strong feelings — “I feel devastated by what you did” or “My ability to trust you has been shattered” — actually reduces the impulse to blame. Over time, as you look ahead, it frees you to talk more comfortably and productively in terms of contribution.

If you find yourself mired in a continuing urge to blame, or with an unceasing desire for the other person to admit that they were

wrong, you may find some relief by asking yourself: “What feelings am I failing to express?” and “Has the other person acknowledged my feelings?” As you explore this terrain, you may find yourself naturally shifting from a blame frame to a contribution frame. You may learn that what you really seek is understanding and acknowledgment. What you want the other person to say isn’t “It was my fault,” but rather “I understand that I hurt you and I’m sorry.” The first statement is about judgment, the second about understanding.

Misconception #3: Exploring Contribution Means “Blaming the Victim”

When someone blames the victim, they are suggesting that the victim “brought it on themselves,” that they deserved or even wanted to be victimized. This is often terribly unfair and painful for both the victim and others.

Looking for joint contribution is not about blame of any kind. Imagine that you are mugged while walking alone down a dark street late at night. Blame asks: “Did you do something wrong? Did you break the law? Did you act immorally? Should you be punished?” The answer to all of these questions is no. You didn’t do anything wrong; you didn’t deserve to be mugged. Being mugged was not your fault.

Contribution asks a different set of questions. Contribution asks: “What did I do that helped cause the situation?” You can find contribution even in situations where you carry no blame; you did contribute to being mugged. How? By choosing to walk alone at night. If you’d been somewhere else, or in a group, getting mugged would have been less likely. If we are looking to punish someone for what happened, we would punish the mugger. If we are looking to help you feel empowered in the world, we would encourage you to find your contribution. You may not be able to change other people’s contributions, but you can often change your own.

In his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela provides an example of how people who have been overwhelmingly

victimized can still seek to understand their own contribution to their problems. He describes how he learned this from an Afrikaner:

Reverend Andre Scheffer was a minister of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Africa. . . . He had a dry sense of humor and liked to poke fun at us. "You know," he would say, "the white man has a more difficult task than the black man in this country. Whenever there is a problem, we [white men] have to find a solution. But whenever you blacks have a problem, you have an excuse. You can simply say, '*Ingabilingu*,' . . . a Xhosa expression that means, "It is the whites."

He was saying that we could always blame all of our troubles on the white man. His message was that we must also look within ourselves and become responsible for our actions — sentiments with which I wholeheartedly agreed.

Mandela does not believe blacks are to blame for their situation. He does believe that blacks must look for and take responsibility for their contribution to the problems of South Africa, if the nation is to move forward successfully.

By identifying what you are doing to perpetuate a situation, you learn where you have leverage to affect the system. Simply by changing your own behavior, you gain at least some influence over the problem.

Finding Your Fair Share: Four Hard-to-Spot Contributions

"The concept of contribution makes sense," you may be thinking. Even so, as you reflect on your own most pressing entanglement, you are baffled: "In this particular situation, I just don't see how I have any contribution." Spotting your own contribution becomes easier with practice. But it helps to be familiar with four common contributions that are often overlooked.

1. Avoiding Until Now

One of the most common contributions to a problem, and one of the easiest to overlook, is the simple act of avoiding. You have allowed the problem to continue unchecked by not having addressed it earlier. It may be that your ex-husband has been late every time he's picked up your kids for the last two years, but you've never mentioned to him that it was a problem. It may be that your boss has trampled thoughtlessly on your self-esteem since you began work four years ago, but you've chosen not to share with her the impact on you.

One of your store managers deserves a warning or even to be fired. But his file is full of "Satisfactory" performance reviews dating back years. Why? Partly because you wanted to avoid the effort of documenting the problem, but mostly because you and other supervisors haven't wanted the hassle of having an ongoing difficult conversation with an argumentative person. And because managers in your company tolerate and collude in a norm of avoiding such conversations.

A particularly problematic form of avoiding is complaining to a third party instead of to the person with whom you're upset. It makes you feel better, but puts the third party in the middle with no good way to help. They can't speak for you, and if they try, the other person may get the idea that the problem is so terrible that you can't discuss it directly. On the other hand, if they keep quiet, the third party is burdened with only your partisan and incomplete version of the story.

This isn't to say that it's not okay to get advice from a friend about how to conduct a difficult conversation. It does suggest that if you do so, then you should also report back to that friend about any change in your feelings as a result of having the difficult conversation, so that they aren't left with an unbalanced story.

2. Being Unapproachable

The flip side of not bringing something up is having an interpersonal style that keeps people at bay. You contribute by being uninterested, unpredictable, short-tempered, judgmental, punitive, hypersensitive, argumentative, or unfriendly. Of course, whether you are really any of these things or intend this impact is not the point. If someone experiences you this way, they are less likely to raise things with you, and this becomes part of the system of avoidance between you.

3. Intersections

Intersections result from a simple difference between two people in background, preferences, communication style, or assumptions about relationships. Consider Toby and Eng-An, who have been married for about four months. Their fights have begun falling into a predictable pattern. Toby is usually the one to initiate a discussion about an issue — who is doing more of the housework, why Eng-An didn't stick up for him with her mother, whether to save or spend her year-end bonus. When things become heated, Eng-An ends the discussion by saying, "Look, I just don't want to talk about this right now," and walking out.

When Eng-An shuts down or walks out, Toby is left feeling abandoned and responsible for coping with the problems in their relationship on his own. He complains to friends that "Eng-An is incapable of dealing with feelings, hers or mine. She goes into denial when the tiniest thing is wrong." Toby becomes increasingly frustrated with their inability to make tough decisions, or simply to have it out.

Meanwhile, Eng-An is confiding in her sister: "Toby is smothering me. Everything is an emergency, everything has to be discussed *right now*. He has no sensitivity for how I feel about it or whether it's a good time for me. He wanted to hunt down a three-dollar discrepancy in our checking account on the night before my big pre-

sentation to the board! He's constantly making these minuscule disagreements into huge problems that we've got to discuss for hours."

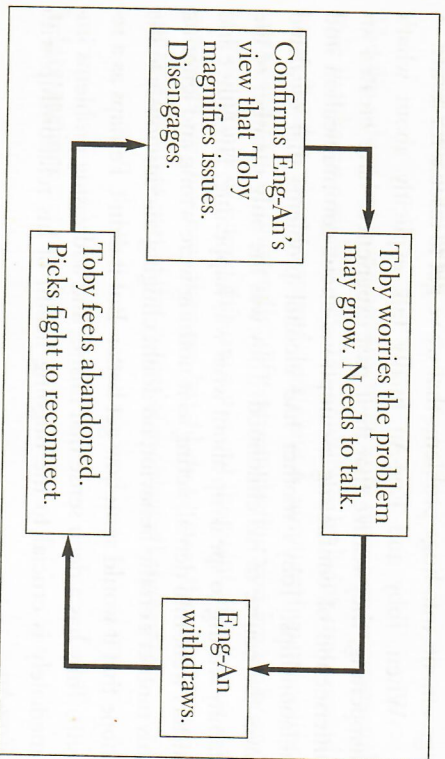
When Toby and Eng-An finally talk explicitly about what's happening, they realize that their past experiences have created an intersection of conflicting assumptions about communication and relationships. Toby's mother had alcohol problems that escalated over the course of his childhood. Toby was the only member of the family willing to speak up about what was happening. His father and sisters went into denial, acting as if nothing were wrong and ignoring his mother's erratic behavior, no doubt clinging unconsciously to the hope that it would somehow get better. But it didn't. Perhaps as a result, Toby has a deep sense that raising and addressing problems immediately is crucial to the ongoing health of his relationship with Eng-An.

Eng-An's home was quite different. Her brother is mentally handicapped, and life revolved around his schedule and needs. While Eng-An loved her brother very much, she sometimes needed a respite from the constant emotional turmoil of worry, crises, and caretaking that surrounded him. She learned not to react too quickly to a potential problem and worked hard to create the distance she needed in an emotionally intense family. Toby's reactions to their disagreements threaten this carefully nurtured space.

We see how combining the two worldviews produces a system of interaction in which Toby talks and Eng-An withdraws. Operating in a blame frame, Toby concluded that their difficulties were Eng-An's fault because she was "in denial" and "couldn't handle feelings." Eng-An decided that their difficulties were Toby's fault, because he "overreacts" and "smothers me." By shifting to a contribution frame, the couple was able to piece together the elements of the system that led to their fights and talk about how to handle it. Only then did communication improve.

Toby and Eng-An were fortunate that they came to understand their intersection in time to do something about it. The failure to do so can be disastrous. In fact, treating an intersection as a question of right versus wrong leads to the death of a great many relationships.

Mapping a Contribution System



When a relationship begins, infatuation may keep each partner from noticing any flaws in the other. Later, as the relationship deepens, each notices some minor annoyances in how the other does things, but the tendency is not to worry. We assume that in time, watching us, the other will learn to show more affection, be more spontaneous, or demonstrate more concern for living within a budget.

The problem is that things *don't* change, because each is waiting for the *other* to change. We begin to wonder: "Don't they love me enough to do the right thing? Do they really love me at all?"

So long as we each continue to see this as a matter of right versus wrong, rather than as an intersection, there is no way to avoid a train wreck. In contrast, successful relationships, whether in our personal life or with our colleagues at work, are built on the knowledge that in intersections there is no one to blame. People are just different. If we hope to stay together over the long haul, we will sometimes have to compromise our preferences and meet in the middle.

4. Problematic Role Assumptions

A fourth hard-to-spot contribution involves assumptions, often unconscious, about your role in a situation. When your assumptions differ from those of others you can have an intersection such as Toby and Eng-An's. But role assumptions can be problematic even when they are shared.

The members of George's family, for example, all knew their parts in a repetitive family dynamic. Seven-year-old George would do something annoying, like bang a spoon against the dog dish. Eventually George's mother would say to her husband, "Can't you make him stop that?" whereupon George's dad would yell "Stop it!" George would jump, and perhaps cry, and his mom would then turn back to her husband and say, "Well you didn't have to yell at him." Dad would sigh and return to reading the paper. And after a few minutes, George would find another irritating way to get attention, and the pattern would repeat. While no member of the family particularly *enjoyed* this dynamic, it did help them connect emotionally.

Obviously, this form of connecting — fighting to show love — has limitations. Yet it and many other less-than-ideal dynamics are surprisingly common, at home and in the workplace. Why? First, because despite its problems the familiar pattern is comfortable, and the members of the group work to keep each person playing their role. Second, because changing a contribution system requires more than just spotting it and recognizing its limitations. The people involved also have to find another way to provide its benefits. George and his parents need to find better ways to demonstrate affection and maintain closeness. And this is likely to require some tough work in their Feelings and Identity Conversations.

In an organization, this explains why people find it hard to change how they work together even when they see the limitations of common role assumptions, such as "Leaders set strategy; subordinates implement it." To change how people interact, they need both an alternate model everyone thinks is better *and* the skills to make that model work at least as well as the current approach.

Two Tools for Spotting Contribution

If you are still unable to see your contribution, try one of the following two approaches.

Role Reversal

Ask yourself, "What would they say I'm contributing?" Pretend you are the other person and answer the question in the first person, using pronouns such as I, me, and my. Seeing yourself through someone else's eyes can help you understand what you're doing to feed the system.

The Observer's Insight

Step back and look at the problem from the perspective of a disinterested observer. Imagine that you are a consultant called in to help the people in this situation better understand why they are getting stuck. How would you describe, in a neutral, nonjudgmental way, what each person is contributing?

If you have trouble getting out of your own shoes in this way, ask a friend to try for you. If what your friend comes up with surprises you, don't reject it immediately. Rather, imagine that it is true. Ask how that could be, and what it would mean.

Moving from Blame to Contribution — An Example

Shifting your stance away from assessing blame and toward exploring contribution doesn't happen overnight. It takes hard work and persistence. You will repeatedly find yourself and others slipping back into

a blame frame, and will need to be vigilant in constantly correcting your course.

Sydney learned this while leading a team of engineers on a consulting assignment in Brazil. She was the only woman on the project, and the youngest on the team by fifteen years. One of the team members, Miguel, was particularly hostile to her leadership, and she set out to win him over by assigning him to work with her on a number of subcomponents of the project. The two executed several tasks together successfully, and each began to feel more comfortable with the other's style and competence.

Then one evening while working through dinner at the hotel restaurant, Miguel changed the currency of their relationship. "You are so beautiful," Miguel said to Sydney. "And we're so far away from home." He leaned across the table and stroked her hair. Uncomfortable, Sydney suggested they "get back to these figures." She avoided his eyes and wrapped things up quickly.

Miguel's provocative behavior continued over the next few days. He would stand close to Sydney, pay more attention to her than to other members of the team, seek her out at every opportunity. Although he never issued a direct invitation for physical involvement, Sydney wondered whether this was what he was after.

Initially, like many of us, Sydney fell into a blame frame. She judged Miguel's behavior as inappropriate and felt victimized by it. But along with blame came several doubts. Just as she would get up the courage to tell Miguel his behavior was wrong, Sydney worried that she was overreacting or misinterpreting his actions. Perhaps it was just a cultural difference.

Sydney also feared that accusing Miguel would take things from bad to worse. "The situation is uncomfortable but manageable," she thought. "If I tell Miguel his behavior is wrong, I run the risk that he will explode, disrupt the team, or do something to endanger the project. And the project is my first priority." By continuing to think in terms of blame, Sydney kept the stakes of raising the issue unmanageably high.

Map the Contribution System

The first step in moving away from blame is to reorient your own thinking about the situation. You can begin to diagnose the system by looking for the contributions you've each made to create the problem. Some of us are prone to focus on the other person's contribution and have a harder time seeing our own. As "shiffters" we tend to see ourselves as innocent victims — when something goes wrong, it's always because of what someone else did. Others of us have the opposite tendency: we are all too aware of the negative consequences of our own actions. In the face of this, others' contributions seem insignificant. An "absorber" tends to feel responsible for everything.

Knowing your predisposition can help you fight it, enabling you to get a balanced picture of what each person is contributing. To understand a contribution system, you have to understand all its components.

What Are They Contributing? Miguel's contributions are relatively easy to identify. He is expressing romantic affection, but failing to clarify his intentions or the extent of his interest. He chooses to stand close to Sydney, to spend more time and energy talking with her than with his other colleagues, to hint at feelings of longing for her. He chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to ignore the nonverbal signals Sydney is sending. She changes the subject. She changes the staffing assignments. She moves away. He follows. He has chosen not to inquire about how she feels about what is happening.

Miguel may or may not be aware of Sydney's discomfort. His actions may or may not be blameworthy. And it may or may not be appropriate to punish him. But these are separate inquiries from the question of contribution. What is important here is that these are the pieces of the puzzle that come from Miguel.

What Am I Contributing? Sydney's contributions begin to surface once we shift out of the blame frame. She was particularly atten-

tive to Miguel's concerns about the team and went out of her way to work with him. He may have read this as interest on her part. Sydney has avoided telling Miguel — at least directly — that she's felt at all uncomfortable. Regardless of how justified or understandable Sydney's actions are, these actions and inactions on her part contributed to their current situation; they make it easier to understand why Miguel continues to act as he does.

List Each Person's Contribution

My Contributions	His Contributions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave M. special attention at beginning • Went out of my way to work with him 1-on-1 • Haven't told him I'm uncomfortable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling me he's in love, wants to spend private time together, etc. • Isn't clear about his intentions • Isn't getting, or is ignoring, my indirect signals • Doesn't ask me if I am comfortable with his suggestions

Who Else Is Involved? Often there are other important contributors to the system. For example, with Toby and Eng-An, their families played an important role. In Sydney's case, other members of the team may have inadvertently encouraged Miguel or passed up opportunities to help Sydney. When exploring a contribution system, consider whether other players may be contributing something important.

Take Responsibility for Your Contribution Early

Raising contribution during the conversation itself can be surprisingly easy. Getting the other person to shift from blame to contribution can be more difficult. One of the best ways to signal that you

want to leave behind the question of who's to blame is to acknowledge your own contribution early in the conversation. For example, Sydney might say to Miguel:

I apologize for not bringing this up earlier, before it became such a big deal for me. Also, I realize that arranging for us to work together at the beginning of the project may have sent a confusing signal, though all I intended was to improve our professional relationship. What was your reaction?

She might also ask, "Are there other things I've done that were ambiguous or that suggested I might be interested in something else?" Sydney would learn important information about her own impact, and also set the stage for discussion of Miguel's contribution.

You may fear that being the first to own up to some contribution puts you in a vulnerable position for the rest of the conversation. What if the other person remains focused on blame, is more than happy to acknowledge your contribution (saying, in effect, "I agree that this is your fault"), and then is adamant that they contributed nothing?

This is an important concern, especially if you tend to be a contribution absorber. Acknowledging your contribution is a risk. But not acknowledging your contribution also involves risks. If Sydney starts by pointing out Miguel's contributions, Miguel is likely to become defensive and feel that the conversation is unfairly one-sided. Rather than acknowledging his contribution, Miguel may be tempted to deflect attention from it, and the easiest way to do that is to point out Sydney's part in the problem. Taking responsibility for your contribution up front prevents the other person from using it as a shield to avoid a discussion of their own contribution.

If you feel the focus is somehow on you alone, you can say so: "It's not okay to look only at my contribution. That's not reality as I see it. I feel like I'm trying to look at both of us. Is there anything I'm doing to make it hard for you to look at yourself?"

Help Them Understand Their Contribution

In addition to taking responsibility for what you contributed, there are things you can do to help them locate their contribution.

Make Your Observations and Reasoning Explicit. To make sure that you're working from the same information and understand each other's interpretations, share, as specifically as you can recall what the other person did or said that triggered your reaction. Sydney might say, for example, "When you stroked my hair or asked if we could spend some private time at the beach, I was confused about what you wanted from our relationship. And I began to worry that if you wanted romance, then I would have a real problem on my hands."

Or Toby could tell Eng-An: "When you left the house last night in the middle of our fight, I felt abandoned and angry. I think that's why I picked a fight with you this morning over the orange juice. I needed to reconnect with you, even if it was just by yelling at you." By jolting down the things that triggered you to react, you are starting to get a handle on the actions and reactions that make up the contribution system.

Clarify What You Would Have Them Do Differently. In addition to explaining what triggered your reaction, you should be prepared to say what you would have them do differently in the future, and explain how this would help you behave differently as well. The husband trying to repair the relationship with his adulterous wife might say:

I want to do a better job of listening to you and not withdrawing in the future. One thing that would help me to listen is if you could first ask me how my day was, and whether this is a good time to talk. Sometimes I'm preoccupied or anxious about work, and when you start telling me about the problems you're having with your boss, I

The "What Happened?" Conversation

just get overloaded and shut down. And sometimes I feel angry, because it makes me think you don't care about what's going on with me. So if you just asked first, I think I'd be in a much better place to listen to you. Is there anything that would make that difficult?

Making a specific request for how the other person can change their contribution *in the service of helping you change yours* can be a powerful way of helping them understand what they are doing to create and perpetuate the problem. And it goes to the heart of the purpose of understanding the contribution system — to see what you each need to do differently to influence and improve the situation.

. . .

Whether you're talking about your contrasting stories, your intentions, or your contributions, the goal isn't to get an admission. The goal is to understand better what's happened between you, so that you can start to talk constructively about where to go next.

But in addition to clarifying the "What Happened?" Conversation, there are two other conversations that need untangling. The next two chapters examine the Feelings and Identity Conversations.

The Feelings Conversation

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