

“Gone Fishing”

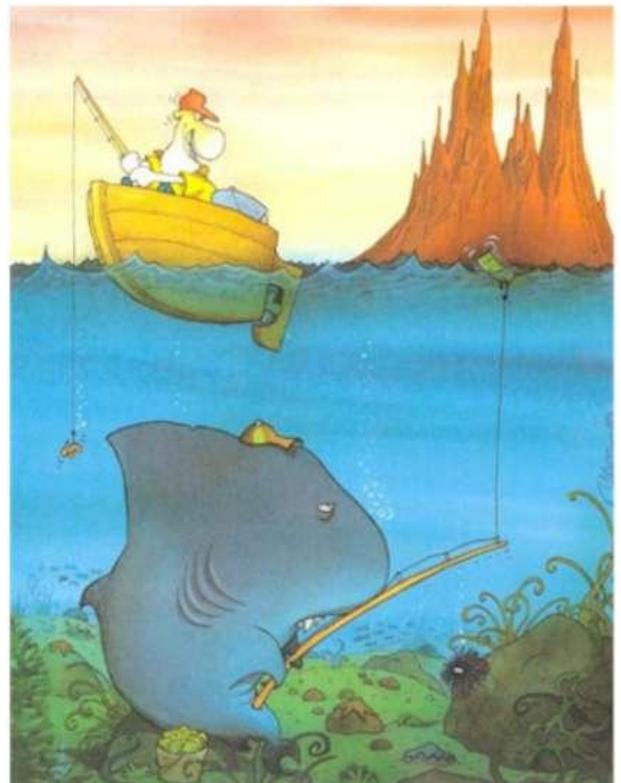
The Game of Conflict and Blame

by Jaime Jusidman

A couple of summers ago, I went for a weeklong backpacking trip in the beautiful and rugged California Sierras. One early morning, while I was getting ready for a 12-mile hike to one of the mountain passes, two fishermen caught my attention—not by accident, but because one was yelling with excitement. “I caught one! I caught one!” he yelled, “And it’s a big one!” Minutes later, he announced again, “I caught another one!” He was obviously feeling very proud of his skills as a trout fisherman. At that point, my mind shifted into judgment. “What a fool,” I thought. “He didn’t catch anything—the fish got himself caught on that hook.” Then I caught myself, and started to wonder about my reaction: How often do I get ‘hooked’ on someone’s ‘bait’ and then blame them for hooking me?

We spend a decent portion of our time – both in the office and out – dealing with conflict or disagreements and blaming others for our disappointment. In fact, interpersonal conflict is often the cause of a major waste of energy and resources, high employee turnover, and in some cases outright company failure. Dealing with conflict is similar to the predicament the fish finds itself in. In a conflict situation, someone puts out the bait, but you have the power to choose whether or not to bite. Once hooked, the more you struggle to pull yourself away, the more entangled you become. You may ultimately surrender the fight, but resentment will build, priming you to bite again the next time the bait is presented to you.

I recently attended a workshop based on the book “Seven Principles for Making Relationships Work.” During the presentation, the author of the book, John M. Gottman, shared an interesting statistic about marriage. According to his research, 61% of the problems in a marriage are unsolvable. Consider that this is probably true of any relationship in which people have to rely on each other to achieve a common goal, including working relationships. This statistic brought me back to my fisherman story. Just think about how many times we bite the same hook thinking this time will be different, but all the while becoming increasingly entangled.



Unfortunately, such “unsolvable problems” are often very closely tied to who we are as individuals — issues that may force us to question our sense of self-worth, or struggle with authority, or become overly dependent on others for validation or security. Each individual has a unique set of experiences, resulting in a unique set of “issues,” which manifest themselves as your own personal “hooks.” When another person unknowingly goes fishing with one of your personal “hooks,” chances are you will bite, struggle, and waste energy trying to deflect blame. You think to yourself, “If only I could get the other person to see that the problem is theirs, not mine.” The sad truth is that the problem is probably yours, and you chose to take the bait...hook, line, and sinker.

I'd like to offer some suggestions to the fisherman and to the fish.

To the fisherman:

1. Don't assume you are a great fisherman just because you catch lots of fish. The fish truly holds the power in its decision to bite, or not.
2. Being a fisherman does not guarantee that you are not also a fish, ready to bite someone else's hook.
3. If the struggle with the fish is too depleting, cut the line. Not all catches are worth the struggle. Consider where you are fishing and the repercussions of hooking a fish from that pond.
4. Reflect on the perpetual/unsolvable issues within you that, on an unconscious level, you are using to entice or lure your next big fish.

For the fish:

1. When you are hungry, bite with care. Remember, only 39% of bait doesn't have strings attached.
2. Remember, you hold the power to decide whether or not to get hooked. Your choice to bite is driven by your own “personal hooks,” so beware of becoming a perpetual victim or perpetual blamer.
3. If you've taken the bait and got hooked in the past, perhaps it's time to change your diet, i.e. reflect on those issues in your past that compel you to take the bait and get hooked.

Happy fishing and happy swimming!