

Advice from the Trenches: The Buck Stops Here



Dear C;

I am a graphic designer for a small agency. It is my job to handle the computer files and graphics on all of the jobs that come through. There are also several other professionals that need to be called in, such as printers and copy writers.

I have never screwed up a job with my own end of the work, but for some reason I am always blamed when a deadline is missed or there is a typo in the brochures after printing. Nearly all of the time, the delay was due to the printers being late or someone else missing the typo. I am not the printer and it isn't part of my job description to check the copy for mistakes (the client is supposed to do this since they know all the information), but who does everyone yell at? Moi.

The problem is, I feel guilty every time this happens, even though I know it's not my fault. And it doesn't matter what I say, it always plays out the same way — I get to be the whipping boy. How can I live with this crap?

Bill Me

Dear Bill,

My question to you would be: Why ARE you living with this crap?

A psychiatrist I once worked with often said, "Don't agree to things you don't agree with." It's obvious that you agreed to this arrangement at some point, and it was assumed that you would continue to do so. I'm guessing that any attempts on your part to address the issue or say NO were hesitant at best and that you probably gave up after a few half-hearted tries. People who feel guilty are not the best self-advocates. I don't mean to be harsh, but you have really done this to yourself.

And only you can undo it.

You seem to be have become a professional victim. The mistake you all make is to blame others for every injustice that is done. The problem there is that if someone else is to blame, they are in the

position of power. Only they have the ability to change the situation. How can you do anything? You're just an innocent bystander who has no control.

News flash: Until you accept responsibility for your own part in this, you can't change anything.

So stop feeling guilty, and stand up for yourself. I have had experience with co-workers who have tried the same trick on me. The Blame Game is an old one. It has definable rules. One of them is: "If you don't hold your hand out, they can't slap it." I've long since learned to keep my hands in my pockets. You should too. Don't accept the guilt when they come around to dish it out.

A word of warning: It would be nice if, when we decided to finally assert ourselves, everyone would go along and applaud our incentive. But here is what is probably going to happen: everyone else will stomp their feet and try to bully you back in your box. Be careful. Don't make the mistake of thinking self assertion means yelling louder or acting self-righteous. That just makes you look like a kid yelling, "Did not!" while the other guys yell, "Did too!" You could all go back and forth all day like idiots if that gets started. Here's what I suggest that you try instead: a preemptive strike. The best way to ward off your fellow players in the Blame Game is to document and list exactly who is expected to do what, and when. They have traffic managers in ad agencies for just this purpose. Make everyone aware of, and agree to, the schedule before you begin the project. Then when someone screws up and they try to blame you, just point to the list. There's not much they can say after that. It's tough to argue with your own agreement.