

6

It's Not My Fault The Problem of Denialism

Having geared himself up to tell Tom, his boss, that he had made a terrible mistake in firing the head of IT, Steve realized that he was wasting his time. There was no way his boss was going to accept that it was his own decision that had had such a costly and devastating effect on the organization. Its result was genuine chaos, a walkout of some of the most capable people in the department, and a temporary lockdown of the company's key operations. Yet Tom persisted in denying that he had made a mistake. Everybody knew there had been problems in the IT department but equally everybody knew that the head of IT wasn't the person responsible. The problem lay with one of the company's sub-contractors—a consulting firm that Tom had brought in. But Tom still refused to listen to what Steve had to say and despite the alarming aftermath insisted that he had made the right decision. The head of IT had never been up to the job and he should have fired him much earlier. According to him, Steve was exaggerating when he pointed out that the company had almost gone into the red. In fact, Steve should hold himself responsible for the mess as he'd introduced the head of IT in the first place.

For Steve, this latest debacle confirmed that there was a pattern to Tom's behavior. Far too often Tom had clearly made wrong decisions

and, when faced with the facts, denied all responsibility. Recently, the two men had had an intense discussion about environmental pollution. One of their plants was producing methane, ammonia, and other toxic substances that were harmful to health and affected air quality. Steve maintained that it was high time something was done about it but Tom would have none of it. He stuck to the position that there was no real scientific evidence for global warming. In the meantime, the company's poor record on environmental issues was widely discussed in the media, causing significant damage to its reputation.

Eventually, Tom's denialism was confronted at a specially convened board meeting. Ostensibly, the reason for the meeting was the IT fiasco, but the bad press the company was receiving as a serious polluter proved to be the tipping point. All board members unanimously resolved to pass a motion of no confidence, giving Tom no alternative but to resign. Afterwards, when asked to comment on what had happened, Tom accused a number of the board members of being part of a cabal that enjoyed character assassination. He had been treated completely unfairly; he was in the right.

We come across denialists everywhere, in all walks of life. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a denialist is "a person who refuses to admit the truth of a concept or proposition that is supported by the majority of scientific or historical evidence." This large group includes creationists (rejection of the theory of evolution); holocaust deniers (there was no policy of Jewish genocide and the extermination camps did not exist); CEOs of cigarette companies (there is no relationship between cigarette smoking and lung cancer); ex-South African President Thabo Mbeki's skepticism about HIV/AIDS treatment (anti-retroviral drugs don't work); the CEOs of many banks (we had no idea rogue trading was going on); the Roman Catholic Church (there have been no pedophiles among our priests); and deniers of climate change (it has nothing to do with human activity).

What compels denialists to stick to specific belief systems or ideas in spite of solid evidence to the contrary? What blinds them to reality? The answer is that they resort to a formidable, ingrained defense mechanism.

Defense mechanisms are complex cognitive/emotive processes that protect our psychological equilibrium from anxiety or conflict and are

triggered by upsetting situations. Denial is one of the most common and automatic human defense mechanisms. Short periods of denial can be helpful, in that they give us the mental space to unconsciously process distressing information. But in the long run, denialism becomes hard work and it takes a lot of mental gymnastics to maintain it. This explains not only why people refuse to change their minds when presented with hard evidence that proves them wrong, but also why they do everything in their power to prove themselves right, even to the point of absurdity.

We usually see denialism (of an addiction, mental health issues, relationship problems, etc.) at an individual level but denialism also takes place in a wider societal context. A major cause of denialism on a larger scale is our tendency to subscribe to alternative narratives—ideologies, politics, religious dogma—rather than to what is true. Another cause is the unwillingness to acknowledge shameful events or trauma in a community's history. Examples include the Turkish government's denials of the Armenian genocide under the Ottoman Empire, the Japanese government's disclaimers about the existence of "comfort women" (sex slaves) in World War II, the US government's continued refusal to introduce gun control, and the denial of race issues in a number of societies.

In Tom's case, we could hypothesize that he was trying to protect himself by refusing to accept the truth about what was happening in the company, even after he was fired. He continued to deny his responsibility for the IT disaster, remained an apologist for climate change denial, and blamed the problems in the company on other people and forces beyond his control. His response to his firing revealed two other salient characteristics of denialism: suspicion of others and belief in conspiracies.

How can we deal with denialism when its roots run so deep in the human psyche? How do we identify it? How do we manage and reason with denialists?

At a societal level, magical thinking is hard to change. Sometimes only a serious crisis will shake denialists out of their illusions. The current confrontation over climate change is a case in point. Tackling denialism at an individual level may be simpler and require a less dramatic process than global warming.

The first step is to recognize when this defense mechanism is at work. One clear warning sign is recurring negative experiences, for example, a series of harmful relationships, the side effects of addictive behavior, etc. However, getting denialists to acknowledge these signs may be difficult, as they touch on their sense of identity. Denialism is an adaptive and creative strategy designed to help people maintain their sanity and keep their sense of self and worldview intact. Therefore, when we try to change these cognitive frameworks, we can expect a strong emotional backlash, especially if people do not like the reality we are presenting.

Confronting denialists head on with “facts” may only strengthen their defenses. Instead, we need to roll with the punches. To have a real impact, we may have to engage in a considerable amount of psychological judo. The use of mild, open-ended questions, or nudging reminders about certain facts may set a rethinking process into motion and stimulate a willingness to face unpleasant realities. However, only denialists can take themselves off the path of denial, and this will only happen if they make a deliberate choice of reality.

The best thing to do is to prevent denialism occurring in the first place. It’s a good idea to surround ourselves with people who have a different outlook from our own and who will challenge our opinions and assumptions. We should take care not to associate only with like-minded people. We all need a devil’s advocate from time to time. It remains debatable, however, whether someone like Tom will ever accept the challenge presented by alternative points of view.

Questions

- Are you quick to believe in conspiracy theories that are intended to suppress the truth?
- Do you often see yourself as the underdog fighting “corrupt” elites that promote sinister agendas?
- Do people accuse you of cherry-picking, using selective information to prove a point? Do they suggest you prefer make-believe to hard facts?

- Are you tempted to put up smokescreens when faced with inconvenient truths?
- In discussions with people who disagree with you, are you prepared to reconsider the sources of information you have been using?
- Are you prepared to reflect on the emotional reasons why you hang on to a particular point of view and to look at the underlying reasons for your strong opinions?