
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak

Barking up the wrong tree

The logo for BBC Learning English, featuring the letters 'BBC' in a white box above the words 'LEARNING ENGLISH' in white capital letters, all on a teal background.

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Feifei

Hello and welcome to The English We Speak. I'm Feifei...

Rob

And I'm Rob. Hello. Errr, Feifei, you're looking a bit angry.

Feifei

Me, angry! I am angry.

Rob

Oh no, what's the problem?

Feifei

I think you know Rob. Somebody told the boss that I spilt coffee over his computer yesterday – and now he's angry with me.

Rob

Oh no. What kind of mean and horrible person would try and get you into trouble?

Feifei

You and the boss were the only people left in the office last night. Hmmm?

Rob

Whoa – hold on Feifei. If you are implying it was me who told the boss, then you are barking up the wrong tree.

Feifei

Please don't make me any angrier by saying that I am like a dog!

Rob

No, no Feifei. Just calm down. I should be angry because you are making the wrong assumption about who told the boss, OK? That's what I mean by barking up the wrong tree – you want to blame someone but you got the wrong person. I didn't even know you had done it.

Feifei

OK, I'm sorry. So the phrase 'barking up the wrong tree' means making the wrong assumption when trying to achieve something. Shall we hear some examples while I make you a coffee to say sorry...?

Examples

If you think I have enough spare cash to pay for your holiday, then you're barking up the wrong tree.

You're barking up the wrong tree if you think I was the one who said you were leaving. It wasn't me!

You're barking up the wrong tree if you think I'm going to lend you my car. I've seen how you drive!

Feifei

You're listening to The English We Speak. We're talking about the phrase 'barking up the wrong tree'. It means to make a wrong assumption about someone or something.

Rob

The phrase can also mean doing something in a way that will not work – you're basically wasting your time. Like a detective trying to solve a crime by obviously arresting the wrong man – he's barking up the wrong tree.

Feifei

Ok Rob understood – and here's your coffee to say sorry for barking up the wrong tree.

Rob

Thanks – make sure you don't spill it this time. The boss would be really angry!
(ANGRY DOG GROWL!) ...what did I say?

Feifei

If I find out you did tell the boss, I'll make sure to bark up the right tree, OK?

Rob

Oh Feifei, I hope your bark is worse than your bite. Bye.

Feifei

Bye