

Accept Responsibility

By

Michael J. Farlow, Ph.D.

"The price of greatness is responsibility." — Winston Churchill

"Rank does not confer privilege or give power. It imposes responsibility." – Peter Drucker

A leader accepts responsibility for achieving the vision and for the welfare and progress of the team. When detractors assail the team, the leader steps forward and accepts the criticism or remonstrance. The leader attributes success to the team or individuals responsible.

Leadership compels people to accept responsibility for their actions, especially their failures.

Leaders attribute success to their teams and overall failure to themselves. Leaders become responsible for their teams in terms of both performance and wellbeing. This is not completely open-ended; of course, there are limits. For example, when you have done all you can and left no stone unturned to help a team member, and that person fails to perform or grow in the job, your responsibility ends.

I suspect that to many, this is a radical concept. Many people expend great energy fabricating situations in which they cannot be held accountable, such as convening consensus meetings where only the amorphous “they” are responsible. Since they don’t want to be responsible for themselves, they certainly cannot fathom being responsible for others. Usually, this detached interest is expressed in such excuses as, “I treat each person as an adult.” This suggests that adults always make the right decisions, know what they are doing, and are responsible. They do not and are not.

The research and development (R&D) environment is a good crucible for testing responsibility. I started my professional engineering career in a very high-technology R&D company developing, testing, and applying low observable (stealth) technology, i.e., making things invisible. Virtually every project we took on had no current solution. In the cases in which I was a leader or program manager, I accepted the risks and made commitments because I felt the great people I worked with were capable and shared my determination to be successful. I also knew I would regularly stand before the program review board and be accountable for cost, schedule, and performance. Things could go wrong and did. But I trusted in my own and my team's ability and determination to find a way to resolve those issues. I was seldom disappointed.

What if the company's leadership isn't enlightened, or your failure was really a BIG one, and you get fired? "They can shoot you but they can't eat you," some western hero said. In other words, there are limits to the pain you might suffer if the worst-case scenario happens. From my own perspective, I look at any setback as a lesson. The inconvenience it causes me is the price of learning. I say to myself you are now much smarter than you were before and more likely to succeed at the next task. Start again. If you keep before you the fear of failure or of losing your job, it will be hard for you to step up and accept responsibility, to commit, and to act with determination. Think of this: Early in his career in GE, Jack Welch was working in a chemistry lab at a GE factory. One thing or another went wrong, and he wound up blowing the roof off the building. He still became CEO of GE.

Perhaps you are thinking, okay, I can accept responsibility for myself, but what about all those other people who are involved with success or failure—the members of my team? If they don't

act responsibly, am I still accountable? Yes. A leader's responsibility extends to insuring accountability within the team. Ideally, good teams are well trained and developed to be accountable; the leader teaches that. Just as you accept overall responsibility for the whole task, you must ensure that each team member is accountable for his or her portion of the task.

There is an old saying: "You cannot delegate responsibility, only authority." What that means is that as a leader you are the responsible party. You cannot in good conscience pass that responsibility off to a team member. The only thing you can pass along your support and backing (authority) for the team member to get the job done.

Example

Bob worked for a company he really liked. He worked hard and trusted and respected his division leader Margo. Margo was an insightful leader and spent a great deal of time training and developing her team. She let each of her direct reports use their heads when solving problems and getting their work done. She had rules and boundaries, of course, but she expected her well-trained team to act responsibly just as she did.

One day, Bob realized he had made a major error in estimating the cost of a project he was managing. He tried making adjustments to the project, using the management reserve he had maintained, but regardless of what he did, the company would still not meet the expected profit margin he had promised. At that point, he informed Margo of the error, how it had happened, and what he had done to minimize the impact. Margo in turn asked a number of questions in order to gain a fuller insight into the issue. She told Bob he had done the right things to try to

solve the problem and in bringing it to her attention in a timely fashion. Then, she asked Bob what he had learned from the event and how he might prevent a similar problem in the future. Bob listed the things he had learned and several ideas about how to avoid going down this path again. Margo appreciated Bob's thought process and gave him a couple of additional ideas for how to make things work more efficiently and cost effectively.

Following her session with Bob, Margo went to the executive vice president, Martin, for whom she worked, and told him she had made an error in calculating the profit margin on the project. She explained what had been done or would be done to address the problem. Martin was not happy. He ranted and fumed for a while and then, facing the facts and realizing he could not fault the steps Margo had taken or proposed, he settled down and looked at the overall picture of his group. As it turned out, several projects were either ahead of schedule or under cost, and Margo's shortfall would not affect the overall profit goals of the company.

As Margo had done with Bob, Martin asked Margo what she had learned and what she would do differently going forward. Fortunately, Margo was prepared and gave him quick and reasonable responses. Martin said he would mention the project issue to the CEO but would stress that this would not impact the overall goals of the company and that steps had been taken to minimize a similar issue in the future. He thanked Margo for being forthright and implementing corrective solutions to a problem, rather than just dumping it in his lap.

Suggestions

1. Accept that, as a leader, you are responsible for making decisions and for their outcomes.
2. Do not attempt to delegate responsibility or pass it along. As a leader, you retain responsibility while delegating authority only.

3. Have a realistic picture of what responsibilities are indeed within your capabilities. At the same time, be willing to reasonably stretch your abilities.
4. Helping others is also your responsibility.
5. Take more responsibility than you do credit.
6. View responsibility as something to be sought, not a burden.
7. Focus on solutions as opposed to problems.
8. Learn from mistakes and move on.
9. Never seek to place blame.

Dr. Farlow is a partner and coach at Wolf Leadership Development, LLC. He works with executives and pre-executives who desire to increase performance and take their leadership skills to the next level. His specialty is improving performance at work by improving relationship behaviors required of successful leaders. He can be contacted at mfarlow@wolfleadership.com.

