The Responsibility Virus
How Control Freaks, Shrinking Violets — and the Rest of Us — Can Harness the Power of True Partnership
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Published by Basic Books, 2002
ISBN 0465044107

Introduction
Take-charge leadership is the stuff of Hollywood and history books, deeply ingrained in our consciousness. In times of crisis, what often surfaces is our reverence for the “man on horseback” who will grip the reins tightly and make us feel safe. And yet, in most cases, such heroic leadership not only fails to inspire and engage but produces passivity and alienation instead.

Responsibility and Passivity
People have a natural tendency toward all-or-nothing thinking when it comes to leadership and responsibility, and our responses are dynamic and infectious. It’s a cycle — the leader reacts to the first sign of hesitation or passivity from others by trying to fill what he sees as a void. That causes the passive party to see himself as further marginalized, which prompts a further retreat, until he has abdicated all responsibility.

These would-be heroic leaders get plenty of assistance in creating failure from well-intentioned subordinates, who believe that when the chips are down leaders should be given latitude to jump into the fray and take total control.

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volved. This leadership model undermines collaboration, generates mistrust and misunderstanding, and eventually causes the choice-making skills of both leaders and followers to decline.

**Spreading Like a Virus**
The dynamic of heroic leadership, unilaterally imposed, can infect any relationship — in life as well as work — and can spread through an organization like a virus.

The Responsibility Virus is as pervasive, and as ancient, as the common cold. The philosopher Hegel described the tendency to flip from dominance to subservience — what he called “the master-slave dialect” — as one of the driving forces of human history.

It appears in contexts both trivial and tragic. You can see it on a basketball court when a gifted player is too dominant and eventually his teammates become disengaged. In its most insidious manifestations, the Responsibility Virus has played a role in many business scandals and political atrocities. Whenever parties within any organizational structure claim victim status, saying they were “duped” or “were just following orders,” there has been an outbreak of the Virus.

**The Governing Values**
The Responsibility Virus always begins with fear. We all know what anxiety can do when it takes hold. Worry too much about spilling a cup of hot coffee and your hand will start to shake, causing you to spill the cup. Fear of failure, similarly, can produce the failure we fear.

Chris Argyris, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, has delineated what he calls the governing values behind most human interactions:

- To win and not lose in any human interaction.
- To always maintain control of the situation at hand.
- To avoid embarrassment of any kind.
- To stay rational throughout.

Over time, we become very skilled at designing all our interactions with others in order to avoid violating those governing values. Together, the four governing values combine to amplify the fear of failure.

When we’re operating from the governing values, failure looms so large as a threat that we try to avoid it at almost any cost. When we can’t avoid it, we try to cover up or deny it.

**Fight or Flight**
Confronted by failure itself or the fearful anticipation of failure, we rush to one of two options: fight, in which we seize total responsibility for the situation, or flight, in which we assume almost no responsibility for it.

When you resort to the fight response you seek to win in the face of failure or fear of failure by stretching your level of responsibility, often significantly above your capabilities. This ensures that you’ll be in control of your own destiny and, ideally, able to work your way out of the fear-inducing challenges.

Your desire to maintain control can cause you to assume full responsibility for the situation, to pre-empt anyone else from seizing control. To avoid embarrassment, you might assume responsibility without discussion with others. Discussion might also become emotional, making it difficult for you to stay rational.

Under the tyranny of the governing values, therefore, collaboration is dangerous — something to be avoided. If you work with someone else, that other individual might screw up, which would make you part of a losing effort. In a partnership, you’re no longer in control.

When you choose the flight response, you withdraw from a responsible stance in order to set the bar low enough to ensure victory. You aspire to manage in a sufficiently narrowly defined task to stay in control. You avoid any situation that would reveal, to your embarrassment, that you’re not up to the task at hand. And you avoid any embarrassing discussions, which might lead you to become emotional. Instead, you appear to stay rational, even though your constellation of reactions is anything but.

Whether fight or flight is chosen, real collaboration never enters the picture. Individuals motivated by their governing values and the overriding fear of failure work largely alone on tasks that, by their very nature, demand the marshalling of many diverse talents and perspectives.

**The Choice Restructuring Tool**
One way of confronting the Responsibility Virus is the Choice Restructuring Tool, which can be used by teams that are failing to reach consensus or attaining a bad or false consensus because of an inability to collaborate effectively. It has seven steps:

- **Frame Choice.** The group must look beyond the problem or issue at hand to discern the type of trade-
off the problem embodies and the type of choice required. Until at least two mutually exclusive options are identified that would neutralize the issue or problem at hand, the choice is not framed. To ensure openness, if any member of the group thinks a given option is important, it should be included in the choice set.

- **Brainstorm Possible Options.** Now broaden the options by seeking even more, trying to view each possibility as a narrative or scenario that describes a positive outcome. In this step, it’s critical to create a climate that discourages passive, under-responsible behavior by welcoming options enthusiastically. It’s also important to discourage over-responsible behavior.

- **Specify Conditions.** Specify the conditions that would need to be substantiated in order to believe that each option/story is sound. This encourages everyone with reservations to speak out.

- **Identify Barriers to Choice.** Now flip around and identify the conditions that each member of the group feels are least likely to hold true. Skeptical members must be encouraged to raise, not suppress, their concerns.

- **Design Valid Tests.** Develop tests that the group agrees are a valid way to check each option. The most skeptical member of the group will have the highest standard of proof for the test and must therefore be allowed to take the leading role in designing the test.

- **Conduct Analysis.** Start the analysis to check the options, beginning in each case with the condition the group feels is least likely to hold up. And have the member of the group who is most skeptical of an option oversee the analysis.

- **Make Choice.** This should be easier than normal because the group has a shared understanding of the logic structure underpinning each option and the Responsibility Virus has been avoided through collaboration.

**Conclusion**

To overcome the Responsibility Virus we need a new set of governing values, as exemplified in the Choice Restructuring Tool. Rather than seeing winning as the highest value, we must replace it with the value of making an informed choice, based on dialogue. Instead of control, we must value generating internal commitment. Open testing can help us avoid embarrassment. And by allowing ourselves to be authentic — integrating our emotions with our logic — we can stay rational.

By living these values, we not only help ourselves but we actually protect others from the Responsibility Virus. We reduce their inclination toward extremes of responsibility and bind them closer to the middle ground of responsibility.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Roger Martin is dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.

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