



LEADERSHIP COURAGE

CHAPTER ONE

The Courage to

ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

*One's philosophy is not best expressed in
words; it's expressed in the choices one makes.*

*In the long run, we shape our lives
and we shape ourselves.*

The process never ends until we die.

*And the choices we make
are ultimately our responsibility.*

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

Assuming responsibility can be a scary thing to do. It means we are accountable to some type of authority. We have to answer for our actions and often the actions of others. And if that which we're responsible for develops problems or fails to meet the expectations of those with authority over us, there can be negative consequences. That's why it's so tempting to avoid and shirk responsibility ... that's why it takes courage to accept it.

When things go wrong, *courageous* leaders accept responsibility for their actions and the actions of their teams. *Conforming* leaders, on the other hand, typically seek and blame the person or department that created the unacceptable result. Look hard enough, and one can usually find others to blame for any situation. It takes courage to look *inside* and discover the truth that contributed to the situation.

Assembly Required

Three dreaded words that often send chills up people's spines are "some assembly required." What those words really mean is: some parts may be left over; frustration ahead; there's a chance you'll never get it put together correctly.

When you have to assemble something like a bicycle, the typical scene goes like this: You open the box and place parts all over the garage floor. You glance at the instruction book and then lay it down because "I can figure this out." Several hours later, your task is completed. The bike is together, it rolls, it looks great, and you're truly proud of your accomplishment.

Then, you look down on the floor and discover that there are a few nuts and bolts remaining. No big deal. Either someone made a mistake when packing the fasteners, or they intentionally gave you extras – in case you lose some. Nevertheless, you know you’ve completed the task well because your child is now happily riding down the street.

Several weeks later, the bike begins to wobble. You try to fix it, but the wheels just won’t spin right – and your once happy child will not ride it anymore. That new (and rather expensive) bike becomes just another unused item taking up space in your already cramped garage. Every time you have to move that bike to get into your car, you blame the manufacturer for the problem ... you’re sure there must have been a lapse in quality control on the day your bicycle was produced. And you hunt through your drawers in search of the purchase receipt so you can take the obviously “defective” product back to the store.

It never crosses your mind that that *you* may be responsible for the bike not working properly. But come to find out, the “extra” nuts and bolts you had left were not extras. They were needed ... they would have made a difference. The person packing the parts did the job correctly and is probably a good worker. The manufacturer made a good product and had proper quality controls in all areas – except in making sure that you followed the instructions they had so painstakingly developed. Certainly, it was convenient and somewhat ego-soothing to blame others. But the real reason the bike didn’t work was that YOU did not assemble it correctly – a fact that you eventually (and begrudgingly) realized. Once you accepted that fact, quit blaming others, and stopped

making excuses, you were able to take the situation as it was and do something to correct it. So you called your neighbor, “Mr. Fix-it.” He took the “extra” nuts and bolts and found a place on the bike for them. Amazingly, your child now has the smoothest ride in town.

Two Envelopes

Accepting responsibility is not always easy. Even though few people enjoy listening to them, the human supply of excuses is seemingly endless.

We are reminded of a story about a retiring CEO and founder who was in the process of turning over his company to his successor. After the normal speeches and kind words, the exiting executive handed two envelopes to his replacement. One was marked “Envelope 1” – the other, “Envelope 2.”

The replacement asked, “What are these for?”

The founder replied, “When a leadership crisis arises and you want to know what to do, open envelope number one. If another crisis comes after that, open the second envelope.”

A few years later, a crisis faced the new CEO and he went to find the envelopes he had safely tucked away. As instructed, he opened the first one. It read, “Blame your predecessor!”

“That should work,” thought the executive. “And it certainly should reduce the heat on me.” So he followed the advice to the letter. He blamed the retired founder for the problems and voilà – the heat was off.

Many months after that, another crisis developed. Looking for a solution that worked as well as the advice from the first envelope, he opened “Envelope 2.” The contents said, “Prepare two envelopes!”

Blaming other people or things is never a good long-term solution. When was the last time you enjoyed hearing any of these statements: “It’s not my fault” ... “If they had done what they were supposed to do, I would have done what I was supposed to do” ... “I was too early” ... “I was too late” ... “I was too busy”? You get the point.

Rights and Responsibilities

When you chose to become a leader, you entered a great profession. However, making that choice meant giving up several of the “rights” you may have enjoyed as a follower. You no longer have the right to blame others for mistakes – *you* are responsible. You no longer have the right to avoid issues – *you* are responsible. You no longer have the right to avoid decisions – **YOU** are responsible.

It’s not unusual to hear of leaders losing their jobs because they refused to accept the responsibilities that came with the position and title. Recently, a college football coach was fired before ever coaching a game at his new school. It wasn’t because of losing – no score had been posted. He was let go because he refused to accept that his coaching job

came with responsibilities *outside* the yard lines. In another case, a successful basketball coach failed to recognize the responsibilities of his position and was fired – even though he won more games than anyone else in the history of the university.

A leader's responsibility cannot be avoided!

Making excuses and blaming external factors, rather than accepting responsibility, is fatal to success. There will always be excuses and others to blame for failures. But much of the time, problems come from within – from good and well-intentioned people who make honest mistakes. Therefore, you must look *inward* to understand those problems and find solutions to them.

Responsibility provides the drive to get things done. It's necessary for security and happiness. So, what are you responsible for at work? Is it the actions of your subordinates? Your boss? Your peers? The answer is that you are responsible for the success or failure of *all activities* you are associated with ... for *everything* you can either control or influence. You control setting the standards for team performance, providing feedback, solving problems, recognizing employee contributions, and a lot more.

A former president of Hyatt Hotels stated, "If there is anything I have learned in my twenty-seven years in the service industry, it's that ninety-nine percent of all employees want to do a good job. How they perform is simply a reflection of the one for whom they work." In other words, if you want to lead responsible employees, you must be a responsible leader.

In Summary

Courageous leaders avoid the temptations to fix blame and focus on the past. They opt, instead, to focus their attention on the future ... on ways to solve situations as they are. If you have the courage to take blame words out of your vocabulary and accept responsibility to move forward, there's a good chance that your team will follow your lead. When that happens, everyone wins.

To become a courageous leader, you must realize that accepting responsibility is not optional – it is mandatory. Accepting responsibility leads to confidence, self-control, and trust. And those are all qualities of effective leadership.

*Success on any major scale requires you to accept
responsibility ... In the final analysis,
the one quality that all successful people have ...
is the ability to take on responsibility.*

~ Michael Korda