Responsibility Virus

The Responsibility Virus: How Control Freaks, Shrinking Violets, and the Rest of Us, Can Harness the Power of True Partnership by Roger Martin
“I did everything I could, worked myself to the bone, and had to struggle alone surrounded by ingrates. I've had enough. Somebody else had better step up to the plate. And for a change, I am going to sit back and watch.”
Responsibility Virus

“I put myself in the hands of the leader who brushed me and my efforts aside. I put my faith in the leader and only suffered due to his/her ineptitude Never again! I'm going to control my own destiny.”
Responsibility Virus

The Cycle of Over- / Under-Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over-Responsibility</th>
<th>Under-Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assume singular responsibility for success</td>
<td>Assume minimal responsibility for success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle hard despite odds, fill the voids but ignore warnings</td>
<td>Focus on others' responsibility, not one's own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collapse under the burden of taking it all on one's self.</td>
<td>Feel dis-empowered, marginalized, vulnerable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemptuous and angry.</td>
<td>Distant, cynical, lethargic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Abdicate power next time.</em></td>
<td><em>Usurp power next time.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responsibility Virus

- Premise: people **dread** doing the wrong thing
- Avoid making choices (which could be wrong)
- Many choices *are* difficult, there is no *right* one
  - Always pros/cons, uncertainty, insufficient info
  - Worries about regret and failure
- Have colleagues to share the burden of choice
- But Fear of Failure results in Over/Under Resp.
- “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.”
Responsibility Virus

● Employee “Empowerment” not the answer.
● Giving responsibility by policy rather than individual capabilities more likely to produce: Dis-empowerment, confusion, and low morale.
● The other two legs of the stool, authority and resource, are rarely given freely.
Responsibility Virus

• Employee “Empowerment” not the answer.
• Occupational stress:
  ➢ a great deal is expected of you (lots of arbitrarily assigned responsibility and accountability)
  ➢ you have no control over whether you will perform well (limited resources and authority)
• Control is critical to avoiding stress.
Responsibility Virus

- Employee “Empowerment” not the answer.
Responsibility Virus

- Human nature claims credit when things go well and avoids blame when things go south.
  - GDP up: “our government has grown this country”
  - GDP down: “international economic conditions/the previous gov't/phase of moon have prevented…”
  - Gamblers guess right when they win, blame bad luck when they do not.
- “I Didn't Do It, Nobody Saw Me Do It, There's No Way You Can Prove Anything!” – Bart Simpson
Responsibility Virus

• More positively:
• heroic leaders and passive followers are pursuing what they feel to be the optimal course of action to avoid failure.
Responsibility Virus

- Fear of failure engages fight-or-flight
  - It's autonomic. Each one of us is stuck with it.
  - Response must be *fast* to avoid danger.
  - We are social animals and respond to it in others.
- Fight: seizing high level of responsibility sends message to flee to lower level of responsibility.
- Flight: abdication of responsibility sends message for someone else to take over.
Responsibility Virus

- It is the *shared* aspect of the failure that creates the virus—and the cooperative dance—of over/under responsibility.
- Leader sees follower as irresponsible, lazy and uncommitted.
- Follower sees leader as imperialistic, disrespectful, and belligerent.
- *Yet both are trying to achieve the same goal. Both have this reaction because they care.*
- Good & bad reasons for caring for but they care.
Responsibility Virus

- *Governing values* behind most *threatening* human interactions
  - Chris Argyris, Harvard Business School
  - Apply across age, culture, gender, status, education
- When a threat is perceived:
  - Reasoning parts of brain mostly shut down
  - Reasoning process is too slow to *respond to immediate danger*
- *Reptilian brain* response
Responsibility Virus

Governing values

- *Win, don't lose* in any interaction
- *Always maintain control* of situation
- *Avoid embarrassment* of any kind
- *Stay rational* throughout
Responsibility Virus

I'm right, you're wrong; my task is to get you to see the light.

- Mine is a better course of action – win
- Stick to my agenda, “stay on message”, avoid tangents and argument – maintain control
- Ignore your plan, my point of view prevails – avoids embarrassment for you (when I override your plan) and me (if your plan is better)
- I focus on logic, not emotion – stay rational (to appear credible)
Responsibility Virus

- Governing values amplify fear of failure and make collaboration dangerous.
- *Win, don't lose*: losing is failure.
  - Responsibility may be shifted away from us to avoid a repeated failure.
- *Maintain control*: but you've lost responsibility
- *Avoid embarrassment*: failure is humiliating
- *Stay rational*: not after all the above!
Responsibility Virus

**Fight** response to fear:

- *Win, don't lose* – avoid failure
- *Maintain control* – assume full responsibility
- *Avoid embarrassment* – avoid discussion of taking over because others are incompetent
- *Stay rational* – avoid discussion: it will likely become emotional. “**Man up!**”
Responsibility Virus

Flight response to fear:

• **Win, don't lose** – set the bar low enough to ensure victory of a lesser task
• **Maintain control** – of a narrowly defined, doable task
• **Avoid embarrassment** – withdrawal avoids that one is not up to the larger task and avoids discussion of the withdrawal itself
• **Stay rational** – withdrawal avoids triggering emotional response to larger task
Responsibility Virus

- “Responsibility virus causes people to avoid collaborating on difficult tasks in which a significant possibility of failure exists.”

Narrow perfectionism strategy:
- Acknowledge aggressive goal but avoid or delegate the tough stuff to insulate from failure
- Avoid acknowledging aggressive goal, redefine success with lesser, more doable goal.
Responsibility Virus

- Break into groups...
- Discuss then present your Responsibility virus stories.