

# Take Responsibility Before It Takes You

by Stever Robbins

**W**E ALL LOVE TO TAKE CREDIT when things go right, and shift the blame when things go wrong. It's especially tempting as a leader. The leader is perfectly positioned to blame just about anyone and anything when things go wrong. "The market is down." "That clerk in accounting is incompetent." "We didn't count on competition." "Regulation is unfair." "The legal department reviewed it before I said it." Such quotes avoid responsibility, and whether from fear or insecurity, they herald the beginning of the fall from leader to pretender.

Recently, a senior manager at a multibillion-dollar firm announced to his general managers that a major initiative had been a mistake. He thanked everyone for their hard work, and then laid it on the line. He said, "This decision was mine." He outlined the thinking that led to the decision. He highlighted assumptions he had made and bets he had taken. "I was simply wrong. You have done an excellent job supporting this decision, and nothing you could have done would have helped. My job is to give you quality process and make the right decision. In this case, the decision was wrong. We're canceling the initiative and starting over." He received a standing ovation. Even multi-decade veterans of the company had never before heard a senior manager openly take responsibility for failure.

## Responsibility is an action verb

As a leader, you must take responsibility. "Take" is the operative word; embrace responsibility. When things go wrong, if your first instinct is to look for someone to blame, stop. Ask instead, "what can I do to help fix this?" Then do it. That's taking responsibility. Only when you've gotten things back on the right track should you consider blame.

But blame's a funny thing. Who is to blame for layoffs? "The competitive situation?" I think not. The largest line item in most income statements is salary. It's the job of senior manage-

ment to manage account. The unwritten contract when hiring someone to work on an initiative is that the company will preserve any jobs created, unless the it's explicitly agreed otherwise. Poor account planning could be blamed on external forces, sure. But you know what? It could also be blamed on bad long-term planning. Placing blame externally doesn't help the organization get better.

## Do what's under your control

You can only get better at what's under your control. One great thing about leadership in our economy is that we get bonuses, salary, and tons of money when things go right, even if they are outside our control. A CEO friend of mine worth \$60 million confided that she has absolutely no idea what she's doing. She thinks she was simply in the right place at the right time. Lucky for her! But with riches-for-results comes the flip side: when things go wrong--for whatever reason--taking responsibility is just as important.

Responsibility means, literally, "the ability to respond." If you're a leader in your organization, you have the ability to respond before, during, and after a crisis. So start by placing the blame on yourself. Spend five minutes feeling awful. Pull your hair out. Feel like a failure. Seriously contemplate suicide. Fantasize that your spouse will divorce you and you'll die in a gutter befriended only by rats (it could happen). Then get over yourself and ask questions that will lead you to become better and better at what you do:

### What could you have done that you didn't do?

Think about the crisis. What could you have done beforehand to avert it? What event would have tipped you off that you needed to take that action? Can you apply that lesson in the future? You may find that spending more time doing quality assurance on your product was called for. Or perhaps you should have spent more time building that critical customer relationship.



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**What could you not have done that you did**

**do?** Review your actions before and during the crisis. Which of your actions reinforced the crisis, prevented it from being averted, or directly caused it? Perhaps it wasn't the wisest course of action to announce to your shareholders at your annual meeting, "We don't believe a company should be managed for the shareholders." (true story... I was there). Or maybe you should have taken your right-hand-person's advice when they suggested changing course.

**What interpretations did you make that you could have made differently?**

It isn't just action that gets in the way. Your interpretation of events, of people's communication, of market forces, or of competitive moves may have led to the problem. Review your interpretations and decide whether you need to do some updating. That dip in sales may have been because people really don't want to buy your new chocolate covered machine parts. It may have nothing to do with the decision to use milk chocolate instead of dark.

These questions make great debriefing questions for you. And they also make great debrief-

ing questions for your teams. Using this framework to begin a crisis post-Morton will help build an organization that learns, rather than blames. It may not be as comfy as denial, but it's better for survival.

This is hard stuff, but people's lives depend on your decisions. That's serious! So when things go wrong, own them. Learn from them. Step up and respond as best you're able. Sometimes you'll fall short, or won't know what to do. Welcome to the human race. It's not about being perfect, it's about being responsible when you aren't perfect. Set a standard of responsibility for everyone around you, and at the end of the day, you'll not only have built a business, you'll have built a rewarding life. It's your choice, and your responsibility.

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