SIGMA
Leadership Series

Great Leaders Assume Responsibility

SIGMA
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GREAT LEADERS ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY

> " There are two primary choices in life: to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them.
>
> — Denis Waitley

Assuming responsibility is a critical component of effective leadership.[1] Those who assume responsibility take initiative to reduce the impact that everyday issues have on the organization. This can be a great benefit to teams. In particular, studies show that teams containing responsible individuals have collaborative environments that foster proactivity, morale, and productivity during challenging times.[2]

At its core, assuming responsibility is the willingness to step forward and take charge of a difficult situation without being asked to do so. Situations may include taking ownership of new tasks, which frees capacity for others, or identifying problems and working towards a solution. As a leader, assuming responsibility allows the remainder of the team to continue operating effectively. Responsible individuals do not put blame on others or wait for things to change. Rather, they willingly take on additional roles to ensure that problems are solved and goals are being met. Responsible leaders show initiative in their own work, but they also feel accountable for their team. As such, leaders who assume responsibility do more than accomplish their own work, they strengthen the performance of individual employees and their team.

In assessing your ability to assume responsibility, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I proactive or reactive towards challenges?
- Do I take accountability for the goals of my team and its individual members?
- Do I tend to blame others for work-related problems?
- Am I willing to step up during times of hardship?
- When I see a problem, do I take it upon myself to find a solution?

Improve Your Ability to Assume Responsibility

Recognize those who step up: One of the best ways to motivate others – and yourself – is to offer recognition and rewards. Create a culture that commends others for stepping up and rewards them for taking ownership of new tasks or providing solutions to new problems. As a leader, you have a unique opportunity to build this culture and set an example. Not only that, as you recognize and reward the initiative of others, you will likely become more motivated to assume responsibility yourself.

Reframe your responsibilities: Another way you can improve your ability to assume responsibility is to reframe what you are responsible for. One of the first transitions a leader makes is from managing themselves to managing others. This transition can be difficult, because it requires a shift in focus from managing your own productivity to helping others be productive. To ease this shift, it can be helpful to reframe your responsibilities to include supporting others. This will give you both license and motivation to take on responsibilities in a way that shelters your team and protects their ability to work well.

Establish role clarity: One of the major roadblocks to assuming responsibility is a lack of role clarity. People are more likely to step up if they have a clear understanding of their position and are able to recognize when a new task falls within their domain. Make sure you have clearly established what your team's goals are and ensure that everyone is on the same page about who is responsible for what.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Assume More Responsibility

The following steps can help you become better at assuming responsibility:

1. **Worry less about who is at fault and who gets the credit.** A primary reason for assuming responsibility is the need to fix errors and solve problems. When these occur, it is important to frame the situation positively and take a collective approach. Instead of assigning blame for failure and taking credit for success, emphasize collaboration toward a common goal. Research shows that adopting this open, problem-solving approach can help facilitate learning, strengthen relationships and lead to more integrative solutions.[3] In the words of President Truman, "It's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit."

2. **Create a system of accountability.** One of the primary reasons why people fail to keep their responsibilities is that they lack accountability. When assuming responsibility, it is important that ownership is formally assigned and accepted, and that there is follow-up on the execution process. The next time you assume or assign responsibility, keep track of who owns which task and what the expectations are, such as deliverables or deadlines. Ensure that there is a system of accountability to check-up on people, hold them accountable to implementation, and follow-up on their progress.

3. **Act with intention.** Although assuming responsibility benefits the organization, it is simply not possible for leaders to take ownership of every challenge faced by their employees. Consequently, leaders must thoughtfully seek out the most efficient way to add value to their team. Assuming responsibility means following through on your commitments, which means you should only take responsibility for tasks you will be able to keep. As a result, leaders can and should turn down opportunities that are outside of their scope or capacity. Accepting full responsibility may be heralded as a trait of exceptional managers,[4] however, it is important to do this intentionally in order to prevent spreading yourself too thin.

Resources

watch　[Responsible Leaders Serve Others](#)

read　[Taking Responsibility: The Highest Mark of a Great Leader](#)

develop　**Develop** your ability to assume responsibility by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.
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References

[1] Waldman, D. A., & Galvin, B. M. (2008). Alternative perspectives of responsible leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 37(4), 327-341.

[2] Pirola-Merlo, A., Härtel, C., Mann, L., & Hirst, G. (2002). How leaders influence the impact of affective events on team climate and performance in R&D teams. *The leadership quarterly*, 13(5), 561-581.

[3] Tjosvold, D., Sun, H. F., & Wan, P. (2005). Effects of openness, problem solving, and blaming on learning: An experiment in China. *The Journal of social psychology*, 145(6), 629-644.

[4] "Responsible Behavior: Stamp of the effective manager," John Zenger, *Supervisory Management*, July 1976, pgs. 18-24