

# Taking Responsibility Is the Highest Mark of Great Leaders

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*I write about leadership development and building strengths.*

Why does one person get selected for a promotion while others with equal skills, education and experience get passed over? While there may be several valid answers to that question, I submit that a person's demonstrated willingness to behave responsibly is one of the major reasons. Much [management literature](#) surprisingly overlooks this characteristic, yet it explains many successes and failures, as well as a large portion of promotional decisions.

More than 40 years ago, a colleague of mine, Dale Miller, conducted a study that compared two groups of executives (*"Responsible Behavior: Stamp of the effective manager,"* John Zenger, *Supervisory Management*, July 1976, pgs. 18-24). One group was identified by their colleagues as highly effective and ready for promotion, while the second group was initially considered ready; but upon further reflection [management](#) was deemed unready or unsuited for that role.

Each group received a deck of 62 statements describing management behavior. Each was asked to sort the deck in a forced choice, bell-shaped curve---going from the most effective to the least effective behavior. The highly effective group's top choice was the statement, "Accepts full responsibility for the performance of the work unit." This item was chosen far more frequently than statements about delegation, planning, staffing, time-management or technical skills. This choice also illustrated the sharpest distinction between the two groups. The managers who had been passed over for promotion attached far less importance to responsible behavior.



I came to understand the importance of this principle in my late teens. I worked at the local hospital where my father was the administrator. I got to know many of the staff. One of my personal favorites was an operating room nurse. My father mentioned one evening that he had offered her the position of Head Nurse, which she had turned

down. I was incredulous. Why would she turn down this promotion? He answered, "She didn't want the responsibility."

### **What is responsible behavior?**

Some might think that being responsible is the same thing as being accountable. But my later research suggests these are quite different mindsets. Being accountable means, you are answerable and willing to accept the outcomes or results of a project or activity. But responsibility goes much further. It is the mindset that says, "I am the person who must make this happen," whether it stems from your belief or because your job requires this of you, or there is some social force binding you to this obligation.

The responsible leader exhibits this behavior in multiple directions. It influences how the leader behaves with subordinates; but is equally strong in the relationship with an immediate boss and with other departments in the organization. Finally, it encompasses an overall set of values and attitudes.

### **Subordinates**

- With subordinates, leaders manifest the quality of responsible behavior through a willingness to take charge and not shirk from decisions. It means giving up being "one of the group" and instead, accepting the role of the leader. For example, I watched a newly appointed dean in a university fail for this reason. He ate lunch every day with the same faculty group that he'd always lunched with. Nothing in his daily routine appeared to change. He resisted the responsibility that defined his new role.

- It means staying on top of problems and not assuming someone else will step in.
- It means having a results-based view of the leader's role. No matter how great a human being you are, your effectiveness is ultimately defined by the results your team produces. The responsible manager ensures the group successfully drives for results.

#### *Upper Management*

- Accepts criticism for mistakes. Takes steps to fix problems and make amends with those who have been inconvenienced.
- Acts as a buffer from pressures that come from above, and fends off unreasonable demands from others.
- Informs those at higher levels of performance shortfalls and needed resources.

#### *Other departments*

- Insures that activities do not fall between the cracks between departments.

### **Responsible Attitude**

A second dimension of responsible leadership is not behavior, but involves having an overall attitude of responsibility. It could be argued that a responsible attitude manifests itself in behavior. However, an attitude of responsibility is also expressed in many small ways. The behavior is subtle and nuanced; but it is also important and palpable.

It begins with the leader's visceral connection with the organization. The leader feels pride when the organization succeeds and is obviously pained during challenging periods. The bond is strong. But there is never a question about where organizational goals and the leader's personal goals stand in comparison to each other. Personal goals always are subordinated to group goals, and group goals are always trumped by what the broader organization needs.

Responsible behavior includes doing things for which there is no immediate reward, but that are in the organization's best interests. For example, most companies have found no efficient way to reward executives who take the time and energy to develop upcoming leaders. Fortunately, many leaders continue to take that role very seriously, despite the fact they may never receive any tangible recognition or reward for this work.

Nowhere does the attitude of the responsible leader manifest itself more clearly than in the use of company resources. The responsible leader uses resources with even greater care than if they were their own.

### **The responsibility-authority paradox**

We often hear managers lament their lack of authority. In fact, authority comes only after a leader demonstrates responsibility. Authority is seldom simply bestowed by a senior executive, but only earned through responsible behavior. As the late Peter Drucker wrote, "Management has no power. Management has only responsibility." I believe he was right in pointing out that leaders must both display and require responsible behavior from themselves and their subordinates. This is what enables them to have maximum influence.

How can you increase your own responsibility? The first step is to focus on the fact that you are no longer primarily responsible for your own outcomes and results, but for the outcomes of your team. It is not about what you do, but about what your team or organization accomplishes. This is a huge leap for many. To their detriment, many never achieve it.

Next is to accept the responsibility-authority paradox. The combination of your responsible behavior with your responsible attitude gives you powerful influence and accelerates your leadership growth.

Jack Zenger is the CEO of Zenger/Folkman, a strengths-based leadership development firm. He is the author and co-author of 13 books including How To Be Exceptional: Drive Leadership Success by Magnifying Your Strengths, The Extraordinary Leader, Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders and The Inspiring Leader: Unlocking the Secrets of How Extraordinary Leaders Motivate, along with his newest book Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution (McGraw Hill, 2016). Connect with Jack at [twitter.com/jhzenger](https://twitter.com/jhzenger)