

# Leading with Responsibility

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Organizations continue to face a challenge — how to get more managers to become leaders who take responsibility for the situations they help create. In some ways, organizations encourage managers to play it safe by becoming administrators, deflecting their responsibility and accountability by looking for others to blame. Organizations need trusted and respected leaders who are free to make choices that contribute to the short- and long-term good of all the

organization's stakeholders — the customers, shareholders, employees, and the organization's natural environment. These changes require leaders to speak up and take personal responsibility for their decisions and refrain from diminishing their own responsibility by blaming others for failures or mistakes. Leaders need to develop the potential of leading with responsibility among their followers. Followers, who are able and willing to lead upward, enhance their leader's growth to be

responsible.

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A great leader seeks service to others above self and is willing to be accountable for his or her choices. Making choices for the good of the community requires the freedom that comes with personal psychological maturity.

We have heard about executives at Enron making selfish and unethical decisions and then declining responsibility for their decisions. Sherron Watkins, a middle manager and

accountant with Enron at the time, took a leadership role when she informed executives that the financial numbers appeared to be cooked and warned that this would lead to problems. According to her, executives chose to make an unethical decision by not addressing the fact that the numbers stockholders relied upon were misleading. In addition, Enron employees who invested in their company's stock were told that they could not sell their stocks while executives were selling their shares and getting rich. Why would executives do this? One of the common explanations is that they were greedy; however, I believe it also had to do with their lack of psychological maturity and that a critical element of this maturity is the desire to take personal responsibility.

The definition of responsibility, as used in this article, rests on the assumption that individuals have the capacity to choose between alternatives. Taking responsibility means being accountable for one's choices, not depending on others to establish controls for one's behaviors. Responsibility can only reside in the individual and cannot be disclaimed or diminished through delegation or shared duties. Responsibility means not placing blame on others and proactively taking ownership to resolve problems in the interest of serving others above self.

### The leadership link

Recent research on great business leaders demonstrates the connection between responsibility and outstanding leadership. The findings reported by Jim Collins in his book *From Good to Great* indicate that the most highly developed leaders inspire others by placing service to others above self-interest, crediting others for their successes, and taking responsibility for mistakes or failures. Collins referred to this as level-five leadership.

According to his schema, managers on the first level of leadership have technical competence; on the second level, they also have effective human relations skills; on the third level, management capabilities are boosted by conceptual operational skills; and on the fourth, strategic conceptual skills are developed. His research demonstrated that level-five leadership behaviors significantly contributed to the organization's long-term success.

Much of what Collins describes as level-five leadership appears comparable to Abraham Maslow's description of a self-actualized person, one who has a high level of psychological maturity. In terms of responsibility, this person is honest, trustworthy, reliable, and dependable. He or she spontaneously does the right thing, takes full responsibility for decisions, has a clear perception of reality, feels self-determined, and bases decisions on internal principles rather than external pressures.

A self-actualized person has high levels of self-awareness and self-confidence. This type of person is independent from yet interdependent with others. He or she is motivated by a love of growth rather than by fear and desires to give back to the world. The person communicates with others by listening actively and presenting information and opinions candidly, sincerely, and without defensiveness.

Self-actualized people are not perfect. They make mistakes and experience failures. The difference is that they are willing to allow themselves to be vulnerable by accepting responsibility for their mistakes and weaknesses. They don't take themselves too seriously, but they do take the principle of personal responsibility seriously. They expect others to be responsible for themselves.

We can use the alignment between Collins' description of inspirational leaders and Maslow's stages of psychological growth to train managers to

lead with responsibility. I propose that we use a process of self-actualization, particularly focusing on the growth of responsibility, as a framework in leadership development.

One of the assumptions in the model is that increases in self-awareness are critical for psychological and responsibility development. At the highest level of maturity, people have learned to face the truth about themselves, even if it is painful, and in the process of becoming more authentic they become less hypocritical and can be trusted to do what they say as a matter of personal integrity. As they develop and learn how to manage conflicting interests among stakeholders, they learn how to choose freely to stand up for what is right and not worry whether others accept them. At the lower levels of responsibility, people are not aware of their hypocrisy or their defensive communication. They may have low emotional competence, leading them to be controlled by fear and anxiety.

Let's look more closely at the stages of development for leading with responsibility: altruism, achievement, conformism, and self-protection.

### Stages of development

At the highest level of responsibility, the primary drive is service to others, in other words, **altruism**. Leaders at this level take responsibility for their decisions and actions, which means they are willing to be held accountable. They do not pass the buck, look for who they can blame, or deem their decisions above discussion. Personal integrity is a key component in their decision making; therefore, they are perceived by others to be authentic, honest, and fair-minded. They also are aware of their responsibility to all stakeholders, not just one group, and they share information with others in a timely manner. Leaders at this level are constantly learning what is right for them and what is right for others

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as they deal with the conflicts and tensions that decisions create for their stakeholders. They accept ownership for their own internal conflicts in each situation. By holding the tension in the thinking process until problems are well defined and solutions meet the short and long-term interests of all stakeholders, they build integrity within the organization as they search and find common ground among stakeholders.

At the **achievement** level, the primary drive is advancement. While there is an awareness of the importance of ethics, individuals may test the meaning of ethics by finding procedural or legal loopholes or not sharing all information because they were not asked the right questions. These people strive to accomplish more in order to achieve status as producers. They become pacesetter leaders and have learned to do things for personal gain; therefore, they cannot be transformational leaders who are capable of inspiring others. Pacesetter leaders realize the power they have based on their achievements and may not be aware that they have become egotistical and arrogant. These leaders or managers may have a limited awareness of the anxiety that drives their need to control things related to their advancement, and they may not be aware that they are expending excessive amounts of energy protecting their accomplishments. Because the achievement level is about self rather than service to others, responsibility development is somewhat limited.

At the **conformism** level, people have a strong need for acceptance by their peers. For them, decision making is strongly influenced by perceived group pressures, even when the group's decision is not the best ethical choice. New managers in particular, as they make the transition from technical work to managing their peers, may feel the need to conform to their

work group's low performance standard to feel accepted. These managers may not be aware that they try to minimize anxiety in the group by avoiding or accommodating conflicts. At this level, managers tend to avoid taking full ownership of decisions by claiming they were victims of the system in which they work, that they have little power and influence in their management position, or that the decisions were group decisions. They tend not to challenge authority even if their supervisors engage in questionable behaviors.

The lowest level of responsibility development is **self-protection**. These managers behave in a selfish and opportunistic manner, exploit loopholes, and operate without concern for the negative impact of their decisions. They micromanage information that is shared with others, decide what is good or bad, lie to themselves and others, justify lies, or cover up misdeeds from a position of authority, and blame others or external factors when something goes wrong. Rarely do they identify their own responsibility when problems occur; instead, they manipulate their way out of personal responsibility. At this level, managers get triggered emotionally and respond defensively when they receive constructive feedback about undesirable work behaviors. Others may experience these managers as hypocritical. Furthermore, these managers are not aware of their hypocrisy, and when it is pointed out to them, they either justify, act confused, or become arrogant.

It is not clear what percentage of managers fall into each of these four categories. I believe that the conforming level has the highest percentage of managers, especially managers who are reluctant to become leaders, because their need for affiliation is stronger than their need for achievement. The next largest group is the

achievement level because managers need to be highly motivated to produce in order to get promoted. The smallest number of people function at the altruistic level. Managers at this level become inspirational leaders and have the freedom to make decisions that are in the best long-term interests of all stakeholders. I believe that the percentage of managers in the self-protective level is low; however, this could vary from company to company depending upon the way top management models responsibility as well as the organization's culture.

Furthermore, it seems likely that some people operate at different levels depending on the time and situation; however, little is known about this.

For managers who function at lower responsibility levels, coaching can help them move to more mature levels. Some managers at the achievement level may choose to operate at the self-protective level when it seems favorable to do so, letting the situation determine their ethics. These managers also need coaching. The developmental goal is to help managers consistently choose the higher levels of responsibility. Managers who either are not willing to develop higher responsibility levels or have a responsibility character flaw should be asked to resign from management positions because they are a high risk and a liability to the organization's stakeholders.

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## Emotional intelligence

Because self-awareness is critical for gaining higher levels of responsibility, emotional intelligence may influence the development of responsibility. Emotional intelligence consists of awareness of one's own emotions, moods, and motivations, as well as awareness of other people's emotions and the way that emotions interact in interpersonal relationships.

Daniel Goleman, one of the pioneers of emotional intelligence,

pointed out that we understand things faster emotionally than intellectually. His research indicates that high emotional intelligence contributes to about 85 percent of success as a leader and is twice as important as IQ. My own recent research confirms that there is a strong positive relationship between managers' interpersonal emotional competency and their direct contributors' assessments of their leadership behaviors, behaviors such as creating a shared vision and enabling followers to achieve higher performance.

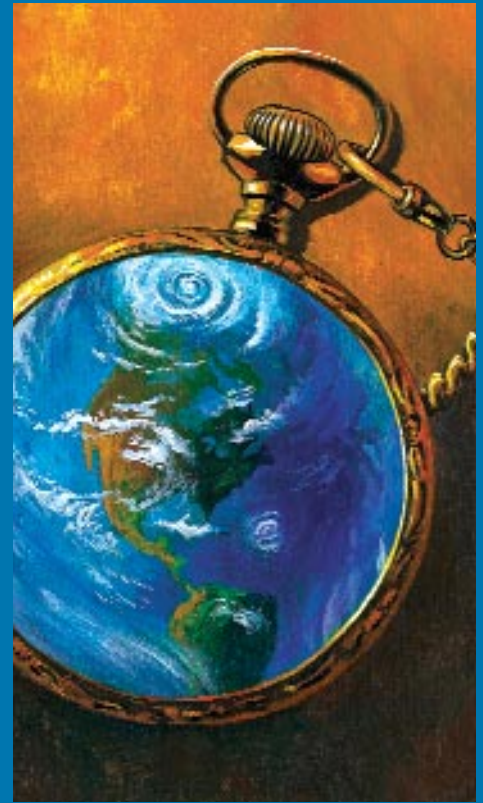
At the altruistic level, leaders are emotionally competent, which contributes to their successes. They are highly aware of their own and others' feelings, which enables them to work through the feelings that accompany difficult interactions. They are able and willing to be honest with themselves and others about feelings and recognize the importance of acknowledging emotions during conversations.

A lack of emotional intelligence may be causing problems for managers who demonstrate less personal responsibility. Managers at the achievement level may not be aware of how stressful emotions like anxiety and fear can control their decisions. The unacknowledged fear controls their behaviors, and as a result, they may be reluctant to own up to the consequences of poor decisions. At the conforming level, managers demonstrate a limited awareness of their own and others' emotions, and their lack of awareness of how emotions control them is evident in the way that they store up feelings about interpersonal conflict and expend energy complaining about other people's behaviors instead of talking with them. At the self-protective level, managers may either not be aware of or disguise their true emotions and either don't know or don't care about the emotions of others. They do not allow themselves to be vulnerable to others and this

limits the psychological growth that comes from learning about self through interpersonal relationships.

Some executives and managers are willing and able to become self-actualized, and some are not willing to become altruistic leaders or are unable because of a character flaw. One problem with training managers to function at the altruistic level is that the achievement motive seems to be necessary for high job performance and attaining promotions. This same achievement motive, however, develops ego, entrapping people in the illusion that it was self alone that produced the results leading to advancement. There is good reason to help high achieving leaders who have developed egos based on their achievements.

According to Goleman's research on emotional intelligence, leaders who used a pacesetter leadership style had a negative effect on organizational climate and performance compared to leaders who used an authoritative, affiliative, democratic, or coaching style. One of the differences may be due to the perception that pacesetters frequently use "I" rather than "we" in referring to accomplishments. They need feedback and coaching about that habit. In addition, pacesetter leaders need coaching to move from a transactional leadership style of doing things in order to be rewarded to a transformational style of being personally motivated through inspiration. Pacesetter leaders need coaching to help them to be open to feedback and to examine their own feelings of inadequacy. The coaching goal is to develop a transparent and enlightened ego. If we trust that some people feel the need to mature psychologically, that it is more rewarding to place service to others above self, then we need to begin finding ways to help them grow. What follows are suggestions for how we can make this possible.



## Developing leaders is a major concern

CEOs in all parts of the world say a rising challenge this year and for years to come will be developing quality leaders and getting employees to buy into the company's goals and values. This is one conclusion of a survey released in October by The Conference Board.

The survey of CEOs on North America, Asia, and Europe shows that while holding onto customers and reducing costs are the leading worries, leadership development and engaging employees in overall corporate goals are fast becoming major concerns.

This is the first time since the survey has been conducted (three years) that more than 30 percent of CEOs selected developing and retaining potential leaders as one of their top three management issues, anticipating its increased importance by 2008. Engaging employees in the company's vision, values, and goals was cited by more than 30 percent of CEOs as one of the factors most important to their company's success now, and nearly 18 percent of CEOs said it would be a key issue five years from now.

## Enhancing leadership responsibility

Using the responsibility model discussed above as a frame of reference in leadership development would accomplish three things. First, the model provides clarity about different responsibility levels and provides an opportunity to discuss responsibility as an explicit performance expectation. Second, using the model can help make responsibility discussible. Leaders can define their responsibility and the responsibility of their followers through open discussion. Mutual goals can be set for development of responsibility levels consistent with each individual's capabilities. Third, an assessment inventory can be created, with questions or statements that address each responsibility level. The inventory can be part of a 360-degree feedback process that includes coaching for development. Coaching managers who operate at the self-protective level as well as high achieving managers who have developed big egos can be challenging. However, these coaching conversations need to take place if organizations want to practice being responsible to their stakeholders and reduce the risks of irresponsible management behaviors.

The characteristic traits of a self-actualized person can be used as a leadership model and designed into leadership assessment using a 360-degree feedback process. There is support for using leadership traits for assessment. Research results indicate that raters have greater reliability when assessing traits than they do when they evaluate behaviors. Research on leadership traits indicates that honesty is the most important trait a leader can have in addition to being inspirational, forward looking, and competent. Traits related to high emotional competency could also be assessed and included in performance reviews, developmental goals, action plans, and ongoing coaching because

this quality helps leaders understand how they manage their emotions, especially anxiety, when making work-related choices.

Another area for assessment is time competency. At the lower levels of psychological maturity, managers spend their time worrying about the past or the future and complaining, blaming, or covering up problems that result from their questionable management behaviors. Here are some questions to help managers assess how well they manage their time with responsibility: How much time is spent complaining or finding blame? Does the manager immediately take responsibility for mistakes without feeling personally threatened? Does the manager get defensive in conversations about responsibility?

Another area to assess is communication style. The altruistic leader relates to followers in a manner that respects others while standing up for his or her own rights. Followers feel that the altruistic leader trusts and respects them as responsible adults and listens to them in a compassionate manner. This type of leader has the psychological maturity to use a participative leadership style with followers. Their motive is to help followers become leaders by developing their active critical thinking skills. These leaders are confident in their own leadership identity, which allows them to get psychologically close to followers. In contrast, self-protective managers use a style that communicates little respect for the people who report to them. This style leaves direct contributors feeling that their managers do not care about them as people but see them as objects to manipulate for personal gain. These managers do not allow themselves to be vulnerable around others and as a result do not learn to deal with their self-defeating behaviors.

Learning to share information in a timely manner is a critical factor

in leadership development. Often, employees feel they are not given all the information management has, and this leads to distrust in the relationship as well as cynicism, which can affect morale, commitment, and productivity. The responsibility model begins to address the area of truth seeking and telling, and I recommend that these areas be regularly assessed and reviewed for development. We assume that self-actualized leaders share relevant information with stakeholders because they are more motivated to serve others. High achieving managers more than likely monitor information and do not share any information that may have negative consequences for them personally. As we move down to lower levels of responsibility, there is more manipulation of information and less truth seeking and telling.

Another way to facilitate the development of altruistic leaders is for managers to set goals to develop their followers into leaders. These goals would be reviewed annually by examining increases in the decision-making authority of all followers. This means that leaders need to delegate higher levels of decision-making authority to people directly reporting to them. According to my research on delegation, middle managers reported that they were motivated to develop their own leadership skills when supervisors made joint decisions related to complex tasks with them and not by other types of delegation. Managers preferred this type of authority because they increased their work knowledge and got to work directly with their supervisors. They reported feeling that their supervisors cared enough to give them more responsibility and were sharing control with them rather than unloading work on them. It's a paradox: Managers can gain control by sharing or delegating control. Furthermore, if organizations annually measured the leadership

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development of the individuals reporting to each manager, then we would begin to see more managers working to develop successors for their positions.

Organizations can help managers develop the characteristics of self-actualized leaders through coaching. There are three requirements for effective coaching in this area:

1. The coach needs to be trusted and respected as a role model. It seems fruitless for managers to be coached by their own supervisors if those supervisors are operating at lower levels of psychological maturity and responsibility. In these cases, managers need to get coaching from someone else whom they trust and respect.

2. The managers must be “coachable.” Managers operating at the self-protective level can be the hardest to coach, yet they are the ones who need it most. If they easily get defensive when receiving constructive feedback, then the issue becomes whether they are coachable.

3. The coach needs to be courageous if he or she finds that a manager is manipulating the coaching conversation. At this point, the coach can discuss the self-defeating manner of interaction and suggest that others may feel frustrated with this manipulative approach. In response to this method, some managers finally drop their defensive routines and allow themselves to be vulnerable and transparent with the coach. For some of these managers, this will be the first time they have encountered a caring listener willing to have a candid conversation with them about the things that prevent them from taking more responsibility for their self-defeating behaviors as well as the things that would enable growth.

### **Altruism: a good thing**

We need to address the reservations that some organizations have about

developing altruistic leaders. The achievement motive is so strong that it may seem impossible to reduce this motive and still encourage managers to grow the business. However, people tend to do what actually gets measured and rewarded, and the measurement and reward process in almost all organizations tends to encourage managers to work at the achievement and conformism levels. If organizations choose to reward achievement only, they limit the growth of their employees. The need to achieve is a part of us and will remain with us; however, what comes with achievement is ego and the need to control, both of which prevent managers from attending to the needs of customers, employees, and the organization as a whole.

Our organizations need more altruistic leaders who practice the highest level of responsibility. All members of any organization, from the board of directors to entry level employees, need to take personal responsibility for their contributions to conflicts and problems, stop blaming others, and communicate in a caring, candid, collaborative manner. The most competitive organizations will be led by highly responsible and altruistic leaders who become trusted and respected models for others and who inspire colleagues to join them on the journey to actualize the greatness within them.

The greatness of self-actualization may scare us: To be free to risk being our true compassionate selves means learning to give up our selfish ways of being in the world. As I write this article and as you read it, we are probably wondering if we can ever attain self-actualization because there seem to be so few people who have. However, the seed of being an altruistic person is in each of us. We need to face the challenge and the pain of examining who we truly are and reflect on our potential to become self-actualized. Leadership

begins with self-leadership, making possible today what seemed impossible yesterday. We'll never know about our full positive potential unless we choose to develop our altruistic qualities and choose the freedom to be fully responsible for ourselves. ❖

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### **For further reading**

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