The Consequences of Taking or Avoiding Responsibility

Leadership is about taking responsibility for your actions and decisions. As you have learned, responsibility is the quality of being trustworthy, reliable, and accountable for your actions and decisions. It requires accepting the consequences of your actions and decisions. **Consequences are the outcomes, or results, of your actions and decisions.** They can be good or bad. To be an effective leader, you need to make sure that you understand the consequences of failing to take responsibility for what you say and do.

Taking responsibility is not always easy. It requires maturity and patience. When things don’t go well, or when responsibilities seem overwhelming, it can be natural to make excuses. But good leaders don’t make excuses. They accept responsibility for their actions and decisions. They take quiet pride in their good decisions and they learn from their bad ones.

In this lesson you’ll learn about the value of being responsible. You’ll learn how to overcome the natural human tendency to make excuses. You’ll learn how making excuses holds you back from realizing your potential as a mature person and as a leader. You’ll also learn how to accept responsibility for your actions and decisions.

The Advantages of Personal Accountability

You can’t lead if you can’t make decisions. Sometimes it’s difficult to know which decision is the right one—especially when you don’t have enough time or information. At that point, you must make the best decision you can, based on the information you have. In a later lesson, you’ll learn more about making decisions and solving problems.
But nobody’s perfect: Sometimes you will make a bad decision. When that happens, you must explain why you decided what you did and admit your mistake. “This is how I saw the situation at the time,” a good leader says, “and that’s why I decided to do what I did.” Poor leaders, on the other hand, offer excuses. They look for any way they can to shift the blame to someone or something else. They seek a scapegoat—someone who is made to take the blame for others. They refuse to take responsibility for what they’ve done.

A First Officer Steps In

The captain of an international flight arrived for the preflight check-in. He’d had a few drinks in the lounge while waiting for the flight. His speech was slurred and his movements were not coordinated. He was in no condition to pilot an aircraft. The ground staff realized he was drunk but said nothing.

When the first officer arrived at the check-in post, he knew that the passengers and crew would not be safe if the captain took charge of the cockpit. Even though the captain was older than he and had a higher rank, the flight officer decided to intervene.

Drawing the captain aside, the flight officer said, “Captain, it’s evident that you’ve been drinking. We will need to find a different pilot for this flight. Will you turn yourself in, or will I have to turn you in?”

The captain went to the chief pilot’s office and voluntarily grounded himself. Getting control of his drinking problem took the captain six months, but he eventually returned to flying. He had no further alcohol-related problems.

The first officer took personal responsibility for the safety of this flight. His behavior demonstrated professional competence and concern for the airline. He did not hesitate to take responsibility, even though the captain was his superior.

After the captain got control of his alcohol problem, the two men developed a positive, respectful relationship that lasted for years. The first officer’s sense of personal accountability had long-term benefits for the captain and the airline, as well as for himself.
Personal accountability is everybody’s business, whether you’re the top leader or a subordinate, a lower-ranking leader or individual. Accountability is a form of honesty. It gives you several advantages:

- You show that you are reliable—you do what you say you are going to do
- You show people they can trust you with responsibility and authority—if you make a mistake, you’ll learn from it and do better next time
- You reassure others that you care about them—you are concerned about their interest and welfare, not just your own
- You show that you are consistent—people know what to expect of you
- You demonstrate that you are a careful and thoughtful decision maker—you won’t go and do something foolish
- You increase your ability to achieve your goals.

The story “A First Officer Steps In” illustrates the advantages of personal accountability. Had the flight officer not intervened, the pilot would have put his passengers, crew, and aircraft at risk. At the same time, the ground crew, who knew the captain was drunk, did nothing about it. They failed to take responsibility for the flight’s safety. If you had been the first officer, what would you have done? Would you have spoken up when others didn’t?

**The Consequences of Irresponsibility**

The story that follows has a different set of characters, but they’re playing similar roles. Gabe engages in a number of irresponsible acts. When he fails to listen to Elena’s advice, he must pay the consequences. How do Elena and Gabe differ as far as personal accountability is concerned?

When you drive a car or pilot an aircraft, you are responsible for your passengers’ safety.

Courtesy of Arthur Tilley/Getty Images
Everyone knows someone like Gabe. He acts without thinking through his decisions. He always wants things his way and ignores the needs and wants of others. His selfishness blinds him to his responsibility for the consequences of his actions and decisions.

People like Gabe often learn the hard way about the consequences of avoiding responsibility. Elena broke up with Gabe because she could tell he was immature and irresponsible. In the case of the accident, he endangered himself and almost injured her seriously. Although Elena liked Gabe a lot, she knew that he had to "grow up."

How could Gabe have acted more maturely? How could he have accepted his responsibility, avoided an encounter with the police, and kept his girlfriend?

He might have:

- made sure the seatbelts in his car worked
- made certain he and Elena were wearing them at all times
- driven more slowly and carefully
- taken responsibility for the accident, admitted his fault, and apologized to Elena
- talked to his parents or guardian, a teacher, or a counselor about the accident.
Gabe’s decision making was flawed. He acted without considering the possible outcomes of his actions. And once his action had a negative consequence, he refused to take responsibility for it. Gabe was old enough to obtain a driver’s license but not mature enough to make careful decisions or to accept responsibility for his decisions to disobey the law.

If you’ve made a series of bad and irresponsible decisions and suffered the consequences, you may gradually lose self-esteem and self-confidence. That makes it even harder to make good decisions in the future.

How Defense Mechanisms Affect Your Actions and Decisions

Why do some people handle their mistakes well, and even learn from them, while others don’t? The difference often lies in a person’s defense mechanisms. In order to learn from a mistake, you have to admit that it was a mistake. People who hide behind defense mechanisms have a hard time doing this. Gabe’s defense mechanisms were as well tuned as his car.

Do you remember the story about Jack and Christine in Lesson 2 of Chapter 3? It explained how Jack’s defense mechanisms ruined his relationship with his girlfriend Christine. Reflect on what you know about the defense mechanisms people use when they feel anxiety, stress, or pressure. As you may recall, they take a variety of forms. They include displacement, repression, rationalization, projection, acting out, and denial.

In the story of the drunken pilot, when the first officer confronted him, the pilot did not resort to defense mechanisms. He took responsibility for his condition and reported himself to the chief pilot, voluntarily grounding himself until he had his drinking problem under control. But Gabe was different. He employed a variety of defense mechanisms to avoid taking responsibility for what he had done. Think for a minute about which defense mechanisms he used.

As you have learned, many people are unaware that they are using defense mechanisms. Like Jack with his girlfriends, they employ them over and over in the same way when confronted with similar situations. Their patterns of behavior become predictable—you almost know what they are going to do before they do it.

If it seems as if the same thing happens to you repeatedly, you might be caught in such a pattern. To break out of it, you must understand yourself enough to know when you are resorting to the same defense mechanism in response to certain kinds of problems. That way you can analyze your reactions and escape the cycle. Often a teacher, counselor, or coach can help you identify these harmful patterns.
You might think of defense mechanisms as people’s natural efforts to “save their own skin.” But again, growing up and developing a positive, productive attitude about your life requires accepting responsibility for your actions and decisions. It means being willing to stand up and take the consequences, good or bad.

People with positive attitudes accept life’s challenges. They set a good example. Other people look to them for leadership.

**Learning to Take Responsibility for Your Actions and Decisions**

How can you learn to take responsibility for your actions and decisions? It begins with thinking before you act. Here are a few guidelines:

*First*, try to anticipate the outcome of each decision you make. If you’re trying to decide between two options, think of the outcome of each one in the long term. Will it solve your problem or provide only a temporary fix? Will the result be the one you want? That others want? How will the decision affect other people—your loved ones, your friends, your classmates, your team?

*Second*, listen to what some people call “the little voice inside” or your “gut feeling.” If you feel uneasy about a decision in any way, review the facts and your feelings regarding it.

*Third*, don’t be afraid to ask someone for help. Get advice: Ask a friend, family member, teacher, or counselor to discuss the decision with you. Don’t expect them to provide answers. That’s up to you. But encourage them to ask you questions. This can help you think through your options. These people can serve as sounding boards. They can give you insight and, especially in the case of an older person, the benefit of their experience.

*Finally*, don’t expect that you will always make the right decision. In other words, don’t be afraid of failure. Failure is one of the best teachers. Everyone learns from their mistakes—the key is to try not to repeat them.

**Responsible Leadership**

There are few leader challenges like those in military combat. Victory in battle makes leaders into heroes, but the effects of defeat can be devastating. Whether a battle is lost or won, the true leader takes responsibility for the consequences of his or her strategic and tactical decisions.

In the following story, notice how Confederate Civil War Gen Robert E. Lee demonstrated the characteristics of a true leader when he took full responsibility for his decision to send more than 15,000 of his soldiers against entrenched Union forces on the third day of the battle at Gettysburg. What do you notice about Lee’s behavior, words, and attitudes? Why were so many men ready to lay down their lives for him? How did Lee deal with defeat and the frustration that followed?
General Robert E. Lee Accepts His Failure at Gettysburg

The three-day Battle of Gettysburg was one of the bloodiest that this nation has known. Some 51,000 men were killed, wounded, captured, or reported missing. After the battle ended, Gen Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate forces, led his troops back to Virginia in a sad retreat.

While General Lee lost the Battle of Gettysburg, he was still a great general. One reason for his greatness was his bravery and military skill. But equally important was his willingness to accept responsibility for the consequences of his decisions and his concern for his Soldiers’ morale.

On July 3, 1863, the final day of the battle, the Confederate forces mounted a major attack, now known as Pickett’s Charge. Lee had miscalculated, and the result was disastrous: The Confederates broke through the Union line, only to be thrown back with heavy losses. When Lee saw that the assault was failing, he rode out among his men to rally them. He also visited the wounded. “All will come right in the end—we’ll talk it over afterwards—we want all good and true men just now,” he told them.

As that bloody afternoon ended, Maj Gen George Pickett reported the sad truth: “General Lee, I have no division now.” His top three generals had been killed or seriously wounded.

“Come, General Pickett,” said Lee. “This has been my fight, and upon my shoulders rests the blame. The men and officers of your command have written the name of Virginia as high today as it has ever been written before.”

As the survivors gathered around, Lee reassured Pickett once more: “Your men have done all that men could do; the fault is entirely my own.”

To show that he held himself accountable, Lee wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and offered to resign. Davis, who recognized Lee’s talents, told him to stay on.
Responsibility and Leadership

Someone once asked Air Force Gen Curtis E. LeMay to provide a one-word definition of leadership. After some thought, LeMay replied, “If I had to come up with one word to define leadership, I would say responsibility.”

A leader should reward a job well done and try to correct substandard performance. In this respect, a sports coach is an example of a good leader. Think of a good coach. Does he or she accept the responsibility for the team’s performance, discipline, and improvement? A good coach is like General Lee. A good coach doesn’t single out individual players and blame them for a loss. The coach knows that winning (or losing) is a team effort.

What are some of the advantages of taking responsibility? When you take responsibility you:

• gain the admiration of your peers and those you lead
• earn the respect of your parents, teachers, coaches, and other leaders
• build confidence in your own abilities
• prepare yourself for future challenges
• learn to trust your instincts and judgment.

When you show that you can handle the responsibility others have given you, they will trust you enough to give you more.

Thunderbirds’ First Female Pilot

The Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron made history in June 2005, when it announced the selection of Capt Nicole Malachowski as the team’s No. 3 right wing pilot. The 1996 Air Force Academy graduate became the first female demonstration pilot in the Thunderbirds’ 52-year history. In fact, she’s the first female demonstration pilot on any US military high-performance jet team.

“It’s a great privilege to be given the opportunity to be a part of the Thunderbird team, an organization that represents the finest traditions of our Air Force,” the Las Vegas native said. “Women have been an integral part of the Thunderbird team for decades. The women of yesterday and today’s Air Force maintain a tradition of excellence, and it is that heritage that has given me this exciting responsibility of being the first female Thunderbird pilot.”
Lesson 3 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. Define the word consequence.
2. List some advantages of personal accountability.
3. List some consequences of making irresponsible decisions.
4. Describe how defense mechanisms affect people’s actions and decisions.
5. List some ways you can learn to take responsibility for your decisions and actions.
6. List the advantages of taking responsibility.

Applying Writing Skills

7. Write a speech you might give to your classmates about someone you admire. (If you want to, you can use the person you chose in the Quick Write.) In the speech, describe how you believe that leader takes responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions.