

## A Sense of Responsibility

Losing weight and getting to within an ideal range for my height has been a desired outcome for a while. Frances, my wife, has been most supportive of this, figuring that if I had less fat my chances of a longer life with her were improved. I concur. I have also been clear I would let my weight go in a kind fashion, without beating myself up with guilt and verbal violence. I did find 2003 a difficult year, with lots of travel. Whilst I had made some gains prior to then, I found myself stuck in a 2 -3 kilogram range, not making any further progress. At Christmas Frances was “encouraging” me to get serious again about my goal, and I realised I felt nagged. The two of us had fallen into a pattern of her encouraging and me resisting. It became clear to me I had relinquished responsibility to her, and was then resisting because that was a source of control. We then had a clearing discussion where we agreed I needed to take ownership of my process, be responsible for my results. Her encouragement was welcome but I needed space to do it myself. The result of changing how we worked together was startling. I suddenly realised that I had better get serious again. I was the person who had the power to make the difference, and I had better apply myself if I wanted to succeed. I lost an additional six kilograms in six weeks, and became excited again because I was making progress. I also owned the results because I was making the decisions and bearing the results.



*Overwhelmed with your responsibilities? How can you respond appropriately without becoming irresponsible?*

### Author

[Stephen Harrison](#) BSc (Hons), PMP, FPMINZ, ACC

### Abstract

*Responsibility is explored as a key to personal power. The energy draining effects of irresponsibility and its tightly-bound associate, resentment, are highlighted. Ways of taking charge of life, owning outcomes, and freeing ourselves of limitations based on irresponsibility are explored. Ideas are shared on how to apply these principles in the work environment so that we can empower others so they succeed and own their results.*

### Keywords

Goal, manage, personal responsibility, responsibility, weighed down

### First Published

March 2004

### Copyright

© [Harrison International Ltd](#), 2004. This document may be transmitted & reproduced in its entirety.

Responsibility is a powerful concept. Whether in work situations, relationships with partners, parents, children and others, or on our own, responsibility play a powerful part in our successes and failures. Resentment is the negative soul mate of responsibility. When we take responsibility for ourselves we own our results. However, when someone takes responsibility for us resentment is the natural outcome, even if we prefer to relinquish responsibility.

### Basic Responsibility Concepts

***I am responsible for me***, for my actions, feelings, thoughts and results. Others may wish or seek to be responsible for me, may use various means to influence me and my beliefs, feelings etc, but I still choose for myself. It may feel easier to divest responsibility to others, blame others for our failures and shortcomings,

but the harsh and empowering reality is we are responsible for ourselves. We get to decide what we do, how we feel, whether we change or not, and for these choices we are ultimately accountable, even if only to ourselves.

***I am responsible to others*** by acting ethically, legally and morally, and by communicating my feelings, thoughts, needs etc. appropriately. I am responsible to my children to teach them good principles so they can survive and prosper in this life. I am responsible to my work colleagues to perform my tasks effectively and in a manner that supports our joint activities. I am responsible to clients, partners and contractors by sharing with them any issues and concerns I have. Being responsible to others requires trust and vulnerability on our part, difficult when we have fear and feel the need to be protective. The result is greater opportunity for a more meaningful relationship which can endure problems with greater resilience.

Responsibility is positive, powerful, forward moving, and enables us to engage in the world effectively, accountably, and can provide the energy needed to pursue our goals, dreams and desires. The opposite of responsibility is irresponsibility. Irresponsibility is draining. Through irresponsibility we rob ourselves and potentially others of energy and power to make choices and exercise free will to some extent.

***I am irresponsible to others*** when I shift the locus of control from within me, out and onto others. When I blame, use control drama such as intimidation, interrogation, aloofness and self-pity, and sabotage others' efforts, fail to share my thoughts and feelings where the other party needs that information, or withhold my gifts and talents, I am being irresponsible to others. When we seek to take responsibility for others we seek to impose controls on them, and shape them as we want them to be. We seek to limit or deny their right to think, feel, choose and act as they want, taking full or partial charge of or control over their results. This process and these controls do not have to be exercised consciously or overtly. Our desire to bend the will and shape other's behaviours can come from good intentions. However, the moment we seek to impose on others our will we are taking responsibility **FOR** them rather than being responsible **TO** them.

***I am irresponsible for myself*** when I struggle with guilt, blame and worry, wallow (strongly or mildly) in self-pity, and give over responsibility for my results to others, whether human, divine or others.

## Managing Our Internal Critic

One word that holds significant disempowering potential is "should". The implication is that not doing the "should"

is a sign of substandard behaviour. It carries implied judgement, condemnation and potential inadequacy on whomever fails to do it. Whether applied to others or ourselves it has the same implication and result. "I should lose weight" says that I am not acceptable as I am, and will not be until I have lost weight. It also indicates that it is a duty rather than a matter of choice and free will, an imposed responsibility rather than one of any number of options open and available to consider. Any sense of accomplishment is undermined because "should" requires it as a minimum performance standard rather than as a sign of choice and excellence. There is no relief from achievement. It was expected, imposed, whether by others or ourselves. We have less effective responsibility while operating under "should", acting out of coercion, and consequently have less personal power.

It is not uncommon for the "should" to become the basis for resistance by us. As much as "should" seeks to impose and control us and force us along a specific path, we may resist and do little or large things to undermine or prevent fulfilling the directive. It may be passive resistance with quiet dampening of energy through to open and active resistance involving blatant rebellion. An alternate approach is to fulfil the "should" with grit and determination, suppressing any sign of resistance within us. The interesting thing is recognising this process does occur within us even when we state the "should" and apply it to ourselves. It does not have to involve anyone else. I can recall years of never losing weight, in fact growing steadily heavier, although I actively and openly stated that "I should". As I learned about and recognised issues of irresponsibility in my life, I realised I used "should" as a way to compel outcomes that all the time I really was resisting. I would then feel frustrated, disappointed, or depressed, and all the while my self-esteem suffered because I was FAILING. "Should" is a key ingredient of our Internal Critic who repeats for us every word and phrase of demand and criticism we received from our significant caregivers during our formative years.

***For more information related to themes in this article, refer to chapter 3 (Pivotal Life Concepts) of:*** Harrison, S. G. (2012). [\*Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose\*](#). Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

***Coaching can support you create the best outcome when working with areas covered by this article.*** Follow these links for coaching information:

- [Coaching Overview](#)
- [Individual \(Leadership/Executive\) Coaching](#)
- [Team Coaching](#)
- [Group Coaching](#)
- [Why Sponsor Coaching?](#)
- [Offer: Free Individual Coaching Session](#)
- [Stephen's Profile](#)



*Is your inner voice supportive or critical of your self-image?*

It is an interesting exercise to complete the sentence starter “I SHOULD...” with all the things that you currently operate under from a “should” directive. Having created that list, write against each the answer to “Why should I do this?” Finally, against each item, answer the question, “Why do I resist doing this?” Some fortunate souls may struggle to find “shoulds”, but many can create a list quite readily. In answering the two support questions it can be startling to learn how much energy and focus is placed on doing things that we “should” out of a false sense of responsibility, feeling obliged for the sake of others, and with a fair degree of resistance (wasted energy!). Replace the “I SHOULD...” statements with “If I wanted to, I COULD...”, and then ask, “Do I want to?” for each item. Some items will disappear with a clear “No”. However, you are likely to find that you do actually want to do many of them, and in using “could” instead of “should” you have freed yourself from the bondage of expected behaviour, and have empowered yourself with choice and through exercising your free will. For those with a “Yes”, answer the question “Why do I want to?” This clarifies what your motivation to achieve is and strengthens ownership and resolve. Making that a habit enables you to positively embrace life and be clear about your results and who owns them. You do!

Obviously this simple exercise may not change your whole life, but the effect can be immediate, pronounced and positive. Some people do gain a sudden awareness that they can own their life at the level where “should” was in control. Doing the exercise once doesn’t solve things. It is a start.

Our internal Critic is resourceful, being equal in capability and intelligence to us, and continually finds new and creative ways to force and cajole us. Guilt is strongly related to “should” and is a powerful tool of the critic, which in essence says, “In the past you should have... and you didn’t. Woe is you!” Forgiving ourselves is the key to releasing ourselves from the past and becoming empowered to make change. It is about letting go so we can move forward. If we forgive others, it may help them, but it is really of most benefit to us. The act of

forgiveness releases our attention and energy from the past where we were, really or perceived to be, wronged so we can focus on what we need to do now. It is not about saying the offender did no wrong, or that we would allow ourselves to be wronged similarly again, or forget it. It is a release that gives us freedom. That freedom comes to us when we forgive, whether we are forgiving ourselves or someone else. [Much more could be said of the Internal Critic but that will have to wait for another opportunity]

## Responsibility In The Workplace

Employees who take responsibility and are motivated to get the job done without being “driven” by their manager are a real asset. Effective delegation is an example of a business application of responsibility. Managers seek employees who demonstrate commitment, are motivated, and are willing and able to accomplish the desired results.

In delegating “responsibility” to a subordinate it is important to:

- Provide a clear statement of required outcome
- Establish boundaries regarding behaviours and actions appropriate in accomplishing the outcome. Where possible, this is best detailed as what is not permitted so freedom is open to the employee to choose any appropriate actions.
- Demonstrate trust in the capabilities of the employee
- Require accountability for performance
- Gain willing acceptance of the assignment from the employee
- Offer support so the employee can grow and develop in a nurturing environment, and hence feel more comfortable with additional responsibilities

The results of successful delegation can include for the employee:

- Growth and development with new skills and capabilities
- Increased trust of and loyalty for the manager because of the expression of trust and the opportunity for increased responsibility
- Improved self-worth and self-confidence
- Greater recognition that they can contribute in a meaningful way.

As wonderful as it would be to achieve these results, the employees’ attitude to responsibility, assuming it, owning it, and being accountable, may be stymied by faulty personal beliefs, programmes and patterns that undermine and distract from the focus and energy needed to perform the role. Self-worth issues, guilt, defensiveness and other patterns associated with self-

protection may impede their ability to engage at work and be effective.



*Delegation is an important way of sharing responsibility*

Attitudes of the manager may also damage or destroy the intended results of delegation. Fear of loss of control can result in the manager not truly passing responsibility to the other person. Instead they micromanage, meddle, or even overtly take back the activity. Perfectionism is one driver for such attitudes. Where the manager is unable to let the employee demonstrate capability, be responsible, and holds on to the supposedly delegated task, then resentment within the employee is the natural result. Taking responsibility for the results of a subordinate to whom you have delegated responsibility, sends messages at odds with the desired positive outcomes, and can leave the employee feeling powerless and incapable of contribution in

that situation. Resentment can erode the relationship between manager and employee, leading to loss of trust, loyalty, and respect, and of interest in working with the supervisor.

When the manager successfully delegates they show interest in progress, within the bounds of the agreed accountability, and may strengthen the delegation through non interfering support. Offering coaching, where the employee can return, share their issues and concerns, and where the manager as coach listens, and may be invited by the employee to offer suggestions, can have a powerful and strengthening effect to the whole delegation experience, and their relationship.

## **Conclusion**

In our relationships at work, within our families, and every other setting, there are opportunities to strengthen our sense of power by taking responsibility for ourselves, leaving others to be responsible for themselves, and engaging at a deeper, more meaningful level as we share our thoughts, feelings, needs etc. with those around us in appropriate ways. Responsibility as a concept underpins and strengthens how we feel about ourselves, others, and our relationship to them, regardless of the environment. As we own our results, stop seeking scapegoats and making excuses, we become the captain of our own ship. As we develop these skills our capacity to sail the stormy oceans of life, sure within ourselves of who we are, what we have to offer, and that we can succeed grows sure.