Creating Personal Responsibility

Retaining Personal Power

By Gary Lear, President & CEO

One of the foundational elements for creating High Performance Organizations is Personal Responsibility. Every CEO dreams about having personally responsible people, because they know that those people are the most productive. Yet according to the research, only about a quarter of the employees in the average organization are personally responsible for their jobs; the rest are just there to do what they have to do to stay out of trouble and get by, or worse (see our article "Who's Working In Your Organization).

Unfortunately, too many CEO's and managers do the wrong things to try to increase personal responsibility. They use rules and regulations, threats and coercion, and basically imposing their will on others. In other words, they are trying to *make* employees accountable. Unfortunately, this just doesn't work. People are only accountable when they choose to be. It involves relinquishing Personal Power, told to be accountable and what to do, or retaining Personal Power, which means making decisions for themselves and accepting the consequences.

Let's take a closer look at this concept of retaining or relinquishing Personal Power. When people are told what to do by others in authority, they make a decision about that directive; they either decide to comply, or resist. If they decide to comply, they usually do it because they are trying to avoid something, such as punishment for not doing it. They might even be trying to avoid personal responsibility and accountability, because if something does go wrong, they can always point to the person who told them to do it as being responsible.

If they decided to resist it doesn't mean that they overtly refuse to do what ever they were told. They can say they will do it and just never get around to it or do it very poorly. They can also sabotage, complain, and exhibit a variety of other behaviors that can drive down moral on their team and in their organization. The attitude that these resisters have is one of resentment, and

A friend of mine was at one time the administrator for the Indian Health Services hospital on the Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina. One day he came across a young physician who was talking very sternly to an elderly Cherokee woman who, in his opinion, wasn't doing a good job of taking care of her health. He was berating her and talking down to her, telling her what she should be doing. She stood there quietly, not saying a word.

My friend went running up to the young doctor and began yelling at the doctor. "How dare you talk to an elder in that manner!" For you see, elders are held in high regards in Cherokee culture. But this doctor was not American Indian, and wasn't aware of the cultural issues. The doctor was at first taken aback, then became angry and stormed off, now mad at the administrator.

The administrator then turned to the elderly woman and apologized profusely for the doctor's behavior. The elderly woman only replied to him "you stole my Personal Power." My friend was puzzled. "How did I steal your Personal Power?" he asked. The woman replied, "I had the choice to determine if I was going to become angry at the doctor or not. It was my Personal Power to make that choice; to decide if I was going to retain my Personal Power, or give it away to the doctor by becoming angry at him. I chose not to become angry. But when you came up and became angry for me, my choice was gone. You took it from me and became angry for me. So you stole my Personal Power and gave it away to the doctor."

My friend finally understood what he had done. By stepping in, he decided how the situation should have been handled, rather than allowing the person who was in the best position to decide to make that decision. He apologized to the woman, and later to the doctor, and learned a valuable lesson.

So, how often do you make decisions for others, tell them what to do, and steal their Personal Power?

they will tend to do what ever they can to make you and your organization fail.

Either way, those who just comply and those who resist what they have been told to do, both have the feeling that they are not responsible for the successful outcome of those orders. After all, they didn't get to make the decision, someone else did. They just did what they were told to do. Their mindset is one of "I have to," not one of accepting personal responsibility.

What you get in the end with those who complied are unengaged employees, doing just what they have to do to get by. Those who resisted become actively disengaged with the organization, causing severe problems, and undermining all the hard work that your engaged, personally responsible employees are producing.

So just how do you get employees to be personally responsible? You let them take control of their jobs and make their own decisions. You insure that they have the proper training and information so that they can make good decisions, and if they need more information, allow them to acquire it. Now when a decision needs to be made, they make it.

They decide about what needs to be done, and their attitude is that they will accept the consequences. As a result, they feel that they are responsible for the outcome, and they have a vested interest to insure that the outcome is a positive one. They behave in ways that show that they are engaged in their jobs, and in the success of the organization. Their mindset towards their managers and the organization is that they get to choose to do the things they do.

After all, isn't this how you allow your best and most responsible employees to operate? Taking away personal responsibility from employees because they aren't currently personally responsible isn't going to make them personally responsible. If you don't allow them to take responsibility for their jobs and make their own

decisions, then eventually those that want to be personally responsible and retain their Personal Power will leave and go somewhere that will allow them to be this way. Others will just give up and become either compliant or resentful. Either way, they relinquish their Personal Power and will not be personally responsible. In the end, all you will get are unengaged and actively disengaged employees for those efforts.

So where do you begin in your efforts to acquire personally responsible employees? Remember, your organization hired all of your employees with the one time belief that they showed promise in your organization. Allow them to live up to that promise. Begin working with them as a coach to help them make better decisions, but allow them to make those decisions, and stop trying to take their ability to be personally responsible away from them. Do not steal their Personal Power. Guide them and ask them questions, but don't tell them what to decide; let them make that decision on their own. After all, that really is where personal responsibility begins—with decisions.

If you do this, you are on your way to building a staff of personally responsible employees.

When you have disciplined people, you don't need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don't need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive controls.

Jim Collins
Good to Great

Gary Lear is the President & CEO of **Resource Development Systems**LLC, *an organizational performance research and consulting firm that helps organizations increase performance by more effectively* **managing the human side of business**[sm], *resulting in the achievement of their goals.*

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