

Collaboration is potent

Managing Books

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The Responsibility Virus
By Roger Martin
Basic Books, 286 pages, \$41.50

John Kennedy challenged Americans with his phrase, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." The Peace Corps, which emerged out of that thinking, remains vibrant today. By contrast, Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" was quickly shattered.

In *The Responsibility Virus*, Joseph L. Rotman School of Management dean Roger Martin suggests that is because Mr. Gingrich's implicit message on behalf of the Republican Party was: "Vote for us, then sit back and watch us perform. We'll take care of it for you." And at the heart of that promise was a leader assuming "heroic" responsibility for making critical choices, rather than a sharing of responsibility between leaders and followers.

Too often, Mr. Martin suggests, leaders try to grab the lion's share of responsibility for some task. That only encourages passivity in followers, who feel left out. At the first sign of passivity, the leader grabs more responsibility, feeling irritated by subordinates who are shirking their duties. The cycle continues, with irritation escalat-

ing into anger, until the leader eventually takes on more responsibility than can be handled effectively.

As the leader approaches failure, he or she does an abrupt turnaround, flipping to an under-responsible stance in order to be insulated from what's ahead. That jolts followers into their own extreme reaction, flipping to over-responsibility, making sure that they are never again put in a position of being dependent on a leader — often the successor to the damaged current leader — who lets them down.

It's an endless loop, driven by fear of failure. And it if seems a touch abstract, Mr. Martin offers lots of examples from his consulting career that will make it starkly familiar, since it occurs daily in most workplaces.

Prompting it are four governing values that Harvard professor Chris Argyris delineated behind human behaviour:

- To win and not lose in any interaction;
 - To always maintain control of the situation at hand;
 - To avoid any embarrassment of any kind;
 - To stay rational throughout.
- "When we're operating from the governing values, failure looms so large as a threat that we try to avoid it at almost any cost. When we can't avoid it, we try to cover it up or deny it," Mr. Martin says.

Under those governing values, collaboration is dangerous — something to be avoided. "If I work in partnership with someone else, the other person may screw up, which would make me part of a losing effort. In a partnership, I am no longer in control. Worse, I may have to be part of all sorts of potentially embarrassing conver-

sations I would love to avoid."

We therefore embrace one of two options: fight, in which we assume total responsibility for the situation; or flight, in which we assume almost no responsibility.

Mr. Martin offers four practical tools that can be applied in the workplace to encourage collaboration and overcome the responsibility virus.

The choice-structuring process, for example, is aimed at teams that don't get full participation because members are afraid of losing in a clash of ideas. The group must frame a choice with at least two options — to avoid everybody meekly assenting to an option they don't really like. Any option that a member of the group feels is important must be included, so they aren't embarrassed and don't withdraw into an under-responsible, sulking stance.

For each option, the group must specify the conditions that must hold true for the option to be a good choice. Next, group members must determine which of the conditions they are least confident hold true, which allows skeptics free rein and helps the group to understand clearly the impediments to pursuing that option.

A test is designed to determine the validity of each option, with the most skeptical person taking the lead role since he or she will have the highest standard of proof. That person then oversees the testing and analysis of that option, to give the group full confidence in the results, with a final choice made when those results are known.

That choice is usually easy, because the criteria have been predetermined and the governing values are not threatened because of the process.

The Responsibility Virus is an incisive and important book. It's easy to read and will offer assistance to all of us who struggle with the responsibility virus at work, at home, or in volunteer-based associations.

♦ ♦ ♦
In Addition: *The Performance Appraisal Question and Answer Book* (Amacom, 238 pages, \$28.95) by Dick Grote is a superb guide to establishing and implementing a performance appraisal system in a small or large company, steering you through all the pitfalls.

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Just In: *The Essential Vince Lombardi* (McGraw-Hill, 204 pages, \$31.95) by his son Vince Lombardi Jr., is a collection of the legendary football coach's motivational statements on everything from fatigue to leadership.

Prolific writer Brian Tracy looks at how to apply proven principles of military strategy to your life in *Victory* (Amacom, 311 pages, \$39.95)

Walk Softly and Carry a Big Idea (John Wiley, 173 pages, \$26.95) by Don Jones is a fable that presents seven lessons for finding meaning, passion and balance in your life.

Intelligent Fear (Key Porter, 208 pages, \$29.95) by Toronto Star writer Michael Clarkson looks at how to make fear work for you.

In *Out of the Box* (Harvard Business School Press, 215 pages, \$47.95) John Hagel III, co-author of *Net Gain and Net Worth*, looks at the new generation of technology known as Web services, which connect existing information technology platforms in more automated and flexible ways.

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This is the on-line version of REALM magazine, which bills itself as the "get-a-life guide for gutsy twentysomethings."

The Burnaby, B.C.-based magazine posts articles about issues facing young Canadian workers as they try to balance starting a career and keeping a life. The latest offering: a look at young people and unions, advice about choosing a MBA program and a profile of 24-year-old Canadian singer-songwriter Dayna Manning.

The site offers a list of career tools, including information about labour standards across the country and academic scholarship and bursaries. For visitors who want to talk to each other, there is a chat room and a virtual bulletin board. It's an ideal place to vent or pass along advice to your peers.

An interest Web site is where er workers can get current information, to find out where they are looking for

The Forum with fresh news with theme-related to the demographic

The "Resort" way to links related Web site list of record radio and tell all workforc check out. The site will feature to let the magazine