RESPONSIBILITY VIRUS: IT'S CATCHING

Matching capability to assumed responsibilities builds employee confidence

BY ROGER MARTIN

HOW MANY TIMES HAS A SUB-ordinate walked into your office and announced something like the following:

"Boss, we've just discovered a huge hole in our network security. We are more vulnerable to hacking than we ever believed. This will be an expensive problem!"

"Our biggest customer just called and they are really rattling our chain. They are threatening to pull the business, and I think they mean it this time!"

"Sam and Mary are at war again and this time I think it is really serious. If their two departments can't work together we will never be able to meet our commitments."

As a capable manager faced with a significant problem, your first reaction — a reflexive one — is to jump right in. You calm your subordinate, make suggestions, give orders and get things under control. True leadership at work.

Little do you realize that this was a trap — and you fell head first into it without a moment's thought. In doing so, you spread nothing less than a virus — what I call the responsibility virus. Your actions were profoundly over-responsible.

In each of these cases the subordinate came forward with the least responsible thing they could do — short of nothing. They informed you that your organization — in their area of responsibility — faced a worrisome situation. However, they failed to offer any possible solutions to the problem. In this respect they have been under-responsible. They could — and should — have done much more. But you also had a chance to help them be less under-responsible. You could have said: "Why don't you go away, think about it and come back with some ideas?" But instead you "helped" in a way that was actually counterproductive for both of you. By jumping in and taking on a problem of organizational consequence — but directly in another person's area of responsibility — you added a task to your already challenging job.
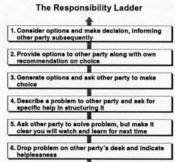
In response to your display of over-responsibility, your subordinate is encouraged to follow up their initial show of under-responsibility with yet more under-responsibility as they follow your lead. Your response may be a relief to them at first (boss helps with dangerous and scary problem) but it is profoundly bad for them because it undermines your view of them: they suddenly land in the "part of the problem," not "part of the solution" column in your organizational ledger. You begin to wonder whether they can handle their job. You are inclined to treat them with a little less respect and you lower your expectations of what — on a good day — they would be capable of.

With each tiny step of taking on responsibility and causing your subordinate to cede responsibility, you unwittingly perpetuate the responsibility virus. Eventually it will be deadly, bringing on failure for both parties involved — and for your organization. This is because eventually there will come a time when you are not able to do your job well and take on important parts of other people's jobs. There will be a straw that breaks the proverbial camel's back. And when that happens, your subordinate will feel betrayed. They never imagined that the person in whom they placed so much confidence could actually fail. And with your failure may well come a new boss and a new team with a dim view of what the old team failed to do to avert the failure in the first place.

But what causes this dynamic which is clearly no fun for anyone? The responsibility virus takes its life from the fear of failure. Failure offends values that — whether we understand them or not — govern how we approach the world. Researchers know that deep inside we desperately want to: win, not lose; maintain control; avoid embarrassment; and stay rational.

Sadly for us, the prospect of failure violates all of the above values: failure equals losing; after failure, someone else takes control; failure is profoundly embarrassing; and it is well-nigh impossible to maintain rationality while all this is going on. The prospect of all of the above triggers the deeply engrained response to fear: the fight or flight mechanism. Fight equates to seizing responsibility to make sure that failure doesn't happen. Flight equates to abdicating responsibility to make sure that failure doesn't happen to you specifically.

However, it takes two to tango in this respect. A step in one direction by you spurs a step in the opposite direction by your counterpart. Their initial hint of helplessness triggers your response of take-charge behaviour which only leads to more helplessness on their part and more aggressiveness on yours, and so on. In due course, over-responsible you thinks that your under-responsible subordinate is helpless and hopeless. Meanwhile, your under-responsible subordinate thinks they are being suppressed by their domineering boss.

Eventually the system crashes and burns. The over-responsible boss keeps soaking up responsibility from subordinates that he or she keeps nudging into greater under-responsibility. In due course this causes failure of some sort and, not surprisingly, by that point the over-responsible leader is likely to claim that there was nothing he or she could have done about it. The subordinates were short on the necessary skills and weren't willing to step up to the plate. "It just wasn't doable" — a remarkably under-responsible stance.

A number of tools can be used to inoculate against the responsibility virus. I describe a whole array in detail in my book *The Responsibility Virus: Stop Taking Charge or Taking Orders* (Basic Books, October 2002). But I will focus here on one key tool — the responsibility ladder.

The responsibility ladder is a tool that provides both boss and subordinate a language system for talking about division of responsibility in more sophisticated ways than, You're in charge and I'm not, or I'm in charge and you're not. Each rung of the ladder represents a relatively modest step in the right direction.

With the responsibility ladder firmly in mind, the boss can respond, "It feels like you are dropping this problem in my lap. Can we try going a bit higher up the ladder? If I work on a solution to this problem, will you watch and learn so that next time you can work it out on your own? Or, if I help with the initial structuring of the problem, can you take it from there?"

Depending on the complexity of the problem and the capabilities of the subordinate, the boss can encourage the subordinate to take on responsibility ever farther up the responsibility ladder. The benefit to the boss is that it doesn't result in him or her taking on excessive responsibility. The subordinate benefits by tackling the problem in a fashion consistent with their capabilities, thereby building their skills and confidence. And in parallel, the boss builds up confidence in the subordinate rather than undermining it.

The key to suppressing the responsibility virus is to inoculate yourself against that first reflexive step — the step into over- or under-responsibility. Recognition of the dangers of the virus — combined with a tool like the responsibility ladder — will help you match capability to responsibility assumed. This in turn will build confidence and capacity rather than initiate a downward slide towards failure for all parties involved.

Professor Roger Martin is dean of the Rotman School of Management.

KATHY BOAKE

The Responsibility Ladder

1. Consider options and make decision, informing other party subsequently

2. Provide options to other party along with own recommendation on choice

3. Generate options and ask other party to make choice

4. Describe a problem to other party and ask for specific help in structuring it

5. Ask other party to solve problem, but make it clear you will watch and learn for next time

6. Drop problem on other party's desk and indicate helplessness