

'Responsibility virus' can weaken a company

The Responsibility Virus: How Control Freaks, Shrinking Violets – And The Rest Of Us – Can Harness The Power Of True Partnership
By Roger Martin (Basic Books, \$41.50)

They don't get it. I'm managing subordinates who are incapable of doing their jobs. They take zero initiative and show no interest in working as a team. They refuse to make a decision. 'Just don't do it' is their mantra. If I want a job done right and on time, I do it myself."

Sound familiar? If so, your organization has come down with a bad case of what author and Rotman School of Management dean Roger Martin calls the responsibility virus.

It's a pervasive bug that breeds heroic, take-charge leaders and passive, distrustful followers. The virus eats away at promising careers and jeopardizes an organization's long-term health.

Fear is the germ that triggers a full-blown outbreak of the responsibility virus. We all dread doing the wrong things, especially in front of colleagues



Jay Robb
Off the Shelf

and superiors. Some of us freeze up and lose confidence. We pass the buck and sit on the sidelines. Others jump in, take over and go it alone. Either way, we're doomed to fail.

So what's the root of fear in the workplace? Four governing values underpin our dealings with other people:

- We need to win and never lose.
- We must maintain control of the situation at hand.
- We must avoid embarrassment.
- We must stay rational at all times.

"When we're operating from these governing values, failure looms so large as a threat that we try to avoid it at almost any cost," Martin says. "When we can't avoid it, we try to cover it up or deny it."

That fear drives us to fight or take flight. Instead of meaningful collaboration, we shirk responsibilities. We underperform, contribute less and marginalize ourselves.

Or we go to the other extreme by shouldering all the responsibility and taking on far more than we can realistically handle.

"It means loading yourself up with everyone else's work until, like the proverbial camel, you collapse under the weight."

The responsibility virus snags organizations in a downward spiral. On the brink of failure, heroic leaders typically opt for self-preservation. They do an about-face and shed responsibility. They blame incompetent and uncooperative subordinates for not pulling their weight.

Stunned subordinates suddenly become over-responsible and refuse to put their faith and future in anyone's hands but their own.

"There is less collaboration, greater distancing between leaders and followers, greater misunderstanding and mistrust, greater atrophy of skills."

Ridding your organization of the responsibility virus is a high-risk proposition. The cure can prove as destructive as the virus itself.

Many an organization has rushed headlong into creating an empowered, decentralized workplace where everyone's a leader. This spells trouble when you've pushed a heap of new responsibilities onto people who can't step up to the challenge.

Their level of fear and anxiety goes off the charts.

To cope, they become even more passive and paralysed with indecision. Morale hits bottom, and leaders can't resist the temptation to step into the void and once again take charge.

The solution is a set of tools that don't run afoul of the four governing values.

"The payoff," Martin says, "is better collaboration, better decisions for our organizations, better understanding and trust of our colleagues and faster skill-building for all of us."

Martin recommends a seven-step "choice-structuring process," a "frame experiment," a six-rung "re-

sponsibility ladder" and a redefinition of leaders and followers. Don't let the buzzwords fool you. Taken together, these tools can foster a better understanding — and sharing — of responsibilities.

At the heart of the responsibility virus are unproductive conversations — and often non-conversations — about the distribution of responsibility for decisions."

Martin shows how managers and employees can effectively talk not only about who's responsible for what and why but also how employees can develop skills to take on new challenges.

Martin's book is the perfect prescription for anyone who's doing too little or too much at work and looking for a cure to the responsibility virus.

"The critical reality is that every one of us, in each specific situation, holds in our hands the power to stop the virus. All we have to do is refuse the opportunity presented to act over-responsibly or under-responsibly."

Jay Robb is a freelance writer living in Hamilton.