

Accountability and Victimization: Getting Off the Hamster Wheel and Getting to Engaged Leadership

In part one of this article I will define the differences between making decisions as a victim or as an accountable leader. In part two of this article I will define what it takes to act as an accountable leader and offer some solutions operating from the accountable stance. Operating from an accountable standpoint offers obvious advantages to any organization.

In the past I've had conversations with leaders about accountability and leadership. Most often, they bemoan the lack of accountability in their organizations saying such things as "people don't take ownership" or "they don't act as if it is their project" yet they often don't know what to do differently. Many leaders need their people to be accountable yet they don't know how to encourage the accountability behavior. I'll talk more about this later.

I recently gained some critical insights on accountability while attending a seminar by Keller Williams, the national real estate company. During the seminar we compared [accountability](#) to its opposite, [victimization](#).

Quite frankly, I never viewed victimization as the opposite of accountability. The chart shows the distinction nicely as two different paths to a decision. In the accountable path, reality showed up, the leader became aware of the business reality, decided what to do and then took action. The accountable path is shown above. While not necessarily the easiest path, this approach provides the best long term business results.

Accountable Stance	Victim Stance
↑ Gain clarity about issue and define the problem	↓ Denial of business reality
↑ Apply their attention energy and focus	↓ Projection onto others
↑ Explore possibilities	↓ Deflection of ideas away from me
↑ Make plans for change	↓ Resignation
↑ Implement change	↓ Status Quo

In the victim decision making path, the leader was confronted with current business reality: the company is losing market share, there is a problem employee who is also a good friend of theirs, they are just barely meeting the sales numbers.

Management does not want to confront business reality so they place blame for problems on others. They may say things like, "We just don't have the people to

get the job done,” or “We didn’t have good information.” In the end, the leader as victim is left with hoping, waiting and resignation. Maintenance of the status quo is the outcome. Employee initiative and morale may remain low as well.

How do we choose one path and not the other? How can we get effectively from one side of the decision making table to the other? As leaders, how can we get more of our people to act more often from the stance of accountability and not as victims? These are questions that leaders are looking to answer to improve both individual and organizational performance.

For me, increased understanding comes from the work of Dr’s. Noel Larson and Jim Maddock and their victim/perpetrator model. The denial of reality occurs in two typical ways: as the victim who experiences reality and shrinks from it or as the perpetrator who has a similar uncomfortable experience or feelings and lashes out, attacks, blames or ridicules others.

Energetically, victims and perpetrators both engage in pushing reality away from themselves and projecting onto others what it is they are feeling or thinking. Some typical statements might be, “You did it” or “It’s the resources the other guys now have” or “That does not work here.” Both victim and perpetrator are victimized by what is happening in their external world. Neither one acts as an accountable leader.

Victim/ Perpetrator: As victim, I experience being at the effect of what I experience, e.g. you have made me feel bad or it’s your fault. I am not comfortable or at ease with my experience and am not willing to acknowledge my discomfort. The victim usually shrinks away from the experience.

As perpetrator, I am uncomfortable with my own inner experience and lash out at you, attack you and actively work to make you feel at fault for my unpleasant experience.

A special type of victim comes from another model developed by Dr. Larson This type is known as the victim/over achiever and in my experience is present all over the business world. Most often victim/overachievers show up as the drivers in high tech, fast paced companies. Typically, these people were victims of their circumstances early in life and their modus operandi is now to be the best at all times in all places. Businesses love them and leaders love them, because they always get a lot done and do it well. They rise to the top. It all works great with them until things go badly with a customer, at a particular meeting or in a certain quarter. Then watch out: they become the best perpetrators, aggressive, attacking, making others pay for their lack of accomplishment. They are talented achievers without a solid emotional foundation. Under stress, or the inevitable lack of success, their lack of true leadership and resiliency manifests itself costing both themselves and their organization dearly.

The key question to ask is, "What drives our victims and perpetrators to choose the victim position rather than the accountable position?" (If we act as victims we need to know what is driving our current behavior to be able to change to more effective behavior.) The answer is simple; the solution difficult and complicated. Our willingness to act as victims comes from our underlying anxiety and discomfort with our current reality. We act as victims because we are unable to manage our discomfort and thus retreat to inaction.

To be accountable, we frequently need to experience difficult feelings or we may need to engage in what may be the uncomfortable leadership tasks such as budget cutting, difficult performance reviews or redeploying resources. All of us periodically become uncomfortable when confronted with new information or circumstances that require us to do something differently. We are all inevitably confronted with information or circumstances that require us to change.

The choice becomes, which decision path do I take?

- The accountable decision making path
- The victim decision making path

The victim path diminishes leadership and detracts from effective organizational performance. When on the victim decision making path I often feel overwhelmed, underappreciated or unacknowledged. I then cover up these bad feelings by doing more, attacking others or blaming others. Just underneath the surface the unresolved feelings stir, waiting to burst out when someone confronts me in a meeting, or when Grace gets promoted and I don't, or when I snap and criticize a staff member for no good reason. Often, this decision path is not entered consciously.

The move from the victim to accountable decision path is essential for sustained effective business performance and quality leadership. People follow leaders who are accountable. Why is it so difficult to get and stay on this path? The answer is simple: To move onto the path of accountability we must be willing to make and keep commitments and act from our personal integrity. Keeping commitments and acting from integrity often results in personal or business pain. Our only solution is to increase our ability to self observe and to become more conscious of our own reactivity.

This implies that we must learn to notice the feelings, thoughts and sensations we have when someone says something that "tweaks" us and that we must learn to pause, intentionally, when others speak, to observe our assumptions and to inquire about what is creating meaning for them when they speak. This is no small task especially in the action of everyday high speed business. To be accountable we must know who we are and then act from the place within us that we know is the right thing to do.

Great leaders are able to act from the accountable decision path because they recognize that there are **key tasks of leadership**:

- to model appropriate action
- set the tone for others to follow and
- to manage perception

Great leaders are willing to act from a place of integrity and keep their commitments because it encourages others to act in a similar manner. The bottom line: improved performance.

Victimization detracts from both individual and organizational performance. Individual victims don't get to experience and bring their best selves into the world. That is the cost to them and to others. The path to accountability is not easy because it requires a willingness to accept pain for growth and demands we become increasingly conscious of what we say, what we think and what we do.

In the world of contemporary business having a plan and superior approach is necessary but not enough. Business is about thoughtful action. Next month:

“Moving to accountable action: How do I get there?”