

When I was a child, one of my responsibilities was to serve as an acolyte in my church. Like many kids my age, I didn't want to be an acolyte – mostly because I hated to sit up front where people could watch my every move. If that wasn't bad enough, my main job as an acolyte often caused me even greater despair. Due to the difference in my seemingly small stature and the mountainous height of the candles I needed to light, I could never quite see where the candlewick was. Consequently, I generally fumbled around until "providence" guided my hand and the candle was mercifully lit.

That's where Roy Schroeder came in.

Roy was a member of my church, my school bus driver and very tall. And on more than one occasion, after briefly watching my struggle to light a candle, Roy would rise from his seat, come up to gently guide my hand to light the candle and then sit back down. I remember Roy's actions with such clarity because, at least for me, he exemplified the definition of personal accountability:

The willingness to claim 100% ownership for the results provided as a consequence of your involvement, both individually and collectively with others.

Sure, it was my job to light the candle.

I was *responsible*. But Roy had a sense of personal accountability in when and how I would light it. He could sit back and wait for providence to guide my hand, or he could intervene. Roy was always careful to never actually light the candle himself. He knew that it was important for me to do it. Still, by simply guiding my hand, his action caused the candle to be lit.

Many people confuse responsibility and accountability as being one in the same. In reality, they are more like two sides of the same coin. There is a cartoon that has been around for years depicting a cowering employee before the large desk of his boss. The employee's boss looks out over the rim of his glasses and says, "Jones, we're going to give you more responsibility. We're going to make you personally accountable for everything that goes wrong around here!"

While each of us may feel like Mr. Jones now and then, this obviously is not the correct way to think about

SOLUTIONS

Is Personal Accountability in Your Job Description?

By Allan Forbis,
Planning and Development



"...being accountable has more to do with giving up certain behaviors, beliefs and attitudes, than just trying to behave in a different way."

responsibility or personal accountability.

Because you get a paycheck, you are responsible for something. It may be a product, a process, a service, or people. Your responsibility involves what you are required to do. At the same time, there is also an expectation of accountability, which means that someone holds you answerable for the outcome of your actions – or inactions.

The question then becomes, what are you doing, or not doing, to further the success of a product, a process, a service – and the people who look to you for help in your organization.

Do you say, "It was the XYZ department that forgot to __." "It wasn't my idea." "My boss doesn't spend enough time with me to train me right." "My employees just stand around every chance they get." And the ever popular, "It's not my job."

Roy Schroeder could have thought, "It's not my job to help Allan light the candle." He didn't. That is one of the reasons I remember him.

William A. Guillory, author of *Empowerment for High-Performing Organizations*, contends that being accountable has more to do with giving up certain behaviors, beliefs and attitudes, than just trying to behave in a

different way. Guillory believes that one of the most common defense mechanisms used to avoid accountability or responsibility is to become upset. Obviously, if you're upset, you can't effectively handle the matter. Guillory says going "unconscious," is another defense mechanism. This is done by simply tuning someone out, or by having your own mental conversation while someone is attempting to point out how you could have assumed greater responsibility. Some of us may be reminded of occurrences such as these with our spouse.

Guillory points out that yet another defense is playing the role of victim to escape accountability. Expressions common to the victim are "I can't" and "I'm unable." Often, what this person is really saying is, "I am unwilling."

Sometimes, being personally accountable simply involves courage. In 1958, Woody Allen enjoyed a lucrative career as a comedy writer for television. He stayed

behind the scenes because his biggest fear was appearing in front of an audience. Besides that, the \$75 a week stand-up comics were earning was only a token of the \$1,700 he was earning doing the writing. Still, Allen followed the urge to stretch beyond what he was doing. He got physically sick before every performance. He was applauded, booed, jeered and cheered, but those who knew comedy revered him as a natural talent. When asked about his fears and insecurities, Allen said, “Talent is nothing. You’re born with talent in the same way that basketball players are born tall. What really counts is courage. Do you have the courage to use the talent with which you were born?”

In their book entitled, *The Oz Principle*, authors Roger Connors, Tom Smith and Craig Hickman seek to put courage and personal accountability into perspective by using the characters from the popular story, *The Wizard of Oz*. As we all know, the main characters embark on a journey of adventure, danger and self-discovery along the Yellow Brick Road to help a lost little girl named Dorothy find her way home. The story uses its now famous characters to portray most of us at some point in our lives. We remember the Tin Man, who sometimes lacked the heart to be empathetic, the Scarecrow, who sometimes lacked the wisdom to make the best choices, the Cowardly Lion, who occasionally lacked the courage to do the right thing, and the Wizard, who tried to pass himself off as “all knowing” to mask self-confidence issues.

By the end of the story, however, it is the character of Dorothy who realizes life’s great truths. To reach your destination and achieve your goal, you often need to think and act in ways different from those that are familiar and comfortable. In Oz, Dorothy realizes that everyone’s fear of failure is lessened when they discover their own courage and become accountable for their own actions. She learns that empowerment comes from within and waits for each one of us to make the discovery. As Dorothy sums up in the film’s famous line, “It was in my own backyard all along.”

Personal accountability is opportunity. It is opportunity to contribute to the organization of which we are a part. It is the opportunity to be counted among the other people inside our organization whom we truly admire and respect. It is our opportunity to ask, “What can I do to contribute?” and “How can I make a difference?”

If your organization fosters an environment that values professional integrity, honesty and courage, personal

accountability truly presents you with the opportunity to grow while serving others. And as you grow, so will your organization.

To see if personal accountability is part of your “job description,” see if you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Are You Personally Accountable At Work?



Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. I am totally responsible for my success at work.
2. I am very productive, regardless of my work environment.
3. I am accountable for the results I produce, even if a situation is unfair.
4. I take training classes to upgrade my skills and competencies on a regular basis, without having to be told.
5. I am very skilled at the work I do as demonstrated by my work performance.
6. I have demonstrated strong interpersonal skills where mentoring or coaching is concerned.
7. I hold my team to their commitments, regardless of how it may affect my personal and professional relationship with them.
8. I am willing to examine my own accountability issues in order to achieve team success.

If these statements have encouraged you to learn more about personal accountability strategies for yourself and your team, watch for the next edition of *Solutions*.

Sources:

The Oz Principle: Getting Results Through Individual and Organizational Accountability by Roger Connors, Tom Smith, Craig R. Hickman and Thomas Smith; Prentice Hall Press, October 1998.

Empowerment for High-Performing Organizations, by William A. Guillory and Linda Galindo (Contributor); Innovations International, January 1995.

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