

# *What Does it Mean: To Take Responsibility?*

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**Trans4mind**

# What Does it Mean: To Take Responsibility?

by Dr. Alan Zimmerman

"The reason people blame things on the previous generations is that there's only one other choice." —*Doug Larson*

Accountability is "in." It's one of the hot topics on the speaking circuit, and indeed, I often address that topic in my keynotes and seminars. If you're going to be an effective manager, you **MUST** hold your people accountable. Otherwise, your company may crash. After all, if an employee is paid \$200 a day to do a job but only gives back \$50 worth of effort, the economics simply do not work out.

The same goes for parenting. If you're going to be an effective parent, you **MUST** hold your kids accountable. When they violate the rules, mix with the wrong crowd, cheat on a test, stay out beyond their curfew, or do any other dumb things like drugs or alcohol, you **MUST** hold them accountable.

Of course, ineffective parents make excuses for not doing their job. They'll say, "By the time I get home from work I'm too tired to discipline the kids ... or ... I want them to have all the things I never had growing up." Your sincere but naive sentiment will simply turn spoiled children into spoiled adults ... who feel entitled to everything but responsible for nothing.

Holding people accountable may sound straight laced. Well, so is gravity. Practice prevention; build a fence at the top of the cliff, not a hospital at the bottom!

So I'm all for accountability. But there's another issue that may be even more important ... and that is ... people learning to take responsibility. It's one of the characteristics of EVERY truly effective, successful individual in any role or job.

Unfortunately, we're living in a time and a culture where many people don't know it means to take responsibility. After all, the "in" thing is to blame everybody else for what's not working.

To turn that around, we've got to start teaching people what "taking responsibility" is all about. Here are a few of the things I teach in my own programs...

### **1. Responsible people take responsibility for making things better.**

As author Barbara Pletcher puts it, "The real winners in life are the people who look at every situation with an expectation that they can make it work or make it better."

That's tough. Anytime you try to make things better, you'll probably face naysayers who say it can't be done, roadblockers who try to stop you, and the very likely possibility you'll fail before you succeed. And who wants to go through all that hassle?

### ***Winners! Responsible winners!***

Responsible winners know it takes courage to leave their comfort zones, go through some tough times, and wonder if they're making any progress at all. But they try to make things better ... anyway.

It's a lesson that needed to be learned at a particular dog food company. At their annual conference, the sales manager asked his sales team how they liked the company's new advertising program. "Great," they replied, "the best in the business."

"What do you think of the product?" the manager asked. "Fantastic," they replied.

"How about the sales force?" he insisted. Of course, the sales team knew they were the best so they responded enthusiastically.

"Okay then," the manager said, "if we have the best brand, the best packaging, the best advertising program, and the best sales force, why are we in 17th place in our industry?" After an awkward silence one of the salesmen shouted, "It's those dogs. They just won't eat the stuff."

Guess what? Your problem is not the dogs, or your job, or your spouse, or society at large, or whatever. Be honest. Your biggest challenge in life is you. If life's not going the way you want it to, you are responsible for making it better. And responsible winners do exactly that.

## **2. Responsible people take action rather than wait to be told.**

In other words, they learn to self-motivate and self-manage. And over time, that builds tremendous character as well as great results. As Dr. Heartsill Wilson said, "The things you do that you don't have to do will always determine what you are when it is too late to do anything about it."

It's a lesson a wannabe sports reporter had to learn. As Gene Marine, the editor of the "Bellefontaine Examiner" newspaper in Ohio, tells the story, he sent a new sports reporter out to cover a big game. He returned to the paper without a report.

"What's the story?" asked Marine. "There is none," replied the reporter.

"No game?" What happened?" quizzed the editor. "The stadium collapsed." answered the reporter.

Unable to believe what he was hearing the editor asked, "Then where's the report on its collapse?" After a moment's hesitation, the reporter replied, "That wasn't my assignment, Sir." Needless to say, that was the end of his career. The wannabe reporter knew little or

nothing about being responsible. He waited to be told to what to do rather than take appropriate action.

Max Steingart writes about that in his eloquent essay. He writes, "Success Requires a Willingness to Act..."

If you want to be successful, you can start at anytime. But you must start.

Don't make the mistake of not doing anything because you can only do a little.

Do what you can do.

To be aware of what you want and not go after it,

To spend years wondering if something could have materialized,

And never knowing if it could have been, is a tragic waste of your life.

The worst thing you can do is not to try.

To reach a port, you must sail.

You must sail, not lie at anchor.

You must sail off in the direction of your dreams, not drift.

A journey of a thousand miles, begins with one step.

### **3. Responsible people don't expect somebody else to do it.**

The greatest researcher on success, Napoleon Hill, commented on that. He said many years ago, "The best job goes to the person who can get it done without passing the buck or coming back with excuses." The responsible person just does what needs to be done instead of expecting someone else to do it.

Now I know there are some people who are aren't taking responsibility for making things better, who aren't stepping up to the plate, because they honestly believe there are others who are more qualified. Their intentions are good ... but they're wrong. Those who make a difference in life or at work are seldom the most qualified. More often than not, those that make a difference are simply the ones who decided to try.

At the University of Southern California commencement ceremony, that's what Chief Judge Alexander M. Saunders told the students.

He said, "As responsibility is passed to your hands it will not do to assume that someone else will bear the major burdens, that someone else will demonstrate key convictions, that someone else will run for office, take care of the poor, visit the sick, protect civil rights, enforce the law, transmit value, and defend freedom. What you do not value will not be valued. What you do not remember will not be remembered. What you do not change will not be changed. What you do not do will not be done. You can, if you will, craft a new society. It's not a question of what to do, but simply the will to do it."

Perhaps you have a tough decision to make, and you've been putting it off and putting it off. Perhaps you've been waiting for someone else to do what needs to be done. If so, write down all the reasons you're not taking any action. And write down all the advantages of making the decision and taking the necessary action. Once you know in your heart what you should do and why you should do it, go for it. It's what taking personal responsibility is all about.

Cowardice asks, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks, "Is it politic?" Vanity asks, "Is it popular?" But conscience asks, "Is it right?"

Long before the days of computers and long before such programs as Photoshop, people would say, "The camera never lies." And people would tend to believe that "What you see is what you get."

Well, some rather nasty characters took advantage of that belief to make themselves look more responsible than they really were. And no one engaged in more of that deceitfulness than Josef Stalin. He did everything he could to alter history and exaggerate his importance.

You see, Stalin was ruthless. Anyone considered a traitor disappeared in the middle of the night, was sent to a hard labor camp, or was executed. That made him extremely unpopular inside his own country as well as around the world ... so much so that he lived his life in fear of being overthrown.

The strange thing is, Stalin didn't change his irresponsible policies. Instead, he did everything he could to make himself "look" like the rightful, responsible leader of the Soviet Union. He added himself to photos of events at which he wasn't present. He forged photographs of himself standing alongside his revered predecessor, the God-like Lenin, while he removed pictures of his rivals or made them look bad. Stalin was even vain enough to make himself look taller ... and hopefully more powerful in the fake pictures.

So it's no wonder history has labeled Stalin as a very sick and highly immoral individual. Instead of taking responsibility for all the crimes he perpetrated, he simply pretended to be a leader with a lot of responsibility. As the old rock-and-roll song used to say, he was "The Great Pretender."

Well that's NOT what I'm talking about when I talk about taking responsibility. I'm talking about the things real champions do to ensure their success on and off the job.

#### **4. Responsible people keep their focus.**

They keep their eye on the ball. They know that without focus, it is difficult to hit a bulls-eye, make a touchdown, take a good picture, or avoid an accident on the highway. They know focus is an essential ingredient in the formula for success.

Responsible people are always asking themselves one critical question. They ask themselves if their present action will take them closer and closer to their goal. If so, they do it. If not, they skip it.

By contrast, irresponsible people are easily distracted. Unexpected events take them off course, and before they know it, the kids are gone or a career opportunity has slipped away. They spend too much of their time chasing the "urgent" things in life rather than the "important" things.

#### **5. Responsible people practice self-discipline.**

Responsible people know that responsibility is a CHOICE that only they can make. They know that their response-ability is the ability to

CHOOSE a correct response in any situation they face. And as a result, they tend to be very successful. But just in case they aren't, they don't blame others. They take responsibility for their actions and attitudes.

Max Steingart wrote about the connection between responsibility, choices, and self-discipline. All of us would be wise to heed his words. He writes:

***You Make Your Own Opportunities***

Your destiny isn't a matter of chance, it's a matter of the choices you'll make in the coming year.

Success isn't something you wait for, it's something you must pursue in the months ahead.

Don't wait for extraordinary opportunities to be successful.

Seize common occasions and turn them into great ones.

Opportunities sometimes come disguised in the form of misfortune, or temporary defeat.

Start where you are.

You're at this moment, standing right in the middle of opportunity.

If you act on your dreams you can live them in the New Year.

You have a lot to look forward to.

To follow Steingart's advice requires a great deal of self-discipline. Every time you stop yourself from doing what you shouldn't (such as turning in a report that is less than professional or eating that extra sweet) and start doing what you should (such as turning in a polished professional report or eating a carrot instead), you become a more responsible person overall.

By contrast, irresponsible people play the blame game. Instead of being self-disciplined and making their own opportunities, they

make excuses for their lack of success. The boss was being unreasonable; the customers expected too much; their kids wouldn't listen to them, and on and on and on.

## **6. Responsible people take care of the small stuff.**

They know that the little things count, and they make sure they do the small things ... such as getting a card for an upcoming birthday or anniversary, attending their child's game, picking up the dry cleaning, straightening up the conference room after a meeting, or showing up at a company picnic.

Irresponsible people tend to dismiss the small things. After all, they got busy, simply forgot, or didn't think those small things -- that were big things to other people -- were really that important. All they offer is more of the same ... more excuses for their lack of responsibility.

## **7. Responsible people start what they finish.**

Responsible people follow through. What they start ... they finish. In fact, they're often known by others as having this observable, admirable quality.

If this characteristic is a tough one for you, if you've got a tendency to quit before you finish, give yourself some relatively small goals that require you to stretch just a little. Start in some areas you care deeply about. And then with a few wins under your belt, start tackling some other more challenging areas. Nothing breeds success like success.

## **8. Responsible people give back what was given to them.**

They know that everything they have ... whether it be possessions, knowledge, or talent ... is to be shared with others rather than stored and hoarded.

One such person was Elie Wiesel who spent a considerable amount of time in the Nazi concentration camps. He realized he was "given" an experience that "gave" him wisdom that he needed to share. So he traveled extensively after his release, talking to young people.

He often asked young people, "How will you cope with the privileges and obligations society will feel entitled to place on you?"

As he tried to guide them he shared his sense of responsibility. He would say, "What I receive I must pass on to others. The knowledge that I have must not remain imprisoned in my brain. I owe it to many men and women to do something with it. I feel the need to pay back what was given to me."

That's exactly what Jeanne Joyce did, a teacher from the school system in the State of Nevada. She attended my "Journey to the Extraordinary" experience and found it so profound, so powerful, and so effective that she began teaching the skills and concepts to her students. When a few of her fellow teachers saw the transformation taking place in Jeanne's students, they wanted to learn what she was doing, so Jeanne took on the responsibility of giving back what was given to her. She began teaching them.

But that was just the beginning. Then Jeanne brought a whole team of teachers to my next "Journey to the Extraordinary" experience, and they went back to Nevada to teach more teachers the techniques they learned from me. And now the program is being taught and shared throughout the entire state. That's what responsible people do. They give back what was given to them.

## **9. Responsible people accept ultimate responsibility.**

It's one of the constant, irrefutable characteristics of all successful people. They accept ultimate responsibility ... like General Eisenhower.

He was given responsibility for planning the D-Day invasion. Giving the okay was a painful decision, one he knew would lead to many deaths. Yet if it was a success, it would guarantee victory over the Nazis. In the hours prior to the assault Eisenhower wrote a press release that he would use in the event of the invasion's failure. It read: "Our landings have failed ... and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and this place was based on the best information available. The troops, the Air Force and the Navy

did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to this attempt, it is mine alone."

How refreshing, leader-like, and how uncommon. You seldom if ever hear today's "so-called" leaders take responsibility and say such things as, "It was my vote that is responsible for our current economic crisis ... or ... It was my legislation that lead to the crash in housing ... or ... It was my willingness to overlook the proper safety procedures that lead to our current disaster."

To wrap it up, responsible people are response-able. With that skill you'll reap more rewards than blame-gamers or excuse-givers ever will.

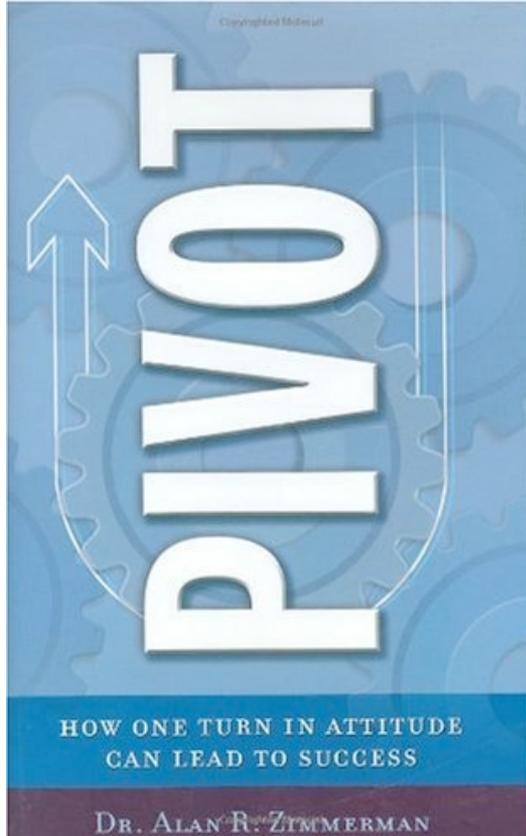
### **Actions:**

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means "always making excuses" and 10 means "always taking responsibility," how would you score yourself? What is your plan for increasing your score?

How good are you at starting what you finish? If you need to get better, write down the steps that will need to be taken to finish your project, and write down a deadline for the completion of each step.

###

As a best-selling author and Hall of Fame professional speaker, **Dr. Alan Zimmerman** has taught more than one million people in 48 states and 22 countries how to keep a positive attitude on and off the job. In his book, *PIVOT: How One Turn In Attitude Can Lead To Success*, Dr. Zimmerman outlines the exact steps you must take to get the results you want in any situation. Go to Alan's site for a [Free Sneak Preview](#)



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