

# Accept Responsibility

# Workshop 5

**S**andy, a recently promoted project manager at Blue Heron Communications, oversees all the brochures, catalogs, and ad copy produced for clients by her advertising team. Everything that leaves her group must have her stamp of approval.

Sandy received the promotion because of her careful attention to detail, keen design eye, and creativity. As her level of responsibility has increased, so has her workload, but she loves her new position and finds the challenge exciting.

When the phone rings, Sandy hears the agitated voice of the marketing director at Bike America, one of Blue Heron's biggest clients. "Sandy," exclaims KaLita Leon. "I just checked the catalogs that came this morning and our phone number is wrong. We need the catalogs for the bike show this weekend!"

Sandy's mind races. "How could we have missed such a basic thing?" she worries. "Reprinting the catalogs will cost us a fortune!"

Sandy realizes her client needs a quick solution, so she says, "I'm sorry for the mistake, KaLita. We'll take care of it right away. I need to check some things, then I'll call you back."

Sandy hangs up, takes a deep

breath and walks to her supervisor's office.

Knocking at the door, she tells Josh what happened and suggests they print labels with

the correct phone number to attach to the existing catalogs.

"Josh," Sandy says before she leaves, "I'm really sorry about this. You have my word that I won't let this type of mistake happen again."



## What's Inside

*Here, you will learn to*

- ◆ identify your work responsibilities
- ◆ demonstrate accountability
- ◆ handle criticism graciously

## Embracing Responsibility

When you accept a job, you take on certain responsibilities. Whether your job is to install solar panels, manage the camera for a TV news show, or administer the correct medications to a patient, your job will include these responsibilities:

- ◆ Being on time and giving your best effort
- ◆ Performing tasks accurately and on schedule
- ◆ Doing what you say you'll do when you say you'll do it
- ◆ Acting decisively and professionally
- ◆ Reporting progress to your supervisor
- ◆ Performing quality work
- ◆ Asking questions for clarification
- ◆ Getting along with coworkers and clients
- ◆ Demonstrating loyalty to your organization and serving its best interests

You will also be expected to take on additional responsibilities without being asked. If you discover a problem, you will be expected to try to find a solution or to bring the problem to the attention of others who can solve it. When you recognize that a task needs to be done, you will be expected to do it. By taking responsibility without being asked, you will increase your value to your organization.

## Attitude Counts!

Instead of accepting obligations with poise, professionalism, and confidence, some people run from responsibility. They complain, whine, and look for the easy way out. They may lack the confidence

to take responsibility. Supervisors doubt their ability to make quick, appropriate decisions. Customers complain about their poor service, and coworkers resent having to pick up the slack in their work.

If you tend to shy away from taking responsibility, it is important to identify why and then to develop the skills needed to perform responsibly.

Don't be afraid to ask for help in order to do the job well. Asking for appropriate help is one way of showing responsibility.



“  
If you take responsibility  
for yourself, you will develop  
a hunger to accomplish  
your dreams.  
”

— **LES BROWN**

*Motivational Speaker*

## Be Willing to Fail

Any time you take on a new task or project, you risk possible failure. While that may be frightening, failures offer opportunities for learning what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes you have to risk failure before you can become successful.



Usually you will handle a new responsibility well, especially if you evaluated your skills and found them to be up to the task before taking it on. If things don't work out as planned, think about what went wrong and decide how to correct the problem next time. You should recognize that failure is nothing to be ashamed of. Thomas Edison and his associates took three years to develop an efficient incandescent light bulb. They worked on more than 3,000 theories and tested thousands of filament materials. It was only after countless failures that they found a filament material that would burn for a long enough period of time.

## Corporate Responsibility

Like employees, companies have responsibilities—to their customers, employees, stockholders, and the community. Often, these responsibilities are outlined in company mission statements. Common corporate responsibilities include:

- ◆ Serving the customer well
- ◆ Providing superior-quality products and services
- ◆ Offering fair and reasonable prices
- ◆ Supporting the growth and development of employees
- ◆ Earning high returns for shareholders
- ◆ Conducting business ethically
- ◆ Protecting the environment

Whether your company's responsibilities are written in a mission statement or passed along verbally, since you are an employee you must help your company live up to those responsibilities as you perform your job.

I haven't failed—I've learned  
10,000 ways that don't work!

— **THOMAS EDISON**

*Inventor*



## Being Accountable

With every responsibility comes accountability—the obligation to answer for your actions. Being accountable means that you keep your supervisor informed of your progress, contact customers to let them know if their delivery is on schedule or delayed, and tell your supervisor if you make a mistake that may create a problem for your company.



For each of your responsibilities, you are accountable to someone. At work, that person may be you, your supervisor, your customers, your coworkers, or your profession. Pilots are accountable to their passengers and their families, the airline, and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Doctors are accountable to their patients, professional ethics committees, and professional associations and agencies.

Companies are accountable to their customers, employees, shareholders, and community.

## When Mistakes Happen

No matter how conscientious you are, you will sometimes make mistakes. Errors occur in every type of job and at every level of responsibility. If you don't make mistakes, you aren't taking risks. Without some risk, you won't advance.

Professionals treat mistakes as learning experiences. Admitting mistakes, evaluating why they occurred, and putting procedures in place to prevent their recurrence are characteristics of employees who understand the importance of accountability.

## Small vs. Large Mistakes

When you make a small mistake, you can often correct it without involving anyone else. But if the mistake is costly or may damage the organization's reputation, you have a responsibility to report it to your supervisor immediately.

When you make a mistake that can create a large problem, follow these guidelines:

- ◆ Take responsibility immediately.
- ◆ Tell your boss what happened.
- ◆ Apologize, and explain what you think you should do to fix the mistake.
- ◆ Take corrective action.
- ◆ Evaluate why the mistake occurred and implement a system to ensure the same type of mistake won't happen again.
- ◆ Let it go, and move on to other tasks.

It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for his actions.

— RONALD REAGAN

*U.S. President*

Actions of yours that cause significant damage are difficult to admit, but your acknowledgment will be respected by your supervisor. Make sure you do not:

- ◆ Blame others, even if they played a part. Blaming others will prolong the problem.
- ◆ Get defensive. It will just escalate the situation.
- ◆ Deny your responsibility. Eventually, the truth will surface, and you will look bad.
- ◆ Make excuses. Instead, look for solutions.

After you correct an error you have made, be sure to take the next step: evaluate why the mistake occurred and put a system in place to make sure the mistake doesn't happen again.

When Sandy, the project manager in the opening story, analyzed what caused her to miss an important quality check, she realized that she couldn't keep everything in her head with the



heavier workload that accompanied her promotion. To make sure that she doesn't miss any crucial quality checks in the future, she decided to write a checklist. She'll check off each item before approving any project.

- ◆ Check client name and address.
- ◆ Verify client phone number.
- ◆ Proofread spelling of product names.
- ◆ Confirm prices.
- ◆ Check dates.

On a personal level, you will feel better after admitting mistakes. You'll eliminate the fear of getting caught that comes with trying to cover up a mistake, and you won't risk angering others by blaming them. You will also be surprised at how much time and energy you save when you come clean and stop making excuses.

## Responsible and Accountable

Phrases used by employees who accept responsibility and accountability:

- "I'm responsible."
- "Please accept my apology."
- "I'll do what it takes to fix this."
- "I'm sorry."
- "I made a mistake."

## ACTIVITY 5.2

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### What Should They Do?

The employees described below all have made a mistake at work. What is their personal responsibility after the mistake? Describe what each person should do.

1. Maggie wakes with a start in the middle of the night. "Oh no," she groans. "I forgot to turn off the sprinkler system in the greenhouse. All the seedlings are going to wash away!" What action should Maggie take?

\_\_\_\_\_

How can Maggie make sure she doesn't repeat this mistake?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Dominic, who works for a small painting company, was asked by his boss to place an advertisement about the company's services in this week's paper. Busy with his work, Dominic forgot to place the ad. What action should Dominic take?

\_\_\_\_\_

How can Dominic make sure he doesn't repeat this mistake?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Brooke, an assistant in a law firm, mistakenly sends a brief intended for one of the firm's clients to the opposing attorney. The attorney who signed the brief should have caught the error but didn't. What action should Brooke take?

\_\_\_\_\_

How can Brooke make sure she doesn't repeat this mistake?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Angela, who works in an elder care facility, forgets to give one of the patients his afternoon medicine. The mistake is not life-threatening, but it could have been. What action should Angela take?

\_\_\_\_\_

How can Angela make sure she doesn't repeat the mistake?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Jocelyn runs a small studio that produces quality stained-glass pieces. She's excited when a well-respected gallery asks to display the studio's work, and she signs a contract to meet the gallery's demand. Soon Jocelyn realizes that the gallery's demand far exceeds her studio's production capacity. What action should Jocelyn take?

\_\_\_\_\_

How can Jocelyn prevent this from happening in the future?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Handling Criticism

While you may get lucky and discover your own mistakes, more often you'll learn of them when others point them out. A supervisor may return a report with comments about sections that need to be reworked. A teacher may tell you that you need to improve your writing. A customer may complain that you took too long to bring his coffee or repair an appliance.



How do you react to direct criticism. It's common to feel attacked and then to react in an angry or defensive manner. But that only escalates the problem. A better, more constructive approach is to view criticism as an opportunity for improvement.

Take Crystal, who works as a customer service representative at a large entertainment center. Crystal's supervisor calls her into his office and says that she needs to pay more attention to customers. He's noticed that she often chats with coworkers while customers are waiting to be served. This costs the company money in three ways: It takes Crystal's time. It takes her coworkers' time. It may cause customers to leave.

Crystal's immediate impulse is to defend herself. "I don't keep people waiting long," she thinks. "He doesn't know what he's talking about." But, to Crystal's credit, she stops, calms down, and thinks about what he's said. She has to admit that he's right.

### Recognize Constructive Criticism

If your supervisor criticizes your work or your behavior, remember that he or she has a responsibility to help the company succeed. Supervisors who give corrective feedback are taking an active interest in helping both you and the company.

Unfortunately, others may not have your best interest at heart when they offer feedback. They may simply be lashing out from disappointment, frustration, or jealousy. Their words may be spoken in anger. Instead of wanting to help you improve, they want to cast blame. This type of criticism is not helpful or constructive.

### Distance Yourself

Try this the next time you're on the receiving end of criticism:

- ✓ Look at the situation objectively.
  - ✓ Think about the advice you would give a friend who received this criticism.
- Then, follow your advice!



## Accept Feedback

When you are criticized, whether the criticism is fair or not, follow these steps to accept the comments maturely and professionally.

**Step 1:** Take a few deep breaths to calm down.

**Step 2:** Make eye contact. Through your body language, let the person know you are receptive to upcoming comments.

**Step 3:** Listen carefully. Ask questions if you don't fully understand. Try not to take the criticism personally. View it as advice about how work needs to be done in your company.

**Step 4:** Analyze what is being said. Does the person have the facts right? What is the person's motivation?

**Step 5:** Decide what to do. If you've made a mistake, acknowledge it and apologize. Say that you'll take steps to correct the error, then thank the person for the input.

If the criticism is unfounded, calmly explain why you feel that way. If there has been a misunderstanding, try to resolve it. But if you realize that the person is simply venting anger, explain that you disagree, excuse yourself, and walk away. If the person expressing anger is someone in authority and you are not able to excuse yourself, remain calm, don't argue, and wait for the person to dismiss you.

**Step 6:** Deal with the issue. If you are honest with yourself, you will usually be able to find more than a grain of truth in the criticism you receive. Distinguish the real issue and work to resolve it.



If you feel yourself cringing under the heat of criticism, follow these guidelines suggested by Sean Lyden, author of *Take the Heat: Handling Criticism Effectively*. You'll recognize them immediately. They're the guidelines firefighters recommend for any fiery situation: Stop! Drop! Roll!

- ◆ **Stop!** Take some deep breaths and calm down.
- ◆ **Drop!** Drop your defenses and listen.
- ◆ **Roll!** Roll with the punches. Deal with the situation professionally and move on. Don't let it get to you.

“  
That which does not kill  
us makes us stronger.

— **FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**  
German philosopher

”

## ACTIVITY 5.3

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Taking the Heat Appropriately

How you react when you are criticized will say a great deal about your professionalism. The following are some inappropriate responses to criticism. In the space after each comment, rephrase the comment into an appropriate response.

#### *Defensive Reaction:*

"It's not my fault. The directions weren't clear."

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#### *Lashing Out in Anger:*

"I'm not going to stand here and get criticized. I'm out of here!"

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#### *Withdrawal:*

"I don't know what happened. And, no, I don't want to talk about it."

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#### *Attacking the Critic:*

"You are such a jerk! If you ever paid attention, you'd see that what you're saying is totally off-base."

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## GETTING CONNECTED

To learn what one nonprofit organization is doing to hold corporations accountable for complying with workplace, consumer, and environmental responsibilities, visit the Website of the As You Sow organization:

**<https://myqss.link/As-You-Sow>**

Read about the organization’s campaigns against industry giants in such areas as recycling, genetically engineered foods, human rights, and sustainable forestry.

Many Internet sites focus on the topic of accepting criticism. Type “accepting criticism” into a search engine. Then read several articles to learn helpful advice in this important area.

## WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- In every job you take on certain responsibilities.
- Successful employees accept responsibilities with poise, professionalism, and confidence.
- Every employee has an obligation to answer for his or her actions.
- If you make a mistake, take responsibility without blaming others, reacting defensively, or making excuses.
- After you acknowledge a mistake, correct it and implement a plan to prevent the same type of error from happening again.
- Think of criticism as an opportunity for improvement, and handle it professionally and graciously.