

Reinhard K.
Sprenger

THE PRINCIPLE

OF RESPONSIBILITY

Pathways
towards
Motivation

The Principle of Responsibility

Dr. Reinhard K. Sprenger is the author of the best-selling *Mythos Motivation* (Campus, 16th edition, 1999) and independent consultant for personnel development and management training. He has advised Coca-Cola, 3M, BASF, Philip Morris, Hewlett Packard, Thyssen Handelsunion, apetito, Siemens, Fresenius, Daimler-Benz and many others. Dr. Sprenger is an associate lecturer at the universities in Berlin, Bochum, Essen and Cologne.

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The Principle of Responsibility

Pathways towards Motivation

Translated by W. J. Hadfield-Burkardt

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People always blame circumstances for what they are. I do not believe in circumstances. Those who make a mark on this world set out to find the circumstances they are looking for, and if they cannot find them, they create them, themselves.

George Bernard Shaw

Contents

Introduction	9
Organized irresponsibility	17
<i>The Philosophical Section</i>	41
Choice	43
Will	67
Responding	96
<i>The Pragmatic Section</i>	137
Farewell to the bellwether	139
Supervisors, managers	158
Leading towards commitment	167
Friendly mistakes	191
How can change be introduced?	203
Commitment to agreements	216
The credibility crisis	224
Epilogue	245
A word of thanks	247

Introduction

A cost-benefit analysis

»One day I was walking through the customer parking lot of one of our department stores when I saw a gardener raking up leaves. He was using a rake which only had about 15 teeth left – normally it would have had twice that number. I asked him: ›Why are you using this old rake? You are hardly making any progress.« – ›They gave me this rake«, the gardener calmly answered. ›Why didn't you take a better rake?« I insisted. ›That's not my job,« he replied. I thought: ›How can anyone give an employee such a poor quality tool to do a job? I'm going to find out who his supervisor is and have a talk with him. His job is to make sure that his people have the right tools.««

James Belasco told this story which illustrates in part what I am writing against in this book: the Pontius Pilatus attitude expressed primarily by »I am not responsible.« as well as an excessively exaggerated concept of leadership. This leads to questions such as: What are employees responsible for? Does giving the supervisor the responsibility solve the problem? What steps can be taken fundamentally to improve this situation? Do not all employees have to stand up for how they perform their work? And if that is true, what is the role of management? And what does it mean to »delegate responsibility?«

After I had published »Mythos Motivation« (The Myth of Motivation) I was asked – more frequently than I expected – whether I wanted to follow up this book with another. In particular many readers wanted to see a concrete »What is the better alternative?« This book is a follow-up to »The Myth« – but is in fact its forerunner. This volume does develop some of the ideas presented in the earlier book, specifically expanding on the outlined theses (especially those on the final pages) regarding self-motivation. But it does so in a way that is complete in itself. The supposed demarcation line between professional and private life – which is a misleading division anyway – is completely ignored. In any case I hope that many of you will see your own lives in this book and find your own questions answered.

The central question

I have stopped reading any books which start with »Everything is becoming more complex, faster, and more chaotic.« There are no advances worth mentioning to be achieved from the salto mortale into the comic opera world of management methods. Of course the winds have gotten a bit stiffer. Of course high-tech in the Far East and low-pay in the Eastern Europe have stiffened competition. But the basic problems in our organizations have not changed a bit. The national economist Werner Sombart formulated the central question of this book back in 1913:

»How is this possible: that healthy and largely admirable people with above average talents can want to perform a commercial activity, not only as a duty, not only as a necessary evil, but rather because they enjoy it, because they devote their hearts and minds, their bodies and souls to it?«

Today managers ask similarly:

- What can I do to insure that employees assume more responsibility?

- How can I harness the potential of my employees?
- How can I create a company into which employees like to come in the morning?

I would like to respond to these questions.

Questions of perspective

The mobilization of employee potential as a decisive factor for success has been well-known for years. Germany is not rich in natural resources. Our most important natural resource is people's readiness to cooperate. But, sadly, the work place frequently remains an area where initiative is absent. We run machines to full capacity, but we do not use the full capacities of people. So labor costs and structural problems are not the only things which sap the strength of the German economy. We do not utilize people to their full potential.

Most importantly, we do not vigorously require employees to assume responsibility. Many employees have dropped out, after years of being underrated, have forgotten how to assume responsibility for themselves, their motivation and their performance. Careful scrutiny reveals that large segments of the labor force are on a kind of psychological strike against the insult of permanently being expected to do work below their abilities. Their unemployment is internal. In their minds as well: work to rule.

The crisis of work is frequently still met with the old recipes which at best reflect no more than tinkering and fail to break loose from outmoded thinking. Some think they can motivate others with cash, for example, by reactivating the policy of offering monetary rewards for employee suggestions. A problem which cannot be solved by reaching for the wallet cannot be solved. But such ideas are like so much dead wood over which their employees trip.

Others think about restructuring the organization. The management mantra in this case is: open spaces, flat hierarchies, de-

bureaucratizing, decentralizing. This second approach seems to me necessary and promising; there are quite a few notable suggestions and encouraging examples.

Still: lean management, partially autonomous work groups, kaizen, reengineering – all these management concepts can only work if people's attitudes change. The research manager Sigmar Klose at Boehringer Mannheim says: With the best structure I can achieve 20 percent. The rest is mental attitude, the will to succeed, the feeling of »We can do it!« The structural optimizers make the same mistake as each one of us who hoped that a trip to a faraway country would make us happier: Your self is always with you.

»Games are won mentally.« The tighter the field, the hotter the competition, the more important the mental attitude is with which the employees work, the management leads and sales personnel go out to call on their customers. Especially regarding attitudes towards *changes*. Thus, it is also a question of attitude whether a company – unsuccessfully – wants to remain stable in the midst of change or seeks stability in change. It is notable to see how much difficulty many employees have in seeing anything positive in change: »That won't work!« (instead of »That won't work *that way*«). »I can't do that!« (instead of »I can't do that *yet*«). Evidently the only creature which loves change is a wet baby.

So in this book I am primarily concerned with the consciousness of people on the job. With a particular manner of observing life in the company. I am concerned with involvement, initiative and the feeling of being on course in one's own journey through life. My focal point is the individual.

The sections of the book

There is no business design task more important than the re-introduction of responsibility into the company. This is even more true since there is a tendency towards fewer and fewer managers and larger and larger management areas.

As a negative foil I describe in the first part of this book the disputes within companies over responsibility, assigning blame and rationalizing. The result is: organized irresponsibility. Near the end of this part I distinguish between responsibility, what is known as individual responsibility in German companies, and commitment.

The *Philosophical Section* lays the intellectual foundation for individual responsibility, motivation and commitment. At this point I am not speaking to the manager »as manager« but to all individuals, regardless of their rank in the hierarchy. You will only be able to profit from reading this part if you are prepared to apply it to yourself, if you use it as an incentive for self-criticism. The three pillars of individual responsibility: choice (autonomy) – will (initiative) – response (creativity) are developed.

Although the subtitle of this section conjures up an image of frozen high-brow thinking, some of the perspectives brought forward there are overwhelmingly simple. The fact that they must be reiterated aptly reflects the present state of our business community. If I crusade against the non-observance of discipline, will and commitment I am, however, exposing myself to the danger that, in this context, many hide their own lack of courage by accusing others of being unrealistic in their thinking. Utopian! Theory! Or the worst of all invectives: Philosophy!

So, I'm warning you: A few passages in this first main section may well strike you as being exceptionally irritating. I would have cut them out if they had been expendable for the argument as a whole. They are not. On the contrary: These parts in particular present readers with their most serious challenge. They require the whole reader, those who are prepared to re-examine themselves and their customary ways of thinking. So I can merely appeal to you to resist the urge to prematurely put down the book. Many things will become apparent and will be explained later in the book – and I hope – in an encouraging and liberating way.

The *Pragmatic Section* illustrates the three basic principles and daily situations in management practice. The question to be

examined is: What can management do to promote commitment? I contrast the widely heard call for managers to act as role models with a change in the overall approach. In the thicket of false alternatives: vision, role model, supervisor, the outlines of a forward-looking management culture can be made out.

This outline is forward looking in the sense that I bring the subjective constructivism for management questions down to earth: How are judgements about employees made? How can I change unsatisfactory conditions without undermining motivation? In addition, I discuss in relation to daily situations the possibility of employees assuming responsibility – but provide at the same time evidence that it is impossible to »transfer« responsibility, to »empower« employees. I develop the thesis that criticism does not work, and offer alternative procedures. The commitment mechanics for target agreements are described. The conclusion is provided by an essay about credibility traps.

The difference between the two main sections is also reflected by the fact that they are argued at different levels. That can be easily shown by the core question of the Pragmatic Section:

How can we create a company in which responsibility is no longer felt to be a burden but is desired?

»That is not the question at all«, is the response heard from opponents. »People want to bear responsibility; only suspicious and control-obsessed bosses stand in the way of them assuming this responsibility.« Granted. So we must open our eyes to a broader question: »What kind of management is needed to ensure employees take responsibility?« »Hold on a minute!« the other side exclaims. »The really interesting question is in fact: Why do employees pass the buck? Why do they *allow* themselves to be deprived of responsibility?«

So what I want to describe in this book is the meaning of commitment within companies and how managers can promote it. The opponents who I am pointing my finger at like the baptizer in Grünewald's painting, are the ethics of keeping your hands clean by doing nothing as well as an excessively exaggerated concept of

leadership. In the latter case I would like neither to deliver a sermon nor bring unwarranted charges against managers, as has become fashionable today in most quarters. But perhaps some managers may do something which their exercising of authority frequently does not allow them to do: take time to think.

Practice

I am practical. Of course I am interested in whether an idea is cohesive but more important to me is whether it works. For the following considerations, therefore, I introduce a criterion which I call »practical«. I ask: »Is this way of thinking practical?« I do not ask whether any of the arguments and ideas are »right« but rather whether it is »useful« to accept such ideas.

So the criterion test admittedly has been chosen only on a functional basis. I move on to the substance, when I turn to the question: »Does an idea strengthen my commitment? Or does it weaken it?« To me, arguments which strengthen my commitment are, *in this regard* »true«. Ideas which are obstacles to acting, justify inaction or maintain a position of non-responsibility to me are *in this regard* »false«. As a consequence, my point of departure is a commitment to a pragmatic legitimization whose moral core is the responsibility of the individual.

So I am not speaking the truth here. If someone could speak the truth they would have spoken it already and we would not have to continue talking about it. I would like to develop positions which are practical in the sense of commitment and a responsible corporate culture. Like all ideas relating to perspective, the concepts suggested here are based on the responsibility of the individuals who must decide for themselves what they consider to be true.

However, those who feel their own ideas confirmed after reading the book – and most people want to have their own thinking confirmed by books – will not have gained much. Those who do not share my opinions at all have an opportunity to gain much

more. Along with Max Frisch, I hope that »the reader will discover primarily the wealth of his own thoughts.«

Yes, there is one more thing to say – for those who have dedicated themselves to an optimistic approach to their work. Karl Popper said: »There is nothing more irresponsible than pessimism.«

Power is in the hands of the doers.

Thinking like this is simply practical.

Organized irresponsibility

*In corporations the cup of responsibility
is an itinerant trophy.*

Ralph Stayer, Chairman of Johnsonville Foods, has had some bad experiences: »We were the sole supplier of a large customer. The customer was continuously threatening to call a second supplier because he was afraid to trust our ability to supply. »Don't worry,« I assured him over and over again, »we will always deliver on time.« One day we received the urgent order to modify the standard version of a product as a rush job and deliver it without fail on the following day. Our people mobilized all our available resources and actually finished on time. They packed the product and, as usual, instructed the carrier to make the delivery. Due to technical problems, the truckdriver did not turn up until the next day, and the delivery was accordingly delayed. Since then we have no longer been the sole supplier. Our employees' excuse: »We cannot monitor the truck driver. He does not work for our company. We did our job. There was nothing more we could do.«

The break for the fire escape

In companies the victim mentality is spreading. Hardly anyone assumes full responsibility for what they do. The continuous whining of the shirker articulates the stubborn will to be powerless: What can I do? The words say: »*They* don't allow it.« – »*The others* are causing the problem.« – »If *they* didn't act so stupidly everything would work out perfectly all right.« – »The Board does not provide any clear instructions!« If the Board then meets the pressing expectations, people moan about the instructions. If the competitor has been awarded the contract: »The customer didn't thoroughly understand everything our product can do.« If the employee does not do what others expect (and on top of that is still enthusiastic): »Unmotivated low performer!« – »It is not what *I* want, it is what the boss wants!« – The »front office« is responsible. The »shop floor« is responsible! The group leader is responsible for the friendliness and efficiency of employees serving customers! The quality manager is responsible for quality (what else?!). The human resources guy for the personnel! The payment system is to blame! »We« would be very successful if »they« wouldn't stand in the way. »But our company is just too big!« – »But our company is just too small!« And today we have the low pressure system coming down from the mountains which makes everyone feel weak and, besides, it's Tuesday.

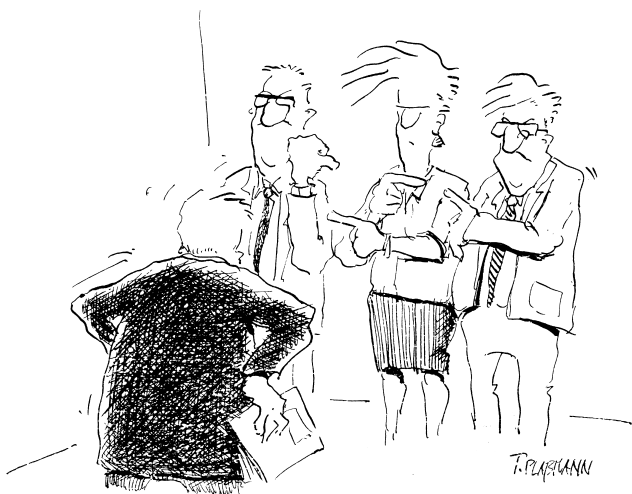
There are companies which are nothing but victim clubs. You hear nothing but whining from morning to evening. About Frosty the snowman in the executive offices, about the uncooperative department next door, about employees with no initiative, about the flatterer in the neck-tie bunker, about the jerks working at the machines, about the residue-free money incinerators in the executive offices, about the customers who do nothing but disrupt work anyway. In a Berlin warehouse the walkway between two administrative areas is called the »Bridge of Sighs«. And according to one legend, the two corporate founders, Hewlett and Packard, introduced the open plan offices so characteristic of that company

only because they knew that for many of their employees every office wall is a wailing wall.

If you could judge the nature of the employees based on the company's situation you would have to define people as creatures who would do anything to duck responsibility. Dr. Kimble is everywhere. In Germany the thunder of the approaching whinge-front has also colonized an additional storm center in the east: »Now I have to show initiative every day, after they had been telling me for 40 years: If you stick your neck out in our plant you'll get into trouble.« Some people idealize the past here, without having to be afraid that it will return.

Responsibility: the itinerant trophy

Fundamentally, the definition of responsibility in companies has been largely left vague. Responsibility does the rounds and swings back and forth correspondingly. Sometimes it ends up with the employees, sometimes with the boss, sometimes in the head office, sometimes with other guys, sometimes everyone is involved.



This insecurity is reflected in the behavior of all the participants: They all alternate between accusation and pity, between concern and irritated demand, between indignation and guilty conscience. The areas of responsibility get confused, it is unclear who is *really* responsible for what, everyone has a word to say about everything, management takes its disruption mission extremely seriously, there is hardly a pot they aren't constantly tending, poking their nose into and wildly stirring, wherever you look – justified? Unjustified?

This snarl of issues becomes obvious from the topics which boards of directors deal with. The misfortune of top managers is not that they are too far from the people but that they are not far enough away. It is hard to believe how many Boards of Directors are still personally involved in unimportant details: like walking through the premises after office hours with an enormous bunch of keys, turning out lights; checking to see if the number of potted plants in the offices of the department heads corresponds to the guidelines; discussion whether the seminar should be held in hotel X or Y. What's more: »I cannot shake the feeling that, besides me, nobody else does any work around here.« I heard of one director who took part in a one hour discussion on how often urinals in the plant flush. Good examples of Liza Minelli's thesis that life is a cabaret.

But what is not so hilarious is the fact that for long term consequences, less and less responsibility is being assumed. The remote-control domination of capital markets looking for short term results leads companies to operate on the basis of quick-reaction policies which are blind to their side effects or the consequences further down the road. After me the deluge! The cultivated cynicism of the shareholder value fetishists undermines every stable relationship, any idea of a company capable of long term commitment. Who still remembers Walther Rathenau, member of the AEG Board of Directors and later German Foreign Minister who developed a »principle of inner responsibility« for companies, emancipating them from profit maximizing and the goals of the share holders and had it made part of the corporate income tax law?

In addition, hardly a manager in our companies has enough leeway and time to be solely responsible for his or her era. Furthermore, as managers, due to more frequent transfers, do not even remain long enough in their positions to see the results of their decisions, there is frequently no direct responsibility for results. At Lever Europe in 1993 just under 42 percent of all the managers were on the job for less than 12 months. Managers who expect such a short stay in one office are hardly interested in long-term solutions to problems. They do not make any lasting commitment to their task or to their employees. The employees know this as well and do not commit themselves either: »We'll survive this one, too.«

This situation in our companies can be best paraphrased by an expression which Ulrich Beck coined in another context: organized irresponsibility. In divided departments, servile subordinates serve, paper pushers push paper, under the supervision of superiorly placed supervisors.

Let us take a closer look at some of these structures.

Not my responsibility!

Thomas Schalberger, PR manager from Düsseldorf, is really in a rush this time. It is ten minutes to twelve by the station clock in the hall of the main railway station in Cologne, Germany, and he is very short on time to his next appointment. He approaches the woman at the ticket counter and says, »A second class ticket to Düsseldorf.« The response is, »On an Intercity or an express?« »I don't know, whichever train is next,« says Schalberger, »you can look it up, can't you?« »I'm not the information desk,« the woman at the tick counter replies curtly, the only employees who are allowed to provide information are at the information desk. A short unpleasant exchange brings no results. Schalberger has to take his place in the line in front of the information desk – and misses his train (Spiegel 26/1994).

This scene is a compact illustration of the »Not responsible!« attitude. This is the mentality of people holding clearly defined

posts, permanent jobs and positions. For this sort of mentality the question is: »Who is responsible?« (Instead of: »Who can do it best?«) Its essence is static, an identity formed by negative exclusion. It's logical location is the »work place«, a place which someone »occupies« by »filling« it and executing a sharply delineated circle of activities. Performed as they always were and as they always will be. Fragmented individual tasks provide the orientation. That's why there are job descriptions. For protective reasons, against unfriendly takeovers. They describe a territory which must be defended, and whose boundaries are not crossed on one's own initiative either. A department head who was hired in from outside by Versorgungs- und Verkehrsgesellschaft MVV in Mannheim, Germany, remembers: »The first words I learned were »competence status«, »biography« and »That is not in my job description.«

The concept »work place« corresponds on the action level to the »file«. And the file-oriented procedure of administration, in turn, rigidifies the domination of the office. Professional knowledge becomes functional knowledge and functional knowledge becomes knowledge about official channels (Dirk Baecker). At one German regional bank all new employees receive a list of people who they must *not* call.

It is easy to see that the division of labor and the organizational fragmentation of work have both played significance roles in this situation. They have turned companies into vertical hierarchies in whose functional silos areas of authority and occupational demarcation flourish. The cutting up of work processes into the smallest steps, the separation of preliminary and final activities (design, job engineering, production, final inspection etc.), which separates the workers from the office staff, the division made between thinking and hands-on activity, the higher value placed on leading as opposed to carrying out – all the items which were invented under the label Taylorism for unskilled workers during America's major industrialization – all these things have reduced people to being the marionettes of machine operating cycles. It separated employees from the responsibility for their work and its quality. The inner

tie to a »work product« was replaced by an external monetary »compensation«, and the working people acted as they were treated: relieved of any responsibility for production and product.

This management paradigm has barely changed down to our days. The management consultant firm Roland Berger studied at German Telekom the way the order for a new telephone is routed. The form sheet went through the in and out trays of four departments. Up to 15 employees devoted time to the order – fragmented into many tiny tasks which specialists carry out with their specialized knowledge. Many are involved, but who is really responsible?

If responsible, then, at best, never open: at a magazine publisher I know there are seven departments involved if retailers send back unsold products for credit. Everyone moans about the work load. But in a narrower sense, the responsibility of responding to the order is not borne by any one single department.

The strides taken in internationalizing companies do the rest: at times the multiple assignments of overlapping regional, European, global and functional networks lead to a deeply felt lack of orientation among employees: »I haven't known who my boss is for months.«

Delusions of grandeur

In response to a guest asking the time the restaurant waiter replies: »I'm sorry, this is not one of my tables!« – The ability to relate to the whole: it is frequently completely absent in our companies. Many departments organize the work processes solely to satisfy their own needs without making the requirements of the whole process their guidelines. At the end of the day, what they expect from a department head is primarily technical expertise and experience! According to the studies done by Taubert, Henkel and Fechtner, managers pursue private and particular department interests during a large portion of their daily working hours. Fre-

quently there seems to be no inclination to cooperate under one roof and for the benefit of the *whole* company.

That can be explained, for one, by the fact that the reward and punishment systems are massively individualized. But often this is also related to the sheer size of the company, which in extreme cases is too big to grasp as a whole and seems beyond the scope of humanly fathomable dimensions. Especially in Germany there are the Jurassic Park of aged groups, the grandfather establishments with their traditional names glued together by the cement of gigantism. But how can responsibility and enormous organizations be compatible? I maintain: they cannot. People do not work in companies, they work in neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are defined by individuals in a »manageable« way. They encompass a certain number of colleagues, symbolic territories, local boundaries such as coffee break areas, hallways, lunch tables etc., as well as ritual procedures. Manageable units like these foster a sense of community and responsibility. On this level people define themselves for the company and, if any barriers are erected at all, they are against external competitors.

The larger the organizations and the less manageable the structures and processes, the less people relate to the whole. Anonymity, isolation, mounting hierarchies are among the complex costs of thinking big. To achieve something like a »we« feeling despite this, people put up barriers within the company: The earth walls and ditches are erected and dug *between* the departments – and it usually doesn't take long until management, with considerable effort, tries to weld together these exact same departments with »all-in-one-boat« slogans.

Large organizations are status-quo organizations. They set out for new horizons only on a rhetorical level. Even if you cut up this large structure and divide it into manageable company units, the new speed boats are quickly integrated into the fleet of a holding company which, behind closed doors, reinserts at least one additional hierarchy level and two rival competence interfaces. What a fun game of musical chairs!