Stepping Up: How Responsibility Changes Everything

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Stepping Up: How Responsibility Changes Everything

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Chapter One
You’re It:
The Moment that Changes Everything

The biggest problem we face at every level is lack of responsibility. We all believe that someone else should fix the problem or is the cause of the problem. This is the biggest problem in the family, in organizations, and in society itself. It is my contention that when we take responsibility and see ourselves as the one who can, must and will do something, everything changes. When we take responsibility we are happier, more successful, have better careers, better marriages, and the world is a much better place.

The second biggest problem we face at every level is impotence, the pervasive feeling of powerlessness that so many people feel both inside and outside organizations. It is a curious irony of our time that the single most common spam message worldwide every day is aimed at solving impotence! Many of us seem to think that we cannot significantly influence the problems that face us, from poverty and the environment to making our workplaces better.

Lack of responsibility and the feeling of being powerless to change things, manifests itself in many ways. A husband and wife watch their relationship deteriorate with each one fully convinced that the other must change for things to be better, but neither one will take steps to change themselves. A person blames their parents or bad luck for their personal misfortunes rather than focusing on how they can choose to change their own internal response to these outer realities.
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Inside organizations, where I have spent most of my career, lack of responsibility is pervasive. Customer service is poor but each department sees the customer’s problem as nested in some other department or division. A company’s morale slides while management points to the union, the union points to management, the senior managers point to the middle managers and those in the middle point up, with no one seeing clearly how they have contributed to that low morale or how they can take the lead to make things better. It can be seen in schools as well. Teachers blame the administration, administration points to the teachers, and the parents blame the system. This lack of responsibility is witnessed to by the seemingly endless use of the word “they” which often merely means “not me.” Of course sometimes “they” really are the problem, but we can’t control “them” so the more we focus on what “they” need to do instead of what “we” can do, the more we give our power away.

This tendency to point elsewhere and to surrender to the belief that we cannot change things happens in the larger society as well. We read headlines about global warming, bullying in schools, lack of civility and tolerance, poverty and so on. Most people say that “someone” else needs to fix the problem and yet feel personally powerless to influence these vexing challenges in any personal way.

Now imagine how your life, your relationships, your organization and our world might be different if we shifted that thinking. What would happen if each of us focused on our part in solving something and stepped up to do what we could to change things?

**You’re It: Changing the Game**
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Seeing ourselves as responsible and powerful to change things is a game changer in the deepest sense. In some ways, it would be fair to say that everything changes when we stop looking at what someone else can do and focus instead on what we can do. The shift is akin to the childhood game of Tag. When I was a child growing up in New York City we played endless hours of this game. One person was “It” and had to run around trying to tag someone else. The moment you were tagged, the whole game changed. Suddenly you were active and involved. Even as a child, it seemed to me that there were some people who wanted to be “It” and would try their best to get tagged while others tried very hard to never get tagged. Yet if we are honest, the game was a lot more fun when you were “It”.

Well you are “It”! You are responsible for your own happiness, for the success of your relationships, for the morale of your workplace, for the success of the company where you work, and for your life. What’s more you are responsible for poverty, for global warming, for your neighborhood, for your school, and for homelessness. Better said, we are all “It”. That is, when each of us takes responsibility, stepping up to do what we can, everything gets better. Not only that, but when we step up and take responsibility the game of life and work is more fun, more rewarding and we find more success.

This is not to say that there aren’t times when our lives, our happiness and our success are significantly influenced by outside forces. Sometimes our manager is a tyrant, some of us did have parents who failed to give us the head start which others benefited from, there are times when our spouse is more to blame than we are, and there are times when the problems we face
Seem so intractable (such as global warming) that it is easy to feel like we can’t make a difference. But when we choose to focus on what WE can do and how WE can act, we are suddenly powerful. Victims simply don’t create change.

Stepping Up: Claiming Our Power to Change Things

The good news is that every day, someone or a small group of “someone’s” decides that they are the person who can, must and will change things. I call this “stepping up” the simple act of seeing a need and deciding that you are the right person to do something about it. This act of stepping up is far from uncommon, but occurs all around us every day. What’s more, the changes we want to create—neighborhoods of pride and safety, schools where bullying is not the norm but filled instead with respect, companies with high morale where everyone takes responsibility for solving problems, a planet that sustainably supports life for thousands of years to come, the end of poverty and violence, all of these things are within our reach if only each one of us chose to step up and be the person responsible for change. In fact, we don’t need ALL of us stepping up, just a greater percentage of us to step up.

Stepping up is also a contagious virus with the capacity to change companies, neighborhoods, schools, countries, and even the planet. Think of what happened when a young street vendor in Tunisia decided he was tired of the daily humiliation at the hands of police and set himself on fire as a protest. This act, as horrendous as it was, inspired others to step up and start a Facebook revolution that eventually toppled seemingly intransigent dictators. Shortly thereafter a similar chain of events erupted in Egypt. Then there are the daily acts of stepping up such as two
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teenagers in Nova Scotia who decided to stand up to bullying when a younger classmate was beat up for wearing a pink shirt. By the time they were done, their action had spawned “pink shirt” days across Canada and later worldwide.

Every time someone steps up and becomes the responsible person, it creates a wave of energy that not only encourages others to step up, but challenges the powerful inertia of the status quo which is the enemy of all change. This is as true in a family when one person in a marriage decides to begin to act with civility towards the other as it is in a company when a few people decide to try to improve service. It happens in a society when a group of people decide they have had enough, stepping up to turn their community around or when one person against all odds decides that inner city school kids are not lost causes.

This book is the story of those who stepped up, who saw a problem or an opportunity and decided they were the right person to do something about it. It is not the story of great people who did extraordinary things, but of ordinary people just like you and I, who saw a problem and decided they could do something about it. It is the story about how each one of us can claim our power to change the world, or at least our part of it.
Chapter Two

The Five Rows of Responsibility:

Why Stepping Up Matters

It was January of 2002 and I was driving to the airport on a snowy day in Cleveland in the midst of a four day business trip. The icy weather mirrored my inner mood. I was running late for a flight that I absolutely had to catch, my wife and I had just had a quarrel on the phone in which I was certain that I was in the right, and the radio was echoing the bad mood of a nation that had just months before been brutally attacked with the epicenter in my hometown of New York.

Arriving just in time to be the last one on the plane, I sat down for the two hour flight. It did not take long for me to realize that everyone around me was in a foul mood. No sooner had I sat down when the stranger next to me turned to me and said “my boss is such an idiot-he is sending me up here to this God forsaken place. They never buy anything, they never will buy anything. He is such an idiot.” Having overheard her diatribe, the man across the aisle chimed in with his own commentary: “Not only is your boss an idiot lady, the people who run this airline, they are idiots too. No leg room, late as always, and look at the ice on these wings, we’re probably going to die.”

Once we took off, the mood continued. Soon everyone around me was complaining about the world, their companies, their spouses, and it just kept getting worse. It was a veritable feast of negativity and victim thinking and like all feasts of junk food, whether for the stomach or mind, the feast felt good going down but left all of us feeling worse.
Now about five rows in front of me, at the bulkhead, there was a mother and her two year old son. All through the first half hour of the flight, the young kid kept trying to get his head above the seat to look back but to no avail. A few times I saw his head, another time his eyebrows, but it was not until about forty minutes into the flight that he finally got his head above the seat and rested his chin and hands on the seat. He looked something like a chipmunk! When he saw all of us behind him, he smiled the biggest, most natural smile you’ve ever seen. Within moments, that little kid transformed the five rows behind him. The boss is an idiot lady started talking to me about her kids. The airline is run by idiots guy stopped complaining and was making faces at the kid trying to get him to smile again. Someone said we should all be a little more positive like that kid and suggested I go borrow him. His mother gladly accepted the break and on his visit back in row six, the mood changed within minutes. Sitting there at 30,000 feet rattling across the Midwest, thinking about the problems in my marriage and in the world, I had an epiphany which I have come to call The Five Rows of Responsibility.

Why Stepping Up Matters

What I realized is that most of us have tremendous power to influence the five rows around us but we spend most of our time thinking about, and talking about, what someone else should do in their part of the plane or on some plane we are not on. What’s more, almost, every problem we face-from global warming and terrorism to poor morale or service in a company, to bullying in schools, is a five row problem. That is, the problem is merely the aggregate of what each of us is doing in our five rows.

Let’s take an example of a seemingly intractable problem. Why is global warming and a deteriorating environment such a vexing problem? On the one hand you could say that the
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government needs to step up and do something, but then you will soon realize that the environment is a five rows problem. For the most part, the problems we have are merely the aggregate result of decisions each one of us (and our companies) make in our five rows—the cars we drive, the trips we take or don’t take, what we eat, the choices we make in terms of what we buy, what we re-use or recycle, etc. On the one hand our five rows don’t matter very much at all, until you realize that only when each of us does what we can in our five rows will the problem ever be solved.

Take a company where bad service and low morale are the norm. On the one hand you could say that the CEO needs to fix it, but soon you would realize that for the most part service and morale are both five rows problems. Only when everyone steps up in their five rows and decides to treat the customer differently or to do their part to improve morale will things really change. What’s more, everyone needs to focus on what THEY can do in their five rows instead of what someone else should do. The CEO should be worried about what she can do in her sphere, the managers in theirs and the front line people in their sphere. The more everyone focuses on themselves, the more likely we are to make progress.

The truth is we have tremendous influence in our five rows. For example, how much influence does each of us have on the future of our company? On the one hand you could say very little until you think about the Five Rows of Responsibility. Then you realize that we impact the morale of our five rows, we impact how people talk about the company, how people interact with each other, whether new people feel welcomed, and on it goes. If we focus on our five rows we are powerful to create change. We can’t control what anyone else does; only what we do.

Whenever I speak to an organization about becoming a more spirited and vital workplace I always tell people that they are the solution to the problem. It does not matter if it is the people at
the top of the hierarchical pyramid or the most front line team in the organization. I do this because of my core belief that everything changes five rows at a time. Every transformation happens in small pockets first and then grows, so in that sense it does not matter where it begins. This applies as easily to our personal lives as to these larger landscapes. Reeling from that quarrel with my wife I was focused on what my wife needed to do to fix our marriage instead of taking responsibility for my “five rows”. The more I focused on what she should do, the less powerful I felt and the less impact I could have. Even if the problem was only ten percent mine (and I assure it was far larger than that), by focusing on what I could do in my five rows to change things was, and always is, the right first step.

**Always Begin Right Here**

Whenever we focus outside of our five rows we give our power away and we also let ourselves off the hook. My mother was Canadian and my father American so I have always had two countries and am privileged to be a citizen of both Canada and the United States. Several years ago I tried, without success, to lead an effort to get Canadians to take a national pledge of sustainability. The idea was simple, to get millions of Canadians to take a pledge to commit to sustainability in our lifetime. Although some people got excited by the prospect, many said “Canada is so small, what difference would it make if we take this pledge? Look at India and China” they would tell me. “That is where you need to focus because if they don’t act we are all doomed.”

But I saw the problem differently. It is true Canada is a relatively small nation with only 33 million people, but Canada also has the highest per capita energy use of any country in the world. Besides, those of us living in Canada cannot fix China or India, all we can is to choose to
act in our five rows, trusting others to act in their five rows. We can’t fix China or India no more than I could fix my wife or you can change anyone in your company besides yourself. This gets at the heart of the challenge. On the one hand, change only really happens when many people step up. Yet each of us can only influence about five rows. Almost every problem we face is a five rows problem and can only be solved by each of us choosing to step in our five rows. It does not matter what anyone else is or is not doing, the place to begin is always right here and right now.

Howard Behar is the former president of Starbucks International and author of the Book *It’s Not about the Coffee*. When I interviewed Howard for this book he told me a story about the first managerial position he had after university running a furniture store that was part of a family owned chain of stores. During his first month there, the owner of the company, a man well into his seventies, came to visit Howard’s store. On the way in from the parking lot, the elderly owner saw a piece of garbage in front of the store and picked it up. Soon he picked up a tiny cigarette wrapper and then some chewing gum. At that point Howard said “hey you don’t need to do that I will have someone come pick this up later.” The old business owner stood up, looked Howard in the eye and said “Howard, if not me, who? If not now when?”

Behar told me that this experience set him on a “lifelong” journey of picking up garbage. The Five Rows is about realizing that you are in charge of your five rows and you can’t control anyone else. If not you, who? If not now, when?

If we all begin in our five rows every problem we face can be fixed. Every challenge we have can be solved. Every time you are tempted to think it does not matter if you step up, remember the five rows principle: If each of us begins where we are and does what we can, anything is
possible. Pointing to someone else and what they should do in their five rows is easy and ultimately means no one will do anything.
Chapter Three
I am Only One Person
(and other Reasons Why We Don’t Step Up)

Why don’t we step up and try to change things? What keeps us from taking initiative and claiming our power? We surveyed hundreds of people to try to understand why they don’t step up. They told us that the primary reasons are a belief that I can’t change things, fear of looking bad if I try and nothing changes, getting caught up in the daily grind, and the belief that since I am only one person I can’t make a difference.

I Am Only One Person

Let’s start with the last one: “I am only one person.” After all, what impact can one person really have on a company, a community or a society? Even those who have stepped up and done great things have often wondered what one person can really do. Ken Lyotier, a homeless man who lead a revolution in recycling in Vancouver put it this way “I know what I have done is just a drop in a bucket, one that has lots of holes in it.”

Yet if history teaches us anything it is that one person often makes a huge difference and, at the very least, it is usually one person or a small group of people who begin almost every change of any significance. One reason we feel disempowered is because while we are only one person, we forget to factor in what I call “aggregate influence.” That is, we look at our own small actions, seeing them as insignificant in the big scheme of things, while forgetting that when aggregated with the actions of others our influence is very large. The paradox of such aggregate influence is that while real change is often dependent on many people taking action, in the end, this aggregate influence requires each individual to act.
Here are a few simple examples. I live in a neighborhood in the middle of a large city. Partly because many tourists and other visitors (along with many homeless people) walk through our community, it is not unusual for me to see litter of various kinds in my neighborhood. As part of my desire to keep the neighborhood clean, I almost always pick up garbage when I am walking around the hood. On the one hand, since I am only one person, the impact of my actions has little impact on the cleanliness of my community. Yet if even ten percent of the people in my neighborhood felt as responsible as I do, there is little doubt that such aggregate influence would make for very tidy place. The paradox is that I can only control my own actions and although I am only one person, the aggregate influence of these “one” persons is significant.

The same is true in an organization. Let’s say your company has a poor brand image when it comes to providing personal, caring service. You decide you want to do something about it but then think “I am only one person.” Your stepping up may not change things but when aggregated with the efforts of others, the image of an entire brand can be transformed.

Let’s take a larger problem. The oceans of our planet are in increasingly poor condition. The two main contributors to the state of the oceans are over fishing and garbage thrown into the ocean. In the farthest most remote places on earth, birds and sea life choke on the garbage we throw into the ocean. This garbage is mostly made up of plastics that do not biodegrade over time. The most visible symbol of this issue is an area of the Pacific Ocean called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch which is more or less the size of the State of Texas. The best way to imagine this garbage patch is that of a loose but still coherent set of floating garbage that has been collecting since the 1950’s. The environmental risks posed by the Great Pacific Garbage Patch are significant. To begin with, the area supports minimal marine life, because the garbage patch restricts the area of water which photosynthetic organisms can live in. Other marine life including birds, sea
mammals, and, fish mistake the garbage for food. The garbage also carries a hidden payload: oily toxins which have accumulated in the plastic floating on the surface of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. These toxins appear to be absorbed and concentrated by the plastics, which are in turn eaten by unwitting sea creatures. Ultimately the toxins wind up being recycled inside of us.

What can one person do about all this garbage choking the oceans? Yet if you really think about it, this is a problem that can ONLY be solved one person at a time. That is why whenever I am on a beach or even on a street where garbage might fall into a sewer drain I make it my job to pick it up. I know I am only one person and, in one sense, my actions are insignificant. But the aggregate influence of millions of one “persons” taking such actions, as well as being careful about what we throw into the oceans, rivers and lakes is beyond measure. In fact, no government or the United Nations can solve the problem of garbage in the oceans, it can only be solved by one person times many stepping up.

**Fear of Failure**

About one quarter of the people we surveyed said that fear of failure is another reason we won’t or don’t step up. What if we step up and nothing changes? After all, for every person who stepped up and changed things, there must be many others who tried and fell short. What if I change myself and my partner does not make changes? What if I step up and try to take initiative in my company and others don’t? What if I step up and wind up looking foolish for having tried? It is true that if we step up there is no guarantee that things will change. You may try to step up and change yourself but your marriage may fail anyway, you may try to rally your colleagues to improve morale without achieving the end result, and you might pick up garbage to keep it from going into the sea but that garbage whirlpool might grow anyway!. But here is the truth: There is a 100% guarantee that if you don’t step up, nothing will change. Daring to step up and failing to
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achieve our desired end is a noble failure. What’s more, we are much more likely to regret having stayed on the sidelines than we are to regret our failure. This is something I learned when I interviewed older people for my bestselling book The Five Secrets You Must Discover before You Die, people rarely regret their failures but often regret not trying.

A woman talked to me about her failed marriage and how hard she had tried towards the end to change herself. She told me “when it ended I did not have any regrets because I knew I had done everything I could have done to change myself to make things better.”

Ken Lyotier is a man you will read about in more detail later in this book. He was a homeless alcoholic when he decided to step up. He ended up not only creating a recycling revolution but starting a business that employs hundreds of homeless people. His chances of failure would have been pegged at astronomical! He told me: “At some point in our lives we have to take the risk of believing we can change things. Even if you don’t succeed, you might inspire others to try. There is a force in all of us that wants to just sit on the sofa, get a beer and watch the football game instead of believing and risking. The risk we are afraid of is that we will step up and won’t find anything, but if you just sit, there is a guarantee that you won’t.”

This is the challenge each of us faces, to take the risk to step up even though we know we may fail or to sit on the sofa and talk about how things might have been different had we stepped up. I have experienced this fear myself many times in my life. Holding back has its rewards. When we hold back we can always say “If I had really tried, just imagine what might have happened?” Yet at some point we have to decide whether protecting our ego is more important than living our values. Failure is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. In fact, some of those who stepped up and made the biggest difference often experienced multiple failures along the way.
The Daily Grind

The final thing people told us was that we don’t step because we are simply caught up in the daily grind. We are often simply too busy getting through the tasks of our daily life or work to step out of that routine to try to influence change. What can be said about this final reason? Can it really be that we are simply too busy to step up and make a difference?

Busyness is often the greatest barrier to legacy in its many forms. It is easy to let trivial matters fill up our calendars and days rather than focusing on making a difference. Even as I write this chapter, my outlook in box is filled with scores of emails relating to trivial matters that ultimately mean little. But right now there are three e-mails in there relating to a board on which I serve for an organization that is in desperate need of reimagining its vision. They have asked me to help them. That work will not pay the bills, it is not urgent or clawing at me with any urgency compared with the trivial emails that surround it, but I am pretty certain that stepping up to help that board could actually lead to things being different in some small way in the city in which I live. This is the choice we must often make, between legacy and the immediate. Between what claws at us and what calls us.

Perhaps you might ask what yourself: What have I been meaning to step up and do which somehow keeps getting sidelined by what seems more urgent but is ultimately trivial? My friend Jeremy has a full life of family obligations and the responsibility to run two businesses. But when his son Robin developed Type Two diabetes as a teenager, he became aware that the help he took for granted in the developed world was often not available to families in other parts of the world. His son Robin and he decided to step up and initiate an effort to get cities in the developed world to adopt villages in the developing world to provide the skill and resources needed to manage diabetes in their communities. Robin stepped outside of himself and any
temptation to self-pity to help others while his father fought the temptation of the “daily grind” which constantly claws at us.

Not stepping up because of the tyranny of the daily grind may be the greatest risk of all. It may mean you come to the end of your life or career wondering what might have happened if you had stepped up. You may wind up feeling deeply the words of an anonymous poet in India once scribed: “The song I have come to sing is life not sung, I spent my life stringing and unstringing my instrument.”
Chapter Four

It’s Not My Job, It’s Not My Fault, That’s Just the Way it is,

(and other Attitudes that will make you miserable and less successful)

How many times in an average week will you hear someone utter these sentiments: It’s not my job! It was not my fault. It’s just the way I am. It’s just the way it is. What can I do about it? It is bigger than me. I wish someone would do something about that. I’m not going first; let someone else step up.

If stepping up is about taking responsibility for change instead of waiting for others to act, you might ask: What’s in it for me to step up and take responsibility? In this chapter I’d like to make the case that you will be happier, more successful and ultimately have more influence if you banish the sentiments above from your vocabulary. People who say it is my job, some of it is my doing, I can be different, and I don’t accept things the way they are, these people are simply happier and more successful than those who don’t.

Locus of Control—Are You an Victime or an Initiator?

Locus of control is a concept in social psychology that refers to the extent to which an individual believes they can control events that affect them. The concept was first developed by Julian Rotter in 1954 and has become an important focus in the study of personality. Locus (a Latin word meaning place, location or situation) can either be internal or external. Individuals with a
high internal locus of control believe that events result primarily from their own behavior and actions. I call these people “Initiators” because they believe they mostly make their own destiny. Those with an external locus of control believe that powerful others, fate, or chance primarily determine events. These people I call “victims” because they feel that mostly life is done to them rather than through them.

Initiators tend to believe that they are in control of their life and that it is their actions that ultimately determine the events that unfold. Victims tend to believe that their environment or other people control the outcome of their decisions or life. Research shows that victim thinking is linked to greater stress and a greater tendency towards clinical depression. Initiators, on the other hand, people who believe that their actions influence reality, have been shown to be both more successful and happier.

Imagine for a moment an organization, community or society with an external vs. an internal locus of control. An organization with people with an external locus, or victims, will be filled with people waiting for someone else or something else to determine their destiny. The words “they” and “you” will be the most common start of every sentence. The focus of the “they” could be the marketplace, the CEO, the managers, the competitors, or the economy. People will say things would be better around here if the CEO would do this, if the market would just pick up, if the other departments would only cooperate. When people talk about their own experience at work, victims will likely see it as someone else’s responsibility to make them happy. They will say “if I had a nicer boss, a better job, if I had got that promotion last year, then I’d be happy at work.” Victims are also less likely to take initiative since they feel the “outcome of things” is not
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in their hands anyway. They may also be more likely to utter those dreaded words “it’s not my job” and it is certainly “not my problem.”

A society with “victim thinking” will exhibit similar behavior. People will say the “government” should do something about poverty, crime and the environment. People will throw up their hands at the largest problems we face saying “what can I do about those things?” They may even let leaders off the hook believing that some things simply cannot be fixed saying “it’s just the way it is.”

Now imagine how an organization or society (or your life) would be different if filled with people with a strong internal locus of control—with what I call initiators. When unhappy on their jobs, people would be less likely to blame others and more likely to look inside themselves for the answer. If they want to develop their careers they will ask for what they want instead of complaining that they aren’t getting it. Rather than acting like victims they will take initiative to solve problems, stepping up and taking the “bull” by the horns. They will probably be less likely to point their fingers at the other department or the marketplace when things go poorly, but instead look inside to see how they can change or adapt to the environment. The same can be said for a society. People would be less likely to point the finger at someone else to change things or to hang their head in resignation at the problems we face.

**Victim Thinking is Becoming More Pervasive**

But surely most people must have an internal locus of control and believe that we shape reality, no? As someone who has both written about and taught about the values of Gen Y, I would especially have guessed that we are surely becoming more internal in our locus of control and
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that younger people today, like my daughter, are less prone to victim thinking than previous generations.

Well here is some disturbing news. After analyzing the results of studies using Rotter’s Scale with young people, Jean Twenge of San Diego State University found that from 1960 to 2005, “average scores shifted dramatically…for college students–away from the Internal toward the External end of the scale. In fact, the shift was so great that the average young person in 2002 was more external than were 80% of young people in the 1960s. The rise in Externality on Rotter’s scale over the 42-year period showed the same linear trend as did the rise in depression and anxiety.” No wonder Time magazine ran a cover story in the middle of the last decade with the title “Victim Nation!”

This victim thinking can take on comical proportions. Remember a few years ago someone sued McDonald’s, and won the case, because they spilled their hot coffee on themselves causing a burn. Hence coffee cups are now emblazoned with words-WARNING HOT! Give me a break. Of course coffee is hot and we can’t blame other people every time something goes wrong. The McDonald’s incident would be a mere diversion if this tendency to blame others for our problems were not so common. Teachers tell me about another seismic shift. In a previous generation if little Johnny was having problems at school, parents would come in saying “what is Johnny doing?” Johnny probably got reamed out by his parents about how he needed to step up. Today parents are just as likely to come to the school defending their child, wondering what is wrong with the teachers, the school and the system that Johnny is not reaching his potential.

Now put aside for a moment whether it is more Johnny or the system and ask this question instead: Which will benefit Johnny more in his adult life: Working on whatever percentage of the
problem is his to fix or learning from his parents that when things go wrong it is someone else’s fault?

So What?

The consequence of having a seismic shift towards victim thinking means more of us feeling that the future is not in our hands but somehow in the hands of forces outside ourselves. And since internal locus of control has been shown to be positively correlated with happiness, success and initiative, while external locus of control has been shown to be related to anxiety and depression, it’s pretty clear that most organizations and society as a whole would be better off if more of us believed we could change things.

If we are going to step up, we first have to have an internal mind shift. The mind shift is from one in which we believe that things are controlled out there to the idea that things are in our control. Making that shift means when we are unhappy we will look to ourselves first before looking outside. We will stop blaming our boss, our company or our spouse for our unhappiness and instead start by asking what WE can do to “step up” and make things different. When we see a problem that bothers us, whether poor service or bad attitudes in our company or garbage in our neighborhood, we won’t first ask what others can do to solve the problem but will begin by asking what we can do.

Of course the truth about the world is somewhere between these two extremes. External events do determine some amount of our success and happiness. Your boss may be a jerk and so may your husband be. There are many factors driving the great problems of our age that are outside your personal control. Global warming did not happen just because you took your gas guzzler on
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a trip you did not need to take this morning. But the point is that when we focus on what WE can change, rather than how the rest of the world has to be changed, we feel more in the driver’s seat. Besides, and this really matters, you are the only one you can control.

As my friend Matt pointed out when he had a total jerk for a boss. “I spent months fighting the fact that she had a personality disorder but everything changed when I started asking myself how I had to adapt to work with her.” Another friend says “in every situation you may only be 10% responsible for what is happening but when you focus on how you can change your part, your whole perspective changes.”

A client of mine, a telecommunications company in the Eastern U.S., has many of their retail wireless stores that are located in poor retail spaces with leases that cannot be broken. The managers of those stores had every reason to blame the external environment for their poor results compared with the newer stores in better locations. Most of the managers moaned about their bad luck, but one manager focused on the ten percent he could influence. He engaged his employees in going out to find the customers rather than staying in the stores waiting for them to arrive. They got involved in the community and met the customers where they were located. Their results were superior, in large part, because they took responsibility for what they could fix rather than the external forces that were out of their control.

Can Things Really Change?

Here is another bit of research to add into the mix. Research on the concept of Mindset by Carol Dweck shows that some of us have a flexible mindset while others of us have a fixed mindset, and this mindset may help explain why some of us are more successful. It may also explain why
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we often don’t step up and change things. What she discovered is that those with what she calls a “fixed” mindset tend to think of themselves as having a fixed set of talents and gifts while those with a “flexible” mindset tend to think that they can grow and learn new skills and gifts.

In her fascinating research with elementary aged students, she discovered that when children were praised for their efforts, regardless of how difficult a task was or how well they performed objectively, those same students would take on harder tasks in order to improve. Those praised for how smart they were tended to take on easier tests after being praised for their natural aptitude. In one study, the researchers would take a single child out of the classroom for a nonverbal IQ test consisting of a series of puzzles—puzzles easy enough that all the children would do fairly well. Once the child finished the test, the researchers told each student his score and then gave him or her one single line of praise. Randomly divided into groups, some were praised for their intelligence. They were told, “You must be smart at this.” Other students were praised for their effort: “You must have worked really hard.”

Then the students were given a choice of test for the second round. One choice was a test that would be more difficult than the first, but the researchers told the kids that they’d learn a lot from attempting the puzzles. The other choice, Dweck’s team explained, was an easier test, just like the first. Of those praised for their effort, 90 percent chose the harder set of puzzles. Of those praised for their intelligence, a majority chose the easy test. The “smart” kids took the cop-out.

It is almost as if those praised for being “smart” did not want to take any risk of blowing that label and those praised for their effort kept taking on more, believing they could stretch. This research has a great deal of consequence in an organization or a school. If we want people to step
up and change things, we need to make sure we praise them for the effort not just the outcome. When people believe that effort leads to success, rather than some set of innate skills or talents, they step up and try harder.

My daughter Lena is an art teacher in the public school system in Chicago. I find this ironic since neither her mother nor I have any seeming aptitude in this area. In fact, since I was very young I assumed that I had no artistic ability. I can vividly recall art classes early in my school years when teachers would look at my art efforts and encourage me in a different direction. Given all of this, I was fascinated by research Dweck references where students who believe they have little or no artistic talent can be transformed in one week’s time to paint reasonably good paintings. She says the students go from where in the first class some of their paintings look like that of first graders to where all the paintings seem quite good to the untrained eye.

When we have a fixed mindset combined with victim thinking, there is a pretty good chance we won’t step up. Locus of control is about how we see the world and mindset is about how we see ourselves. If we believe we can’t change then why step up and try to improve ourselves? If we believe that external events shape the future, why step up personally and try to initiate change around you?

**How Do We Change Our Attitude?**

It is not entirely clear to me how we change from being victims to become initiators. But I have a strong suspicion that just like all activities of the mind, practice makes perfect. As Alvaro
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Pascual Leone, one of the world’s foremost neuroscientists from Harvard, told me: “From a brain perspective, every time we do something we are more likely to do it again and every time we stop ourselves from doing something we are less likely to do it again.” Every time we act like a victim or give in to the fixed mindset about ourselves, we reinforce this behavior and every time we decide to step up and take responsibility, we are more likely to do in the future.

Perhaps we regularly should ask ourselves these questions: Am I going to be a victim or an actor in the various scripts I find myself in today? Will I ask first what I can do to make things better or be content to blame others? Will I accept that I am simply not good at this or choose to believe that hard work and effort will reward me with new skills I did not even know I had? Stepping up is about seeing yourself and others as capable of initiating change. It is about believing things can be better if we put our minds to it and that reality is mostly of our own making.

What’s more, those who say it is my job, it may be my doing, and let’s do what we can to start fixing this, are also just the kind of people who tend to get ahead in organizations. As I interviewed CEO’s and senior leaders in organizations for this book, I kept asking them “tell me who you promote-people who step up doing what they can or those who always have an excuse for why they could not succeed?” Their answers were predictable but important. Being an “it is my job, let me do what I can, let’s get out and change things” kind of person gets you promoted and noticed, it’s that simple. It may even save your marriage or make a huge difference in the world.
Chapter Five
The Responsibility Virus

Have you ever noticed that when you yawn there is a very high likelihood that someone around you will also yawn? Recently I yawned and even my dog yawned! We all know anecdotally, and it has been proven in the laboratory, that yawning is contagious. But the more curious question is why?

As a child my grandmother told me it was because yawning was a way of getting more oxygen to the brain so the room must have less than optimal oxygen. Yet the fascinating truth behind that contagious yawn is even simpler and more important. It turns out, after years of trying to answer the question, that the most obvious answer is the correct one: We yawn because imitating the behavior of others is natural to us as humans.

The reasons we yawn together are the same reason we smile when a stranger smiles at us and why we often lean in when someone else leans in during a conversation, as humans we are social beings and fitting in matters to us. This tendency to imitate may have its roots early in our evolutionary history since the more we mirrored the behavior of others, the less likely we were to be seen as a threat. Since our natural capabilities as predator were few, we were pretty dependent on cooperation which was likely facilitated by this imitative trait.

Whatever the reason, human behavior is contagious both good and bad. All of us have had the experience of entering a break room at work when one person starts complaining about how bad things are “around here” and before you know it everyone has joined in the whining feast. We have also had the opposite experience, that when a few people step up and start talking about how we can fix things instead of how broken things are suddenly the energy shifts.
Responsibility, like yawning, is contagious. When someone steps up to change things, others step up and seem to find courage they had not previously been able to find. This book is filled with examples of people who stepped up and took responsibility for trying to initiate change. In each case, their stepping up inspired others to step up, often against all odds.

**Standing up to the Mafia in Naples:**

A case in point is Silvanna Fulcito, a shopkeeper in Naples, Italy who decided to stand up to the mafia and ignited a firestorm of stepping up right in the heart of the mafia homeland. Naples is known for its pizza but what concerned Silvanna was *il pizzo*, the Italian word for protection money paid by merchants to local mafia thugs.

Alongside her husband, she ran a wholesale paint store, a family business that had been around for almost thirty years. Through hard work the business had become profitable and grown to have ten employees, but along with the growing profits came more frequent visits from local thugs and requests for ever increasing sums of money. The practice was common throughout her neighbourhood and was a resented but accepted part of doing business. Her husband was manhandled, thugs helped themselves to merchandise, forced the business owners to cash checks of dubious origin, and the ever growing demands kept getting larger. Silvanna reached a boiling point and visited the home of the thugs. She confronted them saying that she could no longer pay, but pay she did.

In September of 2002, the apartment building which housed her family paint store was torched. Except for the good fortune of a mother who happened to be awake late at night feeding an infant, the fire might have cost many lives. At first Silvanna was simply outraged about losing the business she had worked so hard to build and the fact that the lives of twenty families had come so close to disaster. Yet it was the reaction of many of her neighbours, not the mafia,
which finally spurred Silvanna Fucito into stepping up. Instead of blaming the mafia, many of her neighbours blamed her for speaking up and fighting back. Turns out, the mafia burned the wrong woman’s store.

A few months later Silvanna founded the San Giovanni Anti-Racket Association aimed at getting residents and the government to put an end to the intimidation. In the year before the association was founded, less than two hundred cases of extortion were reported to the police but the number grew to over 2,000! “No Pizzo” signs began to appear in the windows of merchants throughout Naples. The Italian government, both inspired, and perhaps embarrassed by the courage of ordinary citizens, stepped up and began to crack down on the mafia seizing properties and closing down mafia enterprises. The battle is far from done but as Silvanna was quoted in the International Herald Tribune “we need to be able to say to the next generation that we did something, even if it was just a bit.”

Silvanna Fucito yawned and it inspired others to do the same. It is true that she still requires around the clock protection but her choice to step up when most would have backed down spread a virus that is still growing.

Her story is not unique. When Joanna Beaton refused to act like a victim or point to others for help when she was given a dying business to run for her telecommunications company, her stepping up inspired her team to step up and create a profit center from a business on the brink of dying. When morale and service were deteriorating at a large city hospital in Iowa, most employees were in finger pointing mode until a small group of front line associates began meeting to “re-spirit” the place. As they started taking initiative, their collective yawn began a firestorm of front line people seeing themselves as responsible for making things better.
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Ken Lyotier was homeless when he chose to step up and do something about the waste he saw day after day in his life as a “Binner” searching for enough bottles to buy food. But when the government and his fellow citizens saw the courage of two homeless people, the virus spread, eventually leading to a recycling revolution. Time after time, the stories in this book will show that the responsibility virus is highly contagious.

A Walk on the Beach

The viral nature of responsibility manifests itself not just in seemingly large acts like standing up to the mafia, but in much more subtle ways as we go through our daily lives. When each of us chooses to step up and act, others cannot help but respond.

As an example, let me tell you about an area of personal concern in which I have tried to step up in a variety of ways. Earlier I talked about the state of the oceans and in particular, the massive amount of human garbage that is choking the life out of the ocean. Although I know I cannot singlehandedly solve this problem, I have, for over a decade maintained a simple practice that it turns out is quite viral. Whenever I am at the beach or near the ocean (and because I live right on the coast that is almost every day) I pick up any stray piece of garbage that is near the ocean. I even pluck plastic bags out of the water along with paper cups when I am swimming. I am equally serious about plucking garbage off the street that is near sewer drains since most of that will end up in the ocean too.

On a recent business trip to Florida I found myself walking on a beach and doing my normal routine of picking up every piece of garbage I saw, throwing out things out and recycling what I could. A man sat in his beach lounge chair watching me with some curiosity and apparent amusement. After my third pass he stopped me. “Hey bud,” he yelled holding up his drink “what exactly are you doing?”
“It’s a little hard to explain” I muttered and then told him the Reader’s Digest version of the oceans choking on the garbage we put in it, birds strangling and the whirlpool the size of Texas. “I’m just doing my part.”

He smirked and then he laughed out loud. “You’re kiddin’ me right? I mean buddy do you have any idea how many people are throwing garbage in the ocean right now while you are plucking it out? There are 6.5 billion people in the world, what you are doing won’t make any difference.”

“Well sir,” I said somewhat sarcastically, “thanks for the inspiration. To be honest I feel that way myself sometimes but here is the way I look at it. I feel I am 100% responsible for keeping the ocean clean. It’s not up to the government, the city, the Feds, or the hotel, it’s really up to me. What’s more, really there are no excuses for me not to do this. It takes a few minutes of my time and I feel better when I am done. And the way I see it, if even one of every one hundred people in the world felt as responsible as I do, the ocean would be clean and I would not have very much to pick up.”

He contemplated my rationale briefly then scoffed: “Whatever.”

We parted ways and I finally took my time in the sun. About a half hour later, he got up to leave. He packed his things and headed toward the hotel, but on his way he passed a several litre plastic pop bottle just ready to be pulled out by the waves to the sea. He passed it and paused. He looked back and walked on a few more steps, then stopped again. Quietly he put his things down, walked back and grabbed the bottle before heading into the hotel grounds.

You see this is how stepping up works. Stepping up is inherently viral. When one person steps up and takes responsibility then others are more likely to step up. When one person decides to be an agent of change others will choose to join in. I did not save the ocean that day nor has my decade of cleaning beaches and fetching things changed the fate of the seas. This book is filled
with the stories of people who stepped up and did create large change, but it is also about how each one of us changes things in some small way when we choose to step up. It is the story of how your company, your neighbourhood, your relationships, and the world will be a little better when you choose to see yourself as responsible for change. It is the story of choosing to spread the responsibility virus.

The Responsibility Virus in Daily Life

So far we have been thinking about how the responsibility virus has an impact on larger issues such as standing up to thugs or saving the oceans, but the effect of this principle can be much more personal. Anyone in an intimate relationship has, at some point, experienced the cycle of blame that occurs in relationships. Each partner sees the problems between them as the other person’s fault.

A friend of mine experienced this cycle when his wife blamed him for her lack of personal time for herself saying that if “he would only step up and take more responsibility around the house” she could have more time for herself. From his perspective, she took on many duties that did not need to be done and also needed to get their teenage children to take more responsibility. He also felt that she liked playing the martyr and that even when she had time to do things for herself, she would instead focus on family. They were locked in a turf war with each one dug in blaming the other.

I suggested to him that perhaps the situation would shift if he took responsibility for his part. “Maybe she does take on duties that are not necessary”, I told him and “perhaps the kids do need to take more on for themselves. Maybe part of her does want to play the martyr, but you can’t do anything about that.” No matter what percentage of the problem he thought was his, I advised
him to step up and take responsibility for that part. He did just that, telling his wife that she was right, he had let her take on too much and needed to step up and do more.

Well an amazing thing happened. She said to him “you know, I know that some of this is my doing too. You are probably right that the kids have learned to count on me for everything. Maybe I need to do what I need to do for myself and trust others to step up.”

Now don’t get me wrong, marital bliss did not immediately follow, but the energy suddenly shifted from who was to blame to who could do what to fix things. But someone had to step up and take responsibility first. Once again, responsibility is contagious.

Here is another example. My partner is a teacher and had a run in with a fellow teacher. Her colleague decided to escalate the situation asking the school principal to intervene and facilitate a conversation about what happened. My partner was furious as she felt her colleague was entirely at fault, had blown the whole thing out of proportion, and now had violated a kind of unwritten rule amongst teachers by not dealing with it directly.

The night before she was going into the facilitated meeting with her fellow teacher, she was telling me how she was going to let her have it showing her how it was all her fault. I made a suggestion that perhaps she might have had some small part in creating the problem. Through discussion, she began to realize that in some small but important ways that she had escalated the situation. The next day she went in to the meeting beginning the conversation by saying that she was sorry for some things she had done that escalated the situation and that she was even more sorry that her colleague had felt she had been insensitive. Not surprisingly, that act of taking some responsibility opened up the possibility for her colleague to look at herself. The meeting wound up being productive instead of confrontational.
As my friend and coach Bev McIntosh said to me “in every situation we bear some of the responsibility. When we focus on our part instead of other people’s part, something shifts.” It seems to me that one of the greatest lessons we can give our children is this simple idea: Focus on how you are contributing to any problem instead of what someone else is doing. Take responsibility and most of the time, someone else will yawn back.

**The Fascinating Study of Lights in the Theatre**

One of the people I interviewed for this book told me about a fascinating study they had read about in University. The researchers filled a movie theatre with participants. In the theatre a small light was projected on the front wall of the theatre. The study participants were told to raise their hand any time they saw the light move. The room had several confederates in the room, that is, persons who were posing as fellow participants but were actually part of the research team. After about ten minutes one of the confederates raised his hand indicating that he had seen the light move. A minute later, another confederate said he had seen the light move. Soon, large numbers of participants said they had seen the light move. By the end of the study, the majority had said the light had moved, even though the light had not moved even once. It had remained steady the entire time!

Our human tendency to follow the behavior of others is deeply engrained within our nature. Often this tendency has negative consequences when groups of people act together as a mob. But this also means that when we do choose to step up, to create change, there is a very good chance we will start a viral chain whose end we cannot ascertain. Make no mistake about it, the responsibility virus has the potential to change organizations, families, schools and even the world. When one of us steps up, others will follow.
Section Two:

The Secrets to Stepping Up
Chapter Six: Only Naïve People Ever Change the World First Believe You Can Change Things

Rex Weyler is in his sixties now, but he is showing me a picture of himself as a young man in his twenties. In the black and white picture he looks an awful lot like many of the people I went to university with during the 1970’s, he has long jet black hair tied back in a pony tail and is sitting with a camera in a rubber zodiac with a large fishing vessel dead ahead. He is taking me back to a time almost forty years ago now when he knows for sure that his stepping up, along with others, helped change the course of history. His story which reads like a modern David and Goliath tale, helps illustrate an important principle which is that if we want to step up and change things, first you have to believe you can. Again and again as I interviewed people for this book, I was struck by the fact that almost everyone who stepped up and changed things was pretty naïve. Even if others told them things would never change, they chose a different path.

To put Weyler’s story in perspective, we have to go back to the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. All over the world there was a growing protest movement with the prime areas of focus being peace and civil rights. The women’s movement was in full force and all over the world growing numbers of people were standing up and getting their voices heard, often for the first time. The environmental movement, on the other hand, was in its infancy, with most people focused on the legitimate concerns of people rather than the plight of the planet. Weyler muses “at the time progressive people were mostly focused on people issues but some people were just starting to see that the ultimate social justice issue was the Earth itself. What would it matter if we achieved social justice but ruined the planet?”
One of the most visible environmental issues at the time was the hunting of whales. By the early 1970’s whales had been hunted to the point where only about 5-10% of their historic populations remained. Many whale species were on the brink of extinction and the Atlantic Gray Whale was already gone. A Canadian named Farley Mowat had helped catalyze the issue when he wrote a book titled *A Whale for the Killing* about a whale that had got caught in a cove in Newfoundland and how people came down and took shots at the whale from the shore. “It was the reverse of the Moby Dick story,” Wyler said, “it is the helpless whale being swallowed up by the people.” Whales were pretty much being hunted for products that could be created synthetically. In other words, the Whale hunt was unnecessary. At the same time, there was a growing body of research showing that rather than being dumb uncaring monsters like the image of whales found in Melville’s Moby Dick story, whales were actually incredibly intelligent mammals. Much later we would discover that not only is their brain to body mass larger than that of humans, but that the part of their brain which is most developed is the limbic, or emotional part of their brain. Humans were systematically hunting down intelligent sensitive fellow mammals for no real benefit. Something had to be done.

Weyler and a somewhat disorganized band of hippies and journalists hatched an idea, an idea he admits was a bit crazy. The idea was to go out and confront a whaling ship in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and show the world what was really happening. Being journalists they believed that if you could change the story, you could change the world. There were others trying to save the whales but no real traction was being made.

So what did Weyler and this group of hippies, journalists and ecologists wind up doing? Well they put together an expedition sailing out into the Pacific in search of the Whaling fleet. In the days before GPS and before CNN, finding the Whalers was no easy task. After months of open
ocean and frustration, they located part of the Russian Whaling fleet and confronted them on the high seas. The idea was simple-confront the whalers in the act. Capture the whale hunt on camera for what it really was. Weyler wound up snapping a picture of a beautiful but bloodied whale being harpooned and dragged on the deck of the vessel. The picture and the story of these few not so mighty confronting the Russian whaling fleet appeared in most of the newspapers and magazines across the free world. The story was featured on the evening news across America including the well respected Walter Cronkite at CBS. The story created what Weyler calls a “mind bomb” around the world.

“It didn’t hurt that we caught the Russians just a few hundred miles off the coast of California during the cold war. But what people responded to most was the idea of people stepping up for what they believed in. Today the idea of average citizens standing up for larger forces has become commonplace, but at the time, standing up for another species in such a bold way was virtually unheard of,” Weyler told me.

The “mind bomb” did not stop whaling in its tracks but it raised public awareness about the Whale hunt to a whole new level. Over the next year, all over the world, others began to speak up demanding that the Whale hunt end. Weyler said: “a number of things happen when you take a stand. First it clarifies your own morality because if you are going to take a stand it forces you to make the case. Second, when you step up, it inspires others, because people are typically better at following than leading. Now people have permission to do so. Immediately people begin to stand up because they know they won’t be alone.”

It took several years before the ban was finally signed and the mass hunting of Whales stopped, but if you want to know what began the movement in earnest, the initial step up that galvanized public opinion about the Whales around the world, it can be found in that picture hanging on
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Weyler’s office wall, a black and white symbol of what happens when you think you can change things.

Today, Weyler’s face has aged, but the youthful hippy idealism still radiates when he talks about the issues of the day. Reflecting back now, almost four decades later, I asked the now gray haired Weyler how it felt to be in your sixties but to know that, at one point in your life, you helped change the course of history. “Well,” he mused, “mostly I think of how crazy we were. I mean they could just as easily have harpooned us! This is before CNN and twenty-four hour news; we had no news crews tagging alongside. We were really quite naïve.”

The moment he said that, I had my own mind bomb: Maybe only naïve people ever change the world.

Everything Begins with a Vision

The first step to stepping up, is to be naïve enough to think you can change things. This may seem so obvious as not to merit mention, but having a belief that it matters if we step up is critical. Robert Greenleaf who popularized a leadership philosophy called Servant Leadership once said: “Not much happens without a dream. A dream is never enough, but for something good to happen the dream must be there first.”

The leaders I interviewed for this book echoed those sentiments. As I asked them about people who stepped up and changed things, they often talked about people having a vision of how things could be better and believing they could accomplish it. Don Knauss is the CEO of Clorox and a former officer in the U.S. Marines. He told me “stepping up begins with the belief that you can change things.” As he reflected on his own experiences of those who stepped up and changed things he talked about a “prevailing optimism” being one of the keys, a pervasive belief that if you stay with it you will change things.
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This naïve belief drives change every day in workplaces and communities, often on much less high profile issues than saving the whales. It happened in a child welfare agency in Alberta, Canada when John Buie was asked to take the assignment of leading the agency after a teenager had committed suicide while in foster care. The story had hit the media when it was discovered that the teen had been moved seventeen times before the suicide. People began to blame the agency and morale was in the tank. When Buie arrived, the team was discouraged, deflated and defeated. Staff felt they had been working very hard and now were being unfairly blamed for this young man’s death. Morale was horrible.

Buie tried hard to turn the tide, but he says the turning point came when two frontline supervisors, Shelly and Benno, decided to step up and take personal responsibility for raising morale. The two began interviewing staff, personally coaching other staff members, and began leading small groups to help the team identify their values. Most of all they took the initiative to tell people “look we cannot control what the media says about us but we can control our own happiness and our own internal working environment.” The two frontline supervisors put in long hours day and night, often on their own time. Most of all they had that “prevailing optimism” which Knauss had talked about, deciding things could be different. And turn things around they did. Morale picked up, heads began sitting upright again and the team went on to help many young people. Buie, the former head of the agency told me “You must be resilient and strong when you step up. You may not see the results instantly but a belief that things can be better and a willingness to work hard to make it happen are contagious.”

Bob Peter is the president of the LCBO, a liquor retailer in Canada, and the former president of the Bay, Canada’s leading department store. In his many years of leadership he said that again and again he has noticed that the people who step up and make things better have “a vision of
how things could be better and an almost little dog on a bone quality about pursuing that vision.” He told me about Nancy Cardinal who inherited a marketing department at the Liquor Board of Ontario with just three people in it and a brand that was basically just a building with booze in it. But Nancy had a vision that a government run liquor store chain could be a world class retailer. She helped craft a vision to re-imagine the stores, started a food and wine magazine, created signature vintage stores in certain neighbourhoods, pushed for wider aisles and better stores, and doubled the number of female customers. Mostly she had that same naïve vision of the future that Weyler had of a world with no whale hunting and those two supervisors had of a return to high morale in that deflated agency. Today many of the LCBO stores look more like high end retail shops than a government liquor store. Much of the credit for the transformation belongs to Nancy, but also to many others who did not accept the prevailing belief that being a government agency meant being a second rate retail operation.

If you want to step up and change things, you first have to believe you can. You have to imagine a positive future and believe that you are someone who can do something about creating that future. As Bob Peter told me “people who change things usually have a compelling vision of how things can be different. They sell that vision to others. Most of all they have a determination to get it done no matter what happens.”

**Transforming Inner City Schools in the United States**

Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin joined the Teach for America program in 1992 and were placed at the same inner city school in Houston, Texas, starting September, 1992. They were two
idealistic young elementary school teaches in an inner city neighborhood with a poor track record for academic success. The first months were hard and by mid-year their classes were, by their own admission, a disaster. While they were failing miserably with the kids, just down the hall a teacher named Harriett had a classroom filled with enthusiastic students chanting, having fun and learning. She became their mentor and Mike and Dave learned how to reach even the most difficult kids. By the end of the year their classrooms were lively and engaged. The year ended well, students were doing homework and performing well, and their students went enthusiastically on to middle school.

“We naively thought we had done it. In one school year we had reformed education,” Mike told me. Then reality set in. The next term those same students who they had sent off to middle school started calling them saying things like “they don’t give us any homework because we can’t take the books home because they think we will ruin them.” By mid-year, the kids they thought they had so effectively prepared for life and success, those fifth graders who had done so well, had joined the chorus line of underperformers-smoking dope, playing hooky and joining gangs.

When they first realized the plight of all their good work, Mike and Dave went into a several month funk. Soon they found themselves sitting alongside the other teachers at the lounge pointing outward. “We pointed fingers at everyone. We blamed the district, the superintendent, the parents, the community and even the society itself. We had done our job and everyone else had failed these kids.” Then one night in 1993 Mike and Dave had their road to Damascus, a Jerry McGuire like moment of clarity.

“That night we suddenly stopped pointing the finger out. We looked in the mirror instead of the magnifying glass. We realized that WE were the ones who had failed. Whatever we had done as
teachers was not enough to prepare them to succeed after they left our class. We asked the
question: How could we prepare them for middle school? What could we do as teachers that
would form a foundation that could not be broken?”

The pair put U-2’s Angels Too tied on repeat and by five a.m. they had outlined an educational
revolution called K.I.P.P. (Knowledge is Power) on their computer screen. The idea was simple
and profound. Start earlier, end later, hold classes every other Saturday morning, give 2-3 hours
of homework every night, and ask the parents, teachers and students to make commitments.
With more hours and more dedication, alongside with the teaching of character, the two young
teachers believed everything could change. “It was a very spiritual night. That night we realized
that if we stepped up we could change things. To not do so would have been criminal.”

Mike says “the basic principle was simple. If we committed ourselves to becoming kick ass
teachers, to increase the amount of time we were willing to teach the kids, then it was possible to
prepare them for life success and college. We did not have to revamp the system; we just had to
work hard to become better teachers, thus motivating kids to stay longer.”

They went to the principal at Garcia Elementary in Houston and found a receptive audience. But
when it came time to get approval from the district however, the answer was initially no: “They
asked us if we were changing the curriculum and we said no. We told them smart people have
created the curriculum. They said how can it be educational reform if you are not creating new
curriculum? Then we said the kids will start at 7:30 a.m. and end at 5 p.m.so they said so you
want to do an early-hours and after-school program? We said no. The kids will start early and
end late and come in every other Saturday but it will be the same curriculum.. In the end they
told us ‘look we don’t get it but if you can find fifty parents and kids crazy enough to do it we
will let you do it.’ So Dave and I went door to door like vacuum cleaner salesmen, and when we were done, we had the fifty parents and kids who said yes.”

After the first two years the program was off to a great start but then Houston had a major space problem. The district superintendent called and said we can’t get more modulars for you grow. So either you can’t take in new fifth graders or your seventh graders will have to go back to the normal program. Mike protested and his boss told him he was being stubborn. In the end she told him that only the superintendent could fix this.

“The next day,” Mike told me, “I went down to the superintendent’s office and said I’d like a meeting with Dr. Paige. They basically said go away. When I left his office I figured there has got to be a way to get a meeting. I found his car in the parking lot in the superintendent’s spot and sat on the car in the hot sun for four hours grading papers. I figured sooner or later he had to come out of his office. When he saw me he told me to get off the car. I told him why I was there and he said come see me tomorrow morning. The next morning I showed up and my boss and her boss were there and they looked like they wanted to kill me. I plead my case, the superintendent said ‘well let’s solve this, I have to go negotiate a food contract, you guys figure out how to solve it.’ When he left, my boss told me I was basically a jackass. I said yes I may be, but Dr. Paige said we need to work it out.”

Work it out they did. Today there are 60 KIPP middle schools (grades 5-8), 24 elementary schools (grades Pre-K-4), and 15 high schools (grades 9-12) with a total of 27,000 students in twenty states and the District of Columbia. They are all charter schools within the public school system and students are accepted regardless of prior academic record, conduct or socioeconomic background. Every day, KIPP students across the nation are proving that demographics do not define destiny. Over 80 percent of KIPP students are from low-income families and eligible for
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the federal free or reduced-price meals program, and 95 percent are African American or Latino. Nationally, more than 90 percent of KIPP middle school students have gone on to college-preparatory high schools, and over 85 percent of KIPP alumni have gone on to college. These numbers are far above the averages for their respective communities. Most of all, their work and that of others, has challenged a long standing paradigm that inner city kids were destined to be defined by demographics. In Houston alone, there is a waiting list of 6,000 for 1,200 seats.

I asked Mike what it takes to step up and change things. “First you can’t be about blaming others. Our first reaction was to point out. But you can’t do anything about what is out there. When you look in the mirror suddenly you have the power to do something.” Not coincidentally, KIPP schools are built on that same simple philosophy which is that there are no shortcuts. If you work hard you will achieve. It is a message of self-responsibility in its purest form. If you are not succeeding, look in the mirror.

Such sentiments are enough to drive someone who has a disdain for motivational speakers crazy if the results were not so compelling. The moment we look outside instead of inside we are like superman around kryptonite, our power is gone. Even the message at KIPP is bang on. They don’t say that demographics don’t influence destiny, only that it does not determine destiny. The distinction is subtle but profound. Our community, our parents, our zip code, our upbringing, our height, our looks, all of these things influence our destiny but they don’t determine it. That is why personal responsibility is so vitally important. The moment we focus on what we can change that is the very definition of stepping up.

Mike Feinberg also talked to me about a kind of prison that keeps us from stepping up. “There is a line in the matrix about being in a prison of our own mind. We all have a voice inside of us that
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says we can’t step up. It tells us we are not good enough, that we are going to screw this up, a voice that says how foolish we will look if we fail. There is another voice alongside it that says you can do it and that you want to do it. Be aware of that voice in your head that is keeping you prisoner. Make sure you are not selling yourself short. We can accomplish so much more than we think we can if we are willing to work hard and be as creative as we can be.”

Naïve Belief In Changing Things in Daily Life

This naïve belief in the possibility of things getting better is as important in daily life as it is in the larger landscapes of stepping up at work and in the world. When we are naïve enough to believe that things can be better, or even that we can be better, things change. We all have an image of ourselves; this is the person we think we are. Sometimes it is a positive image but other times we limit ourselves with that image.

We say I am not an artist, I am not musical, I am not good at relationships, I am not a people person, and I simply don’t have the influence that others have. As teams we often say things like things will never change around here, I can’t make this place better, and things have always been this way. What these people who stepped up show us, is that believing we can change and that things can change, is a prerequisite to stepping up because it is not until we believe that things can be different that we will step up and try.

Some time ago I was asked to coach a senior leader in a large company. He was a strategic master, as smart as a whip, and ran a tight ship. The problem is that he was simply not in his own words “a people person.” He had a hard time connecting personally with people and in meetings
he often made others feel unappreciated by the matter of fact way he would dissect their work finding every tiny fault. When he engaged me as a coach the first thing he said was: “I’ve never been a good people person. I’m naturally critical and very task oriented. I don’t need people to blow sunshine at me so I don’t see the need to blow it at others. Ever since I have been a manager, people have said they admire my smarts but he’s just not warm and fuzzy.”

The first thing I told him was that it’s going to take a lot of hard work to change these behaviours because you have been doing this for a long time. But I said we have to begin with this image you have of yourself. The truth is you don’t think you can change and you have already given yourself every excuse to fail. All your life you’ve probably been told this is just the way you are. But it is not true. It is just the way it is right now. The moment you decide it can be different if you work hard to make it so, that is when we have a chance.” I asked him to write up a vision of himself in the future, what he would be like in six months.

To be honest, everyone in the organization pegged the odds of success at near zero. One of his colleagues told me “Bill is just a smart jerk, it’s that simple.” Six months later that same colleague told me “I can’t believe this is the same guy.” It took a lot of hard work, that “little dog on a bone” quality that Bob Peter talked to me about. But I honestly believe the big leap was imagining a different future and him realizing that until he believed it could be different there was no way things would ever change.

No one thought a group of hippies could stop the whale hunt or that two teachers could turn inner city students and schools into top performers. No one thought a government liquor store could
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become a top notch retailer or that morale would ever come back at that child services agency. But Weyler believed the whale hunt could be stopped, Mike Feinberg believed that inner city schools could succeed, two naïve supervisors saw a different future at the agency and Nancy Cardinal saw a great retailer where others saw a government liquor store. They were all naïve, they all stepped up, and things changed.

What do you think right now can’t be different? What image of yourself do you need to throw out so you can step up and change yourself? What situation at work or in your life do you believe can’t be fixed and that belief is keeping you on the sidelines?

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Ways to Step up:

• Every time you think something can’t be different, whether it is yourself or a situation, remind yourself that only naïve people every change things. Decide to take a step instead of focusing on what can’t be done
• Every time someone says “things will never change” make it your mission to challenge that assumption
• Every time you hear a voice inside yourself saying “it won’t matter if I step up” take the step anyway
Chapter Seven

100/0-100% Responsibility/Zero Excuses---
See Your Self as the Key to Solving Every Problem

In 1998, a relatively unknown bank, Synovus, was named the best company to work for in America by Fortune Magazine. Each year, Fortune compiles a list of the 100 best companies to work for, and to be named the very best among thousands of contenders is quite an honor. Given that I had never heard of the bank, I decided to do some research on this “best company to work for in America.” What I discovered was a one hundred year old bank that had grown like a virus throughout the southern United States, a company that had fifty-seven straight quarters of double digit profit growth and that was beating the pants off of much bigger banks in most of their markets. Needles to say I was intrigued.

Three months later I was sitting in the office of the then CEO Jimmy Blanchard, a position he had held at the time for over thirty years. When I asked him what the bank’s secret was and why they might have been named the best company to work for in America, he offered a simple reason; “It is the power of love. We are successful because we love each other and we love our customers. When one part of this company cries, the whole company cries with them, we love our customers and each other it’s that simple” Then he set me loose to talk to others throughout the bank and its subsidiaries.

Over the next few days I did hear an awful lot about love, but I also kept hearing people talk about a concept called 100/0. Finally I asked a teller in one of the branches: “What is the 100/0?”
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She said “the 100 stands for 100% responsibility. You never say this would be a great bank if the CEO did his job, I’d have made the deadline if not for the other department, I’d be having a better day if my boss was nicer, or it’s not my job to take care of that customer. She said each one of us has to take 100% responsibility for ourselves and for the success of this bank since it is up to each one of us to keep this company great and keep the customers happy. And the zero” she said, “that stands for zero excuses. There are always reasons you did not come through but at the end of the day, you work with what you have, so there are no excuses for not giving your best.”

In a meeting a day later I asked Jimmy Blanchard that if the secret to the bank was the “power of love” what’s with the “100/0?” He simply replied “well I guess it is tough love.”

After I left the bank, that simple principle, 100/0, kept running around in my head. It started to occur to me that those two numbers were transformative. For a company, for a person and maybe for the world! When we take 100% responsibility and give ourselves zero excuses for why we can’t or should act to make things different, everything changes.¹

₁ Synovus Bank was very successful throughout the next several years but hit some tough patches after the financial meltdown of 2008
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Throughout my career as an advisor to companies and a coach to individuals, I can’t tell you how many times I have seen people turn those numbers around. There are lots of 0/100 people in the world. It seems like they don’t think anything is their responsibility and they have all kinds of excuses why they can’t step up and change things. People say things like: My marriage would sure be better if she would be different, morale around here stinks and I sure wish the manager would do something about it, but I’m not going to take any action until he does. My restaurant is not doing very well, but we are in a bad location and the place is kind of run down, if the company would just spend some money business would pick up. Bottom line: it is not my fault and here is the long list of reasons why I can’t do anything about it.

There is a disease of 0/100 thinking in our society as well. Zero excuses may seem a bit extreme, but the point is not so much that there are never any constraints. There are always constraints but when we focus on those constraints instead of what we can do given those constraints, we wind up acting like victims. Make no mistake, your career will be very limited if you become known as someone who always has a reason why they did not come through. When I interviewed CEO’s and senior executives for this book, they basically told me that people who always have a reason why they did not come through drive them nuts! Don Knauss, the CEO of Clorox, summed up the feelings of many of those executives I interviewed: “What really drives me nuts is when people rationalize losing. There is a real sickness in organizations around rationalizing losing.”
Yet when we take 100% responsibility and see ourselves as the ones who can, should, and must make changes, and when we throw out any excuses as to why WE can’t fix things, amazing things happen.

**A Woman Who Had Every Excuse to Fail….But Didn’t**

Here is a great example. Joanne Beaton wanted to get back into operations inside her company but did not anticipate the assignment she was to be given. She was asked to take over the Operator Services business for TELUS, a large telecommunications company in Canada. It was hardly a plum assignment. For one thing, it was a dying business since just about everyone could see that eventually technology would replace human beings for most of the functions operators once played in the telephone business. Gone were the days when every call went through a human interface or even when calling information was the main route to finding information. The service was losing money and losing steam. In fact, most of TELUS’ competitors in the telecommunications world were trying to outsource the business to outside vendors to reduce their cost of providing the service.

The attractiveness of the assignment was hardly enhanced by the workforce she inherited. Engagement and morale were low. She was told that the 1,000 or so workers, mostly unionized, were deeply in an entitlement mentality and waiting for someone else to fix their eroding business. She was told by her leaders that the most likely ultimate solution was to outsource the business to others like so many competitors were already doing, but in the meantime her
marching orders were to cut costs. Some colleagues even wondered aloud as to why she would take such a tough assignment. Joanne had every good excuse to just follow the natural path—reduce costs and eventually get some outside vendor to do it cheaper. That is probably what would have happened in most cases. But that is not what happened. It is not even in the ballpark of what happened.

The zero excuses part of the 100/0 means that we begin by not surrendering to all the excuses that could keep us from stepping up and making things better. In my experience, there are always constraints and reasons why you can’t succeed or change things. Zero excuses does not mean glossing over real constraints. Rather it is recognizing that while some excuses may be true, they are almost never useful. The question is always what are you going to do IN SPITE of those constraints?

Joanne says it like this: “The differentiator between a good leader and a REALLY good leader-is that there are a lot of people coming up with reasons why they could not, did not, deliver what they said they could—everybody has constraints. Since we always have constraints it becomes about asking what can I do with those constraints?”

People who step up and change things take 100% responsibility and don’t surrender to their excuses. That is exactly what Joanne Beaton and her team did in that dying business. Some people might not have seen it as their responsibility to save those jobs for TELUS but she did. When Joanne took over as leader, there were some people on the team who had an alternative idea of the future, however unlikely it seemed. Some members of the team believed that rather
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than outsourcing, they could become the place where others outsourced operator services. Even though they had dabbled in those waters, the idea seemed far-fetched given their cost structure and the engagement of the employees.

Stepping up means taking responsibility and it means throwing out all your excuses and that is exactly what happened. Joanne met with every one of the team members at operator services and basically said “look no one else is going to save this business but us.” She encouraged them to act like owners and asked them to consider this question—if you were the competition what would you do put us out of business? She pretty much said “let’s go big or go home.” She basically said we have a choice to be outsourced or to step up and make this the best operator services in the world, so good that we will be the “outsourcer” instead of the “outsourced”. If we want to become the outsourcer instead of the outsourced, we will have to take responsibility to step up and make it happen. No one else will do it. The company won’t save us, we need to save ourselves.

This is a key element of 100/0. We stop looking to anyone else to fix the problem. We also take 100% responsibility for doing whatever we can to solve the problem. So what happened at operator services?

Well the team did take responsibility and threw out their excuses. The team, not the leader, came up with a simple theme: Our Customer, Our Team, My Responsibility, and Our Business. To save their business every person would have to step up and ask what they could do to make the business successful. They realized that they needed to make it happen. And they did.
They began to benchmark, talk about how to improve the business, figured out how to raise morale and productivity. Everyone stepped up and stopped looking for someone else to fix the problem. Within a three year period, the engagement of this work unit went from low to supercharged! Not only did they not get outsourced, they grew the business threefold, they increased their productivity by 1,000 percent, and became a high service, low cost operator. Eventually they won awards for the best operator services in the world and became a sustainable profit center! They became a major provider of operator services for many of their competitors. Headcount grew fourfold instead of shrinking. They saved their jobs and they also transformed a dying business into a growing enterprise.

As Joanne looks back on this experience, she says “people had told me we have been trying for eight years to shift this, these folks can’t change. But I did not accept the story.” And when people on her team pointed fingers at TELUS she kept putting it back on them. “I kept telling them, look stop blaming others, let’s take the levers we can move and do it. If this place stinks, it is because we let it stink.” Joanne makes it clear, “I was the leader but everyone stepped up and took responsibility that is why we succeeded.”

Years later in 2005, a call center within the same company was in a similarly dismal position. They heard rumors that the company was considering closing down their call center which was located in a remote rural community, which made sense as they were the last call center not located in a major urban area. The leaders and employees could have simply waited around for
their ultimate fate to be sealed, they could have as Joanne said “accepted the story” but instead they acted on the 100/0 principle.

So they stepped up and asked for a meeting with senior managers in the company and said “look, what do we need to do so you won’t close us down?” Notice that people who step up focus not on what someone else will do for them, but what they can do for themselves. The senior leaders, impressed with their initiative but skeptical of the outcome basically said “well if you create a super high productivity, high engagement, great service call center, we would be fools to close you down.” And that is exactly what they did.

Groups of employees began to meet with managers to ask everyone to step up. They worked hard to create an infectious spirit and eventually became one of the most highly engaged work units in the whole company with over 90% of their team members giving high scores on the company wide survey. Considering that call centers are notoriously low morale, high turnover jobs, this was no small feat. The spirit became so infectious that the company kept their word. Not only did they not close it down, they recently made a significant investment to grow that center, in part, as a reward for those employees and managers stepping up.

**How 100/0 Changes Everything**

If you doubt the power of these two numbers, 100/0, for even a moment, think about this. How would your company be different if everyone felt 100% responsible for the company morale, for
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the image of the brand, for cutting costs, for their own happiness and careers, and for winning
customers? What if instead of looking for someone else to solve a problem, we all just began by
asking what we can do personally to make things better? When the employee survey numbers
came back, imagine if every team both asked how they had contributed to the current level of
engagement and how they could make things better. It is not that I am saying that senior
managers in a company don’t have a big influence or even that there are not real constraints that
get in the way of stepping up. All I am pointing out is that if everybody stepped up and took
responsibility for what they can do, the energy shifts and good things happen.

How might your company different or even your life be different, if you decided not to surrender
to your excuses? What would happen if we realized that there are always constraints and the only
question was how we will work to accomplish our goals given those constraints? Joanne
Beaton’s team could not change the fact that operator services was and is, a dying business, but
by not giving into that story they focused on stepping up in spite of it.

Think about the impact of those two numbers in a marriage (or really in any relationship in our
personal or work lives). In my first career as a Presbyterian minister, I was often called upon to
counsel couples who were having trouble in their relationship. Never once in those seven years
did a couple arrive with one partner saying “wait before we even start, I want you to know it’s
me who needs to change. The pervasive norm as each person arriving with fingers wagging at
the other—if she would just and if he would just, then everything would be better.
Now I will grant you, as an objective outsider, often it seemed like one person was a little, and sometimes a lot, more responsible. But what I discovered was that if you could get people to look at themselves instead of at the other person, the whole energy shifted. If they said there is not a lot of romance, I would ask “so tell me what you think you can do to bring more romance into the relationship?” You see it really does not matter what percentage of any problem is created by you, all that really matters is whether you are doing what you can do to make it better. One hundred percent responsibility, it’s that simple.

It may be a natural human tendency to focus on what THEY need to do but trust me you will a lot happier if you focus on what YOU can do. When you find yourself focusing on an excuse as to why you can’t succeed, whatever excuse it might be, instead of asking if the excuse is true, ask if it is useful? What would you do in spite of that excuse to get what you want?

Let me give you a personal example. Historically I have not been a good “networker” which is not a good thing when you run your own business. Once I have a relationship with someone I am very social, but I have this very strong fear of reaching out to people I don’t know well. Now I have a whole list of excuses, all of which are true, for why I am not a good networker. I am shy by nature, did not have good mentors, had bad acne in high school which played havoc with my self-esteem, and am somewhat of an introvert to boot. All of these excuses are true, valid and even help explain my poor track record as a networker. They also all happen to be useless. The more I focus on them the more I let myself off the hook. Excuses may be true but they are not useful. Focusing on our excuses, even when they are legitimate, merely locks us into a cycle of
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inaction. If the truth be told I have become a pretty decent networker, in part because I ditched all the reasons why I could not be one, which conveniently kept me on the sidelines.

Part of being 100/0 is a willingness to look in the mirror first, instead of looking outside. . When we look inside we move to a place of responsibility instead of blame it is that simple. When we take responsibility, full responsibility, for every problem, even if we are only a small contributor, everything changes.

Let’s look at two real life examples of what happens when we take responsibility and when we don’t. A friend of mine is the CEO of a nonprofit. It is his first assignment in such a senior position and about a year after he became the CEO he ran into some trouble when his board called him to task and basically told him that he needed to make some pretty significant changes in his behavior or they might have to let him go. At first his reaction was defensive, 0/100 of you will. He focused on the organization, its challenging history and a few board members who were dysfunctional. Soon however, he came to an important realization. First, he could not fix them. Second, if he chose a path of self-reflection, this could be a meaningful learning opportunity. Instead of focusing on what they were doing, he focused on his part of the problem. He sought feedback, listened without becoming defensive and asked for their help. He took 100% responsibility for the situation. Right now he and the board are back on track and most everyone who works with him says he is a better leader than he was before.

The second example has a far less happy ending. Another executive of a nonprofit felt he was being questioned by his board, he blew up several times showing some significant emotional
immaturity, and bristled when the board wanted to give him some hard feedback. This executive focused on what others had done to him. Admittedly, he had a somewhat dysfunctional board but no more so than many other boards. But because he stayed focused on what others were doing rather than what he could do, the situation escalated. Eventually he had to resign.

I am convinced that both of these executives were equally competent, their situations equally redeemable. One chose 100/0 and one chose 0/100. One is gainfully employed now and the other not.

**True Grit**

This capacity to work through challenges is probably one of the most underestimated competencies of successful people. That is why the work of Angela Duckworth fascinates me. She has studied a concept she calls “grit” which she defines as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals.” Much of grit as Duckworth has defined it involves the willingness to work hard through adversity to achieve success. Surely this means not focusing on excuses and taking responsibility.

Her research has shown that grit is a better predictor of grade point average, retention at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point and ranking in the national spelling bee than intelligence. That is, the capacity to work through adversity is a pretty good predictor of success in most any endeavor. Stepping up requires grit.
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Don Schroeder, the CEO of Tim Horton’s, whom I am fortunate to count as a colleague and client, is fond of quoting John Wooden on this matter. Wooden just happens to have won more national championships than any coach in college basketball history. He once said: “Things turn out best for those who make the most of how things turn out.”

Ways to Step Up:

• Whenever you encounter a problem, ask yourself what you have done to contribute to the problem. Then ask, what can I do to change the situation?
• Next time you are given a “tough assignment”, don’t make any excuses as to why you could not succeed. The odds are pretty good that your “boss” or others already know about the constraints and will be more impressed with your willingness to try anyway than your list of reasons for failure.
• Most everyone who steps up and accomplishes anything had to endure setbacks along the way. Grit may be one of the most important characteristics of people who step up and make things happen. Next time you experience a setback on your way to achieving something, instead of raising the white flag, ask yourself how else could I get this done. There is a time to raise the flag but most of u raise it way too soon
Chapter Eight

Do Something…Do Anything:
If you don’t know what to do just start

A few years ago, in the United States, a foundation ran an ad about the state of the environment. After a series of dire facts about the state of the planet, supported by visual images, the ad ended with a simple admonition: “Do something, do anything!”

As I began to listen to the stories of people who had stepped up and changed things, I began to realize that one of the greatest enemies to creating real change is our need to have a plan before we start to act. Without a clear plan for success, we often stay on the sidelines. Yet often the best advice for those who want to change things is simply to step up and get started, to do something, anything. One of the most powerful “some-things” we can do is to get people together to start talking about how we want the future to be different. A case in point is the story of how a priest and a small group of citizens transformed one of the worst slums in the world.

In 1996 the United Nations issued a statement naming Jardim Ângela, a slum district in Sao Paulo, Brazil, one of the most violent places on Earth. Jardim Ângela and two other districts, Capão Redondo and Jardim São Luís, were considered by the São Paulo Civil Police to be the “triangle of death.” The district of 300,000 residents had a murder rate higher than most places in a formal war zone with 538 murders in 1996 alone with most of victims being teenagers. Police presence in the district consisted mostly of night raids by heavily armed police platoons with drug crime being their prime focus. The schools, the community, and its youth were all trapped in a cycle of violence and hopelessness.
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Father Jaime Crowe is an Irish Priest who had lived in the district for almost a decade and witnessed the cycle of hopelessness build. He said “there wasn’t a day that would go by, when I walked around the parish that I wouldn’t step across two or three bodies. To step over a body in front of a door with a newspaper over it to have a drink, people would think nothing of it. Children, small children, would tell me that life was not worth living.”

One of the things about people who step up is that there often comes a moment when people have simply had enough, a kind of moment when you realize that even if you have no coherent plan to fix the problem you simply decide it is time to get started. That is, you decide to act even before you know what steps you will have to take to succeed.

For Father Crowe that first step came when he organized a march on November 2, 1996 to the cemetery where so many of the community’s murder victims, mostly teens, were buried. Five thousand people walked in that “march for peace and life”. That same year, Father Crowe and other community leaders began a weekly meeting they called the Forum for the Defence of Life. The Forum brought together community leaders, police officials, and school officials. The idea behind the meetings was to generate ideas on how to solve the neighborhood’s many challenges. In the beginning all they could do was talk, but talking is often a powerful pre-cursor to creating change.

As word spread about the group’s weekly meetings, international aid agencies and municipal leaders started attending and were soon joined by hundreds of local residents. During these weekly meetings ideas on how to change thing began to surface along with a growing resolve to put them into action. One of the early realizations that emerged from these weekly meetings was that doing something about schools was critical. The schools in the slum were dangerous places
and offered only very basic education, often for only four hours a day, so there was little hope of upward mobility for the youth of the community. Many children would drop out and begin drug dealing by the age of 12 or 13 years of age.

This focus on revitalizing the schools soon began to bear fruit. Classrooms started to fill up, not only with young students but with adults and teenagers who wanted a better life. Another focus was policing. It became obvious that residents feared the police almost as much as they feared the gangs. Many police officers had been implicated in thousands of contract slayings in the slums of Sao Paulo. Rather than policing from the outside like an enemy force, residents wanted the police integrated into the community. Even former strong armed police leaders began to attend the meetings and were captivated by the ideas the community was generating. In 1998, after two years of pressure from the Forum meetings, the police opened up a station in the district and began the practice of community policing.

The results of these Forum meetings were not instantaneous. In 1996 there were 538 murders but the murder rate peaked in 2001 five years later. Finally, in 2002, the district began to see a reduction in homicides that continued to tick down with each passing year: 254 in 2002, 212 in 2003, 172 in 2004, 119 in 2005, and only 91 in 2006. Do the math that is a 90% reduction in murders. More importantly, a vibrant community emerged from the process. The march for “peace and life” still happens every year and so do the meetings. The march has grown from 5,000 to 25,000.

The point of this story is that stepping up often means getting people together to talk about the future. There is no need for a perfect plan or to even know where the process will lead. What is needed is a desire to create change and the intention to gain allies to make that change happen.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

Of course, most of us are not trying to transform a slum where murders are a daily part of life. We may be in a school where a culture of disrespect and bullying have become the norm, we may live in a neighbourhood where litter has become commonplace, we may be in a workplace where life-work balance has become the butt of jokes, or in an organization where poor service and poor morale are an accepted reality. Regardless of the challenge, the principle of doing something, of just getting started is critical.

What I have discovered is that part of that doing something almost always begins with people getting together and talking about the future. Almost always there is a need for someone to start that process.

How a Hospital Turned Around

Take the case of Mercy Hospital in Sioux City, Iowa. The hospital had a long history of serving its community but by the time Peter Makowski arrived as the new CEO, the hospital’s reputation had been tarnished. Service and morale at the hospital had deteriorated, relationships with the physician community were at a low point, and the word on the street was that “if you are really sick go to Mercy, but if you want to be cared for in a compassionate way go somewhere else.”

The hospital was losing market share and staff would often comment that as they walked through the corridors of Mercy there were few friendly or happy faces to be found. Although the hospital still provided great quality care, people told Makowski that the “spirit of Mercy” was missing in action.

Transforming an organization with poor morale and service, back to its former glory, may seem like a radically different challenge than creating hope in the most violent place on earth, but in
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either case, the act of stepping up often involves people gathering to talk about a different future with no clear plan of how they will create it. Makowski began meetings with his leadership team sharing his vision of a better future for Mercy. For months they met and talked about what they wanted to be true of the future and what was required to turn it around.

Yet one of the most important steps in the hospital’s transformation had nothing to do with the people who had the word “leader” on their business card. A group of front line employees began to meet on a weekly basis, often on their own time. The group called itself the “re-spiriting committee.” Like those residents meeting for the “defence of life” in Sao Paulo, these people really had no idea how to transform the hospital. What they did know, was that they were tired of the low morale, poor service and unhappy faces, and wanted to change things. They also believed they could do something about it.

Over a period of one year they met and shared ideas. Many of them took the inherent personal risks involved in stepping up. They bore the scorn of those employees who felt they were kissing up with management, they risked their jobs by speaking up about managers who were getting in the way of creating a more positive work environment, and mostly they shared their ideas and began to step up in their own daily work lives. They began to challenge their colleagues to become more positive and challenged them to work with managers to create a new spirit at the hospital. Stories began to emerge about how many of these front line people began challenging the bad attitudes of peers as they called on their co workers to stop the negativity and “choose their attitude.”

Ultimately it was the re-spiriting committee that came up with the idea for a campaign to win staff back by challenging them with four simple principles including choose your attitude and
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

make someone’s day. Within a few short years, staff engagement scores shot up, market share was growing again, the hospital was winning quality awards and most of all people in the community began to make unsolicited comments about the new spirit they saw at Mercy Hospital.

On the one hand, this is just another story about a CEO and a new management team that came in and turned an organization around. But at a deeper level, it is the story of individuals who chose to step up even before they had a clear plan for change. It is the story of a small group of committed front line employees who risked ridicule to advocate for change. It is the story of a few managers who joined Makowski early on to confront the prevailing gloom that had overtaken the hospital. It is the story of what happens when people get together and start talking about a different future.

**Doing Something in Action**

Imagine for a moment the power of this simple idea: Do something, Do Anyting!

Any student in a school, where bullying is the norm, could start today a “forum for the defence of school spirit.” They could just start meeting and let the ideas flow. Any manager or associate in a company could start having conversations with a few colleagues about how to achieve more work-life balance in your company. Even without a clear plan, or some official sanction from management, they could just start taking some actions to create more balance. A few neighbours could gather and begin to talk about how to clean up the “hood.”

Think about this for a moment: Everything that has EVER been done began with someone taking a single step. Almost nothing that has ever been done had a detailed plan at the beginning and even if it did, the path to success likely had little resemblance to that initial plan.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

There is no guarantee that your conversations will lead to a coherent plan but it is almost guaranteed that if no one begins to have the conversation nothing will happen. Doing something, doing anything is the key to getting started.

Let’s apply doing something, doing anything to the many realms in which we might be called to step up. For example, what if you have a marriage or a romantic relationship that has lost a sense of excitement and adventure? Thomas Moore in his revealing book Soul Mates talks describes this as the “Cayote” in a relationship, the wild unpredictable chemistry that goes beyond the mundane of shopping, cooking the meals, etc. You may want to find the perfect antidote but what if you just started. What if you began by having conversations about this aspect of your relationship, began remembering times when that sense of adventure and “cayote” was present. Perhaps that conversation will lead to a few steps you can do to get started. Maybe you can just start doing things like planning a surprise trip or bring a book home and suggest reading it together.

Perhaps you want to do something about work-life balance in your company. You are not the CEO, nor a senior leader, but you feel strongly that work life balance is out of sync. Why not begin just meeting with one or two allies, someone who agrees with you that there is a need to change. When you meet don’t focus on what someone else needs to do (remember 100/0). Instead, ask what steps could we take that might help with work-life balance?

This is exactly what happened at a real estate investment firm in the Midwest when a small group of employees began meeting on how to “claim back our lives” and still get our work done well. They began with some simple ideas such as they would stop emailing each other on weekends and try hard not to schedule meetings after five p.m. wherever possible. Soon larger numbers joined the group and made the commitment to stop emailing on weekends and trying to
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keep meetings during normal business hours. Over time a real shift happened in the culture because three people decided to start meeting and took a few simple steps to start.
The point is that most everything important that has ever been done began with someone deciding to do something. It may not have been the perfect thing but it got the ball rolling.
Think of something you would like to change right now? It could be something about your life. It could be something about your company or your community? Now think of something you could do right now to begin to create change. Think of a group of people you could get together and begin the conversation. Imagine the Forum for the Defence of whatever it is that you want to change or the re-spiriting committee for whatever it is you want to re-spirit. What could you do to begin?
One last humorous example may make the point. Stepping up is about shifting the energy, doing something to change whatever status quo has us locked in. Years ago I heard the late Richard Carlson, author of Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff, talking about exercise. He asked the audience how many people had always wanted to start exercising regularly but had never done so. To my surprise about seventy-five percent of the audience had wanted to exercise regularly but never been able to do it.
Carlson then said I want to make a suggestion that if implemented you will be able to say you regularly exercise two weeks from now. “Beginning tomorrow morning when you wake up stand by the side of your bed and do five jumping jacks. Just five jumping jacks like you did in elementary school P.E. class. Do this for two straight weeks first thing in the day by the side of your bed, and then when someone asks if you exercise regularly you can say yes-I do that first thing every morning.”
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Now I will confess when I heard Carlson say that, my first thoughts were something like “give me a break.” Then I realized what he was saying. Most of us have the intention to do something but are waiting around for the perfect plan. Five jumping jacks was as good a start as anything else. Doing five jumping jacks every day would begin to change the energy. It was not enough, but doing something, doing anything, is often just the right way to begin stepping up.

Jardim Ângela began to change the night those first citizens gathered with Father Crowe to talk about the future. Mercy Hospital was on the path to re-spirit itself the very first time those front line people volunteered to put their skin in the game. The decision for three people to stop sending e-mails on the weekend was the right first step.

Do something, do anything. If you wait for the perfect plan, you may never step up.

Ways to Step Up:

• Think of something at work, in your life or in the world that you want to do something about. Instead of trying to hatch a master plan, identify one think you can do starting immediately to move in the direction of what you want to change.

• A great way to step up is to find a few allies and start to meet. The focus could be making your school better, improving work life balance or morale, improving service, doing something about bullying in your school, or saving the planet. But when you meet, DON’T SPEND ONE MINUTE TALKING ABOUT HOW OTHER PEOPLE NEED TO STEP UP. Instead, focus on what you can do, the steps you can take, no matter how small they may be
• Talking about the future is often a powerful pre cursor to significant change. Imagine how sceptical people must have been at that first weekly meeting in that violent slum in Sao Paulo. If something concerns you or you want to change something start talking together about the future. This itself, is a way of stepping up.

Chapter Nine
Always Begin in the Room You Are In
(You can’t start anywhere else anyway)
“Where does change begin? It begins in this room? Why?
Because this is the room you are in.”
Peter Block

If we really want to step up and make a difference in our company and in the world we need to understand that the best place to begin stepping up is wherever you are right now. Stepping up begins when we open our eyes and see that wherever we are, whatever moment we are in, and whatever situation we find ourselves in, stepping up is available to us right there.

Remember my simple definition of stepping up- “Seeing that something needs to be done and deciding that it is you who can do something about it.” A corollary of this is that we must step up
with whatever gifts and skills we have. As Arthur Ashe, the late tennis great, once said “to
achieve greatness you must start where you are, use what you have and do what you can.”

Rahul Singh is a paramedic and still makes his living that way. He also happens to have been
named by Time Magazine in 2010 as one of the world’s top one hundred most influential people.
His story, and how he became named so by Time Magazine, illustrates this important principle
of stepping up right where you are with the set of skills that you have.

Singh grew up in Montreal and Toronto, trained as a paramedic, and was working in emergency
medicine. When his marriage ended in the mid 1990’s, he decided to travel and wound up in
southeast Nepal. While training at a teaching hospital he got deployed to an area where there had
been a series of horrific mudslides.

“When I got there it was great to be able to see the impact of your work so directly. Every day
we were getting clean water to people who had none, literally saving people’s lives every day.
We were doing really good work and then suddenly the word came down that the agency had run
out of money and they pulled the plug.”

Upset about the shutdown, Singh hiked and took a bus back to Katmandu to find the head of the
agency. When he found him, the director was staying at a five star hotel and offered to take
Singh out for a fancy steak dinner. Halfway through the meal Singh said he felt an incredible
anger well up in him. “I could hardly keep my meal down. It was such a contrast, people were
living in such poverty, we were bringing clean water to people who had none, and here he was
living it up. I let him have it, told him what I thought. Guess what, no surprise, he fired me!”

Singh went back to Canada. Soon after his return home, his best friend David Gibson died from
complications after a liver transplant. Gibson had just married the year before, he had fought like
hell to stay alive, and only in his early thirties. David’s death was a deep personal blow, but it
also became a catalyst. “When I went to his funeral I saw how many lives he had touched in his short life and I thought look what he did while he was here. Then I thought, he’s so young and I’m not far behind, so now is the time to live. That’s when I put two and two together. My experiences in Nepal, my training as a paramedic, and decided to start a foundation in his name to meet the need for emergency medicine in the developing world.”

His organization, Global Medic, was built on a simple principle. Get paramedics and other emergency personnel to donate their time during emergencies, raise money for supplies, and try to get to the scene as quickly as possible. Over the last ten years the agency has grown from $8,500 per year in donations to over one million. But the impact of the organization is far greater than those numbers might imply, because everyone who goes to provide services are volunteers. Singh has personally been on the scene of many of the worst disasters of the last decade including the Tsunami in Southeast Asia and the horrific earthquake in Haiti. To this day, the charity has only two employees, and Singh is not one of them, he still makes his living as a full time paramedic. “We have a mantra,” Singh told me, “the most amount of aid to the greatest number of people, for the least cost.”

He was not a fundraiser nor did he have any particular managerial skill. What Singh had was even more important. He had a desire for things to be better and decided he was the one who could do something about it. During my interview with him he also gave me one of the most important insights into stepping up. A simple but profound idea: You have to use the gifts you have to work with.

Here is what he told me. “I am a paramedic so the natural way for me to step up was to go do emergency medicine. For some kid in school whose in grade seven she might be best at holding a bake sale to raise money. If you are a pharmaceutical company the best way for you to step up is
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providing drugs, and if you are an airline it is about providing a plane to send the supplies. There is a woman named Sharon who volunteers for us. She works at a local hospital and can’t take off and go to the sites. But she comes and spends hours packing the supplies, so that’s her way of stepping up. Just because you are the one who chops off the leg doesn’t make you more important, each of us has to step up with what we have to offer.”

**Begin Where You Are, Do What You Can**

Beginning where you are and doing what you can with your unique set of skills is critical. Last year my partner and I made a trip to Uganda where we spent about five weeks volunteering for an organization that has helped thousands of woman elevate themselves out of poverty. When we returned home we experienced a bit of a “sink” as here we were back at home without that deep sense of purpose we had every day in Uganda. Then one day we were stopped at a light where a homeless man was begging for money. He looked as poor and as sad as those we had seen in Uganda. My partner said: “What a shame we had to go all that way to help those women. We should do something right here where we live.”

Often we think we have to go to some far flung place to step up, when the opportunity is sitting right in front of us. Over the next several months, with our eyes open now, we started noticing the punishing poverty and hopelessness within blocks of our home. We “adopted” a homeless man becoming his main supplier for recycled products he could take for refunds, I offered my consulting services for free to an organization four blocks from my home that does extensive work with the homeless and wound up joining the board. We also, began selling the jewellery of one of the women we met in Uganda, even though selling beads is not our core competence, but selling it right here in our city.
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One of the people I interviewed told me a simple but profoundly important story about stepping up where you are. A young man in his early 20’s wrote an e-mail to Rex Weyler when he had read about how he and others had stopped the whale hunt in its tracks so many years ago.

Attracted to the sense of adventure and purpose in the Whale Campaign, the young idealist told Weyeler that he wanted to do something “big” like that and help save the planet. Rex wrote him back saying it was great to want to do something big, but that he should start by finding something he could do right there in his own neighbourhood.

Some months later the young man wrote back. After receiving the advice to look right in his own backyard, he had noticed that on recycling day, very few houses in his neighbourhood recycled very much. So he put together a simple flier showing what a difference recycling makes, he went out and got scores of “blue boxes” and then went door to door to win his neighbours to recycling. By the end of a few weeks, his neighbourhood had full blue boxes outside almost every house.

He stepped up right where he was with the gifts he had. He parlayed his passion and enthusiasm into his neighbor’s lives. Most of all he had realized that stepping up right where he was planted had produced immediate results.

**Stepping up is about Seeing the Possible in the Mundane**

Many of the forms of stepping up that have been featured in this book were written on the larger landscape. Divisions of companies turned into profit engines, whale hunts stopped, school systems transformed and violent slums turned into vibrant communities. But much of stepping up is about seeing the possible in what may seem mundane.

Westjet is one of the most profitable airlines in the world based in Canada. Over a short fifteen year history they have gobbled up market share from their competitors, mostly because of an
intense focus on great customer service. Almost any job offers the possibility of stepping up and making a difference. All that is required is that we keep our eyes open.

Lisa is a Westjet call center agent who spends her days booking flights for customers. The job is, in some ways quite routine, however important it is to the company’s success. One day she was on a call with a man who was trying to change his flight times. While he was looking at his paperwork his young son came on the phone and started telling the agent how much he loved NASCAR racing. The agent, Lisa, happened to also be a big fan. The man told his son to stop bothering the “lady” and apologized. Later that week she put together a little NASCAR care package of stuffed toys, etc. At the time she was simply stepping up to make a good impression for Westjet and bring a smile to a little boy.

A year and a half later, a letter arrived from the father telling the story of what had happened. He said “I have been thinking about this now for many months and the impact you had on my son.” You see it turned out that the young boy was battling terminal cancer. He had taken the stuffed car with him as he went through chemotherapy treatments. He had kept the stuffed animal and passed away with the toy she had sent him by his side.” The agent, Lisa, was blown away.

The real point to this story is that stepping up is always available to us. We can step up and improve the image of our company, we can step up and choose to make someone’s day at any moment. Although most of the time it won’t have this kind of impact, in small ways each choice to step up changes things in some small way.

Lisa could have chosen to be a nurse working full time with terminally ill children but that is not her work in the world. But in her work, that of booking tickets for customers, stepping up was equally impactful.
Sometimes stepping up can mean simply keeping your eyes open in every moment and asking:
How might I make a difference now, right here where I am? It is asking that question which
Howard Behar was asked by that elderly store owner in his first job when he tried to say
someone else will pick up the garbage later: If not me, then who? You see part of stepping up is
realizing that at any moment if you don’t step up, maybe no one will do so. Maybe you stepping
up means more than you can ever imagine.

Years ago a woman told me one of the most profound stories I have ever heard. Her mother was
that kind of woman, a person who had stepped up in a variety of ways in her life. When she died,
at her funeral, there were many people whom her daughter did not know. Because she had
moved away years before there were many strangers, so she kept asking her father and her
brothers who each person was. There was one woman sitting in the corner who no one knew.
The daughter went over and engaged the middle aged woman in a conversation. “I am her
daughter and my family and I were just talking about the fact that none of us know you. So I am
wondering how you knew my mother?”
The woman paused and then replied: “I am sorry to say, I did not know your mother.”

Taken aback, the daughter asked “I don’t understand, then why are you here?”

“Well it is a bit of a long story. About five years ago I was going through a very, very difficult
time in my life. I was so distraught that I had made a plan to kill myself. That day I was riding a
bus sitting next to a woman who was very engrossed in a book. Halfway through the trip she put
her book down on her lap and turned to me saying ‘you look like a woman who needs to talk.’
For the rest of the bus ride, I don’t know why, I confided in her. She talked to me. She told me
that sometimes things seem so dark but that if we hold on, the light comes. When I got home I
changed my mind. I decided to live.”
“I was so into myself that day I never even asked what her name was, but then three days ago I saw her picture in the paper. You see, I did not know your mother, I did not even know her name, but her twenty minutes with me saved my life. So I came to say thank you.”

During the normal routine of riding a bus, this woman had stepped up. She had felt a need and thought maybe I can do something about it. She could have just as easily not done so. She could have kept her nose in the book or minded her own business. She might have said let someone else clean this up later? Instead she said if not me, who? If not now, when?

You see this is where responsibility comes in. Just as I think it is my job to keep the beaches clean, just like Lisa thought it was her job to improve the reputation of Westjet, just like Rahul thought it was his job to organize emergency care for the developed world, just like this woman on the bus who thought it is my job to help this stranger, so I think stepping begins with seeing that you are the one to step up in your sphere of influence. Ask yourself, in your five rows, if not you, then who?

**What is the Role You Can Best Play**

So here are some questions for you to ask yourself?

What is something you care deeply about? What is role you are best positioned to play in solving that problem?

To make a difference we must get ego out of the way. Doing something big is nice, but doing something big is almost always an outgrowth of doing something smaller. Rahul did not set out originally to be one of Time’s most influential people. He saw a need and connected it with his skill as a paramedic. He saw a need and said I can do something about that.
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What can you do right now where you are? How can you step up and make your company better (its morale, its reputation, its service)? How can you step up and make your community better. Whose career can you aid or influence at work?

Maybe you won’t stop poverty, or solve world hunger, but there probably is a homeless person within a few blocks of your home or a dissatisfied customer right on the other side of your desk.

Heartbreak and Hope in Haiti

Rahul Singh, like so many people who have stepped up, wondered aloud to me if he has done enough. “I think I have not stepped up enough. Why are we only bringing in a million dollars a year when the need is so great?”

When the Haiti earthquake occurred, Global Medic was among the first to arrive. They flew into the Dominican Republic and drove across the border into Haiti arriving on the scene a mere sixty hours after the quake. They would be in Haiti for four months. For every life they saved there were disappointments. He told me heartwarming and heartbreaking stories of what it is like to be on the front lines of such a disaster. One story stood out. This is the story in his words.

“I had a moment when I wanted to throw up my hands and say this is not worth it. I was working from five in the morning until late at night. I had not slept the night before when a guy with a shot gun taps me on the shoulder and tells me there is a woman whose children were sick. She had triplets three days before the quake. One died during the quake and the other two were sick. It was 5:30 Sunday morning and the sun had just come up.”

“The only facility for an eight day old infant was run by the Israeli’s some twenty kilometers away. At day six in Haiti, it might as well have been two thousand miles away! The streets were not safe, and there were looters everywhere and people with guns. I was going to say no and something in me could not do it. We packed her up with her two infants in a land cruiser and
headed that way. At one point the car was surrounded by such a large mob that the driver had to
shoot a few rounds out the window to clear the crowd.”

“All the time as we drove, and it took most of the day, I was working on the kid. At one point
during the drive I realized he had died. In Toronto where I live, the police would have come and
guided us to the hospital. But here, it was simply too far and had taken too long. I did not have
the heart to tell her he was dead so I bundled him up and handed him back to her. She cuddled
him in her arms until we arrived at the makeshift hospital.”

“When we finally arrived the Israeli’s took the one kid in right away and then they told me I
needed to tell the mom that the other one was dead and to ask her if she wants to bury him. So I
told her that her son was dead. At home, we would have to fill out certificates of death and all
kinds of paperwork. But here there would be no record of this boy’s death, there were simply too
many to keep count. I was angry and wondered how many people did not get drinking water that
day because I came here with these kids?

“But that day, when I got back to our base, some of the kids lead a cheer in Creole about how we
had saved the day for them and given them hope. Then I thought look what they are going
through and they have hope, who am I to be pissed?” Then again they had served 7,000 patients,
brought in millions of dollars in meds, and distributed a million liters of fresh water every week.
Even if you step up you can’t fix everything.

Of course it was anger, in part, that had motivated Singh in the first place. That steak dinner at
the five star hotel and then the death of his best friend. I asked him what he would say to others
about stepping up.
“There is a sense of urgency. Life is short, if you are not going to step up now, then when will you? You don’t want to look back on your life and wish you had stepped up and changed something.”

Ways to Step Up:

• What is the skill you have for stepping up? Think of how you can use that skill to apply towards something you care about. Maybe you can speak in front of groups, maybe you have writing skill, or maybe your main skill is time. How can you use what you have right now to make a difference?

• Think about your average day at work or in your life. What are all the ways you could step up and make a bigger difference in your daily life without moving anywhere or changing anything except yourself.

Chapter Ten
Stepping Up by Speaking Up

Sometimes, just speaking is a form of stepping up and often one of great consequence. That is, simply the act of bringing up an idea that may be unpopular
or challenging a status quo with your words is a powerful form of stepping up. Josh Blair, the Executive V.P. of Human Resources for TELUS put it this way “stepping up is often about having the courage to go to an uninvited place and make some great things happen for your customers or the area you are running.”

The idea of stepping up and speaking up in an uninvited way brings fear to most of us, especially in the world of work. After all, isn’t it true that people who kiss up, go along with the flow, and get with the program are more successful? We all know stories of people who stepped up, broke the silence and got punished right? Well after spending two decades advising companies on leadership and corporate culture, I have spent a lot of time with senior executives so I think I know a bit about how senior people feel about people who speak up. Routinely I have found that quite the opposite is usually the case. Those who speak up and stand up for something are more likely to get promoted and are more highly admired than those who just go with the flow. When I interviewed senior executives and CEO’s for this book, I actually came out and asked them this question. How do you feel about people who speak up and challenge things? To a person they all talked about how valuable these people are, how much they improve the organization and how “yes” people rarely get ahead. I will admit sometimes they said these people can be a “pain in the butt” but the truth is, people who speak up make things better. If this is
the case, why does the prevailing myth of being a good soldier and keeping your mouth shut have so much weight in the world of organizations?

**Two Kinds of Speaking Up**

One clue to that question can be found in the work of Dr. Dominic Infante and William Gorden, two retired professors of communication studies at Kent State University in Ohio. I owe Dr. Infante a personal debt of gratitude because he directed my doctoral dissertation and will be forever one of my favorite people because during my defense of my competency exam for my doctorate, upon seeing I had no clue the answer to an important question, asked “would you like a hint.” To which a rather hard-nosed colleague scornfully looked at him and said-“a hint.” He merely smiled and said “yes a hint” and proceeded to give me a big hint.

Infante spent a good deal of his career studying two constructs called Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggression. Simply put, people who are high in argumentativeness like a good debate, tend to speak up with their ideas and challenge things. Verbal Aggressiveness has to do with finger pointing and blaming, people who tend to use a great deal of “you” language and often put down others with their communication. Years of research by Infante shows that managers routinely rated employees much higher who were high in argumentativeness. Ironically those most likely to speak up were rated highest, not
lowest. On the other hand, those who were high in verbal aggression were rated the lowest by managers.

The moral to the story is simple. Those who step up and challenge things are actually more likely to get ahead, but only if they do so in a way that is not perceived as “finger pointing and blaming.” For those of you who believe that all your complaining over the years was a form of stepping up I beg to differ. Complaining, usually characterized by lots of “you” and “they” language is actually a mask for not stepping up. Like verbally aggressive people, complainers are neither respected or promoted.

Speaking up in a positive way means challenging things but focusing on what we all need to do in order to make things better. Here is a surefire way to know if you are speaking up or complaining. If your speaking up has mostly the words “you” and “they” you are probably complaining. If you are using lots of “I” and “we”, you are probably speaking up in a positive way.

**Why Speaking Up Matters**

Stepping up by speaking up can have real positive effects both for your company and your career. At one of my large clients, a woman who worked in benefits was often approached by friends and colleagues about a problem with the services of her company. Talking to other colleagues, she realized that this was a common
occurrence, and that her fellow managers and employees often felt incredibly powerless to solve real customer complaints that came to them directly. Even though it was not her area of responsibility, she chose to speak up at a company town hall meeting suggesting that the company needed a method for employees to get issues resolved when customers brought them directly to them, something better than suggesting they call customer service. She suggested that this inability to act was bad for the brand but also left employees feeling powerless. It was a bit of a risk, speaking up and raising what could be an unpopular issue.

Yet her speaking up helped two other leaders decide to step up. Those two leaders spearheaded an effort to create a problem resolution system where a customer issue brought to the company by an employee or manager could be resolved in 48 hours. The system was implemented and became a great success but likely would never have happened if this one woman had not spoken up at a town hall meeting about an issue far from her area of responsibility. She did not say you need to fix this, she said we need to fix this.

Breaking the silence is an important kind of stepping up, a willingness to say what everyone is thinking but no one seems willing to say. It is no accident that in the monarchies of the past, the court jester was a very powerful position because the jester could often say things that everyone else was thinking but no one else dared say (hence the well known saying “some things said in jest….).
Being the one who breaks the silence can be nerve-racking, yet this kind of stepping up is often critical. We may not even think of opening our mouths as a way of stepping up but often it is the very form of stepping up that is most needed. In one of my client companies there was a gathering of middle and senior leaders. Over the last year, as the company grappled with a recession, senior leaders had become tighter and tighter about controlling expenses, often leading to micromanagement of leaders throughout the organization. The word on the street was that managers did not feel trusted and felt like the senior people needed to just tell them what needed to be done and trust their judgment to do so instead of tying their hands with procedures. At this gathering, managers were dancing around the issue until one manager raised his hand. “Look” he said, “no one seems willing to say it but the real problems is that you guys are control freaks.” You could hear a pin drop. He had probably said what everyone in the room was thinking, but he had actually said it! In fairness, he had used some “you” language but he had done so in a very constructive way. He went on to say “we need you to trust us and hold us accountable, then we need to step up and prove we deserved it.”

His speaking up created some helpful dialogue in the moment but there was also nervousness and defensiveness. Like Jerry McGuire when he put his “mission statement” in the boxes, outwardly people cheered, but some wondered if a price would be paid for speaking up. What happened later is most instructive.
One of the senior leaders who had been named as a “control freak” by this man told me that later that night he got to thinking about what the manager had said. As the financial crisis had abated the CEO had let loose some of the controls on the senior team, but the senior team had not done the same with their people. He realized that the manager who spoke up was correct, they were acting like control freaks. Not only did his speaking up help loosen up the controls, but that senior manager told the story over and over again for the next year. The man became a kind of folk hero in his company.

Stepping up by speaking up can mean defending someone at school when others are making fun of them, it can be challenging a meeting after hours in a company where “work-life balance” is out of control, it can mean being the one who says let’s have the gossip stop here instead of spreading it, and it can often simply mean a willingness to be unpopular, in the moment, just because it is the right thing to do. It is going to that “uninvited place” that Josh Blair talked to me about.

If You Don’t Have Something Nice to Say

My mother is a native New Yorker although Canadian by descent. Her family raised her to be polite and speak only when you have something nice to say. But if you want to step up and make a difference there are times when you have to speak up, even if it may not be popular in the moment. Years ago she was sitting at lunch with a group of colleagues including one young co-worker who had just moved
back into her parents’ home after living with a boyfriend for two years. At lunch, the young woman was complaining to her co-workers about how controlling her dad was and that after being on her own for two years, she resented being told when to come home and her parents need to know where she was going. Things had gotten so bad that her mother and father were no longer speaking to each other as they disagreed on how to handle the conflict with their daughter.

The rest of the lunchroom gang were listening and lending support, even though when she was not present they were saying that it was, after all, her parent’s house. My mother simply listened again to the daily rant, had finally had enough and decided to speak up. She did not do it to look good or to show-up her young colleague. “Look I have to say you have some nerve. You move out and then move back into your parents house, now you are living off of them and now you resent that they want some say. For God’ sake, now your mother and father are not even talking to each other. Do you think that is right? Maybe you better look at yourself.” My mother said the rest of the table looked shocked, not that they did not agree, but they could hardly believe my mother had said it.

A week later, the young colleague came to my mother and said: “Irene, I have to tell you that it bothered me when you said what you said at lunch last week. But later that day, I started thinking about what you said. I went to my father and
apologized and we have worked things out. My mother and father are talking again. Thanks for saying what you said.”

Speaking up can be a form of stepping up when we challenge our colleagues to do better at work. Years ago I was staying at a Ritz Carlton outside of Atlanta, Georgia. As many of you know, the hotel chain is known for having great customer service and I was standing at the front desk receiving that great service from a young front desk associate. While she was helping me, another guest came up to the front desk where two of her colleagues were talking to each other about a ball game they had seen the night before. They continued talking as the guest waited to be served. The young woman serving me turned her head ever so gently keeping her eyes on me and whispered to her colleagues “there is a guest present.” Immediately they ceased talking and turned their attention to the guest. It was so subtle but so profound.

The woman at the front desk had stepped up. She had broken a code of silence that often exists between people. The code is something like “I won’t challenge you if you won’t challenge me”. But in breaking that unwritten code, she had stepped up and changed things. I can’t be sure how her colleagues reacted. Know the Ritz they probably appreciated it but regardless she had spoken up, taken responsibility not just for her guest but for their guests.
Now I can’t guarantee that every time you speak up, the company will solve a problem and you will become a folk hero. I can’t even guarantee that if you speak up, your career will be better. But I can guarantee you that when people step up by speaking up, real problems often get resolved. I can tell you that years of research by Infante and others, as well my interviews with senior people for this book, suggest that stepping up by speaking up is a great way to raise your profile as long as you are not just complaining.

What’s more when we don’t step up by speaking up, the consequences can be catastrophic. How many people at Enron knew things were not right at the company long before things blew up along with the wealth of employees and shareholders? How might things have been different had they spoken up more loudly, more clearly, and for the good of the company?

If you want to see the consequence of not stepping up by speaking up, watch the award winning documentary Inside Job, about the run up to the financial collapse of 2008-2009 when the sale of complex derivatives and loose mortgage standards nearly brought about a Great Depression (and still is having far reaching consequences). Surely, lots of people knew that these practices were dangerous, irresponsible and surely unethical. But few spoke up loudly and challenged the prevailing paradigm. For some, their failure to speak lead directly to the destruction of the very companies they worked for and were supposed to defend.
In the end we also speak up because it is, as one man I interviewed said, your life that is on the line. Ken Lyotier, a homeless alcoholic who helped start a recycling revolution, told me that when we don’t step up “there is a part of us that dies”. We have all had the experience where we remained silent and ever regretted it.

When I was a young minister, my second assignment was at an all-white church in northern Ohio. They were good people but there was also a strong racist streak among some members. Before the monthly meeting of the elders, a few members would often tell jokes about black people with offensive phrases like “porch monkeys.” I have to admit that as a young minister who had grown up in a family with friends of all races and where people were judged by the content of their character, I found these jokes offensive. The fact that they were spoken before a meeting of elders in a church that professed themselves as followers of Jesus made the irony even more profound.

For months I just put up with it in silence, I even laughed nervously to fit in on occasion. Then one day, I finally spoke up. I knew my life was on the line. Not my literal life of course, but my psychic life, my sense of myself as a person. In the middle of one of the jokes I merely said: “You know this is the house of God, not just the house of the white God.” The jokes stopped. I offended a few people. A few elders took me aside afterwards and said “thank you.” But most of all, I felt good about myself. I had stepped up by speaking up. It may not have changed
anyone’s mind but that is rarely the point of speaking up. We step up by speaking up because it is the right thing to do.

_________________________________________________________________________

Ways to Step Up:

• Starting today make a commitment to stop being a complainer and to stop being a “yes” person. Complaining is finger pointing and not a form of speaking up. Instead challenge things while suggesting how you can make the change as well. Be the one who says what others are thinking in a constructive way.

• Challenge your colleagues at work. Better, start challenging your friends and family members too. What I mean is doing what the woman did at the Ritz Carlton—make it your mission to speak up and make others better but do it in a respectful way because you want them to be better.

• Break the silence. Enron, the financial disaster of 2008 and maybe even genocides like Rwanda might have been stopped by people being willing to speak up before things escalated. The world needs courageous people who will challenge things. It may “breaking” the silence about an unethical business practice, or challenging a racist comment. Make no mistake speaking up is a powerful form of stepping up.

Chapter Eleven
Leadership is Not a Position…It’s a Posture

Leadership is not a position. You can’t be assigned or appointed to be a leader. Leadership is not about what your business card says, what your title is, or where you sit on the organizational chart in your company. Leadership is a posture, it is a decision that you want to have influence over others in a positive way.

David Shepherd and Travis Price did not hold positions of leadership but in September, 2007 but they did decide to lead. It was a normal first week of school at Central Kings Rural High School in Nova Scotia, Canada when a student arrived to school wearing a pink polo shirt. He was a ninth grader and it was his first day at the school, having just moved into the community. It turned out not to be a very good day. He was bullied mercilessly by a group of twelfth graders who called him “gay” and told him if he ever wore a pink shirt again they would beat him to a pulp. Welcome to the school!

Events like this happen in schools around the world every day and as we know from recent events such as the high profile suicide of a Rutger’s University student in New Jersey, bullying often leads to terrible consequences. According to the Center for Disease Control over 4,400 teens commit suicide every year in the United States alone and students who are bullied are up to nine times more likely to take their life than those who are not bullied. A British study suggested that half of teen suicides are related to bullying. That means as many as 2,200 teens may commit suicide in the U.S. alone every year because of bullying! Some 160,000 students in the U.S. alone, according to a report by ABC News, stay home out of fear of bullying every single day!

At Central Kings High, two twelfth graders David Shepherd and Travis Price, heard about the pink shirt bullying incident and decided to act. Shepherd later said “I just figured enough is
enough. We figured this had gone too far, someone needs to do something about it. I told Travis we should be the ones to do something and he agreed.”

They hatched a simple idea. They would go to a local discount store and purchase as many pink t-shirts and tank tops as they could find. Through Facebook and e-mail later that night, they tried to get as many people as possible to agree to what they had dubbed a “sea of pink.” The next morning not only did the fifty shirts and tank tops all get used up, but hundreds of students showed up wearing pink, some dressed from head to toe in pink! The boys were overwhelmed with the response.

One of the bullies saw the sea of pink and threw a trash can in protest, but as David would say later “not a peep was heard from the bullies after that day.” The story was picked up by the national media across Canada and later overseas as well. Today there are hundreds of schools that hold annual pink shirt days across Canada and elsewhere, all because two twelfth graders decided to step up and lead. No one had appointed them, they were not the chairs of (or even member of) the anti-bullying committee, and they were not the stars of the football team. They simply decided to be leaders. David told CBC news “we won’t be able to stop all bullying, but if enough of us step up and just do what we can, we can get rid of most of it.”

**You Can’t NOT Lead**

Not only is leadership not a position, the truth is that you can’t “not” lead. That is, whether you want to or not, you will have influence over others. Simply by choosing to show up a certain way in our lives and at work, we are leading. Each of us spreads a virus by the way we show up even if we don’t intend to.

Try this little experiment. Next time you enter a conversation that is negative, intentionally shift gears and watch what happens. If someone is talking negatively about your company or someone
who works with you, turn it around and make a positive comment. Watch how the energy shifts. In fact, by saying nothing we are actually taking a leading role without choosing to do so. That is why bullying experts talk about the “bystanders” being such a critical element of bullying culture whether in work or school. Doing nothing is a form of leading.

Or try one day to have no influence at all. Simply be quiet on every issue that comes up. Before you know it, people will be falling all over themselves to ask you for your viewpoint. Your very silence and desire to have no influence at all will have influenced the course of the conversation. Remember back to our earlier conversation about yawning. Whatever we do it causes a reaction. We cannot decide not to lead even if we want to do so.

As parents we should be acutely aware of how we lead even when we are not trying. Think about those times you suddenly find yourself sounding like your mother or father even though you said you’d never do that. They were influencing you even when they did not know it.

Since leadership is not a position, it means that each of us can punch way above our weight. We don’t need a title or a position of power to have influence. Of course claiming we have no influence is a great crutch that can keep us from having to step up. We can say things like “if they ever give me some real authority around here, let me tell you what I would do.” Well here is a news flash, you already have authority. You already are a leader. The only question is how you are using the influence that you already have?

One way to begin to get in touch with how you want to influence is to ask what your intention is every day in terms of how you want to influence the world. That is, what is the way you want to influence others every day just by how you are showing up? Over the years, in sessions I have lead inside companies, I have asked thousands of people to do that simple exercise. I am always both amazed and inspired by the answers people give. A receptionist in a law firm, for example,
told me that her intention was that every person who met her all day long got a “shot of friendliness” so that people felt the world was a friendlier place because they encountered her. Others say kindness, goodness, compassion, creativity, energy, enthusiasm, courage, or hope. The point is that your position does not limit the way you can influence others. She was “only” a receptionist but she could influence others in a very profound way by holding that intention.

What is your intention every day? How do you want to influence others by the way you are showing up?

**Go Beyond Your Role-Whatever Your Role Is**

Part of stepping up is deciding to lead bigger than whatever your role is. Your job description may say you have a certain responsibility, but if you want to get ahead, decide to lead bigger than your role says you should.

Here are some of my favourite examples. Many of you have probably had a Starbucks Frappucinno, and you may have even guessed that the introduction of the Frappucinno had a huge impact on Starbuck’s profit growth. What you probably don’t know is the story behind the drink.

According to Howard Behar, former president of Starbucks International, the Frappucinno almost never got launched. In the mid 1990’s in Santa Monica, California, a local coffee shop was serving a cold dessert drink that was taking away customers from the local Starbuck’s stores in the summer months. Staff and the local manager felt they needed to get some blenders and create a drink to compete with the local operation. The idea went all the way up to the CEO Howard Schultz, who said that doing this experiment was not a good idea.

It was not in the store manager’s job description to come up with new products. In fact, Starbucks had a group of people who were tasked with creating new menu items. But the folks in
Santa Monica kept bugging Howard Behar, then vice president at Starbucks. When he talked to me about the folks in Santa Monica, both front line managers and front line associates, he used that phrase I have come to hear so many times as I interviewed people about stepping up “she was like a little dog on a bone.” They kept pushing, saying this idea was a winner even when the answer came back as no. They started experimenting and the sales skyrocketed. The perseverance paid off and the cold drinks became a major product for Starbucks, in part, because a few people lead in an area they were not supposed to be leaders. They did not let position get in the way of choosing to lead.

Leading beyond your job description or your defined role, can happen in the most unlikely of places. Canadian Tire is a large home grown retail hardware and general goods chain. Some years ago they came up with a slogan: Customers for Life. They wanted to be so service-oriented and treat customers so well, that we would want to bring our business to them for life.

In some jobs it was pretty obvious how people could take the lead on this effort. But there was one group of people where the connection might not be so evident. There were a group of people in a call center that spent their entire day calling people whose store sponsored credit cards were overdue. All day long they would call delinquent customers to try to get them to pay their bills. It sounds like a pretty tough way to win customers for life. In fact, who wants a customer for life who can’t pay their bills anyway? It would be easy to cut some slack for anyone in that department who thought to themselves “it’s not my job to win customers for life!”

One of the agents made an outgoing call to talk to a woman who was months behind on paying a fairly substantial bill to Canadian Tire. The agent asked when the money might be paid and the woman told her this story. She said that some time ago she had decided to start a home candle-making business where she would have parties at people’s houses to sell her candles. She had
bought a large amount of supplies at Canadian Tire to start the business but there was one big wrinkle in the plan. She could not get people to host the parties. The woman apologized for not being able to pay her bill but given the large amount of supplies she had on hand, with little prospect for parties, she had no idea when she could pay.

Now let’s be honest, most of the time this is where the story would end. The agent would say she was sorry to hear about the woman’s plight and then admonish her to pay very soon. The agent might have even told a few people the story. She could easily be forgiven for not trying to “win a customer for life.” But few agents would have taken the next step which this woman did.

The next day she called the woman up and said “I have been thinking about your situation and I have an idea. We have several hundred people, mostly women, who work here at the call center. I’d like to organize a day where we have some candle parties during lunch times here at the center. I will put up fliers, talk up the party and all you need to do is show up with your candles.”

A few weeks later they held the parties. Not only did the woman sell out most of her inventory but many of the agents said they’d like to hold parties in their house for their friends. The day of parties at the call center launched the struggling business. Not only did the woman pay off her credit card but a year later sent a letter to the president of Canadian Tire about what a difference this agent had made in her life and business. The agent won an award from the company. She had, of course, won a customer for life.

This simple story illustrates so many of the things in this book. First, the issue of responsibility, it was not in the agent’s job description to help people pay their bills or to help struggling businesses become successful, but she took responsibility anyway. She could have easily said “that’s not my job” to do that. Instead she did what everyone does who steps up; she saw a need
and decided she was the right person to do something about it. This is what 100% responsibility means in action. It means saying “why not me” instead of “why me?”

It also illustrates what a profound difference we can make regardless of where we sit. Stepping up is about doing what you can, where you are, and with what you have. There are so many of us waiting to be in a position of influence before we influence. The opposite is more representative of reality. The more we influence, the more we will given the opportunity to influence. That agent’s credibility in the company grew because she stepped up. Awards are not given to those who simply punch their weight, but to those who decide to lead in a way greater than their position.

**Stepping-Up When No One is Looking**

There is another important point that needs to be made about stepping up. Stepping up is not about only stepping up when someone is watching. Stepping up means taking responsibility even when there is no pressure from the outside to do so and even when you think no one is watching. Think about all the tragedies that have come from people who thought it did not matter if they took responsibility even when no one was watching?

In the previous chapter I mentioned the film *Inside Job* about the trail that lead to the financial meltdown of 2008. It is the compelling and disturbing story of how people did not step up and did not take responsibility. Behind the scenes where few of us could ever peer, very smart people made decisions that cost millions of people trillions of dollars. As you watch the film you will begin to realize how many people probably saw that something was amiss but decided not to stick their necks out. Maybe it was not their job, maybe they were not “leaders.” One can’t help but wonder how the world would be different right now if more people had decided that it was
important for them to take responsibility, to lead even if they did not have the official position to
do so. Perhaps the crisis could have been avoided or at least been more muted.

Don Schroeder is the CEO of Tim Horton’s, a hugely successful restaurant chain based in
Canada. He told me that “part of stepping up is doing so when no one has asked you to do it, but
you do it anyway.” Tim Horton’s has an iconic brand in Canada and a growing brand in the
United States. They have been in business for almost fifty years and have always been known for
their work in running camps for underprivileged children. They also buy lots of coffee from
farmers in Central and South America.

Several years ago the company decided to step up to help poor coffee farmers. They were not
pressured to do so and had not been implicated in any scandals. Schroeder said “we decided we
had to do something to help these farmers and to raise the bar on social responsibility. We were
known for giving back through our camps but we wanted to do this. Today we have a very
successful program that helps coffee farmers grow their business. We don’t just write a check,
we decided to help them become better business people whether they sell their coffee to us or to
someone else. We have helped about 12,000 farmers so far farmers. Biggest impact the head of it
said we are becoming better business people. As a chain we stepped up even though no one was
saying to us to do it.”

Stepping is about taking a position of leadership even if no one is asking you to do it. That is
what David and Travis did in September, 2007 when they took on bullying. That is what those
committed few did at Starbucks when they fought for the cold coffee drinks, it’s what the agent
did at Canadian Tire when she stepped out of her role to help a delinquent credit card holder and
it is what Tim Horton’s did when they decided to help coffee farmers with little fanfare.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

You are leading right now whatever your position may be. Why not lead bigger than your position?

Ways to Step Up:

• Decide what your intention is every day how you want to change the world or your workplace every day. Write that intention on a card and all day long be active in leading. It might be compassion, it might be respect, whatever it is look for ways to influence all day long

• Punch above your weight or formal position. Come up with ideas for new products and innovations even if it’s not in your job description, win customers for life even if it’s not your department, and generally go bigger than whatever your role says you MUST do

• Don’t let your lack of position get in the way of your influence. David and Travis had no position but they did lead. How could you lead right now even though you have no position?
Chapter Twelve

Who Am I to Step Up?

How Ordinary People Do Extraordinary Things

“There are no extraordinary people, only ordinary people who do extraordinary things.”

Mother Teresa

One of the most common things people say when they think about stepping up and creating change is: Who am I to step up? Of course I could easily turn that around and ask “who are you not to step up?” As I interviewed people who had stepped up the more I was struck by the fact that stepping up is not about being extraordinary. In fact, I found that often those who stepped up were unlikely candidates.

Ken Lyotier is a case in point. By his own admission, at the time he stepped up and began a recycling revolution and later created jobs for hundreds of homeless people, he himself was an alcoholic “dumpster diver” in Vancouver making his living digging bottles out of dumpsters. Just how he got to that state of affairs and how he stepped up to create change, is the stuff of urban legend.

He was raised just outside of Vancouver and had a pretty normal upbringing in a working class family during the 1950’s and 1960’s. When he was seventeen years old he went to study at the University of British Columbia. At the same time he began to take ill. By the time he was diagnosed with severe Crohn’s disease, a form of inflammatory bowel disease, the illness had wreaked havoc with his health, his social life and his studies. He never did finish his degree.
They did not know what was wrong with me and it took a very long time to diagnose it. It turned out to be Chrohn’s disease. For a decade I was sick, diarrhea all the time it was very isolating. I simply could not commute to school so eventually I had to drop out. I sold real estate for awhile, was involved in land title, basically had a good life but also discovered alcohol and drugs. It is a long story but I wound up homeless and a dumpster diver. I lost my job and eventually the money ran out. For some time I was homeless.”

He was not on the “most likely to step up list.” His description of the life of a homeless person is riveting and heartbreaking. He told me stories of the daily indignities homeless people had to face to scrape together a meager existence. I also learned that the stories of how people fall on such hard times are very human and unique to each person.

Lyotier told me “at the time there were very few products in the recycling deposit system, Pepsi, Coke and a few beer companies. So to make a living you had to really work hard to find enough to live. Even worse there was the indignity of it all. Stores had a limit on how many bottles you could bring in at one time and they did not like having these dirty, smelly street people in their stores. People were treated so poorly and often manipulated-things like store owners would say unless you buy something from the store I won’t give you the deposit money. A lot of people who live a normal life have no idea how hard many homeless people work to get a few dollars.”

It was in 1991 while still “diving” dumpsters for a living, that Ken and Williams Tremblay had a chance conversation in a coffee shop with a United Church minister about the problems and the daily challenges faced by the homeless “binners”. The United minister said he had access to a little bit of money if Ken had an idea on how they could make things better. With $1,500 of seed money, Ken came up with an idea. “As a binner we had a close up view of people’s garbage and
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

I was amazed at how much was being thrown out—tons of bottles and cans that could not be recycled. So we had this idea of a one day event where people would be invited to bring any bottles they could find to a particular place on a Sunday morning and they would get paid for the bottles that were not in the deposit system.” Ken hoped it would raise awareness about both the plight of the divers as well as the sheer amount of waste people were creating. They advertised the event by posting fliers on dumpsters, offering ten cents for small bottles and twenty-five cents for the big ones. Ken had no idea how many people would show up.

When the day came, Victory Square in Vancouver had a line up several times around the block. Hundreds of homeless showed up and at the end of the day there was a huge mountain of garbage. Of course most of the street people came for the prospect of earning ten dollars but Ken was overwhelmed. “People were lined up and I thought we did this! It was so energizing and profound, like the loaves and fishes in the Bible they just kept coming. It made us want to do more. I thought wow, if we can do this; I wonder what else we can do.”

The mountain of garbage and the march caught the media’s attention. The idea that two “binners” had organized such an event caught the imagination of the public and the government. On the back of the publicity from the event, the Provincial government made a promise to bring scores more products into the recycling program. Even though it took years to fulfill that promise, Ken and Williams helped spawn a recycling revolution. These two dumpster divers had helped set in motion a chain of events that would end up leading to scores of additional products being recycled over the next twenty years. The mountain of garbage they helped avoid is almost unfathomable.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

Ken told me “It was a kind of protest that day against what was being thrown out and the indignities faced by the homeless, but most protests are people with signs marching against something. Instead, we did a good thing and just said come and look at how things could be.” If the story ended there it would be inspiring, but Ken’s story of stepping up was far from over.

Emboldened by the experience from Victory Square, Ken became an advocate for his fellow dumpster divers. When the government started hiring consultants to research the implementation of the new recycling deposit system, Ken pushed for a series of town hall type sessions to get input from the homeless and diver community into the process. He told the government that since they were just as much consultants as the high priced advisors the government had hired, he got the government to agree to pay ten dollars to each person who attended.

It was, in part, out of those town hall meetings that Ken hatched a larger idea. “People came to those meetings and I remember one woman who had all kinds of problems and addictions talking about how she was treated at the stores, how they made her buy gum with the money or they would not give it to her. She told us I have no dignity.” So I had this idea to create a bottle depot of our own, a depot where the homeless could come and be treated with dignity. More than that, he envisioned a place where all the employees would also be dumpster divers.

When Ken first started talking to people about this idea of a depot run by the homeless and indigent, people thought he was nuts. “The idea kept bubbling along for a few years. Honestly I was still making a living with bottles so I had to do this in my spare time.” But Ken kept pushing until finally a window of opportunity opened up when the city was building a new sports arena and made a commitment to employ poor people from the downtown eastside into the workforce.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

Ken told the government you need a “test lab” for training the homeless to enter the workforce. His years of hard work and persistence had finally paid off and the bottle depot was born.

“It was hard, we became a nonprofit and even had a board, but I was still fronting the money for the pizza. The idea of the homeless working at the arena never came to pass, but the depot opened. Early on they told me I needed to get a line of credit and I didn’t even know what one was at the time. Imagine the banker’s face when I came in asking for one!”

Today United We Can continues to run a bottle depot and an urban farm called Sole Food on the downtown eastside in Vancouver right in the heart of one of the poorest neighborhoods in the developed world. They eventually came to recycle millions of products a year, turn a profit, employ hundreds, and contribute to a recycling revolution. Ken is retired and on the board, but with the exception of the executive director and the manager of the urban farm, the staff is made up entirely of binners, some homeless, many addicted, who have found a place of dignity through work. Some gave up their addictions, some did not, but all found something at the depot. Every day hundreds of homeless bring their bottles and cans to the depot and are treated with respect. The homeless dumpster diver had become an entrepreneur and an activist. He had raised awareness in the Victory Square rally and persevered until he created a thriving enterprise.

When I asked him to tell me a few stories about the difference the depot has made in people’s lives he told me about the first Christmas after they opened. “We had been open for about a year and we had a party for the staff and whoever wanted to come. People came to that thing and we sat around and drank and talked and talked. These folks had no place to have Christmas, They came and it was not a bar, not the street or a hotel room. There was this sense of community. I remember the laughter, people talking to each other about memories of their Christmases past.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

They so needed that. It gave me a lot of comfort and hope seeing people alive and engaged. To be reassured that they somehow knew there was hope, that no matter how miserable their lives can be they can still find a place to connect.”

And then there were the stories of those individuals whose lives changed. “There was a guy who had been fostered out and adopted many times as a child. He had drifted from place to place and finally was working with us at the depot. He had stepped up, taken on some supervisory responsibilities but there was a street altercation and he had been beat up. He told me ‘that’s it I’m gone’. He just wanted to move on, the way he had probably done all his life. I said you have some vacation time—take it. I let him know you are valuable and there is a place for you here. We are not letting go of you even if you leave. Later on he said to me ‘I don’t want to move on, I am tired of moving on.’ That guy stepped up more and more and eventually became a very valuable person taking on lots of responsibility. In time he got his own apartment and settled down.” For every victory there have been defeats, but Ken has no doubt that the depot has changed lives.

Have a Vision, the Rest Will Come to You

Ken’s story is a great reminder that we can step up from anywhere. Stepping up is not about being extraordinary or having extraordinary means. It is about having the heart, the perseverance and the desire to make something happen. It is about having a vision. Once you step up, somehow that act of taking initiative drives you to find the resources you need inside and outside yourself. If Ken had worried about whether he was the right guy or whether the resources would
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be there, he never would have stepped up. Instead, he had a vision and the resources somehow materialized.

Perhaps what people responded to in Ken was more important than intelligence or resume. Study after study shows that the one great quality all great teachers have is passion. We are attracted to passion and to visions. Think of the stories of those who have stepped up that have been told in this book. All of those who made something happen had two things in common, passion and determination. It is the one quality that is infectious and makes others want to help us.

It may be that almost every person who has ever stepped up doubted that they had the resources, talent and skill to do so. What I learned in this research is that skill, talent and resources are overrated compared with drive, determination and vision.

Devin Hibbard is the CEO and co-founder of an organization called Bead for Life. Over the last seven years, the organization has helped thousands of women in Uganda escape the cycle of extreme poverty by starting their own businesses. Bead for life began because of a chance meeting between Devin Hibbard and Bead for Life’s two co-founders (Torkin Wakefield and Ginny Jordan) in 2003 on a visit to a refugee camp in Kampala, Uganda. The camp was filled with women, many of who were HIV positive or AIDS widows who had fled from a civil war in Northern Uganda. A woman named Mille showed them jewelry she made out of beads made with recycled paper outside of her mud hut. She told them that she worked all day crushing rocks at a quarry for one dollar per day. He beads were beautiful but she said she had no market to sell
her work. They bought some of Mille’s jewelry, not realizing that their lives, and the lives of thousands of women were about to change.

When they came home they showed the beads to friends and also told the story of these women’s lives. In September, 2004, they had a “bead party” and women loved the jewelry. An idea began to hatch in the women’s minds: Maybe they were being called to create a market for these women’s work.

“The funny thing is that at New Year’s we had set some intentions together for the year and one of those intentions was to do something for the world,” Hibbard told me as we sat in her humble office in Kampala, Uganda’s capital city. Hibbard is a deceptively powerful woman who runs a tight ship, but who is deeply loved by her Ugandan staff. When I met her for the first time she had just arrived back from a month in the United States and the offices were filled with notes and pictures about how much she had been missed. On the one hand her style is matter of fact and no nonsense, but her passion for this mission and for life is contagious.

“Frankly, we did not have a grand plan, or any real credentials to do this. We had no marketing experience, no retail experience and no grand plan but we felt like the universe was knocking at our door and I figured if the universe was knocking who were we to say no! We just kind of leapt into the unknown and took it step by step”

Within a few years, bead parties were happening all over the United States. In Uganda, Bead for Life took in groups of women who were in desperate poverty and trained them to make the beads
and jewelry. They stabilized them with a steady income from the beads while they trained them to start more traditional businesses giving them a grant if they had a solid business plan. Eventually they even bought a large piece of land outside the city and created a community called Friendship Village where women and families could buy modest new homes with the beads they supplied to Bead for Life.

When I visited Uganda for a month in August of 2010, I had the opportunity of visiting the homes and businesses of many women who had been through the Bead for Life program. Again and again I heard stories about how making these beads had changed these women’s lives. What I learned is that Bead for Life was not just eradicating poverty it was helping women to believe in themselves and in the possibility of dreaming again.

One young woman named Fiona was in her late twenties. She had been an AIDS widow at a very young age and she and her children were destitute. Other women in the neighborhood in which she lived nicknamed her “old young” because she looked so very old for being so very young. “When I passed the cemetery,” she told us, “I envied the dead.” Then she told us what happened when she met the people from Bead for Life. “They taught me how to make beads and jewelry but more importantly they taught me to believe in myself.” Today Fiona lives with her two children in a home she owns in Kampala and her jewelry is sold in stores in both Seattle and Vancouver. She is independent of Bead for Life, leaving room for other women to join the program.
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Today, Devin leads an organization with over sixty staff members and interns, almost all Ugandans in Kampala. Every year, several hundred more women and families are lifted out of poverty, all because three women with few credentials, but lots of heart, decided to step up. Devin gave me a great definition of stepping up: “Stepping up is seeing a need and deciding you are the right person to do something about it!”

When I asked Devin about stepping up she gave me some important counsel, “To step up you need patience. We are so wedded to instant gratification—but if you want to change things you have to know it won’t happen right away.”

It is an important lesson. It took years before Weyler’s picture lead to the banning of the Whale Hunt. Ken stepped up and the government promised to recycle more, but it took years of persistence to make good on that promise and begin the bottle depot.

What I learned is that many of those who stepped had this thought: Who am I to do this? Devin Hibbard started Bead for Life with no marketing or retail experience but a great desire to get something done. Joanne Beaton had never run operator services but wanted to create a thriving business. Rahul Singh was a paramedic not a fundraiser. Ken was diving in dumpsters but chose to step up anyway. Mike and Dave were brand new teachers, not entrepreneurs, but started an alternative public school system. David and Travis were just normal twelfth graders when they began a pink shirt revolution.
So maybe the question really is: Who are you not to step up? Whatever reason you have to say you are not the right person, there is someone who had those same thoughts and stepped up to get something done. As Mike Feinberg had told me: “There is often a voice inside of us that says I am not good enough or qualified enough to do this, but there is another voice that says we can do it. Too often we give that negative voice too much power.”

Ken Lyotier knows that voice but he also heard another voice. Ken’s parents died while he was still living on the streets and some years after his mother’s death he was diving in a dumpster one day in Stanley Park in Vancouver when he came upon an urn used for human ashes. “Someone had probably put the ashes in the water at the beach and then thrown the urn away. As I handled the urn I could hear my mother’s voice saying ‘Ken, there must be something more you can do with your life than dive in dumpsters’.”

Just a few weeks after I met Ken for the first time, he told me that he had just learned that he would be receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of British Columbia, the school he had dropped out of because of illness over forty years ago. Things had come full circle. With tears in his eyes he said “I just wish my parents could be alive to see this.”

Ways to Step Up

- Whenever you are tempted to step up and think you don’t have the talent, skill or qualifications, remember that vision, determination and perseverance were the most important qualities of those who stepped up. When that voice says-why me? Replace it with Why Not Me?
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

- Take a step you don’t think you are qualified to take to try to change something.
- Encourage someone who says they want to step up even if you think they are not qualified. Your word of encouragement could make a big difference.
Chapter Thirteen:
Creating a Culture of Stepping Up—
How to Create Companies, Schools & Families Where People Step UP!

Every leader in every company wants their people to step up. We want them to act like owners, to have an “it’s my job attitude” and to go beyond whatever their formal role is to take leadership. Most every parent wishes their children would step up and act more responsibly. The effects of having a company full of people stepping up can be a game changer. Here are two examples.

Take Harley Davidson. The company has been making motorcycles since 1912 but by the mid 1980’s the company was on the brink of bankruptcy. In most crisis circumstances, companies decide to become more hierarchical. The leaders go off to some hotel, eat shrimp cocktail, the smoke comes out of the chimney and they come back barking orders. But at Harley, the new owners took a different path. Rather than bark out orders they asked their people to step up and become leaders. They engaged them in making decisions, asked them to step up and look at their role in making the company successful, and made them a part of the leadership team. Within four short years the company’s turnaround in profits and market share continues to make it one of the greatest success stories in modern American business. Only when everyone stepped up, from the front line to the CEO, did Harley turn it around.
Westjet is a great success story north of the border in Canada. Their whole culture is built on the premise “because owners care.” In an industry known for its toxic relationships with employees, and its unrelenting punishment of shareholder’s wealth, Westjet has bucked that trend and created a place where people at all levels regularly step up and act like leaders. Pilots often pitch in to clean airplanes, pack up bags, and do whatever it takes to get a plane out on time. It is no accident that they have grown from zero to over 33% market share in just over a decade.

The same is true of schools. Examining the success of the K.I.P.P. program in the United States there can be little doubt that when you ask people to step up and take responsibility things change. When I asked one of K.I.P.P.’s two co-founders, Mike Feinberg, how much of their success had to do with longer hours of education and how much had to do with character development (that is getting kids, parents and teachers to step up), he told me “fifty-one percent is character development.” It is an imprecise guess at what almost every leader knows. When people step up and take responsibility everything really does change whether it is in a company, a school or even in a family.

The results of having a company or school (or family) where people act like owners may be evident, but how to create such a place is another story. It is a paradox that every leader wants their people to step up and every parent wants their children to act responsibly, but still this is not the norm. I have spent a lifetime helping companies and schools create just such a culture which is why when I interviewed people for this book I wanted to ask leaders who had created those kinds of cultures to tell me how they did it.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

If you are not a formal leader in your organization you might be tempted to skip on to the final chapter and feel free to do so. But you may be interested in the advice I give to formal leaders because since you are a leader in your organization, whether you have that title or not, you can hold their feet to the fire once you have heard my advice. You might also find that you too have a part to play in creating a step-up climate.

People Will Only Step Up if They Have a Seat at the Table

Don Knauss is the CEO of Clorox, one of the most successful consumer products companies in the world. Don is an ex-officer in the U.S. Marines and did stints in leadership at Coca-Cola, Proctor and Gamble as well as Frito-Lay before joining Clorox. When I asked him the secret to getting people to step up at work he had a straightforward piece of advice: “People will not step up if you don’t give them a seat at the table.”

In one of his previous assignments Don had been given charge of at one of a region in the southern U.S. for Frito-Lay, a group that delivered and sold chips and snack products into stores. His region was the worst in the country in just about every metric whether sales per route or amount of product breakage (which basically means the amount of product that can’t be used due to damage). Don told me that “the place was filled with tough old drivers who people had given up on years ago. I guess they figured if I could handle marines I could handle these guys.”

When he took over the region Don began with two key activities. The first was that he told people in the region that he wanted them to go from worst to first. He demonstrated what he
called a “prevailing optimism” which is belief that things could change. Like so many of those who stepped up and made things better, he was naïve enough to think he could take this group from worst to first. But the other thing Don did was give people a seat at the table and asked them to step up.

“When I took over running that region with the worst numbers in the company one of the first things I did was walk around and talk to the route drivers on one. Even the old guard who had been there for years and were very entrenched. I asked them for their ideas on how we could make things better. When you listen to people and value their ideas; that’s when they begin to step up. Of course I had ideas, but I knew that if they didn’t have a seat at the table they would not step up. They shared their ideas and suddenly felt like they were part of things.”

Another thing Don did was to force responsibility back on the drivers. He set up a weekly scorecard so each driver knew how they were doing on all the key metrics-sales, breakage, etc. Then he asked the drivers to meet once every week to go over their scorecards. There was no blaming and shaming, just a chance once a week to benchmark against others and share ideas.

Within twelve months the group had achieved Don’s vision and gone from worst to first. Later they won the Herman Lay award for one of the best performing groups in the entire company. Don is quite humble about his role in that success. “All I did was give people a voice and create a vision that things could be better, they made it happen.”
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

Many leaders are afraid of letting people have a seat at the table because we think they will make the wrong decisions, but this fear is misguided at best. Joanne Beaton’s story was featured earlier in this book for the turnaround she led at TELUS, taking a dying business and creating a major profit center. One of the interesting elements of that turnaround is that her first act when she took over operator services was to meet one on one with hundreds of employees. She asked them what they would do if they ran the business and if they were the competitors what would they do to put us out of business. She needed people to step up, to become more productive and to improve customer service, but she began by inviting them to take responsibility. She gave them a seat.

As part of the research for this book we surveyed several hundred professionals to ask them what leaders do that keeps people from stepping up. The top answer with sixty-four percent was “leaders making decisions themselves instead of involving others.” Given this overwhelming desire to have a “seat” at the table, what exactly do leaders fear that causes them to make decisions without consultation.

Many leaders are afraid of giving people a seat for fear that people will make bad decisions. Joanne hit that idea head on: “Most of the time, given the same information, people will make the same decision as the leader would make. The difference is that when THEY make it, they are much more likely to step up and take responsibility to make the change happen.”

Of course that is exactly what she did if you recall. Like Knauss, she both had a compelling vision of the future which she promoted with unrelenting optimism and she engaged them by
meeting with them one-on-one asking for their ideas telling them that only if each of them stepped up could they save operator services and their own jobs. Both had a prevailing optimism (being naïve) alongside giving people a seat at the table. The formula is simple yet profound.

Giving people at seat at the table also has an important side benefit. Executives at Harley Davidson have been quoted as saying that after they shifted their culture to involve people in decision making that it started to take longer to make decisions but that executing on those decisions accelerated. That is, when we give people a seat at the table change is executed more quickly because people are engaged instead of sitting around wondering who and why the decision was made.

This same “seat at the table” principle can be applied in the family. Let’s say your teen behaves in some way that concerns you and you feel called to give some kind of punishment. Imagine if you sat down and gave them a seat at the table? Believe it or not, I think in most cases the punishments they suggest might be aligned with yours or even more severe, but imagine the difference in how they might receive it.

A friend of mine told me that her daughter had put up what she considered to be inappropriate pictures on her Facebook page. She could have easily ordered her to take them down. Instead she gave her a seat at the table and invited a conversation about what those pictures might say to boys about her. She listened deeply, asked good questions, and occasionally led the witness. In the end, they came up with three options. The conversation wound up being a teaching moment.
not just a conflict. Her daughter thanked her for engaging in a conversation. The pictures came
down by choice.

Now don’t get me wrong, if it were my daughter and I felt the pictures were inappropriate, in the
end the pictures would come down. If the drivers had said “hey let’s stay worst” Knauss
probably would not have gone along with it. The point is, as Beaton told me, most of the time
people, including our kids) will come to the same conclusion when we give them a seat.

**People Won’t Act Responsibly if you don’t give them Responsibility**

One of the ways we create a place where people will step up is to give people responsibility.
Unless we have responsibility, it is hard to ask people to act responsibly. As Dennis Bakke, the
former CEO of the AES Corporation, once told me: “If you treat people like adults they will act
like adults. But if you treat them like children, then they will act like children.” It sounds like a
great philosophy, but what does this mean in practical terms?

Let’s take the Ritz Carlton and the Four Seasons as examples, which are both known as two of
the best customer service hotel chains in the world. At both hotels, associates are routinely given
a large amount of money at their disposal to create a memorable guest experience. At the Ritz,
associates down to the most front line jobs like bellhops and housekeepers, have up to $1,000 at
their discretion to use to create a great experience or thrill a guest. Clearly they want people to
step up and take leadership and there are many stories at both chains about people doing just that.
But you might wonder how a hotel chain can take that kind of risk of giving people so much discretion?

The answer is actually quite simple and goes back to that advice Dennis Bakke gave me. When people are given responsibility they tend to act responsibly. If we want people to step up, we have to have the courage to give them a chance to stumble, to learn and to grow. They may sometimes go too far but by giving them power, we encourage them to act like leaders.

At Westjet, gate agents and other team members have lots of power to do things to please any unhappy customer right on the spot without asking for permission. Not surprisingly, customers love knowing that front line people step up and make things better when there is a problem. But Ferio Pugliese, the company’s Executive VP of People and Culture, told me about a time when a new agent had gone too far giving out loads of free tickets for what amounted to a small inconvenience for customers. In some companies she’d probably have gotten reamed out for going too far but “we held her up as a good example and then we coached her on how she could do even better next time.”

Pugliese told me: “The best way to get people to step up is to have spontaneous positive reinforcement for people when they step and take initiative. The moment you hint that it is not desirable for people to take initiative or step out of their role then it won’t happen again.”

Getting people to act responsibly by giving them responsibility even works in the family. A friend of mine’s sixteen year old son was addicted to high end clothing, often paying large sums
for name brand sunglasses and t-shirts. His parents got tired of the constant requests for more money for clothes. So they decided to give their teenage son the responsibility. They decided how much they could afford to spend on clothes for him each year and gave him the money in two lump sums in January and July. They said “here is your clothes allowance for the year. You can spend it however you want but if you run out, we won’t give you any more money.” Suddenly he was shopping at discount stores and bringing home five t-shirts for the price he had been paying for one name brand shirt. Given responsibility he acted responsibly.

Some Sure Fire Ways to Keep People from Stepping Up

As part of the research for this book, we asked hundreds of people who work inside companies to tell us what leaders do that keep people from stepping up? The list they provided shows surefire ways to keep people from stepping up. As was noted earlier in this chapter, the first and surest way is to make decisions without asking for people’s input. Yet sometimes it is leaders’ reaction to people’s ideas that matters, which explains why thirty-eight percent of the respondents said that “dismissing ideas before exploring them” was the main reason people won’t step up.

Howard Behar was the centerpiece of the Starbuck’s Frappucinno story I shared earlier in this book. After his time as vice president, he went on to become the president of Starbuck’s International operations. Behar told me the story of a guy who sent him a memo that he had sent to his company’s president. In the letter he shared a slew of highly constructive ideas on how to make the restaurants better, how to improve the menu and how to really win loyalty from the customers. The man then showed Howard the letter he received back from the company.
President. Filled with management jargon, the letter basically said “thanks for the ideas, they won’t work, we have tried them before, you don’t have your facts straight, write again soon.”

Behar said to me: “Do you think that guy is going to step up and share ideas again?” The guy was not only disappointed but felt his efforts had been totally ignored. Maybe all of his ideas were not workable, maybe some of them had been tried before, but the moment we dismiss ideas or appear to not take them seriously, people often decide to go back and play the part we have asked them to play. In this case, the man who had written the “memo” to his CEO was a committed and eager employee, now deflated and soon perhaps to join the ranks of cynics.

My experience has been that it does not take many of those experiences for people to pull inside their shell like a turtle. Mark Twain once observed that “a cat that jumps on a hot stove won’t jump on another hot stove any time soon. The problem is, the cat won’t jump on many cold stoves either.” As leaders we need to know that every time we discourage someone from stepping up, they are far less likely to ever step up again.

Tim Horton’s is a company that has worked hard to create a place where people step up. Brigid Pelino, the Senior VP of H.R. of Tim Horton’s told me that leaders have to be very careful how we respond to people’s ideas: “The moment you say clear it with so and so, or we have tried that before, well people shut down.” She went on to talk about the importance of keeping an open mind. “Don’t be so quick to judge, turn off the mouth for awhile and take the ideas in before responding.”
Don Schroeder, the CEO at Tim’s echoed similar sentiments. “You have to be willing to take a certain amount of risk and let people make some mistakes. If you have a place where everyone is afraid to make a mistake then people won’t step up. Also, you need a climate where people can speak up and challenge things. That is why we have so many town hall meetings and opportunities for people to weigh in. Because unless you let people know you want to hear it, they will hang back. If you get defensive then they shut down.” Schroeder often poses the question as his town hall meetings with franchise owners and employees: What would you do right now if you were the CEO?

Tim Horton’s has an incredible track record of growth explained perhaps by the strong partnership they have with franchisees. The company has been very intentional about creating a sense of partnership, of a place where the ideas of the franchise owners shape the business.

**Praise for Effort, Not Just Results**

If there is one characteristic that permeates modern corporations it would be a pervasive focus on “results.” We judge people mostly by whether they “made the numbers” and achieved the targets we have set out. In such an environment, risk mitigation often becomes the norm. Doing what everyone else is doing is a lot less risky than stepping up and innovating. Risk aversion and people stepping up are simply not congruous.

Let’s go back to Carol Dweck’s fascinating research on Mindset. If you recall, she found that children who were praised for effort rather than intelligence were much more likely to take risks
on the next task. Perhaps an unrelenting focus on rewarding only success rather than highlighting noble failures, creates a climate where people prefer to color inside the lines. As a leader you might ask yourself: When was the last time you rewarded and highlighted someone for stepping up and taking initiative even if the results were not successful?

Here is a humorous but telling example. A friend of mine’s wife had been on his case for quite some time about being more romantic. She felt that their relationship had become predictable and boring. It’s my guess that these are sentiments expressed thousands of times every day by spouses all over the world in one form or another. After months of her hints, subtle and direct, he checked a book out of the library on ways to be romantic. One Friday night he got home early planned a candlelight dinner in which he would be waiting for her naked. The house was warm, the wine poured and the dinner prepared. When she arrived home, her first words were “that’s not romantic that is just stupid.” He got dressed, they ate dinner in silence, and he took the book back to the library.

Now admittedly, he might have chosen a different romantic act as his first attempt and it may be that his plan may have seemed more romantic to a man than to most women. But the moment she said you “blew it” he was not going to step up again. The organizational equivalent of this somewhat humorous image happens every day. Someone steps up, plays outside the box, and with one sentence we shut people down.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

At the end of the day it is often fear that keeps people from stepping up. Not surprisingly, thirty-three percent of our survey respondents said that “creating a climate of fear and compliance” is what leaders do that discourages people from stepping up.

Jim Grossette, the Senior VP of Human Resources at Agrium (one of the world’s leading producers of agricultural fertilizer) put it this way: “I’ve been in places where the moment you do something that does not work you are going to get slapped on the hand. If people fear for their jobs, or that they will get their hands slapped, or that they will be embarrassed or put down for failure you will never get people to step up. We need to spend more time catching people doing things right and less time on what’s wrong if we want people to step up to the plate.”

In my experience, this environment of fear is often very subtle. It can be a frown from a CEO in a meeting, it can be an idea dismissed so quickly that people feel that maybe their job is at risk for even suggesting it, or it could be a well intended risk that went wrong which gets highlighted in a negative light in front of others. If we want people to step up there is a certain amount of “risk” that needs to be acceptable. Stepping up and getting it right 100% of the time is simply not congruous.

Leaders need to be very intentional about the messages we send to people. As Tom Peters said years ago “everyone is a boss watcher.” We watch to see which way the wind is blowing so we know how to play it safe. When I did a tour to senior leaders in the Electronic Systems division of Northrop Grumman with Jim Pitts, the sector president, he told his people “I hope you are not a boss watcher. I don’t want you sitting around waiting to see which way the wind is blowing
before you act. If I create an environment of fear you need to tell me so I can stop doing it.” Such messages sent with clarity give people permission to step up, especially when followed up by congruent actions.

Maybe the keys to getting people to step up at work were best summed up by Ferio Pugliese of Westjet, a company that has spent fifteen years building a culture where people are encouraged to take initiative resulting in stellar business results. “At the end of the day people feel safer in the middle of the herd, but that is not where we want people to be. When you consistently recognize and reward people who disturb the status quo and when people know that you stand for that, then you have a chance of creating something interesting. At the end of the day, people step up because leaders create an environment where it can be done safely.”

**It’s Not about the Horse**

Many leaders seem to believe that the way to get people to step up is to hand pick your people, almost as if they believe that people’s capacity to step up is somehow hard wired into them. Truth be told, my experience has been quite the opposite. Just about every person I have ever met wants to step up, take initiative and make a bigger difference. Think about the experience of Joanne Beaton at Telus. The staff at Operator Services were not on the most likely to step up list nor were those drivers at Frito Lay when Don Knauss took the help of leadership, but when people are challenged to step up by a leader who truly wants to listen, great things happen.
In fact, according to Dennis Bakke, when AES, one of the world’s largest power companies, did a worldwide survey of their employees, they discovered that in every country they did business in, across Asia, Europe and the Americas employees valued the opportunity to step up and influence their own destiny above most everything else at work. We want a say and we want to play outside the lines.

At the end of the day, if people are not stepping up, it may be best to look in the mirror. Years ago I had the opportunity to attend a leadership camp that involved helping to train horses. On the first day of the camp our instructor bore a striking similarity in both appearance and demeanor, to Curly the fictional cowboy in the movie City Slickers. Within the first hour of our week long time with horses he gave us the most important lesson. He told us: “All week long there will be times when the horse will not be doing what you want it to be doing. When that happens, you will be tempted to blame the horse. But I’m telling you right up front, that every time you are tempted in that direction you need to remember that it’s not about the horse! Every horse in here is capable and wants to do what we are training them to do. It’s not the horse, it’s you.”

As leaders we need to remember this lesson. People want to step up and given the right climate created by leaders, they will do so.

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**Ways to Help People Step UP:**
• Build a seat at the table into your leadership style—do one on one rounding, have a make it better meeting monthly, invite staff members to have breakfast with you on a rotating basis, have town halls and invite people to speak up. The more we give people a “seat” the more they will take it

• Watch your reaction, ALWAYS. Remember as formal leaders we are always on stage when it comes to encouraging people to step up. Even a hint that we want people to “stay between the lines” will shut down innovation. Remember the two ways survey respondents said we keep people from stepping up—not asking for their opinion and dismissing ideas without exploring them

• Go overboard to praise effort as well as results especially if someone goes beyond their role and really steps out there

Chapter Fourteen
One Person Always Makes a Difference
“Everything you do is insignificant, but it is very important that you do it”
Mahatma Gandhi

Much of this book has danced between two concepts, the need to take responsibility and the results of what happens when we step up to take action. It is hoped that by now you are convinced that looking in the mirror is better than pointing blame, that when we focus on what we can change everything changes, that even if only a small portion of any problem is ours something important shifts when we decide to take 100% responsibility for that part, and that taking responsibility is contagious. This final chapter will focus on the second concept, that one person stepping up really matters.

Most of us have at least one time in our lives when we know it mattered that we stepped up, that somehow things were different because we chose to act. Just before I sat down to write this chapter I went to cast my vote in a national election and on my way back I picked up several plastic bottles off the sidewalk to throw into the recycling. In each case I might rightfully wonder if it really mattered that I decided to take those two actions. They are both acts of faith. When I think about my own experiences of stepping up, I can think of several times when I do believe my stepping up mattered and also times when it mattered that I chose not to do so. I grew up in Staten Island, New York, one of the five boroughs of New York City. At the time of my childhood the Island still had lots of green space and even farms. As the population grew, “green space” turned into burgeoning housing developments and roads. The Island lost its park like beauty replaces by rows and rows of housing developments. In the middle of the Island there remained a circle of green that came to be called the “greenbelt” which was a series of parks and natural areas that remained intact.
Stepping How; How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything

When I was in high school a major fight erupted over the future of the green belt and new development threatened to break the circle of green. Over the years, many people had helped to preserve the belt and now decisions would be made that would forever determine its fate. Along with many others, I stepped up to express our views, helped write articles about the greenbelt and even participated in some protests. I have not lived on the Island for several decades, but flying over it on a recent business trip I could see right in the center of the Island that beautiful ring of uninterrupted green. Thousands of people had stepped up and there is little doubt that if we had not done so, that green would have long melted into the urban sprawl that enveloped the smallest borough. It is a small victory in the largest scheme of things perhaps, and not one I can lay claim to as mine alone, but I am sure that if people (including myself) had not stepped up, things would have been different.

The many stories in this book bear ample witness to the power of stepping up. Joanne Beaton and her team at TELUS saved the jobs of those employees in operator services, that woman on the bus saved the life of a stranger contemplating suicide, Devin Hibbard’s chutzpah in starting Bead for Life changed the lives of thousands of women in Uganda, there are kids who went to and graduated from University because Mike Feinberg and Dave Levine chose to create an alternative school system, Starbucks made a lot of money because one store manager in Santa Monica kept on pushing, there are homeless people who found new dignity because of Ken Lyotier, whales swim in part because of Rex Weyler, and a Canadian Tire collection agent changed the life of one customer while helping to create “Customers for Life.”

But there is more to each of these stories which impart an important lesson. In each of these cases, the starring cast in these movies is much larger than it appears. Think of the people who hold Bead for Life parties every year across Europe and North America doing their own stepping
up. The money they have raised is as much a part of helping women out of poverty as what Devin does in Uganda. Think of all those who wrote letters to save the whales, signed petitions, made phone calls, walked in marches, and so on which is the real reason whales roam free. Sure that agent made one “Customer for Life” but the future of a company and its reputation are in the hands of thousands of employees who will make a choice this very day to step and be counted. One person always matters and one person acting in concert with others matters even more. You can change your company and you can change the world just by choosing to act, choosing to be naïve enough to think you matter.

**Step Up…or Live to Regret It**

One of the most important reasons to step up is because most of the time we regret not stepping up. As Rahul Siggh told me “life is short and you don’t what to wonder what might have happened if you had stepped up.” It was that realization following his best friend’s death that compelled him to start Global Medic even though he had no experience raising funds or running a nonprofit.

Life gives us many opportunities and those opportunities require us in one form or another to raise our hands and say “count me in.” As Mike Feinberg told me “there are always voices telling us not to step up, a voice telling us that we are not good enough, skilled enough, worthy enough.” But these voices are not our friends.

In 1994 I had the privilege of attending the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt. Although I went there representing an environmental organization, I was not an employee of that organization only a volunteer. As part of the “shadow” conference run by NGO’s (non-governmental organizations) I had no particular authority. The job of the NGO’s is to both influence the official delegations who had gathered to
tackle the daunting human challenges of population growth, sustainability and poverty. Our other job was to help win the media war, to tell the story of why it mattered so much that we act.

The first day of the conference, all the environmental organizations from around the world gathered together meeting by region. I found myself in the North American caucus surrounded by scores of qualified people, most of whom were full time environmental activists. We were told that each region needed to select a chairperson who would represent the caucus. As we gathered together, I thought about putting my hand up but then I thought “who am I to be the chair since many of these folks are full timers with a lot more experience than I have?” Still I wanted to have influence, I wanted to step up. In that moment I thought of other times in my life when the chance had come to step up and I had not done so out of fear of failure. Suddenly my hand was in the air “I will do it” I blurted out. Before anyone had the opportunity to suggest an alternative, someone had seconded the notion and the chair was mine. You could almost sense the stunned faces of the more qualified candidates who had expected to be selected.

For the next two weeks I had the time of my life. I attended daily meetings with Timothy Wirth, the head of the U.S. delegation, got to have my say directly about what we felt needed to happen, I was interviewed by numerous media outlets including an interview that ran on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition all across America in prime time. One of my clients called me to say she was in the shower when she heard me on NPR and almost slipped and fell! I also learned a great deal about issues that mattered to me and felt that the experience lead to other choices to step up down the road.

As the conference wound down, several members of the North American caucus confided in me that they had wanted to volunteer to be the chair, but they had hesitated in part because they had listened to that other voice which Feinberg had talked to me about. Having seen how much fun I
had and how much influence I wound up having, they told me they were sorry now that they had not raised their hand.

What might you step up to do right now in your life if you knew you might regret not doing so later on? It might be stepping up to say what others are thinking at work, it might be volunteering to write an article or lead a project at work. One thing is for sure, as Ken Lyotier reminded me “it is safer to stay on the sofa and watch the game, but you will never know what you are capable of until you step up.” He stepped up and in spite of years of homelessness and alcoholism, he would wind up influencing many people’s lives, earning an honorary doctorate, and helping to spawn a recycling revolution. He might not have felt good enough to put his hand up and say pick me, and may even have doubted his own voice, but step up he did. This is the time to step up, right now. It may not matter if you do so, but you won’t ever know if you don’t.

The real point is that the world is always different when we step up. Something changes in the field of energy when people chose to take initiative. Your voice may be one of many or wind up putting you at center stage. But those who wrote letters to save the Whales were as important as those who ran after the Russians in rubber zodiacs and those operator services staff members who changed their behavior were as important as the woman who led them.

**The Two Most Important Questions You Will Ever Answer**

Ending a book is always a great challenge. On the one hand there is the desire to end with something profound, some memorable words to send you out. Yet again and again I am reminded that the end of a book is never written by an author, it is written by the readers. One of the most rewarding things about being a writer is that often, out of the blue, someone will send me an email, a letter or tell me in person how something in one of my books lit a fire in them, changed their perspective, spurred them into action, or merely gave them comfort in an important
period of their life. Just a few weeks ago, a man told me that he and his wife had a copy of my book *The Five Secrets You Must Discover before You Die* on their bedside stand. He told me that often they read a passage right before bedtime. He went on to tell me that they had recently taken six months off to visit family overseas, to give the grandchildren a chance to spend time with grandparents before it was too late. They had sacrificed some money, but the sacrifice had been worth it.

I cannot be certain what you might do because you read this book, but it is my fervent hope that you will do something. It is my hope you will begin looking taking responsibility and stop pointing fingers. Maybe some of you will be the next Devin or Rahul or Ken. Maybe in your ifve rows you will simply step up more actively and make a big difference in your sphere of influence.

Most of all it is my hope that you will always, in every situation, ask yourself the two most important questions that each of us must ask.

The first is: What can I do about this? Instead of focusing on what others can do, it is my hope that you will always first ask this question. What can I do, how did I contribute, and what steps can I take to make things better instead of pointing to someone else?

The second question I hope you will always ask is this: Why not step up? Why not be naïve enough to think something can be different because you chose to take action? You may save the whales or simply get your neighbors to recycle. You may save an entire division creating profits for your company or simply make one customer’s day. You may start a charity that raises people from poverty bringing medicine to those who don’t have it, or simply make the world a better place because you speak up for someone whom no one else will speak up for.

One person always matters. One person stepping choosing to step up is all that matters.