

Reigniting Responsibility

By Dr. Kimberly Alyn

Winston Churchill once said “The price of greatness is responsibility.” Many people gravitate toward leadership or supervisory positions for the “greatness” they think it will offer. Few embrace the true responsibility that comes with that greatness. Personal responsibility is becoming more and more scarce in our society. People want to blame or sue everyone else for everything that goes wrong in society. Few people are willing to step up and take responsibility for the mistakes they make or the rules they break. Exceptional leaders will rise to the personal responsibility challenge, even if no one else is willing to join them.

Taking responsibility starts with admitting your mistakes. Leaders who can’t admit when they are wrong create a lack of trust with followers as well as a lack of respect. Exceptional leaders learn how to say, “I was wrong,” and “I am sorry,” and “What can I do to make it right?” Taking responsibility or admitting you are wrong is not sending out a mass email to everyone saying, “We could have handled that situation better but let’s all just move on.” When you minimize your mistakes, people want to maximize them. When you maximize your mistakes, people want to minimize them. The more you downplay your errors, the more people want to bring it up until you own it. The more you acknowledge your errors and profusely apologize for them, the more grace people want to give you.

The failure to admit you are wrong conveys an arrogance that followers find repulsive. I know I am being rather blunt here, but I think it’s imperative. When you screw up, admit it, take responsibility, and take ownership. As management, if you expect your employees to own their mistakes and take the discipline that comes with it, you need to model that behavior.

I have had managers tell me they have often been advised to never admit guilt because if a lawsuit follows, that admission could incriminate them. The right thing to do is the right thing to do no matter what the circumstances may be. If you made a mistake, the right thing to do is to admit it and try to make restitution. People tend to want to file lawsuits as a result of people *not* taking responsibility. Again, if you expect your employees to admit guilt and accept the discipline that comes with that guilt, you had better model that. If your admission of guilt comes with a price tag, then that price needs to be paid.

In October of 1982, the makers of Tylenol, Johnson & Johnson, faced the worst possible crisis management scenario an organization could ever face. Some psycho decided to pull bottles of Tylenol capsules off the shelves and inject them with cyanide and then return to the shelves where unsuspecting members of the public would buy them and consume them. Seven people in Chicago died as a result, including a child. The connection to the Tylenol was made very quickly and the company stepped up immediately to take responsibility and protect the public. Johnson & Johnson was in no way at fault, yet they took full responsibility.

An immediate recall of all Tylenol capsules was made, which constituted about 31 million bottles and \$100 million in lost revenue. The company then launched a triple safety seal tamper resistant package that included a plastic seal over the neck of the bottle, a foil seal over the mouth of the bottle and a glued box. Johnson & Johnson reached out to the families of the victims, providing counseling services and financial assistance even though the deaths resulted through no fault of theirs.

Now let’s contrast their reaction to that of Exxon. In March of 1989, an Exxon oil tanker spilled eleven million gallons of oil into Alaska’s Prince William Sound. The crew master had been drinking; a crew member was tired, overworked, and could not properly maneuver the ship; there was an inadequate number of trained crew members; and the ship contained inadequate equipment. Exxon was 100% at fault and it would seem to be a no-brainer to step up immediately and assume responsibility. But unfortunately, that is not what happened.

When initially asked by the press about the incident, the first response of Exxon executives was “No comment.” This caused public outrage and an assumption that the company was trying to minimize the incident, cover it up, or hide something. While Johnson & Johnson came forward immediately to address their crisis, Exxon drug their feet trying to formulate a plan for damage control on the PR side. Lawrence Rawl, the chairman of Exxon, did not fly to Alaska until two weeks after the spill occurred.

No one ever sued Johnson & Johnson for those deaths. Exxon was sued and ordered to pay \$5 billion in punitive damages in 1994 on behalf of thousands of fishermen and others affected by the spill. Exxon appealed and the award was cut in half and then reduced again to \$500 million in 2008 as the case dragged on for over twenty years! When you minimize your mistakes, people want to maximize them.

Take responsibility folks! And now that I have picked on management to set the role model example of stepping up and taking responsibility, let me pick on employees too. If you break the rules, make a mistake, or screw up, step up and admit it. Accept the consequences and try to rectify the situation.

We now live in a society where personal responsibility is not high on the priority list. Irven Ball once said, "Most of us can read the writing on the wall; we just assume it's addressed to someone else." Exceptional leaders rise to the challenge of taking responsibility and ownership for their actions and mistakes. If you want to see your organization become a benchmark for excellence, you will embrace this concept wholeheartedly.

Dr. Kimberly Alyn is a best-selling author and an international professional speaker. She is the author of 11 books including *How to Inspire People to Achieve More*, *How to Deal With Annoying People* (with Bob Phillips, Ph.D.), *Discover your Inner Strength* (with contributors Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, and Brian Tracy), and *Men are Slobs, Women are Neat... and other Gender Lies that Damage Relationships* (with Bob Phillips, Ph.D.). She has also developed and produced numerous CD/DVD productions on a variety of topics.

Dr. Alyn has been a contributing author to a variety of magazines and has been quoted in prominent books and publications like *Cosmopolitan*. An advocate of life long learning, Dr. Alyn has her bachelor's degree in business management, her master's degree in organizational management, and her doctorate degree in organizational management with a specialty in leadership. Dr. Alyn has over 20 years of experience with speaking, training, educating, and entertaining audiences.

To find out how to have Dr. Kimberly Alyn come speak at your event or to get more information about Kim, log on to KimberlyAlyn.com.