The Mindset of an Agile Leader

call me (formerly) irresponsible

by Christopher M. Avery

What if there were a deceptively simple way of thinking that (1) was a perfect fit for agile environments, (2) naturally supported and leveraged the complex adaptive nature of the human mind and personal development, (3) was independent of personality and personal style, and (4) could be learned, propagated, and even spread contagiously throughout a team or organization? Would you want to know about it? Would you pursue that mindset for yourself and your organization?

Such a mindset *does* exist. It is the mindset of personal responsibility and problem ownership.

Personal responsibility — taking ownership for one's actions, outcomes, opportunities, and problems — is one of those few essential attributes executives desire most in employees yet seem to find in scarce supply. And it's not just executives who would like to see more of it in others. The frustration of relying on coworkers who avoid taking personal responsibility is experienced by anyone who shares responsibility with others to get things done and whose paycheck ultimately depends on the ability to create a productive relationship with those people.

So why do executives — and the rest of us — desire personal responsibility and yet not find it? It could be the complex nature of organized work. In work, some efforts succeed, others fail, conditions change, and unplanned opportunities, gaps, and problems appear. That is, things change. Instead of stepping in to own the problems and seal the gaps, employees too often pass the buck for mistakes, blame others for failures they had a hand in producing, and make excuses that let themselves off the hook for poor performance. And given the recent revelations of dishonorable corporate conduct and social irresponsibility, it appears the failure to take personal responsibility extends to the executive suite as well.

In generally futile attempts to engender greater personal responsibility, managers tinker with foundational elements (purpose, vision, mission, and values), organizational structures, compensation systems, and performance management tools. These attempts usually fall short of creating true problem ownership because they don't address the fundamental human experiences, thought processes, and interactions that lead to personal responsibility.

Agile environments require the people working in them to collaborate, iterate, and adapt in pursuit of a final product that does exactly what the customer expects. Furthermore, agile environments are designed to expect problems and to thrive on unplanned opportunities. Because of the central role of change in agile environments, they offer the ideal petri dish for testing, developing, and refining a leadership mindset of personal responsibility and problem ownership in life at work.

A SHORTAGE OF PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS IS NOT THE PROBLEM

Agile environments are all about solving problems. Agile approaches attempt to provide environments where participants can successfully address development problems in the most successful and supportive ways in order to reliably and efficiently produce products that delight customers.

In our research on collaborative leadership in engineering environments, my colleagues and I seldom find a lack of problem-solving ability. In fact, studies reveal ineffective teams to have substantially the same levels of talent and expertise as do effective teams [2]. Instead, what we find is a lack of problem *ownership* among highly educated, talented, well-meaning professionals. People will own many of the problems that pertain to their role, but they tend not to take responsibility for the everyday things that go wrong in organizations: misunderstandings, poor communication,

lack of follow-through, broken agreements, self-created messes, and so on. Why? Because people are loaded with mental programming for avoiding owning up to it when things go wrong.

I'll explain that mental programming below, but first, think about this. When my colleagues and I have taught people about problem ownership and offered them the thinking tools and conversational skills to better own it when things go wrong, their ability to solve problems both individually and together soars rapidly [1]. Individuals and groups can rapidly begin operating at higher levels of truthfulness, ownership, power, and trust. As we all well know, however, problems can be like the game of hot potato. Now it's time to find out how you and I react when the hot potato lands in our hands.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

There is a natural mental process that plays out dozens — if not hundreds — of times every day for each of us. This mental process protects our egos from our own painful mistakes and, at the same time, keeps us from solving problems, adding value, and making forward progress. The processing itself goes relatively unnoticed, though my colleagues and I have teased it out of thousands of coaching, consulting, and problem-solving interactions.[1]

The mental process is simply this: each time something goes wrong,

[1]Avery, C.M., and B.J.T. McCarley. Unpublished book manuscript.

you and I do our best to avoid owning it. We all do it, no matter how responsible we attempt to be. It matters not whether the problem is small, such as spilling the garbage on the kitchen floor, or huge, such as losing one's life savings; the mental process is the same.

The existence or lack of personal responsibility is not so much a character trait (or flaw) as it is a well-developed and practiced mental process. People who are well practiced in avoiding ownership for their actions are usually quite effective at it. Your level of intelligence or other professional skills make little difference. In fact, the smarter you are, the better you may be at craftily avoiding ownership!

Here's an example. Think of something you generally keep close by yet will occasionally lose track of, such as your car keys, watch, purse, wallet, PDA, or cell phone. When you are scrambling to get out the door and you reach for that thing and it's not there, what's the *very first* thing you think and maybe even say to yourself or out loud? I'll bet you $100 it is this: *Who took my car keys?!* That's not just a figure of speech. That's the communication of a thought rooted in an assumption of cause and effect.

My colleagues and I call this Laying Blame, and it is the first of five ways you (and I) avoid owning it when something goes wrong (see Figure 1). The other four ways are these:

1. Justify
2. Shame
3. Obligation
4. Quit

These are the positions of irresponsibility. When something goes wrong anywhere in your life, large or small, you automatically enter into Lay Blame (*Who changed these requirements after the phase review?!*) and won't ever take productive ownership of the problem until you mentally climb through the five positions of irresponsibility to the position of responsibility. The faster you mentally progress through the five stages without getting stuck — we're all conditioned to gravitate toward one or more stages — the faster you reach a position of ownership where you can act responsibly.

You may not think you experience all the positions. That's normal. There are a number of explanations for your not noticing them all. It may be that our model is inaccurate, and you *don't* experience all the positions. All I can say in response to this is that we believe what we see and are happy to invite scrutiny of the model. Or perhaps because the positions of irresponsibility are automatic reactions rather than chosen responses, you are operating within these positions of irresponsibility and don't know it.
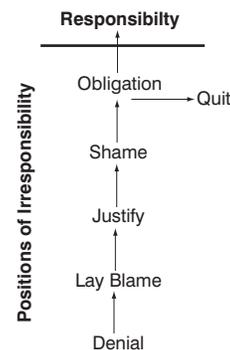

Figure 1 — The Responsibility Process Model.

In fact, one way your mind protects you from owning a problem is by preventing you from seeing how you *aren't* owning it. A third explanation is that you may be accustomed (through your own choices or operant conditioning) to moving rapidly through one or more positions only to arrive at a favorite place. For instance, one reviewer declared that she usually skipped Lay Blame and Justify and went straight to the self-flagellation of Shame. I would ask her the following question: What thoughts were you experiencing just before you began to experience shame?

The Positions

Each position in the Responsibility Process Model is defined by a unique assumption — a mental projection if you will — about the cause of your problem.

In **Lay Blame**, you are sure someone did this thing to you: *Who screwed up my laptop?!* If a suspect can be placed in the vicinity, you immediately project your vitriol in his or her direction.

In **Justify**, you still assume you are a victim, but of unavoidable circumstances rather than of a specific culprit: *Sorry I'm late, but the traffic out there was killer this morning.* You know anybody in her right mind would agree with you and join in commiserating about how awful it is you have to deal with that horror.

In **Shame**, you go from externalizing the cause to internalizing it. You assume the problem exists because something's wrong with you. *I messed up the code and set us back a week. Blame me. I'm such a dolt.* Note that many cultures mistakenly confuse shame with responsibility. We assume that if someone is feeling bad for making a mistake, they are taking responsibility. However, shame and guilt are not resourceful states of mind but just the laying of blame on oneself.

In **Obligation**, you assume you are trapped and feel compelled to comply with a policy against your better judgment: *I have to go to that stupid meeting.* Many cultures mistakenly confuse Obligation with Responsibility, thinking that if someone complies with a policy — even one he detests — he is showing ownership. However, Obligation is not a resourceful state of mind either. At best, it represents unenthusiastic compliance; at worst, passive-aggressive compliance.

Quit is an escape from the bad feelings of Shame and the resented traps of Obligation. You quit by leaving the problem without owning or solving it. For example, if you keep leaving jobs because you can't stand your boss and coworkers, maybe there is *something else* for you to figure out before you take another new position.

Why Are They Irresponsible?

These positions are irresponsible because each of them limits past, present, and future choices available to you. You cripple your ability to respond productively to whatever is not right.

In Lay Blame, the wrong can only be righted by changing another.

You don't own that you created, attracted, or chose to be in this situation where someone else can harm your experience. Perhaps that's why we so want to control and manipulate others.

In Justify, the wrong won't change until the circumstances change. Again, you don't admit that there is anything for you to learn about how you got yourself into this circumstance of seeming powerlessness.

In Shame, you are wrong and deserve to suffer. You can't correct, improve, or learn because you are focused on self-flagellation.

In Obligation, the wrong is that you must suffer an experience you don't want in order to have an experience you do want. You are in a trap of your own design and assume you must stay there, taking the bitter with the sweet.

In Quit, you've left the immediate problem behind, but since you haven't figured out how you created, chose, or attracted it to you, you are likely to find yourself in the same situation again soon.

Each stage helps you craftily avoid recognizing and owning the true problem. Hence your problem-solving skills can't be used resourcefully, because they are misdirected — if applied at all.

HOW TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Many who first learn this model ask for a positive prescription for pursuing responsibility. They don't want to focus on all these unpleasant positions of

irresponsibility but instead to focus on the positive steps they can take.

I wish it were that easy. The truth is that the positive steps to taking responsibility have to do with recognizing and moving through the positions of irresponsibility. It is like being underwater where you cannot breathe and reaching the surface where you *can* breathe. No one needs to tell you the positive steps for breathing once you break the surface. You just need support in getting there.

It is the same with taking ownership. There are three keys:

1. **Intention.** To become proficient at taking ownership, you will first commit to the idea that you intend to operate as much as possible from a position of responsibility. The more this matters to you, the firmer the idea in your mind, the stronger will be your intent.

2. **Awareness.** You will develop, through discovery, support, and practice, the ability to recognize the thoughts that accompany each of the positions. As you do so, you will become increasingly skilled in noticing when you are laying blame, or justifying, or shaming, or obliging.

3. **Confrontation.** When you become aware of your irresponsible thoughts, you can examine your assumptions. You can ask yourself what is true about this situation.

Movement Through the Positions

If you are to ever take complete ownership for a problem, you must progress position by position from Lay Blame to Justify, to Shame, then Obligation, and on to Responsibility. The time it takes to move through the positions for each problem ranges from milliseconds to a lifetime. It depends on how committed you are to the assumptions in each stage and to the practice of personal responsibility. If you think it is hard, it is. But what is harder, living the unexamined life of a victim or operating from true choice and responsibility?

The trigger for the movement involves both the *awareness* of what you are doing (*I'm laying blame*) plus the *intention* to reject that assumption of cause and effect. So, if you are in Lay Blame (*That customer is completely unreasonable!*), recognize it and acknowledge that this mindset won't solve your problem.

When you do that, your mind will naturally pursue an exit from Lay Blame. However, the exit from Lay Blame leads into Justify, where you find yourself making up really good stories about how the circumstances were unavoidable: *If we hadn't needed the business so badly, we would never have agreed to this project with this customer.*

When you realize you are telling yourself a convincing story that lets you off the hook for whatever is wrong, and you decide you don't want to tell yourself stories, then your mind will naturally begin to exit from Justify. This exit opens the door to Shame, so you will likely start to feel depressed because you know you've chosen, created, or attracted this problem to yourself: *We were crazy to take on this customer.*

When you realize you are beating yourself up for making a mistake and decide to stop doing so (remember, awareness plus intention), you start to feel better and begin looking for the "right" answer. This opens the door to Obligation: *We'll just have to do the best we can under the circumstances and absorb the loss.*

In our society of specialists, we buy into the notion that there is a right answer to every problem, so we seek that right answer through expert advice: *What should I do?* Then we discipline ourselves to comply with that "right" advice — to do what we know we *should*. Sooner or later, things we thought were right to do no longer feel so right, but we don't know how to extricate ourselves from them, so we find ourselves in Obligation.

Feeling trapped in life and work patterns from which we don't know how to escape seems to define many societies. Interestingly, we have tools like goal setting, planning, and time management for getting what we want, but we don't have very good tools — or expectations — for getting rid of the things we don't want! The Responsibility Process Model is such a tool.

CAN THE RESPONSIBILITY PROCESS BE ACCELERATED?

Learning to accelerate the Responsibility Process is an excellent pursuit for leaders in agile environments. A useful analogy is the experience of crisis and accompanying panic. It is well understood that to panic is to lose one's

resourcefulness, so the common invocation is to *not panic*. However, it is the highly advanced nervous system that will never panic or never evaluate a circumstance as wrong or problematic. Therefore, assuming you won't completely avoid this process, how can you accelerate your way through it?

The way to accelerate the process was described above. It involves intention, awareness, and confrontation. That means you dedicate yourself to the truth of a situation and to paying attention to what is real rather than to what is assumed or projected. My colleagues and I call this seeing something "as it is." The more you see something as it is, the clearer you are. When you are clear, you trust your insight and your resources. You choose freely. As described above, when you clearly see that you are operating in Lay Blame, you tend to immediately exit it, and so on through each position for each problem.

That briefly explains how to accelerate through the positions of irresponsibility, but how about getting there even more rapidly, as in immediately? I'm happy to report there is a way.

You can completely avoid all of the positions of irresponsibility if you never judge any circumstance or outcome as wrong. Yes, that's a preposterous proposition, especially in business, where analysis, judgment, and evaluation are critical. However, consider the implications. If you never judge anything as wrong, then you never enter the stages of irresponsibility, and you

don't have to slog through them to get to a resourceful mental state. When you operate from such a mindset, all of your mental and emotional resources and faculties are available to you.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OWNING IT

Change Is Neither Right Nor Wrong
Agile environments are perfect for adopting and exploring the responsibility mindset as a way of leading and working together. Since change is expected, it doesn't have to be evaluated as right or wrong. It's just change.

If adaptation, evolution, iteration, constant testing, and collaboration are the tools for operating in an agile manner, then a mindset of responsibility and problem ownership is the perfect personal vehicle for optimizing your ability to respond to whatever happens.

Leading Change Is a Mind Game
Remember, responsibility is not a personality characteristic but a mental practice. Successful leaders in the agile movement must have a moderately well-developed mastery of the personal responsibility process. And nowhere in leadership do you get to be let off the hook. The better your ability to own problems completely and rapidly, the greater your ability to lead.

Below the Position of Responsibility No Personal Learning Occurs
All of the positions of irresponsibility keep you from learning. Adaptation, evolution, iteration, testing, and collaboration all imply

learning. To hasten learning, hasten movement through the positions of irresponsibility to ownership.

The Agile Leader Demonstrates the Responsibility Process
The fastest way to get someone else to take personal responsibility is to demonstrate it yourself in her presence. This is far more easily said than done, so give yourself lots of practice. Rather than point out another's underbelly, demonstrate your own humility, your desire to take responsibility, and your capacity for correcting, learning, and improving. Then invite her to try it on for herself. Let her know you expect her best, and you know that mistakes are part of the process.

True ownership — and the lack thereof — seems to be contagious. Ownership tends to beget ownership (although it is not guaranteed) and vice versa.

If you truly want to support others in learning to take responsibility, teach them the Responsibility Process Model so they can apply it to themselves. Remember, though, the Responsibility Process Model can only be *self*-applied. Here's a case in point: I was feeling bad, but I couldn't see the situation as it was. I spoke with my colleague Bill who immediately sensed that I was in Shame, but he didn't say so. Instead, he pointed to our copy of the Responsibility Process Model on the wall and asked me where I was on the chart. My eyes immediately went to Shame, and it became clear to me that's where I was. More importantly, I knew what I needed to do to take ownership of

the situation, and that was to get off my own case for being human and making a mistake. Only then could I actually take responsible action.

Find a buddy who wants to learn and apply the process with you. Draw the model and talk about it together. Then, whenever either of you has a problem, seek out the other and talk about the problem in relation to the model. You will progress rapidly.

Again, the Responsibility Process Model Can Only Be *Self*-Applied

For some reason it's much easier to see the speck in another's eye than the log in our own. After reading about the Responsibility Process Model, you will likely notice the stages of irresponsibility happening all around you. You'll see how adroitly people use Lay Blame, Justify, Shame, Obligation, and Quit to avoid ownership and how well they can get others to go along with these projections of their reality.

Keep making your observations *and* keep them to yourself. Why? Because the Responsibility Process Model can only be successful when used on yourself. Every time you try to use it on someone else, it backfires. Unfortunately, many will adopt the model's language as a management tool and begin to accuse others of laying blame or justifying. That won't help a thing. Think about it. If another person is mired in a position of irresponsibility, all that will happen if you label him is that he will feel judged by you. Now he'll have two problems instead of one, and his biggest problem will be you!

The Agile Leader Intends to Clearly Own What Is

You may be wondering what a leader does when she lets go of the positions of irresponsibility and operates from ownership. That's a fair question. I've described what happens, but I haven't prescribed what to do about it. Responsibility is a discovery process. In Responsibility, you sit in the anxiety of the unknown and look for what is true about the situation. That's all. You look for what is instead of for what you've been assuming or projecting. The result each time adds to your clarity and understanding about the world. That's the prescription — look for what is true about the situation.

The Agile Leader Develops His Awareness

When you become more aware of your frame of reference in relation to your problematic situation, you possess a much broader range of options. Your choices increase. Your anxiety diminishes. You experience greater freedom because you encounter fewer bonds. You own ever more and know you are free to choose in any direction.

The Agile Leader Examines Her View of the World

Change is hardest when worldviews get shattered. When you know your point of view is limited, because you acknowledge that you are human, then you are open to the process of discovering and expanding your worldview. That's the mindset of an agile leader.

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When you demonstrate responsibility and problem ownership,

others will recognize the power in it and be more likely to step up to personal responsibility themselves. When a group of people all move rapidly to problem ownership, discovering the truth, and acting in resourceful ways, the group will be truly agile.

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Christopher Avery has pursued agile practices in R&D teams and organizations for 20 years. Dr. Avery is the author of Teamwork Is an Individual Skill *and a popular speaker, author, and business advisor on responsible leadership, teamwork, and change in technology enterprises. Dr. Avery's extensive research focuses exclusively on what happens when people share responsibility to get things done with others over whom they have no direct control. He and his firm Partnerwerks apply this research in leadership development seminars and consulting projects to help knowledge workers dramatically improve performance in teams. A popular source for the media, Dr. Avery has been featured or quoted in hundreds of publications, including* Investors Business Daily, *the* Chicago Tribune, HR Executive, NPR, ABCNews.com, *and* USAToday.com. *Professionals in more than 50 countries read his digital* TeamWisdom Tips, *available at www.partnerwerks.com.*

Dr. Avery can be reached at Tel: +1 830 995 4853; E-mail: cavery@ partnerwerks.com.