

Eye of the Needle: Responsibility

by Dr. Nancy Oelklaus

The Eye of the Needle is my trademark tool. Its initial purpose was to enable communication to be satisfying and complete. It is evolving to be a term that means “right on the mark” or “aiming for the bull’s eye.” In other words, it is a place of “just right-ness,” being neither less than nor more than is needed.

I’m choosing the topic of responsibility because two clients in different locations and different industries have presented me with the challenge of getting their employees/constituents to “take responsibility.” How? What are some root causes that result in people not taking responsibility?

Reflecting on my own experience, I realize that sometimes I have been over-responsible, not leaving enough space for others to exercise their rightful responsibility. An example is when I was teaching high school. I had to be away from the classroom for a couple of days, so I taped the lecture and activities for the class. All the substitute teacher had to do was turn on the tape recorder and supervise the students. The substitute had just completed a master’s degree in liberal arts and actually knew more about “The Lost Generation” (which was the topic for the lesson) than I did. I spent hours on that preparation, unnecessarily. I took time away from my family and my own well-being. I was over-responsible.

If someone in an organization is over-responsible—doing everything—over-functioning—others are under-functioning.

But I haven’t always been over-responsible. Sometimes, in fact, I’ve been under-responsible. I haven’t taken the responsibility that was mine. Some of these experiences have been painful.

A recent example comes to mind. Over the last two years, I have developed a system for our family and business finances that works smoothly. Having worked on it so long and finally seeing it work, I said to myself, “I can relax.” I stopped checking monthly credit card charges. Our system is to pay all credit card charges every month, so I had been doing that—but I didn’t itemize and double-check the individual charges for four months. When I finally “got around to it,” I discovered a serious mistake that had cost us thousands of dollars. It was a big problem.

Why did I not take responsibility? I believed I had done all the “important” work and that it was no longer necessary to check so closely.

Winston Churchill once remarked, “The price of greatness is responsibility.” If we believe that we are important and that what we do makes a difference, we are responsible. If we believe that others are also capable, we are responsible in the right measure.

If you feel your employees are not taking responsibility, try this step toward improvement:

Examine your thinking. Are you thinking, “This person is not responsible?” Change your thinking to, “What does this person need in order to fulfill his/her responsibility more effectively?” Ask the question silently and release it. Wait for the answer. (The answer may come from anywhere. Be alert.) If you feel judgment coming back into your thoughts, dismiss it and focus again on the question.



About the Author

With the advantage of a 25-year career in education as a top-level administrator in a school district, as well as entrepreneurial leader of a state education association, Dr. Nancy Oelklaus has been a leader in the fields of organizational development, change, systems thinking, and adult learning. Her national and international experience brings diversity to her work, which is grounded in a knowledge base of the brain and systems thinking. She is the founder of the Success Accelerator Brain Trust™; a nonjudgmental personal development coaching process which builds upon inner strengths and provides solutions for weaknesses.