

The Meaning of Responsibility

By Wayne Visser

Do you sigh when you hear the word responsibility? Perhaps responsibility is even a dirty word in your vocabulary. Perhaps you associate it with burdens and restrictions; the opposite of being carefree and without obligations. But responsibility doesn't have to be a chore, or a cage. It all depends how you think about it.

Responsibility is literally what it says – our ability to respond. It is a choice we make – whether to be attentive to our children's needs, whether to be mindful of the plight of those less fortunate, whether to be considerate of the impact we have on the earth and others. To be responsible is to be proactive in the world, to be sensitive to the interconnections, and to be willing to do something constructive, as a way of giving back.

Responsibility is the counterbalance to rights. If we enjoy the right to freedom, it is because we accept our responsibility not to harm or harass others. If we expect the right to fair treatment, we have a responsibility to respect the rule of law and honour the principle of reciprocity. If we believe in the right to have our basic needs met, we have the responsibility to respond when poverty denies those rights to others.

Taking responsibility, at home or in the workplace, is an expression of confidence in our own abilities, a chance to test our own limits, to challenge ourselves and to see how far we can go. Responsibility is the gateway to achievement. And achievement is the path to growth. Being responsible for something means that we are entrusted with realising its potential, turning its promise into reality. We are the magicians of manifestation, ready to prove to ourselves and to others what can happen when we put our minds to it, if we focus our energies and concentrate our efforts.

Being responsible for someone – another person – is an even greater privilege, for it means that we are embracing our role as caregivers, helping others to develop and flourish. This is an awesome responsibility, in the truest sense, one which should be embraced with gratitude, not reluctantly accepted with trepidation. Responsibility asks no more of us than that we try our best, that we act in the highest and truest way we know. Responsibility is not a guarantee of success, but a commitment to trying.

So why is responsibility seen by many as such an onerous burden? Responsibility becomes onerous when choice is removed from the equation, when we do not realise our freedom to act differently, when we forget that we are allowed to say no. Responsibility becomes pernicious when we take on too much, when we mistakenly think that more is always better, when we take on the guilt and expectations of others. Accepting too many responsibilities is, in fact, irresponsible – for it compromises our ability to respond. Do few things but do them well is the maxim of responsibility.

Being responsible also does not mean doing it all ourselves. Responsibility is a form of sharing, a way of recognising that we're all in this together. Sole responsibility is an oxymoron.

Taking responsibility is a way of taking ownership in our lives, of acknowledging our own hand in the shaping of destiny. Responsibility is the antidote for victimhood.

When we walk with awareness, we realise the enmeshed nature of reality, we see the subtle strands that make up the web of life, we accept that everything is linked to everything else. Responsibility is being conscious of the oneness of existence.

Responsibility, if we manage it well, should never be like the curse of Sisyphus, eternally rolling a rock uphill, but rather a blessing gratefully received. For what can be more joyous than making a positive contribution in the world, or making a difference in someone else's life? Responsibility is the footprint we leave in the sand, the mark of our passage. What tracks will you leave? Where is the place where you can most freely and effectively respond? The choice, as always, is yours.

I wrote these opening words on responsibility in 2005, and I believe they are still as relevant today as they were back then. Responsibility is the choice we make to respond with care. My book – *The Age of Responsibility* – and this TBLmedia blog series, is a way of taking stock. What choices have we made – in the way we live our lives, in the way we do our work and in the way we run our businesses? How have we responded to the needs of our day – especially the social, environmental and ethical crises we face? And have our actions been taken with care – have we cared about our impacts on others?

There are even more troubling questions. For instance: Are companies more a part of the problem or the solution? Is the net impact of business positive or negative? There are other questions too; awkward questions that cut even closer to the bone. For better or for worse, I chose corporate sustainability and responsibility (CSR) as my way to make a positive difference in the world – the mark of my footprints in the sands of time. But given that CSR has increased dramatically over the same 50 years that many of our global problems have been getting worse, does that mean that CSR is ineffective?

It gets worse. Could the whole CSR bonanza be an unwitting accomplice to the spate of corporate crimes of recent decades? Am I quietly and unintentionally aiding and abetting our collective demise? After all, Enron was stuffed to the gills with CSR – from codes of conduct and ethics officers to corporate volunteering and community development programmes. I am sure all of these CSR programmes had their merits. And yet, if they did nothing to prevent these companies acting like pirates on the high seas of finance, what good are they?

If CSR cannot form the bedrock of ethical corporate behaviour, does it deserve to have 'responsibility' in its title? More worryingly still, if CSR is used to legitimise businesses or practices that are, at heart, irresponsible, surely CSR is partly to blame for the various corporate 'sins' that go undetected and unpunished? I am led to a very uncomfortable conclusion. At worst, CSR in its most primitive form may be a smokescreen covering up systemically irresponsible behaviour. At best, even the most evolved CSR practices might just be a band-aid applied to a gaping wound that is haemorrhaging the lifeblood of the economy, society and the planet.

So we need a new approach – a new CSR, which I call CSR 2.0. This blog series will explore why CSR 1.0 is broken, and how CSR 2.0 can breathe new life into the concept and practice of corporate sustainability and responsibility. I hope you will join me.

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