

To the Rescue

Beating the Heroic Leadership Trap

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NEW YORK CITY MAYOR RUDOLPH GIULIANI became a national hero for his leadership during the Sept. 11 crisis. He oversaw rescue and recovery, consoled grief-torn families, and reassured the public, while helping to get the New York Stock Exchange up and running within a week. "Giuliani's performance ensures that he will be remembered as the greatest mayor in the city's history," wrote *Time* magazine, in naming the mayor Person of the Year 2001. "Giuliani's eloquence under fire has made him a global symbol of healing and confidence."¹

The mayor's greatest achievement, however, came in the last weeks of an autocratic administration during which his style took considerable heat. In dealing with the New York public schools, for instance, Giuliani failed miserably. What made the difference? Fundamentally, it emerged from the manner in which Giuliani seized responsibility.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks were beyond the capacity of any person to rectify. Appropriately, Giuliani's message reflected that. "Tomorrow New York is going to be here," the mayor said. "And we're going to rebuild, and we're going to be stronger than we were before. ... I want the people of New York to be an example to the rest of the country, and the rest of the world, that terrorism can't stop us."² He signaled he would give all he had, leaving no doubt he would need the talent and energy of thousands of others to succeed.

With the public schools, the mayor's message was different.

"He governed by hammering everyone else into submission," *Time* wrote. Reflecting on his approach, Giuliani told the magazine: "People didn't elect me to be a conciliator. ... They wanted someone who was going to change this place. How do you expect me to change it if I don't fight with somebody? You don't change ingrained human behavior without confrontation, turmoil, anger."³ As a result, hundreds of people in the public schools who Giuliani needed became passive followers.

Take-charge leadership misapplied not only fails to inspire and engage, it produces passivity and alienation. And this is true not only in the for-profit and government sectors. When nonprofit leaders assume "heroic" responsibility for making critical choices, when their reaction to problems is to go it alone, work harder, and do more – with no collaboration or sharing of leadership – their "heroism" is often their undoing.

Such action often leads to an organizational affliction I have dubbed the "responsibility virus." A leader senses a subordinate flinch under pressure and responds by taking a disproportionate share of responsibility, prompting the subordinate to hesitate and become passive. The heroic leader reacts by leaping to fill the void. The passive employee retreats further, abdicating more responsibility, becoming distant, cynical, and lethargic. The leader, unable to cope with an impossible workload, becomes contemptuous and angry. A once-promising project becomes rudderless and spirals toward failure.

The good news is, the virus can be treated. During two decades of work with struggling organizations, I have devised a set of management tools to help them avoid the virus and, if stricken, to battle back.

The first tool is the "frame experiment," which helps individuals mired in over- or underresponsibility improve relationships and collaborate. The second tool, the "responsibility ladder,"

helps subordinates take on increasing responsibility, preventing their bosses from becoming overresponsible. The final tool, the "choice structuring process," helps group members collaborate to make inspired and robust decisions, avoiding groupthink, and inoculating against the virus.

Taken together, these tools can help nonprofit leaders suppress the lurking heroic leader, while elevating employees at every level into leadership roles they can handle, resulting in high-quality decisions and reduced burnout.

Origins of the Virus

The responsibility virus is pervasive and ancient. The philosopher Hegel described the tendency to flip from dominance to subservience, "the master-slave dialect," as one of the driving forces of human history.⁴

Why is it so pervasive? Psychologists have shown how much people dread doing the wrong thing, so much so that they go to great lengths to avoid making choices, or even viewing themselves as choosers. Irving Janis, a social psychologist and leading scholar of group behavior, found that the heart rate of participants in certain experiments quickened as they were about to find out whether they made a "right choice."⁵ Social and cognitive psychologist Leon Festinger showed that many people avoid choices between equally desirable options by postponing them or pretending there is no choice to be made.⁶

The roots of the virus, then, can be found within our deepest human motivations. Like the gamblers studied by Ellen Langer, who want to take responsibility for their predictions once they win, but blame chance whenever their hunches go wrong, it is human nature to claim credit when things go well and to avoid blame when they go badly.⁷

Chris Argyris, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School,

The Frame Experiment

DIRECTOR'S EXISTING FRAME

"I know the right answer."

"My employee is uninformed or ill-intentioned."

"My task is to get my employee to see things my way."

DIRECTOR'S ALTERED FRAME

"I have a wealth of data and experience, but I may not see or understand everything."

"My employee may see things that I don't see, which might contribute to my understanding."

"My task is to access our collective intelligence so that we can make the best choice."

When nonprofit leaders assume heroic responsibility for making critical choices, when they go it alone with no collaboration, their heroism is often their undoing.



has delineated what he calls the “governing values” behind this human predilection: In any interaction, people want to win, maintain control, avoid embarrassment, and stay rational.⁸ Confronted by failure or the anticipation of failure, they either “fight,” seizing total responsibility for “winning,” or “flee,” assuming no responsibility, so that if they “lose,” it’s not their fault.

Merely adding employees to a choice-making situation does not help, as the literature on “groupthink” and conformity to group norms¹⁰ makes clear. In situations in which responsibility could be shared, the fear of failure triggers extreme responses that can actually undermine collaboration.

Case I: The \$100 Million Fundraising Strategy

How does the virus take hold internally, within an organization?

Consider the case of FreshStart, a nonprofit that provides targeted educational help to at-risk youth, some with criminal records, helping them overcome poverty and drugs.¹¹ In 1996, the nonprofit hired Jack as executive director, charging him with turning around the organization’s lagging performance. Jack had spent his career in private equity, buying laggard companies, turning them around, and selling them, yielding impressive gains for investors. He was young and well educated, with a history of success. He took his new post with trepidation (he was completely new to the nonprofit sector) as well as exhilaration (he believed he could make a difference).

Jack set an ambitious five-year goal: Increase fundraising \$50 million, from \$40 million to \$100 million. He went to speak with Derek, the development director, about the new goal – and was surprised to find that Derek didn’t share his enthusiasm for the plan. Derek had spent his career in nonprofit development, and he had a strong record, but he was concerned about this new “cowboy” who had come in from the “outside.” Undeterred, Jack asked Derek to work up a fundraising strategy, showing how the organization could hit its new goal.

The two began calling prospective donors, and Jack was perplexed by Derek’s passive approach. Jack found himself jumping in more forcefully to make FreshStart’s case, and as he did, Derek faded further into the background, relinquishing responsibility. Prospective donors began calling Jack for follow-up, leaving the executive director with less time for his other responsibilities, including strategic planning and managing senior executives. On prospect calls, Jack found himself working virtually alone.

A month passed, and Derek, sinking slowly into underperformance, failed to deliver the new fundraising strategy. He spoke in vague terms about the project, mentioning that an MBA from a local university was helping out with it as a volunteer, but indicating there were “complications.” The strategy document Derek eventually turned in was incomplete, confusing, and unhelpful.

Jack, frustrated and pressured by his board, decided to write the strategic plan himself. Two weeks later, Derek resigned.

Jack was somewhat relieved by Derek’s sudden resignation, seeing an opportunity to bring on a like-minded development director. He hired Sheryl for the task, giving her an upgraded job title and salary to match. But by then, Jack was afraid of getting burned, and it was not easy for him to trust his new hire. When Sheryl asked Jack for permission to fill a vacant development position and add another staff member, Jack insisted on seeing her strategic plan first. Sheryl described her plans informally, leaving Jack frustrated. Slowly, and unintentionally, he began to exclude Sheryl from his inner circle. She began to feel Jack had no confidence in her ability, and began a retreat.

For a second time, Jack found himself with a passive development director. He could not blame this on the prior administration, however; Sheryl was his handpicked hire. He wondered if nonprofit development officers were passive by nature. Within six months, Sheryl resigned to take a lesser position at another organization. “Jack was domineering,” she said. “He wouldn’t give me a chance.”

Jack, meanwhile, wondered what had gone wrong. Others had worked happily for him, yet he had developed a reputation for browbeating his top fundraisers. Something had to change.

The Frame Experiment and the Responsibility Ladder

The remedial tool for breaking out of this self-sealing loop once it has started is the “frame experiment”¹² (sidebar, p. 38). In this

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The Responsibility Ladder

RUNG 6: Consider all options and make decision, informing executive director after the fact.

RUNG 5: Generate possible options for executive director and make recommendation.

RUNG 4: Generate possible options for executive director but ask him or her to make the decision.

RUNG 3: Describe problem to executive director and ask for help structuring possible solutions.

RUNG 2: Ask executive director to solve the problem, but make it clear you will watch and learn for next time.

RUNG 1: Drop problem on executive director's desk; signal helplessness.

experiment, individuals develop an alternate framework about themselves, the other individual, and the task at hand. The leader's frame changes from "I know the right answer" to "I have an important point of view," allowing that a subordinate might have an alternate position that could contribute to a better solution. This qualified opening encourages inquiry, prompting subordinates to assume responsibility.

It is not easy for individuals to develop alternate frames, in part because it can feel like a loss of control. Many leaders are uneasy about approaching an interaction with the notion that their view might be wrong. For this reason, leaders should try the experiment for just one specific interaction that they can plan in advance. Directors can plan a meeting, at which they decide ahead of time they will be receptive to an approach they had previously shunned. Applying this approach to a planned interaction enables the leader to take the time to thoroughly adopt the altered frame before starting a conversation. This is no easy task, which is why it's advisable for leaders to have an out: If they are feeling uneasy, they can return to their old frame and con-

tinue the conversation. Most people find this to be an acceptable bargain, and, when they actually try it, they are pleasantly surprised when their colleagues present a new, valuable lens, without taking advantage of the opening.

In the case of FreshStart, what if Jack had adopted the following frame: "I think it is reasonable to ask Derek to come up with a \$100 million fundraising campaign, but I might be missing something. My task is to find out how I might be making the situation worse and how we can fix it together." Had that been Jack's frame, he may have been able to plan a five-minute conversation, starting out: "Derek, I am getting nervous. I have asked you several times for a new fundraising strategy. Have I been obscure about what exactly I want? Is this a task that you feel uncomfortable with? Help me understand."

This opening might have encouraged Derek to say something like: "I'm glad you asked. I can tell that you have a very clear idea what a 'fundraising strategy' would look like, but I don't understand what you want. In my experience, all that is required is to set a goal and go after it. I have never seen the kind of formal strategy you describe. So if you could help me get started, pointing out examples of good fundraising strategies and other resources, I would be relieved."

For Jack, the level of learning evidenced, the mutual trust engendered, and the quality of thinking displayed constitutes a wholly positive revelation, arresting the downward spiral. Many come out of frame experiments willing to broaden them, taking altered frames into their next conversations, and creating upward spirals with their own momentum.

But how can a nonprofit build on that momentum? One way is by using the "responsibility ladder" (sidebar, left). At the heart of the responsibility virus are unproductive conversations about "distribution of responsibility." At FreshStart, for example, Jack had asked Derek to assume a great deal of responsibility by developing a new fundraising strategy, essentially saying, "You're in charge." Meanwhile, Jack assumed no responsibility himself.

But what if a "responsibility conversation" could go beyond simply "I'm in charge" or "You're in charge"? This is where the ladder can help.

The ladder has six rungs, each representing a higher level of responsibility. On the lowest rung, an employee assumes no responsibility. By failing to produce a coherent strategy and sinking into passivity, Derek was standing firmly on this rung.

But what if Derek had said: "I know you want me to produce a plan, but I don't know where to begin. If you provide direction I will internalize this lesson, so that in the future I will know what approach you want me to take"? This would have placed Derek on the second rung, signaling his interest in developing choice-

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making skills to share a greater burden moving forward.

Now suppose Derek is ready to help make a particular choice. He would step on to the third rung, asking Jack to help structure the decision by framing it among mutually exclusive options. At FreshStart, those options might have been a fundraising campaign focused on corporate donors interested in helping at-risk youth move into the labor pool; a campaign focused on foundations that support education; a broad, direct mail or phone solicitation campaign; or some hybrid of those three. At this level, Jack still makes the choice, but Derek comes to understand the choice-making process, and gives his input rather than fading into passivity.

The fourth rung is an important step up: Derek takes responsibility for structuring the choice himself, stopping short of making specific recommendations. Derek might have said, for instance, "I know we need to raise more money; these are the ways we might do that, and these are the corresponding problems." This leads naturally to the fifth rung: Derek analyzes the options and makes a recommendation. On the top rung, Derek makes the decision unilaterally, informing Jack afterwards.

For his part, Jack was not clear about what rung he wanted Derek to step on. Did he want Derek to develop and decide on the fundraising strategy? Or was he asking Derek to develop a recommendation for Jack to consider?

If Jack had used the frame experiment, he could have had a productive dialogue with Derek, and figured out the appropriate rung for Derek to step up on to, thereby defeating the virus.

Case II: 'Nobody Lifts a Finger to Help Me!'

The virus can also infect an organization's external operations.

Consider a case from the International Development Agency (IDA), one of the world's most elite economic development organizations.¹³

In 1993, Pierre, an idealistic and ambitious employee, was assigned to the IDA's Private Sector Development Unit, which delivered services to clientele in the developing world. Pierre was the perfect choice for the post. The handsome 35-year-old, fluent in seven languages, had finished at the top of his class as an undergraduate in his native France, going on to graduate school in North America, financed by full scholarship, to study development economics. In his final year of study, major investment banks in New York and London plied him with offers, but he was more interested in a career in public service, working to overcome Third World poverty. He had been with the IDA for four years, doing exemplary work to improve power and transportation infrastructure in Africa, when he was tapped for the private sector unit. His first major undertaking for the unit was a project to boost the flagging peanut industry in Senegal.

Pierre made a promising start, traveling to Senegal numerous

times to study the industry. He learned quickly, and before long, he had a firm understanding of the problem: Thousands of Senegalese farmers grew peanuts in relatively small quantities and sold them to inefficient and often corrupt middlemen, who transported the peanuts nationwide and sold them to inefficient processors, who made peanut butter and other peanut products and sold them at subscale prices on the global markets. The inefficiency of the system hurt Senegal at multiple levels. The poor farmers were getting gouged; the processors didn't make much money because of their high costs and low margin selling internationally. Senegal had the potential for generating far more wealth from the industry.

Pierre's key contact was Hakeem, the minister of agriculture, a man who tended to observe rather than initiate. A somewhat portly man in his mid-50s, Hakeem laughed uproariously when, toward the end of the first day's session, Pierre suggested that they work through dinner. "My young friend," Hakeem said, "we have to put some food in front of you because when you eat will be the only time you will stop talking!" Hakeem had already picked out a favorite restaurant, with a wide selection of local delicacies and lovely ambiance. Pierre enjoyed the food, but was put off by Hakeem's refusal to talk about the project over dinner. The Senegalese soon came to see Pierre as a serious man who did not give them much of an idea of what was on his mind, and who never asked their opinions.

Still, Pierre came up with a bold plan to restructure the Senegalese peanut industry: He would create a cooperative to collect and transport the peanuts to the processors. The cooperative would be partially owned by the farmers, giving them a better cut, and would replace the inefficient middlemen. Under the plan, the processing industry would be dramatically consolidated and the remaining processors would be equipped with substantial new capital to build efficient plants, lowering their processing costs. Additionally, they would be assisted in marketing internationally by a single marketing cooperative, which would have the scale to negotiate big deals globally.

Pierre traveled back to Senegal to deliver his restructuring plan. Hakeem was lukewarm from the start. He objected to performance conditions (including a monitoring agency to prevent graft and corruption) that were standard IDA requirements. And he seemed overly concerned about the fate of the middlemen. Undaunted, Pierre forged ahead, making mod-



fications based on Hakeem's concerns.

Back at the IDA, Pierre tried to devise a compromise plan. In his view, the agency needed to soften its stance, particularly on the monitoring agency, and work with him to convince Hakeem that Senegal must also show some flexibility. Pierre reviewed the situation with his superior, but was informed the agency's position was firm. Pierre returned to his office furious. "I'm trying to help these people," he thought, "and nobody lifts a finger to help me!"

After nine months, with little forward progress, the IDA shelved the Senegalese project. Pierre felt betrayed. When he told Hakeem the project was cancelled, Hakeem flew into a rage. "How can you do this?" he asked. "We've already started spending, expecting your funds. Now we will have to stop and our budget will be in deficit. You aren't here to help, but to be the imperialists who have always terrorized us."

For his part, Pierre began to wonder whether he was foolish to give up an investment banking career to help ungrateful clients in the developing world.

Pierre, however, had seen no merit in collaborating. Hakeem recognized this, becoming passive, which only convinced Pierre that his doubts about Hakeem's capabilities were accurate. Pierre treated the IDA officials charged with approving the program as obstacles rather than valuable collaborators, and they quickly grew tired of his overbearing attitude. The virus was running rampant.

Inoculating against the Virus: Choice Structuring

In Senegal, Pierre conducted the analysis and made all the restructuring decisions on his own. While he consulted with various Senegalese, including Hakeem, they were never a key part of his decision-making process.

But what if Pierre, Hakeem, and the agency officials had a tool to help them reach compelling choices, a tool that generated group commitment without violating the governing values and triggering the responsibility virus? The seven-step process I call "choice structuring" is just such a tool (sidebar, below).

As a general rule, until a choice is framed as a choice it cannot be made. Furthermore, group members will not truly engage in the process, because they cannot yet understand a decision's consequences. As the first step in the process, then, the group must discern a tradeoff, identifying at least two mutually exclusive options. Pierre might have started with two options: (1) Senegal can leave the current peanut industry in place and work to improve its efficiency, or (2) Senegal can achieve efficiencies by restructuring the industry, eliminating the role of certain midlevel players.

The next step is to broaden the list, being as inclusive as possible, creating an atmosphere in which options can be offered without fear of embarrassment. Options should be framed as stories describing positive outcomes, with internally consistent logic, but they do not need to be proven or even carefully vetted. As long

The Choice Structuring Process

1. **Frame Choice** → Convert issues into at least two independent options. If only one option is considered, there is no "choice" to be made.
2. **Brainstorm Other Options** → Broaden the list to ensure all possible viewpoints are represented.
3. **Specify Conditions** → For each option, specify the conditions that must hold true for the option to be a good choice.
4. **Identify Barriers** → Determine which conditions are least likely to be true: These are barriers to choice.
5. **Design Valid Tests** → For each barrier, design a test that would be sufficient for generating commitment. Have the biggest skeptic design the test.
6. **Conduct Analysis** → Test the most suspect conditions first. If one condition does not hold up, the option can be discarded.
7. **Make Choice** → Review analytical tests and make informed choices.

When Pierre told Hakeem the project was cancelled, Hakeem flew into a rage. “How can you do this?” he demanded. “We’ve already started spending. You aren’t here to help. You are an imperialist!”

as group members can imagine that a given option could be valid, it makes the initial cut.

In the Senegal case, Pierre may have considered many options, but he only presented one. While his choice made perfect sense to him, it was impossible for the Senegalese to support it without understanding why other options might have been ruled out.

Once the options have been enumerated, group members must specify the conditions that would need to be met for the stories to be plausible. Each option may have three or four conditions – the logic and data that would have to hold true for it to be valid. At this stage, group members are still not interested in opinions – they just want to know what would have to happen for everyone to feel committed.

For Pierre’s plan to have made sense, for example, it would have to hold that consolidation of the fragmented processing sector into a few large processors would reduce costs, and that selling Senegalese peanut products through a single international marketing cooperative would result in better overall prices.

The fourth step executes a 180-degree flip. Now leaders want to know which of the listed conditions are least likely to hold true. What are the barriers blocking each choice? Skeptical group members must be encouraged to raise concerns. For example, Hakeem had deep concerns about Pierre’s plan to eliminate the middlemen. While Hakeem knew that some of these players were corrupt, others were hardworking entrepreneurs and collectively, they had considerable political clout. Even if the middlemen could be eliminated without too much controversy and recrimination, Hakeem was not certain it was desirable. What was he going to say to friends in the business who would be replaced by the cooperative? However, without an invitation from Pierre, Hakeem was unwilling to outline his concerns. They remained hidden barriers to choice.

Next, the group must design ways to test each barrier. Typically, the most skeptical group member will have the highest standard of proof, and should, therefore, design the tests. Without his or her commitment, any “consensus” would be false.

The second-to-last step involves testing the barriers, starting with the condition group members feel is least likely to hold up. If Hakeem’s concern had come to light, he would have designed a test that would have allowed him either to gain confidence that middlemen could be eliminated, making restructuring a viable option, or confirming his doubts. In the latter case, the option would have been eliminated.

Now it’s time for the seventh and final step: Making a choice. In the past, with the stakes high, this might have been a fertile breeding ground for the responsibility virus. But with choice structuring, the last step is simple and anticlimactic. The group has a shared understanding of the logic structure underpinning each

viable option. The most skeptical member has set standards of proof and overseen the analysis.

The group needs only to review the test results. In essence, the choice is presold; there is no need for serious debate. And there is no cause for the virus to flare up, since the governing values are not threatened.

Without realizing it, Pierre had presented Hakeem with only one option – with no conditions laid out, no barriers identified, no tests designed, and, not surprisingly, no commitment. The virus took hold and spread until it was out of control, eventually undermining the entire project.

Pierre had sent Hakeem and the Senegalese a signal: “I am the hero! Stand aside and be saved!” He could have structured a choice process that produced a robust decision-making chain, yielding a choice backed by consensus. He is not the first hero to make this mistake. And, unfortunately, he won’t be the last. □



1 Time, “Mayor of the World,” Dec. 31, 2001.

2 Time, 2001.

3 Time, 2001.

4 Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. G. Miller (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

5 Janis, I. and Mann, L. *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1977).

6 Festinger, L. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

7 Langner, E. *The Psychology of Control* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983).

8 See Argyris, C. *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1990); Argyris, C. *Knowledge for Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993); Argyris, C. *On Organizational Learning* (London: Blackwell, 1993); and Argyris, C. *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap: How Managers Can Know When They’re Getting Good Advice and When They’re Not* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9 Janis, I. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascos* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

10 Asch, S. “Opinions and Social Pressure,” *Scientific American* 193, no. 5 (November 1955).

11 This example comes from a personal experience that prompted me to begin researching over- and under-responsibility. The situation is disguised and all names are pseudonyms.

12 Diana Smith, a founder of the consulting firm Action Design, created the tool. Smith introduced me to the concept when we worked together on a consulting assignment. Thus far it exists only in unpublished work by Smith and Action Design.

13 This example is based on a case from my consulting work. The situation is disguised and all names are pseudonyms.