

Taking Ownership: It's Better to Act than React

At SuperCamp we encourage teens to take charge of the way they respond to unfavourable situations. They gain empowerment by first getting a handle on how they feel, rather than lashing out or reacting in retaliation to something or someone.

As they work through their feelings about unpleasant events in their lives, they discover that they've made choices along the way. Some ways of responding to an event diminished them. Some made them stronger. The responses they chose were up to them. When they come to this realization they discover that in the future they can choose responses that have a better outcome. When it comes to their responses to an event, the power is all theirs.

We call this principle of taking responsibility for one's actions "taking ownership." Students really understand this concept by relating it to the term "pride of ownership," the way they felt about the first special their first valued possession, for example. When they realize they can feel that same pride of ownership about their behavior, their whole attitude changes. Owning their actions puts them in control. It allows them to move their lives in the direction they choose instead of being a passive recipient of someone else's choices.

Ownership becomes an even more powerful tool during tough times. Taking ownership of the way a traumatic event affects them means they have a choice in a situation that seems otherwise out of their control.

What choices do they have? During our summer enrichment programs we have teens play the Ownership Game to learn more about the kinds of choices they make every day. In any given situation, everybody chooses behavior that's either Above the Line or Below the Line. Whenever they're making excuses, laying blame, justifying, or giving up, they're playing Below the Line. When they take responsibility, look for solutions, or follow through on plans, they're playing Above the Line. They learn that playing Below the Line brings penalties like powerlessness, lack of trust, and loss of freedom. Playing Above the Line brings rewards like freedom, trust, respect, and success.

When teens play the Ownership Game they make a breakthrough discovery. Even in the most traumatic circumstances, when their lives seem to be in chaos, they still have control over one thing: they still can decide how they're going to respond!

Playing Above the Line means choosing positive attitudes and behaviors - and letting go of destructive ones. Young people sometimes respond to emotional pain by hanging on to resentment - blaming another person for their pain. They may resent one or both parents for a divorce or for moving them away from their old home. They might even blame a parent for dying and leaving them. But the tricky thing about resentment is that it hurts us even more than it hurts the person we resent.

One teen told a staff member of mine that she held a lot of resentment toward her father who wasn't around much after her parents divorced. Her new stepfather was involved in her life and came to all of her events but she kept him at arm's length for fear that if she got close to him he would abandon her too. She realized that by not allowing herself to get close to her step dad she was hurting herself, and missing out on the close relationship that was available.

When they're able to see it this way, they understand that resentment is a Below the Line choice. But it's not always easy for them to let go of resentment if they've been carrying it around a while.

We ask teens at SuperCamp, "How many of you have ever been hiking and gotten a rock in your shoe?" Most respond with a nod.

We tell them that resentment is just like that rock. "Rather than take your shoe off and remove the rock, you wiggle the stone around in your shoe until you find a place where it doesn't hurt as much. Then you leave it there. Instead of telling people about our feelings, we wriggle them off to the side, hoping they'll get better."

The campers are still nodding. Some are laughing. Most of them can see themselves in this story.

"... But pretty soon the yucky feeling slips back up just like the rock. Eventually, your foot goes numb. Once you're in a dull, numb state, resentment starts wearing a hole in your soul too."

All around the room, you can practically see light bulbs going on in their heads. They totally get it. They realize that just like they do with the rocks they keep in their shoes on a hike, they're putting that pain on themselves. Resentment is pain they volunteer for. They can make it stop any time they want!

Teens who learn to Live Above the Line take a major step forward in the growing up process by taking ownership of and responsibility for their own emotions, reactions and responses to all situations.