CHAPTER 13

Key Catalyst: Take Ownership

Be someone who can be counted upon, someone who responds.

What You’ll Discover in This Chapter:

• The power and pleasure that comes from being in control of yourself
• The secret to overcoming mistakes and healing damaged relationships
• How to win the ownership game
To be a man is to be responsible. It is to feel shame at the sight of what seems to be unmerited misery. It is to take pride in a victory won by one’s comrades. It is to feel, when setting one’s stone, that one is contributing to the building of the world.
—Antoine De Saint-Exupery

Remember your first car? You were so proud of it. You polished it, vacuumed it, bought accessories to dress it up. Okay, so it was a twenty-year-old clunker with rust holes in the fenders. But it was yours! Just claiming that car as your own made you feel proud.

When you claim ownership of your actions and your attitude, you feel fantastic about yourself. When you own your behavior, you’ll feel the same surge of power and pride you felt over that fine piece of rolling steel you owned in your youth.

Taking ownership is all about accountability, taking ownership of what you do and think—including your mistakes, your excuses, your failures to act, and actions that you’re less than proud of.

Dismantle the word “accountability,” and you’ll see that it literally means the ability to be counted on. It means you’re willing to take responsibility for the choices you make. It means accepting responsibility for making change happen, whether personally or globally. Bottom line, it means whether things go wrong or right, you point to yourself as the cause. You’re accountable.

Why Accountability?

Why hold yourself accountable? What does accountability do for you?

Accountability puts you in control. It allows you to make things happen. It makes you a potent force in your own life.
Many years ago, a high-profile person did something while at SuperCamp that had the potential to hurt our reputation. The person came to me and apologized. She looked me right in the eyes, took full ownership of her actions, and said she would do whatever I wanted to make it right. I was impressed with her sincerity and never told anyone about the incident. If she hadn’t apologized so thoroughly and sincerely, I’d have thought less of her. As it was, my esteem of her was, in some ways, higher than it had been before the incident.

Accountability is a whole-life concept. You can take ownership of your career, relationship, finances, education, fitness—all areas of your life. You can create a massive shift in your life simply by taking ownership of your attitude.

Accountability not only puts you in control, it makes you feel terrific. The great feelings that come with accountability are self-reinforcing: when you enjoy a certain pride of ownership over your own life, you take better care of the things that are your responsibility. You’ll give your best effort and, as a result, enjoy greater rewards.

Pride of Ownership Looks Great on You

What’s pride of ownership? It’s that glowing feeling you have about something that’s yours. Pride of ownership inspires you to take special care of the things you possess. You’ve probably felt this way about clothes you’ve owned, maybe furniture, real estate, artwork, or pets. But you can enjoy pride of ownership in nonmaterial things too.

When you own the things you think and do, you’ll experience pride of ownership, and you’ll be inspired to “take special care” of your actions and your attitude. Pride of ownership shows in your posture, in your voice, in your whole bearing. When you
own what you do, you walk tall, speak with confidence, and draw people to you.

When You Pass the Buck, You Abdicate Power

When you pass the buck, you volunteer for powerlessness. You make yourself a passive ingredient in the recipe of your own life. You remove yourself from the equation.

How often have you heard, or said, these refusals of ownership?
“ I couldn’t help it.”
“I would have called, but Larry had my cell phone.”
“The sun was in my eyes.”
“The people in sales didn’t get me the numbers on time.”
“I wouldn’t have said it if you hadn’t made me so angry.”
“I’m late because my kids didn’t get ready on time.”
“It’s not my fault.”

How good does it make you feel to fall back on lines like these? It doesn’t generate pride or boost your energy. It does the opposite. Denying responsibility doesn’t make the problem go away. Statements like, “I didn’t know I was supposed to work on that report. I never agreed to that,” cause frustration and make you look unreliable and even dishonest. It might take some of the immediate heat off you, but it does little to relieve the feelings of guilt and incompetence that come when you know you’ve let somebody down.

And that’s the worst part of passing the buck: it erodes your relationships. It marks you as someone who can’t be counted on. And, as I’ve said throughout this book, relationships are at the heart of success.

If you’re after Quantum Success, the buck stops with you.
The Responsibility’s Yours Whether You Take It or Not

Rob Dunton, Quantum Learning Network alumnus, wrote of accountability: “A few months ago, I was in Tijuana, Mexico. I passed a little boy on the street. He was curled up, fast asleep, clutching a battered guitar in one hand and a cup with a few pesos in the other. I dropped a five-dollar bill in his cup, then I walked on, happy to be an anonymous giver.

The money would be a huge help to him, whether he knew who gave it or not.

Years ago, when I was a teenager, a friend of mine and I were playing “air guitar” in the basement with my parents’ guitars. Our heavy-metal moves got pretty wild, and I cracked the neck on one guitar. I thought, It’s not all that noticeable; I’ll put it back and no one will know.

But the guitar was just as broken, whether I took responsibility for it or not.”

Rob realized that by refusing to own what he did, he’d turned one negative into two: The guitar was broken, and his parents would feel awful that whoever broke it—and it wouldn’t take long for them to guess that it was him—would betray their relationship by shirking the responsibility. Rob realized later that if he’d owned what he did, he could have turned the negative into a positive. He could have shown his parents what a great kid they were raising by owning up to what he did and working to fix it.

Play the Ownership Game

Let’s play a game. On a blank piece of paper, draw a horizontal line. Above the line, write the words Choices, Accountability, Freedom,
Responsibility, and Willingness. Below the line, write Laying Blame, Justification, Denial, and Quitting.

Here’s how you play the ownership game: Pick something you did recently. Did you start off the week arguing with your spouse? Did you follow through with your plans to go to the gym for a workout after work? Did you hide that credit card bill from yourself because it was much larger than you’d expected? Did you apologize to a client for missing a deadline, and outline a plan for getting that project back on schedule? For each action you identify, examine what you did and determine whether you were playing above the line or below the line.

When you’re playing above the line, you’re taking responsibility, being accountable for your actions, and looking for solutions. You’re taking ownership. Playing above the line wins you freedom, trust, and success. Above the line, you’re not a victim of circumstances because you determine how you’ll respond to them.

When you’re playing below the line, you’re blaming others for your mistakes, justifying your actions, denying them, or quitting before you reach your goal. Below the line, you act as if circumstances are beyond your control. It’s not your fault; there’s nothing you can do about it. You live in complacency and inaction. It seems easier than playing above the line, until you realize you’re not getting anywhere.

Now comes the most important part. Instead of reflecting on past activities, play the ownership game in the present. In each moment, check yourself: “Which side of the line am I on?” The object of the game is to put yourself above the line in every action and interaction. When you find yourself slipping below the line, put yourself back on top.
Playing Above the Line

Choices Accountability Freedom Responsibility Willingess

Laying Blame Justification Denial Quitting

Playing Below the Line

Communicate Your Ownership

One day a few years ago, I got hung up in rush-hour traffic and arrived twenty minutes late for an important meeting. The person I was meeting looked upset. I started to say, “I got stuck in traffic and couldn’t help it,”—ducking the blame. Instead, I said, “I knew traffic was heavy this time of day, and I should have left earlier. I know I’ve cost you time waiting for me. Would you like to stay later than we planned? Next time, I’ll leave earlier.” Instantly, the anger melted from my associate’s face. We charged ahead into our meeting in an upbeat mood.

Take Responsibility for All Aspects of Your Life

You may not be able to control everything that happens in your life, but you can control your reaction to what happens.

Last summer, irate parents came to me with a complaint. Another child had allegedly taken something from their daughter, and they had decided that somehow it was all my fault. They said I had ruined their vacation. They went on and on about it when they could have chosen to put this minor incident behind them and still enjoyed their holiday.
You’re in control of your own conditioning. If you’re in the habit of backpedaling and buck-passing, you can recondition your response. Remember Pavlov’s dogs? Whenever Pavlov fed his dogs, he rang a bell. Soon, the dogs associated the sound of the bell with food and would salivate whenever the bell rang. If you’re accustomed to responding to failures with blame, denial, and excuses, it’s time to recondition yourself. It’s time to teach yourself a new response.

Practice the ownership game daily. After a while, you’ll get into the habit. Just as Pavlov’s dogs automatically salivated at the sound of a bell, you’ll automatically respond to situations by taking ownership. Best of all, you’ll develop the habit of taking ownership in all aspects of your life, not only at work, but in your personal relationships, at home, with friends, with strangers in line at the grocery store—in all your interactions.

You’ll also learn to take ownership of your frame of mind. Why leave your attitude up to chance? Instead of adopting whatever random mood strikes you, you could choose “upness”: enthusiasm, optimism, and alertness. Nobody could possibly feel cheerful and optimistic all the time, but with practice, you can make upness your default mode of operation, the mental state you return to whenever you take a moment to refocus.

Just like that well-polished first set of wheels, your attitude is all yours. Drive it with pride.

Taking ownership can mean taking responsibility for finding a creative solution to a problem. Once we scheduled a luncheon meeting in a conference room only to find that the room was packed with boxes of equipment, leaving no room on the tables. One of our staff, Jan Miner-Kane, said, “We’ll just have to have a carpet picnic.” And we did. We spread everything out on the
floor picnic-style. The unusual arrangement gave the whole luncheon a delightful feel of spontaneity.

Own Your Actions and Attitude

• You can fix mistakes and overcome failures.
• You have the power to repair damaged relationships.
• You experience a surge of potency and a sense of pride.
• You’ll never again be a victim of circumstance.