

WALKING THE LEADERSHIP FLOORS

Is the Victim Virus Undermining Your Organization or Business? Here is how to know.

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Why do players with the “owner worldview” stay consistently ahead of those with the victim mindset?

A business executive (let’s call him Mr. Shot) goes to the psychiatrist with a big problem; *“Doctor,” he begins, “My boss is about to fire me. My wife is threatening divorce. My kids are not talking to me on account of differences about Christmas presents. Even my parents are staging a protest. I don’t understand what is going on. Why am I surrounded by this many unreasonable people?”*

What point is Mr. Big Shot missing? Do you recognize some aspects of your subordinates, or perhaps even yourself, in this executive who sees problems with the entire universe while seeing himself as the innocent victim?

It doesn’t really matter that we are managers, senior executives or spouses, the fact is that when as leaders we are faced with troublesome circumstances, our typical first reaction is both unmistakably defensive and decidedly cowardly. *“This is not my fault. I am innocent,”* we protest. So how will the problem on the table get solved if we “saw nothing and heard nothing.”? How can we win the performance game if we are not playing but just hanging around?

In our immediate, unexamined and unchallenged thoughts, we are always victims of external circumstances, innocent bystanders that are *“just being blamed for other people’s actions or ill will.”* This victim perspective pads up our righteous indignation and gives us the false ‘right’ to blame the world for our misfortunes or for what is not working under our watch. How can a manager expect to lead the troop by sitting on the fence and pleading innocence?

The problem with the victim mindset is ***lack of responsibility***. This is the most pernicious of all productivity killer viruses. The infected person feels like a victim of circumstances outside of his or her control, incapable of taking any effective action to address the business challenge on the table. The word responsibility here is more appropriately termed ***response-ability***. This is the manager's ability to change gear in response to business challenges, rather than the tendency to stay stuck in a fixed personality, while complaining that the universe is not quite arranged as one would want.

In the business performance space, a manager afflicted with the victim virus does not carry much weight. The question here is, would you rather be right or be effective? The victim's story on why a failure occurred may be true, but such stories are never effective since they do not galvanize action. These defensive stories are like drugs to which a junkie has become attached. They fix the victim in place. Here are some of the ways a victim justifies the inability to respond effectively when action is called for:

1. I am not responsible for what is happening to me, therefore I cannot.....
2. I did not create the problem, so I am not.....
3. The cause of my situation is external, so there is nothing....
4. Since the problem is not my fault, I am not responsible for solving it. You have to
5. Since I did not break it, I am not responsible for fixing it. Perhaps you should....

Why is the victim virus an ailment to battle with fire in the gut? The reason is that this ***virus is ubiquitous and very prolific***. From the mailroom to the highest executive office, the victim virus can penetrate the most formidable walls. You have to fight it if you want to stay ahead of your competitors. And you must fight it if you want to get in touch with your inner creativity. Until you do, you cannot sufficiently ***access your personal*** power to become an effective player. The victim virus is a virulent productivity killer. It takes a learning organization to neutralize its force. And it requires an actively engaged leadership team to keep it away from the corporate management room.

Why is the victim virus so persistent? The simple fact of life is that in most cultures, we learn very early to become skillful and eloquent Victims rather than Victors. Our experience, at WealthStreams, with leaders from all around the management world is that

the victim virus is common to all climates and cultures. The reason is that it is through declaring ourselves victims that most managers seek to avoid blame. Or so we think. ***Victimhood is the currency with which we try to buy our innocence.*** The double bind here is that while our need to look good is real, the currency with which we seek to buy this inferior position is fake. The irony is that it takes no more than the amount of energy **we invest in our victim personalities to become great at solving problems. The ROI (return on investment) when this energy is solely directed at becoming an owner is huge.**

Think about it. Have you ever heard a child say *"I spilled the juice"* or *"I broke the toy"*? Of course not! It is much more likely that *"The juice spilled" ...all by itself*, or *"The toy broke" ... mysteriously*. As parents, we are likely to hear the proud declaration that *"I scored an A in math,"* as well as the victim blame-the-world sulking, *"The teacher gave me a C in French."* These may seem like defenses that we drop once we leave high school, but you will be surprised at how many managers have not left high school when it comes to taking ownership. The good news here is that we know and like the side of our bread with butter. We like to be owners. But to become an owner, one must first become response-able.

When managers are in the victim frame of mind, they are very effective at deflecting questions and hiding from challenges. As a consequence, they are practically ineffective at taking the lead and solving business problems. Can you imagine such a manager minding your business? Here are some examples of victim responses to business questions:

Business Question	Victim's Deflection
"Why are we running late again with this schedule?"	"Because of the rain, traffic was a mess," or "Because I got a telephone call while I was leaving," or "Because the meeting lasted too long."
"Why are you taking so long to send me the document? I thought you and I worked on the original two months ago?"	"Because the original copy just disappeared from my computer."
"I will need to respond to the President in two days. When can I expect your feedback?"	"Hey, you only just gave this to me this morning and you are already asking for an answer. I will do my best."

Please review the victims' deflections above and attempt to improve on them with your own action-oriented answers. Your answers will indicate whether or not the victim virus is a personal challenge you need to address.

The Danger of Managerial Innocence

The victim answers above may be true, and they usually are. But read through them again and see what you may have missed the first time. If this guy says he's got your back, will you sleep well at night? You will notice that while these answers all sound quite innocent, they all lack operational power. Operational power is the inherent assurance (in a manager's explanation of events) that a particular error of judgment or bad result will not recur and has been, or is being, corrected. It says "I am on top of this and you need not worry about it."

When a manager's 'truth' as to why things went awry lacks operational power, it is a lie that fools the manager – big time. In the context of the organization's mission, you will certainly agree that none of these 'true answers' can generate **inspired and compelling action**. The reason is that the victim has orchestrated an AWOL - an undignified escape from the action zone. There is no chance to galvanize an ascent towards the optimal productivity level and least possible cost to the organization – the one input-output relationship that today's business needs desperately.

The implicit assumption in all three answers is that the causes of the undesired results are all external. "I have nothing to do with what is wrong and I don't have to change. The guilty parties are the rain, the traffic, the meeting, the telephone, the computer that makes things disappear, the fact that I didn't get the request sooner, not me." But who is suffering here? The rain or the traffic? Can you see that a manager who cannot change gear in response to business challenges is losing ground to the Performance Gravity and cannot rise? If you are the one suffering, you are the one that will benefit the most from changing.

Here is the immediate problem: in the victim state, unless something over which we have no control (an external event) changes, we are stuck. The price of innocence here is impotence. The victim is a master at **blame-ability**, but on the **problem-ideas-solution-result** strategy table, this person is powerless. A manager with a victim mentality is not a leader you want to follow or put in charge of an important mission since he or she is going nowhere.

When will the victim manager arrive at work or for meetings on time? When will the victim engineer guarantee that the water leakage will be minimal so the chemical usage of the plant is maximized? When will the victim head of department turn in his or her budget on time and craft an appropriate mission for the department? When will the innocent manager develop and agree his or her measurable goals with the CEO? When will the innocent public servant finally produce results? When it doesn't rain? When there is no traffic on the road? When will that be?

When will the 'innocent' accountant or operations general manager schedule a meeting with the internal customer so they can get on the same page for the success of the team? When will the report be produced on time without careless errors? When will the leader finally begin to lead so

others can follow? When there is another fire on the mountain? When the document ceases to take the wrong turn and disappear inside the computer? Hard to say!

As a leader, manager or colleague, what excuses do you give for mediocre results? The consequence here is that those around the victim leader quickly catch on, learning to disown any responsibility that may fall on their backs. They thus fail to develop the necessary muscles to carry the weight of maturity. And just as the victim manager blames others, these “others” will in turn return the favor, cascading the victim virus all the way down the chain of command until the weak links overwhelm the mission. What a business ends up with is thus a perfect collusion where nobody is accountable, where all live in denial and resentment, believing that “we deserve better” but not realizing that they are getting what they have commanded. Meanwhile the business suffers.

When was the last time you felt the ultimate high of a great performance? In what aspects of your job do you need to drop your victim badge and join the owners’ winning team? Are you conceivably in a state of suppressed response-ability and diminished personal effectiveness right now? Have you become a perfect model of powerlessness, resignation and resentment? Do you sometimes feel like a bitter and unhappy camper that is perpetually discharging anger against an “unfair” world? There may be a virus here that is curable. But even the best doctors will tell you that this is one tough strain that cannot be cured with pills.

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