

# Develop a Sense of Responsibility Among Your People

By Ben Baran, Ph.D., Agility Analytics Practice Leader



It was a new organization, a new unit in the U.S. Navy Reserve, and someone—in his infinite wisdom—put me in charge of it. One of my first tasks was to make some sort of sense of how to organize the 55 members of the loosely defined group into an arrangement that would divide the work in a relatively sensible way and allow for an efficient and effective flow of communication.

I had some specific ideas. In fact, I had a clear picture of what I thought would work.

Yet I paused when deciding how to proceed. And instead of announcing my plan and telling everyone to get in line, **I chose a different path.**

I gathered the six people next-highest ranking people and gave them an overview of where we needed to head. I told them that we needed a workable structure and what I hoped that could do for us. But I didn't tell them the details of my plan. Rather, I told them that I'd give them 30 minutes to discuss among themselves, and that I'd check in on them toward the end.

They sat down around a table positioned outside my office. Leaving them, I went into my office and closed the door most of the way, leaving a small crack so I hear just enough of what they were doing to know that they were making progress.

After a few moments of slightly stunned silence (this was apparently an unusual approach for all of them, particularly in this rank-driven, military context), they started to talk to each other. They went through a few different ideas, and then began to converge on a working model.

When the 30 minutes were up, I went out to see how they were doing. One of them proceeded to outline a plan that was, in large part, the same as what I had already thought up on my own. But it wasn't "my" plan anymore.

**It was their plan.** They developed it; they owned it. They now felt an obligation to carry it out—a sense of duty that I'm sure far surpassed what they would have felt if I had simply given them an order.

It cost about 30 minutes, but it resulted in a sense of duty among them that allowed me to take a step back and watch them put it into action.

It took no convincing, no cajoling, no pleading, no threatening. It was, after all, their plan, and they wanted to see it succeed.

**In short, they now had a little bit greater sense of responsibility than they had 31 minutes before.** "Developing a sense of responsibility among your people" is number nine of in the U.S. Navy's list of 11 Leadership Principles, and one way to do that is through empowering other people to create and

implement solutions—like I did in the example above. A sense of responsibility has to do with a feeling of obligation or duty to getting the job done and for the collective success of the team. When people on a team have a sense of responsibility, they require much less oversight from supervisors, they get the job done the first time, they proactively anticipate issues and they work faster.

**Here are a few other ways to develop a sense of responsibility:**

- Explicitly—and frequently—discuss the “big picture” of what you’re trying to achieve as a team and give examples of how people’s contributions fit into that.
- Clearly define your expectations, and while doing so, discuss what categories of actions are well-suited for proactive behavior. For example, if your team is supposed to serve a particular customer, define where the team has latitude in making that customer happy. Can they throw in extra products or services to reward customer loyalty? Can they spend extra time getting to know that customer’s needs?
- Properly incent behavior that demonstrates a sense of responsibility or ownership. These might be financial rewards, but nonfinancial ones—and even accurate, timely verbal recognition—are often rather powerful too.
- Do nice things for your team, tell them you care about their well-being and value their contributions. When people do nice stuff for us, we’re generally programmed as humans to feel obligated to reciprocate by doing something nice in return. In the workplace, this reciprocation often takes the form of higher performance and commitment to the group.

**Although it requires the leader or manager to relinquish some control, developing a sense of responsibility, in the long run, can make for a much more productive and efficient team.**

This post is **one in a series** that I’m doing on all 11 of the U.S. Navy’s Leadership Principles. Here are all 11 of those principles:

- 1 Know yourself and seek self-improvement ([read more](#))
- 2 Be technically and tactically proficient ([read more](#))
- 3 Know your people and look out for their welfare ([read more](#))
- 4 Keep your people informed ([read more](#))
- 5 Set the example ([read more](#))
- 6 Make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished ([read more](#))
- 7 Train your unit as a team ([read more](#))
- 8 Make sound and timely decisions ([read more](#))
- 9 Develop a sense of responsibility among your people**
- 10 Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities
- 11 Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions

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