



# Unconditional Responsibility: The Power of Being a Player

By Fred Kofman

*Your soul is dyed with the color of your thoughts. Think only those things that are consistent with your principles and that can stand the brightest light of day. The content of your character is your choice. Day after day, what you choose, what you think and what you do make who you are. Your integrity is your destiny...is the light that guides your way.*

*Heraclitus*

If being a responsible player is so effective, if becoming spectators of the problems and seeing ourselves as victims is so ineffective, why do we tend to act as victims and not as players? Why do we choose to prolong our suffering as opposed to end it?

Suffering is always the result of unconscious choices. Pain and grief are unavoidable features of a human life, but suffering is not. We cannot skirt “the slings and arrows of fortune”, but we can respond to them with dignity. Suffering is the additional and continued pain that derives from our attitude vis-à-vis pain. Suffering is not produced by external conditions but by internal states of mind. In short, suffering is “optional”.

We (unconsciously) choose to suffer as victims because we are attached to the self-image of the knower. We are afraid of disapproval, embarrassment and threat to our self-esteem. We believe that security and happiness grow out of other people’s approval. We tie our well-being and success to our “innocence”. Thus, we spend a great deal of energy building an “unblameable” public self that will please others.

We learn to link responsibility to guilt from our earliest childhood. We talk about being responsible *for* something. When our mother finds our toys scattered around the room,

and with a stern look asks, “Who is responsible for this mess?” fingers always point towards someone else. When our father finds us in the middle of a fight, and with a harsh voice asks, “Who is responsible for this fight?” the unison answer is automatic, “He is!” In our child mind, being responsible means being guilty of something. Moreover, being guilty is something wrong, something you get punished for. It is not surprising that we defend our innocence by separating ourselves from the problem. As the saying goes, “Success has many fathers, failure is an orphan”.

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The problem of removing ourselves from the explanation of the problem is that we lose all power to influence the situation. As I have said in the previous chapter, *if we do not see ourselves as part of the problem, we cannot feel part of the solution*. Even when we are not a direct agent or cause of the problem, we can see ourselves as part of the system that generates the unsatisfactory result. Every time we suffer, we have

“something to do” with the matter. This can be made obvious through hyperbole: if I were dead, I wouldn’t have any more problems. But let us take a real case to make the point.

A South American manager I was consulting for, let us call him Al, was angry because his colleagues had programmed his staff’s vacations without checking with him first. According to the schedule, his department would be understaffed at a critical time. Al was furious because nobody had considered his needs. “This is unbelievable!” he said frustrated. “How dare they leave me only with five people in February? They are out of their minds if they think we can process the orders we receive from North America! It is winter there, nobody takes a vacation.”

To help him think, I asked, “Al, whose problem is this?” “Theirs, of course”, he answered angrily, “they should have checked with me before scheduling *my* staff’s vacations and making a public announcement”. “It would have been better if they had checked with you, but they did not”, I told him empathically. But I did not accept his position as victim; I insisted, asking him to look for an opportunity to be a player, “Al, who is suffering because of this situation?” “I am, of course!” he said. I repeated my question, “Then whose problem is it?”

There was a long silence, and in that moment, I saw a spark of understanding in his eyes. “Are you trying to tell me it is *my* problem?” he asked in disbelief. “I had nothing to do with the decision”. “Precisely, you did not participate in the decision”, I acknowledged, “but you are suffering the consequences. *If you are the one suffering, you are the one who has the problem.* There is nobody else but you with stronger incentives to take corrective measures. If you expect ‘them’, those who made the decision according to their priorities, to solve your situation, I wish you luck”.

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Even though Al started to follow my train of thought, he was still caught up in the victim’s story. “Why do I have to solve a problem that I am not responsible for?” he protested with conviction. “Because you are the one that is being bothered by it. If you want things to change, you better take on the problem”, I insisted. “You are not responsible *for* the problem, but you are responsible *to face* the problem. It does not matter who caused the problem, the fact is that you face an unsatisfactory situation. You can continue regretting it and blaming others, or you can *become* responsible and act to change things. Whatever you do, you will have to live with the consequences”. “But that is not fair”, he defended righteously. “This is not my fault”.

“Al”, I said somewhat sadly, “life is not fair; and if you wait for justice you will only wallow in resentment and resignation. My suggestion is that you give up the illusion that other people will take care of your problems just because you think they caused these problems. You’ll be much better off if you deal with the situation yourself. It does not matter if you think it is not fair. Justice is an opinion often used to hide irresponsibility, ineffectiveness and lack of leadership. Personal power and inner peace are totally opposite to the expectation of justice”. I ended the conversation with Al

suggesting a book: *Man and his search for meaning*, by Victor Frankl<sup>1</sup>, a book that influenced my life tremendously, and continues to do so today.

**“You are not responsible  
for the problem, but  
you are responsible to  
face the problem...”**

In his work, this Austrian psychiatrist describes his experience as a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp, during the Second World War. It is hard to imagine a more destructive and unfair situation. Those who were imprisoned there were not to blame. They had no guilt for their situation. They were completely powerless and blameless. Amidst such terrible conditions, Frankl discovered that a human being’s first and last dignity is his inalienable capacity to choose his response to any situation. In that response, a human being can express his principles and values in an unconditional way.

#### Stimulus – Reaction

Unconscious beliefs and assumptions cause general irresponsibility and the sense of victimhood. Almost all of us have been indoctrinated to relinquish as much responsibility as possible. Therefore, most of us think and act according to the traditional theory of human behavior: stimulus and reaction. This theory denies free will, responsibility and accountability, saying that people and their behavior are entirely determined by external factors.

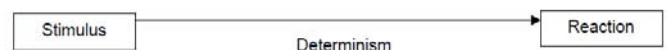


Figure 1a: The stimulus-reaction model

For example, if you ask people why they answer the phone or stop their car, most will say that they pick up the phone because it rings, or that they stop the car because there is a red light. This explanation conditions their behavior to an environmental factor. This theory leaves no room for a conscious choice: the person is a robot, responding to external stimuli according to pre-established rules. However, this cannot be right. Who hasn’t left the phone ring off to voice-mail (particularly in this age of caller id’s)? Who hasn’t crossed a red light? There must be something beyond the environmental factors.

Of course, this “something else” is “choice”. Acknowledging our choice is uncomfortable; it brings us out from our hideout and exposes us. When the phone rings in the middle of a meeting and, shrugging my shoulders, I tell the person in my office, “Excuse me, *I have to take this call*”, I am really lying. I *do not have to* take the call. I *choose* to take it--possibly hindering the conversation. It is a lot easier to blame the phone than accepting responsibility for the interruption. It is

as if I said, “If this bothers you, you can get angry at the phone, not at me. I have nothing to do with this”.

Behavior has its roots in the human being’s conscience (his mental models). What happens outside of that conscience does not *cause* action, it *influences* action. We do not answer the phone *because* it rings, neither do we stop the car

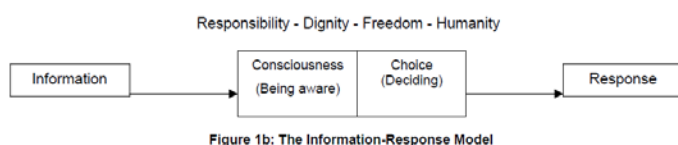
## Unconscious beliefs and assumptions cause general irresponsibility and the sense of victimhood.

*because* there is a red light or do anything *because* of what happens in our environment. We *choose* to do what we do as an *answer* to a situation we are aware of. We choose to act as we do, *because* we think it is the best possible way (under the circumstances) to pursue our interests according to our values. External facts are not stimuli, they are *information*.

### Information-Consciousness-Choice-Behavior

An external occurrence is not a stimulus that triggers a conditioned reaction, but data that provides information. Perceptions do not force a person to do anything; they just provide data about what is happening. It is the person’s choice to decide how to respond to such information, according to his objectives and values. Therefore, we answer the phone *when* it rings, *because* we want to talk to the person who calls. (If we have something more important to do, we will choose to let it ring.) We stop our car *when* we see a green light turn red, *because* we do not want to have an accident. (If we have a great urgency, we might choose to risk the accident and cross the red light anyway.) We do what we do *when* we receive information from our environment, *because* we think it is the most efficient way to reach our objectives according to our values.

When I answer the phone in the middle of a meeting, my true explanation would be: “I understand that taking this call means interrupting our dialogue, but I *prefer* to do it because I am more interested in finding out who is calling than continuing our conversation”. This does not sound as “kind” as apologizing for *having to* pick up the phone. However, the apparent “kindness” is pure irresponsibility mixed in with hypocrisy. The truth is that I am more interested in answering the phone than continuing our conversation; that is why I choose to do so.



This consciousness and ability to choose is essential to responsibility, dignity, freedom and humanity. Regardless of its circumstances, the human being can pay attention, be aware and choose how to respond. In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey<sup>2</sup> quotes a phrase that had an important impact in his life: “There is a space between stimulus [and reaction]. In that space are our freedom and our power to choose our response. In that response lie our growth and happiness”. This phrase expresses the difference between the stimulus-reaction model and the information-response model; between reactivity and responsibility.

### The Expanded Model

We can expand the model with new variables and relationships:

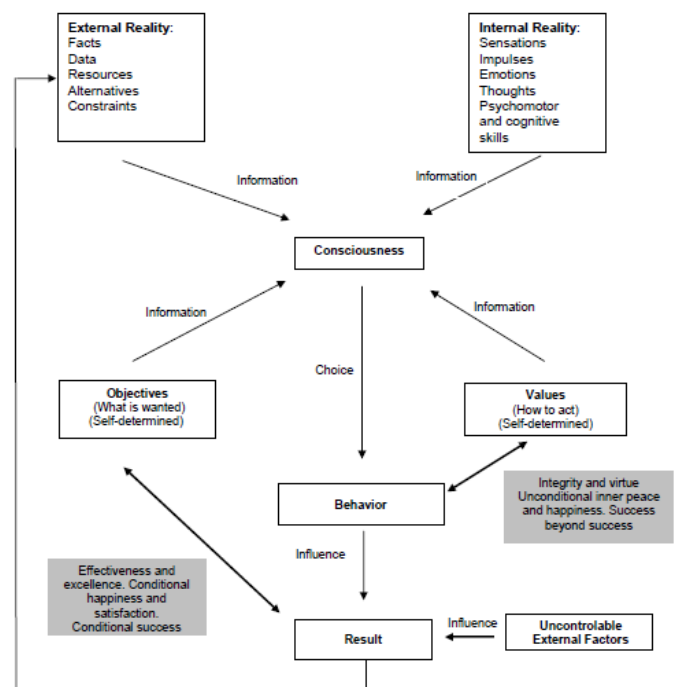


Figure 2: Consciousness and Behavior

The human being exists as a conscious entity. His *consciousness* allows him to *be aware of* his external situation (facts, data, resources, alternatives, restrictions, historic results, etc.) as well as his internal situation (sensations, impulses, emotions, thoughts, skills, etc.) Even when these internal facts take place inside his body and mind, we categorize them as part of the *situation*, because they are beyond his control.

Once we compose our perceptions into a *situation*, we consider our position regarding our objectives and values. After this assessment, we *choose* a response and we *behave* according to our choice. Behavior, together with uncontrollable external factors, determines results. These

results become part of the situation we will find ourselves in at the next moment. We say behavior is unconditioned, because it depends only from the person's will. On the other hand, results are conditional, because they depend in part from factors that are beyond the person's will.

## Behavior, together with uncontrollable external factors, determines results.

We try to use our skills and resources (physical, as money and assets, and intangible as reputation or knowledge) in the best way we can, by means of our decisions and actions. We do this to pursue our objectives according to our values. Comparing objectives and results can tell how effective a person is (there is more effectiveness when there is more consistency). Comparison between values and behavior can tell a lot about a person's integrity (there is more integrity when there is more consistency)

When the result is consistent with objectives, we say the person is successful. This success creates a "conditional" satisfaction and happiness. They are conditional because the result depends on factors beyond the persons' control. Even after the keenest effort, it is impossible to guarantee success; "whatever can go wrong, will go wrong" -as the saying goes.

When behavior is consistent with values, we say the person has achieved unconditional success: success beyond success. This success generates an inner peace and happiness beyond the threats of external shocks. It is unconditional because it is based on the human being's free will, his autonomy beyond any external factor. Even when results may not be what we want, it is always possible to feel at peace because we know we did our best to face the situation with dignity. The (superficial) sadness of (superficial) failure is totally compatible with (profound) satisfaction of (profound) success.

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The *Bagahvad Gita*<sup>3</sup>, the sacred book of Hinduism, says, "you have a right to your action, but no right to the fruits of your action". In a free version of some of its verses, we can create the following poem:

*While those with a simple mind  
cling on to their actions  
and are concerned about the results,  
the wise man is free from all attachments*

*Not blinding himself by success  
nor suffering anxiety over his failure  
he offers his actions,  
in the fire of virtue.*

*At peace with whatever happens,  
unattached to the pleasure of victory,  
and to the pain of defeat,  
he acts with full consciousness.*

*He who performs his duty  
without worrying about the results  
is a true man of wisdom.*

### Responsibility vs. Reactivity

This model rests on a fundamental assertion: we possess free will, and we can always exercise it consciously. This is not obvious, especially when facts trigger in us strong emotional reactions. Automatic thoughts and feelings are pre-conscious; that is why it is impossible to prevent them from happening and it is hard to contain them once they appear in our minds. How many times we discover ourselves acting in a totally reactive and unconscious ways! We do and say things we later regret, we feel bad about our behavior, and we feel guilty for rushed decisions. A common thought in all these cases is: "It would have been so much better if I had thought *before* doing it, if only I had taken a deep breath to think about what I was going to say or do..."

Rather than continue regretting, we could learn the lesson finally. Reactive behavior is never satisfactory in the long-term--in the short term, however, we must admit that acting out can provide relief and gratification. Unconscious passions are rarely consistent with conscious objectives and values. Therefore, before taking action, it is advisable to take some time and consider the situation. One way to do this is taking a deep breath (in silence) to re-engage our conscious mind. It takes only a couple of seconds and it generates great benefits. (See Chapter 19, "Meditation, Energy and Health", and Chapter 23, "Emotional Intelligence").

As I inhale, I pay attention to the air coming in through my nose and filling my lungs; I pay attention to my legs and feel how I am supported by the Earth; I pay attention to my arms and feel freedom in the air. This in-breath brings me completely to the "here and now", it helps me be present, fully conscious. As I exhale I pay attention to my objectives and values, I remember the interests and principles in my life; I reaffirm my commitment to give my best at all times in the face of any challenge. This out-breath projects me into the future, reaffirming my consciousness.

Fortunately (fortunately?) life provides me with many opportunities to practice conscious breathing. A few months ago, for example, I was in a meeting with executives of a European company. They were considering asking me to do some seminars. Although the meeting was going well, one of the executives had a quite patronizing attitude towards me. In his opinion, the contents of my material were *soft stuff*, not relevant for the business world. Several times, I tried to inquire, asking him to express his concerns; it didn't work. His "explanations" were mere repetitions of his initial statement.

## My own behavior is what counts for my own integrity and peace.

My desire to get the job was soon joined by my fear of losing it because of this "enemy". My emotions flared and I started to prepare for verbal warfare. After years of experience with this kind of opposition, my conceptual arsenal is diverse and compelling. I've been told I am really good at overwhelm. Just before the battle started, though, an alarm went off in the back of my mind. I closed my mouth, took a deep breath to find my center, my freedom, my desires and my values; to find myself. Without the previous reactivity, I looked at these executives and told them: "I am not sure if my material is suitable for your company at this time, that is something for you to decide. I believe that to succeed in your business, you'll need to make the best possible use of your people's capacity. To put together high performance teams, a company needs an environment of consciousness, responsibility, and effective communication. My offer is to help you develop leaders who are capable of fostering such environment."

The meeting continued in a much more pleasant atmosphere and the conversation ended well. As I remembered the episode on the airplane, a smile of satisfaction came to my lips. Oh, yes. Finally, the company decided not to hire me. I did not succeed, because I would have liked to get the contract, but even though I regretted this failure, I was still proud of acting in total harmony with my values: my main objective is not "persuading" the potential client to hire me. My task is to "offer" my services in the most attractive way possible; to show that they could bring value to the client. Afterwards, I can only respect the client's free will.

The decision of whether to hire me is beyond my control; my own behavior is what counts for my own integrity and peace.

### Success and Peace (Integrity)

Any action can be assessed from two different perspectives. As it aims to accomplish certain results, it can be judged as more or less effective according to its degree of success. Beyond results, however, the action aims to stay within a

space defined by moral principles. Thus, it can be judged as having more or less integrity according to its consistency with the person's guiding principles.

Let us consider a plant manager concerned about quality problems. After analyzing the situation with his team, he finds that some machines are not in control. With their best effort, they analyze, test and adjust the system, improving the situation, but the product is still defective. The team "failed" in their total quality objective (zero defects), but at the same time they were dignified for using their resources to the best of their knowledge and behaving according to their values. This sense of integrity is exactly what lets the team accept its partial failure without embarrassment. Unafraid to recognize the unsatisfactory result, the team can start a new cycle in their learning process.

There is no contradiction between success and peace; both are precious. Many people fear that if they find satisfaction in their honorable behavior, they will stop being concerned about the result. (This may be why many parents fail to acknowledge their children's academic excellence and, when receiving their report card, they ask, "what about this B? Why did you get a B and not an A? What happened here?") Maybe this is why so many managers are reluctant to acknowledge their employees' excellence. We will study this in further detail in Chapter 15, "Multidimensional Communication"). This is not the case. Excellence is one of the most fundamental human values, a value that compels us to vigorously pursue success by all honorable means at our disposal.

## Excellence is one of the most fundamental human values, a value that compels us to vigorously pursue success by all honourable means at our disposal.

But success is not the only value. Virtue imposes some restrictions in our pursuit of success. He, who subordinates success to integrity, is self-restrained in the use of means. For example, he will not boycott a colleague who is a candidate for the same promotion as he is. It is also true that perverted behavior can sometimes succeed in the short term. Nevertheless, when integrity is subordinated to success, there are no rules and life vanishes into an existential void.

Abraham Maslow<sup>4</sup> found a pattern of justice in life. In a letter he commented that "It is quite clear to me that, sooner or later, life hurts us all, and that virtue is more often rewarded than ignored. I also believe that now I can prove this hypothesis rigorously using orthodox research methods.

Essentially, I have concluded that during the course of a lifetime -the quintessential long-term- the odds of evil being punished are [almost 85%]. The odds of virtue being rewarded are [about 55%]. This probability is not very high, but is higher than pure fate [50%]".

## Freedom to choose how to respond to a situation (responsibility) opens the door to the ethical dimension of human existence.

However, Maslow did not believe these observations about external consequences got to the heart of the matter. He went on to say, "But the true issue is that punishment and reward are essentially intra-psychic. This means they are related to the personal feeling of happiness, peace and serenity, as well as the absence of negative emotions such as regret, remorse or guilt. In regard to rewards, they are usually gratification of basic needs of belonging, of feeling loved and respected and generally living in a Platonic world of beauty, truth and pure virtue. In other words, our rewards in life do not necessarily come as money, power or social status".

Expressions such as "essential peace" or "unconditional satisfaction" are very real to anyone who has given himself fully in a sports event. The satisfaction of giving 100%, putting our heart and soul into the game, in the spirit of fair play, is independent of the result of the match. Winning or losing, the wise man -as called by Bhagavad-Gita - is always ready to accept his destiny brings and to continue learning, since life's shortcomings do not have a negative effect on his self-esteem. On the contrary, facing these challenges willingly and enthusiastically is the very source of his deepest pride.

Freedom to choose how to respond to a situation (responsibility) opens the door to the ethical dimension of human existence. Although we cannot determine the situation we face or the results of our actions, we are always able to choose how we will behave under the circumstance we have to face. Human dignity does not depend from effectiveness, but from consistence between behavior and values. The chance to act with dignity is absolutely basic and inalienable. Dignity, like responsibility, is so unconditional as the human being's humanity. It only depends from acting according to conscience and values.

Some consider values and virtuous behavior a "luxury" affordable only by those who have their basics covered. "When circumstances are difficult", these so called pragmatists say, "It is necessary to give up scruples and do whatever is necessary to come out ahead". I think exactly the opposite. It is precisely in difficult times that scruples become vital. It is when the world threatens to pull us away from our

center and wreck us against the rocks of unconsciousness, that our true nature is most clearly exposed. To operate with dignity in chaos, we need to stay anchored to values. Without that mooring, we will act in regrettable ways, planting bitter seeds of future remorse.

Freedom of choice imposes the need to explain. Free will compels the human being to justify his response to circumstances. Accountability is the other side of responsibility: the need to be accountable for our behavior. The coin has two sides: decision power on one side, and the obligation to account for our decision on the other. Fear of accountability is what drives many people to take the victim's role. When we take ownership of our actions, we also take ownership of their consequences. If we take charge of ourselves, we will be called to explain our behavior.

For example, in assault trials, the defense tries to reduce liability through claims that the defendant acted in a state of "high emotion"; in robbery cases, the defendant had some urgent need, and so on. The legal doctrine that justifies this line of defense proposes that, under certain circumstances, the person is not free to choose his actions; in other words, he has no other choice than stabbing the lover or stealing other people's property. Since the person is not free, then there is no responsibility attached to his actions. He cannot be accountable for actions that he never "chose". The same thing happens with insanity arguments (temporary or permanent), which suggest that the person was "not himself" when he perpetrated the crime he is charged for.

I think my children are legal experts...

### From Victim to Player

As we look again at the distinction between players and victims, we can see that, in addition to greater chances for success, the player has an inalienable possibility to achieve inner peace (integrity). Even though is not always possible to achieve the desired result, it is always possible to behave honorably. Let's do an exercise to better appreciate the differences between victims and players. (The exercise can be done individually or in groups. In groups, the exercise is enhanced by the dynamic of collusion of victims)

## Even though is not always possible to achieve the desired result, it is always possible to behave honorably.

Think about an unsatisfactory situation you have been (or are) going through: an ineffective meeting, a harsh conversation or a frustrating event. Based on this situation, please answer the following questions from a victim's perspective. (To accomplish the exercise's goals it is

necessary that you take on the victim's role completely. Please make an effort to feel absolutely irresponsible)

If done as a group, while each participant complains, the other participants "help" him, taking his side with expressions such as, "I can't believe they did that to you", "It is so unfair", "You shouldn't be treated like this", "They are so mean", "Poor thing, you don't deserve this". The goal is to provide "moral support" to the victim. This type of "help" and "support", however, are totally counterproductive. They encourage unconsciousness and powerlessness. These comments are a "leaded life-saver"; they sink the recipient deeper and deeper into the victim's story.

Pity is an empty form of friendship. Nurturing the victim's feeling of helplessness, resignation and righteous indignation is a "cheap" way to be a friend. In the same way, people can buy a child's pseudo-love at a low price, giving him all the chocolate he wants; or an alcoholic's, buying him another drink. A victim's pseudo-friendship can always be bought by telling him he is right. Just as chocolates and alcohol, the victim's reasons are unhealthy. True love supports long term health, rather than immediate gratification or relief. Tough love challenges the victim and encourages him to become a player.

## A victim's pseudo-friendship can always be bought by telling him he is right.

The questions for the first round of the exercise are:

1. What happened to you?
2. Who hurt you or had a negative impact on you?
3. What has this person (or group) done to you?
4. How do you feel about that?
5. What should that person (or group) have done?
6. What should that person (or group) do to repair the damage?
7. How would it affect you if this person (or group) carries on with his behavior?
8. How do you feel in the victim's place?

Let us take a case from real life.

1. "What happened to me? A few days ago, I got an urgent request to submit a proposal for consulting services. I had to submit the proposal in 48 hours. Can you believe this? They wanted something on paper in two days, two days! There was no way I could do it. I was busy with other things. Don't these people realize that they are NOT the only client in the world?"

2. "Who hurt me? The Human Resources department of the company that requested the proposal. I cannot believe they are so disorganized. How dare they demand something like this almost overnight? They are so unprofessional. What are they thinking? That I have nothing else to do, that I have to be ready for them at all times? Grrrr!"
3. "What have they done to me? They put me between a rock and a hard place. With everything I have to do, the last thing I need are urgent requests. Because of them, I had to work until very late at night and with great stress. Besides, my wife was angry with me for staying up so late plugged into the computer. All of this thanks to that stinking proposal".
4. "How do I feel about that? Pissed off! It makes me mad to know I have to pay for these fools' lack of planning. They obviously need help to learn how to work properly. They know nothing about planning and management control."
5. "What should that person (or group) have done? Clearly, they should have asked for the proposal much earlier. Normally these things are requested a minimum of two weeks in advance. They should be more considerate and not assume that consultants are sitting at home, having a good time, ready to jump immediately into action at the snap of their fingers. It is humiliating to work for people like that".
6. "What should that person (or group) do to repair the damage? They should at least apologize and promise they will be more considerate in the future. Of course, given my willingness and flexibility, that they should hire me for the job. In addition, I hope they consider the effort I made and not even think of negotiating a discount in my fees. (I included a 10% surcharge as compensation for putting me under such a tight schedule; I definitely deserve that.)".
7. "How would it affect me if they carry on with this behavior? If I win this job (win? perhaps it would be better if I lose it), I will feel tense, resentful and stressed. I will surely have more problems with my wife. Putting out their fires will not let me plan my life. I will always have to be ready for my client's urgencies".
8. "How do I feel as a victim? I feel horrible. As Jack Nicholson in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". Resentful, frustrated, upset, irritated and anxious. Yuck. This is a total mess."

Once each member of the group has answered these questions, they go on to the second round of questions. It is vital that the participants *refer to the same story* at this second stage. The facts remain the same; what changes is the interpretation.

The questions for the second round are:

1. What challenge did you face?
2. What response did you choose to give to the situation?
3. What was your goal?
4. What values and principles would you like to guide your actions?
5. What were the (negative) consequences of your behavior? (Had there been no unwanted consequences, this would not be a story of dissatisfaction).
9. Can you think of any alternative action that would have been more effective to reach your goals (success)?
10. Can you think of any alternative action that would have been more consistent with your values (integrity)?
11. Is there anything you can do now to minimize or repair the damage of the original situation?
12. Can you learn something from the experience that will help you behave with more effectiveness and integrity in the future?
13. How do you feel as a player?

Let us continue with the example.

1. "What challenge did I face? I got an urgent request for a proposal (RFP) from a potential client. They wanted it back in two days."
2. "What was my response? I stayed up late to finish on time. I had things to do during the day, and as I chose not to postpone them, I (unconsciously) chose to write the proposal at night."
3. "What was my goal? To get the contract for my consulting services. I also wanted to not upset my wife."
4. "What values and principles would I like to rule my actions? I want to be honest and responsible. I want to be in charge of my decisions. I want to balance the demands of my professional life with those of my family."
5. "What were the (negative) consequences of my behavior? Primarily, the stress level I had while working. Second, the resentment after everything had finished. Third, the dispute with my wife, and the bitter atmosphere that ensued."
6. "Could I have done something more effective? Hmmm. Certainly. I could have tried to negotiate an extension of the deadline. I do not know if they would have accepted, but I didn't even ask. Even if the deadline had been fixed, I could have postponed some of the other things I did

during the day. The truth is that I spent quite some time doing things that were not so urgent, they could have waited for another day. Moreover, even if I could not have postponed what I did during the day, I could have at least explained the situation to my wife. She is very sensitive and I am sure she would have understood the situation. She might have even helped me to finish sooner. Finally, I could have declined the request for the proposal. Nobody forces me to submit proposals for all the possible jobs out there. If I can't do it, I can't do it. It is not worth going through so much trouble. I have been so blind; none of this came to my mind before. I see so many opportunities now!"

7. "Could I have done something more in line with my values (integrity)? Actually, my answers to the previous question would not only have been more effective, they would have also had more integrity. I wish I had done this exercise before getting so upset. There was no reason to be angry. I'm sure I would have avoided the argument with my wife."

8. "How can I minimize the damage now? The first thing I will do is apologize to my wife. She knew nothing about the proposal. When she asked me to unplug from the computer, I accused her of being insensitive. She didn't deserve that; I think I acted unconsciously. Second, I will stop blaming the company that requested the proposal. They are free to ask whatever they want, and I am free to decline their request if I don't want to do it. It is silly to stay resentful about something I *chose* to do. Third, I will learn the lesson for the next time I get an urgent RFP."

9. "What lesson can I learn? Before I accept to submit a proposal on such a tight deadline, I will ask for an extension. If that is not possible, I will look at things in my calendar and see if I can postpone something. If I cannot postpone anything, then I will talk to my wife to see if I can extend my working hours with her approval. If together we decide that this is too much pressure, then I will decline the request. If we decide that the effort is worthwhile, then I will do my best without feeling victimized by the circumstances. I don't need stress or resentment in my life."
10. "How do I feel as a player? A lot better! I feel some pain, seeing how unconscious I have been. Nevertheless, I rather pay the price of awareness than remain unconscious. I will not fall into this same trap in the

## Can you think of any alternative action that would have been more effective to reach your goals ... (or) more consistent with your values?



future. I'm actually looking forward to getting another 'urgent' request for proposals to test my new skills!"

While the questions in the first round activate the victim's story, the second round of questions bring the player's story to the fore. Beyond this exercise, these questions are useful in personal and professional interactions. Just as a manager can help his employees leave the victim's path, a mother can help her daughter. Just as a colleague can help another to be more aware of his need to be a player, one spouse can help the other to stop feeling miserable and take responsibility for his future. As a consultant and teacher, I try to help my clients act responsibly when faced with the challenges of life.

### Freedom

The traditional definition describes freedom as the capacity to have and do what we want. I call this freedom "relative" or "conditional", because it depends on factors beyond a person's control. Nobody is totally free according to this definition: life is full of constraints. For example, gravity prevents us from flying as birds, or being born in Argentina prevents that person from being a native citizen of the United States. There is a range of relative degrees of freedom. For example, someone with a car is "freer" than someone without it—as teenagers are keenly aware. From this perspective, tangible and intangible resources broaden a person's freedom: Bill Gates can do things I cannot do, and a college graduate can do things an illiterate person cannot do.

There is a different argument that claims that the way to increase one's freedom is by reducing one's desires. Since freedom depends on want satisfaction, the less we want, the easier it is to be satisfied. This is illustrated in a Sufi story. The Mullah Nasrudin was sitting on the street, eating a plate of chickpeas—a poor man's diet. One of his acquaintances stopped by and laughed: "Mullah, you're such a fool. If you only learned to bow to the prince, you wouldn't have to eat more chickpeas". "And if you only learned to eat chickpeas, you wouldn't have to bow to the prince", replied Nasrudin.

My concern here is not this conditional type of freedom but a more basic one: the essential freedom.

The essential or unconditional definition describes freedom as our capacity to respond to a situation exercising our free will. According to this definition, every human being is absolutely free. Furthermore, we are all equally free—nobody has more freedom than anybody else. Essential freedom is a basic feature of the human being's existence. It is actually a tautology (the useless repetition of a thought expressed in a different way) because we *always* respond to a situation behaving in such a way as we chose to behave.

If we face an armed robber threatening to take our money or our life, for example, we still have plenty of options as to how to respond: we can hand him the money, attack the thief, try to escape, shout, ask for help, etc. What we cannot choose is

to have the criminal not be there, attacking us. The cold hard facts of reality are not a choice. A human being's freedom is unconditional; because *within* the constraints imposed by the situation, he can choose what he thinks is the best possible alternative. Unconditional does not mean unbounded; but that one always has infinite options within the set of possible answers.

A "bounded infinity" is not a contradiction. We can prove this through a mathematical example. Let us take a set of fractional numbers between zero and one. This is an infinite set, because between any two fractions it is possible to find other fraction—for example, by finding their average. (Actually, between any two fractions, it is possible to find infinite others). For example, between 0 and 1, there is  $\frac{1}{2}$ , between  $\frac{17}{751}$  and  $\frac{18}{751}$ , there is  $\frac{35}{1502}$  (the average between  $\frac{17}{751}$  and  $\frac{18}{751}$ ) and so on. Even when the range (0, 1) contains infinite fractions, it is obviously bounded. There is no contradiction. Many times life presents us with the opportunity to choose any number between zero and one, but no chance to choose number two.

Freedom itself is not a free choice. We are human, therefore, we are free—thus responsible and accountable—regardless of what we believe about our freedom. The only difference between players and victims is that the first group is *aware* of their freedom, their responsibility and their accountability, while the second is not. This is similar to two people, each having a million dollars in the bank, but only one of them being aware of this fact. They both have the same amount of money, regardless of how much the second complains about his poverty.

**The cold hard facts of reality are not a choice. A human being's freedom is unconditional; because *within* the constraints imposed by the situation, he can choose what he thinks is the best possible alternative.**

A person is always free to choose his behavior, but sometimes chooses to be unconscious of that freedom and acts as if there was none. This is the victim's case. In his mental model, the victim sees his behavior totally determined by external facts. The victim does not see that what conditions him is his deterministic perspective, not the external facts. Let us take the case of Mary, who feels victimized by her boss who "forced" her to attend a meeting. If we ask Mary why she attended the meeting, she would reply, "Because my boss sent me". Even if her boss had asked her to go, this way of telling the story generates resentment and resignation. We can challenge Mary, reminding her it was

her decision to attend; she could have chosen not to go to the meeting, in spite of her boss' request.

"No, I could not have missed the meeting. My job was on the line", Mary could argue. And we could counter: "Then you were able to miss it, but you chose to go because the consequences of declining your boss' request were more negative than the consequences of accepting it". "Well, it is the same thing" she might say.

The difference is purely semantic", Mary would probably conclude. However, the difference is **not** just semantic. To accept her free will, Mary must abandon what existentialist philosophers call her "bad conscience" (her denial of freedom). Mary can negotiate not attending the meeting, or in an extreme situation, she can decline her boss' request. This could result in unwanted consequences – Mary cannot choose to keep her job if her boss fires her- but quitting her job is a possible option (although not a desirable one at this point). Freedom does not mean Mary can do what she wants; freedom means that she can choose, when confronting a certain set of circumstances, the answer that is more consistent with her goals and values.

### Social Freedom

An interpersonal definition of freedom says that it is the capacity to make choices without threats of coercion. We are free when we can decide what to do without fear of aggression (a physical threat or attack against a person or his property). Social freedom is based on respect for each other. According to the U.S. declaration of independence, the only limit to an individual's social freedom is the same right other individuals have of living their lives as they see fit without threats of violence.

This is dramatically different to the concept of freedom as the capacity to choose between many options. A person who has more resources or possibilities for action (for example, an affluent person) does not have more freedom. On the other hand, a person is free when he can control his destiny without being subject to aggression by others. (We will discuss this in depth in Chapter 24, "Values and Virtues".)

**A person is free when he can control his destiny without being subject to aggression by others.**

At an organizational level, the right to property is the basis for harmony between order and freedom. The manager has some capacity to control certain resources, because the owners have delegated in him the authority that derives from their property. However, the employee can always use his inalienable freedom to resign and leave. As long as there is no

coercion or violence, the job contract to has its bases on the free association of sovereign individuals, who think it is more convenient to operate together rather than doing it separately. If this link is modified (in other words, if someone thinks it would be more convenient for him to separate from the others), the relationship will be untenable. The only honorable choice is separation.

Human misery and suffering are always due to violations of freedom and lack of respect for the other person's autonomy. When we suffer in human relationships, we are always in one of these four situations:

1. We try to force another person to do something we want, but he or she does not want to do.
2. The other person tries to force us to do something he or she wants, but we do not want to do.
3. Two people want to force each other to do something neither of them wants to do.
4. We try to force ourselves to do something we find painful or undesirable.

The key to avoid suffering at work (and life in general) is to pay attention and avoid falling into these coercive dynamics.

**Human misery and suffering are always due to violations of freedom and lack of respect for the others person's autonomy.**

### Success and Integrity

When I present my views on freedom, victims and players, I tend to get some strong push-back from people who feel they've endured difficult circumstances. Whether reality has burdened them or they've suffered at the hands of others, their reaction to my advocacy for playerhood is similar: "How do you dare ask us to take responsibility for these events?! Are you heartless? Don't you see that we are in pain? Besides, we didn't make the mess. Why should we clean it up?! They broke it, let **them** fix it!"

I am not heartless. The stories of people in pain break my heart. I am also well aware of the innocence of many of my challengers. In many cases, they are not at all responsible **for** the difficulties they have born. On the contrary, they are innocent victims. Even then, I claim that each one of us can – and must– become responsible **as we face** our difficulties.

Imagine an airplane pilot who, finding himself in a storm, abandons the cockpit saying to his copilot: "I am not responsible for this storm. God created it, let Him deal with it. I'm engaging the autopilot while I go take a nap in the passenger section. As soon as the turbulence is over, call me."

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? The dangerous storm—regardless of who or what created it—*demands* that the captain take the controls even more firmly. It is cowardice to abdicate responsibility on the autopilot. The captain needs to take ownership for the safety of the passengers, doing his best, engaging all his resources, to cope with the circumstance he faces.

**... if I don't see myself as response-able towards the problem, I will not be able to address it successfully.**

As we said several times, response-ability means ability to respond. To be responsible, in this interpretation, is completely different than being "guilty" for "creating" the situation. As opposed to many new age philosophies that advocate that "you create your reality in your mind, so fix your thoughts and your problems will go away", I believe there is such thing as an objective reality which is out of our control. Even the most enlightened people in history have suffered difficulty, pain, illness and death. Often we have to confront situations not of our making. But that is irrelevant for the purposes of my argument. Regardless of who made the mess, I am the one suffering the consequences, I am the one in pain. If something dear **to me** (such as myself, for example) is in harm's way, that is **my problem**. And if I don't see myself as response-able towards the problem, I will not be able to address it successfully. Irresponsibility is not only ineffective. Abdicating in the midst of difficulties is an act of moral cowardice that betrays the most basic dignity of the human being.

In Chapter 2, we explained that watching a baseball game from the sidelines is very comfortable. We can criticize mercilessly "those idiots who don't know how to play". But our criticisms have no influence over the course of the game. The price of comfort is powerlessness. To be a baseball spectator is an innocuous pastime. To be a spectator of one's own life is an infallible recipe for suffering. We didn't—in large measure—create our difficulties, but we are the ones who have to bear them. So we need to choose: will we be responsible players or powerless victims?

"But how can you manage? There are lots of situations that are beyond anybody's capacity to cope!", Many confront me. "It's impossible to manage things when you're starving to death, or when powerful people abuse you simply because they dislike your nationality, color of skin, sexual orientation or religious beliefs!" Point well taken. There are plenty of challenges that can and do overwhelm us; situations for which we have no effective response. Perhaps the ultimate example is the impermanent nature of life itself. As a popular saying remarks, "life is a terminal disease for which there exists no known cure". But my claim is not that we can

**succeed** in the face of any challenge. It is impossible to guarantee that every time one steps on the basketball court one will **win**. The only guaranteed thing is the possibility to **play** honorably.

There is the fundamental difference between **success** and **integrity**. Success is to accomplish our goal, to beat the opposite team. **Integrity** is to play fair, to behave with dignity, to put our heart and soul in our efforts, and to conduct ourselves according to our highest moral standards. There is no way to insure success; it depends on a multitude of factors that are outside of our control—such as the strength of the forces opposing us. What we **can** insure is our integrity; it depends only on our (controllable) behavior. Aligning our actions with our values is all that is required.

**Success is to accomplish our goal ... Integrity is to play fair, to behave with dignity ... and to conduct ourselves according to our highest moral standards.**

Of course it is possible to act with integrity and to fail. It is also possible to triumph with no dignity. Such triumph always leaves a bitter-empty aftertaste. Life is long, and one always ends up reaping what one sows. Even if human justice doesn't reach him, whoever betrays himself suffers the punishment of his own conscience—or, worse yet, is trapped in dark unconsciousness. Whoever acts virtuously, on the other hand, may suffer the pain of loss and defeat. But at a deeper level, his soul is at peace, knowing that he did his best to pursue his goals in harmony with his values.

I strongly believe that we can all be players in this deeper game of. We can all attain this success beyond success, a self-reliant peace unconditioned by external events. Lovingly challenging people to take responsibility for their lives is not heartless, is the only help that I believe is worth giving.

#### **Lamb or Tiger?**

There is a Sufi story<sup>7</sup> that illustrates the difference between freedom and unconsciousness, between the victim's irresponsibility and the player's power. These two archetypes are represented by a sheep and a tiger:

Once upon a time, a pregnant tigress was looking for food. She saw a herd of sheep, and attacked them. She got one, but because she made a big effort and she was almost due, she died while giving birth. The tiger was born an orphan, surrounded by the herd of sheep. Without knowing his identity, the young tiger joined the herd and started to walk, eat and bleat like sheep. The young tiger also learnt to feel a victim, to moan and blame others for his suffering, just as sheep do.

One day, another tiger that was in the region came across this offensive scene: a young tiger, walking, eating and bleating like sheep. With a loud roar, the tiger ran towards the sheep, dispersing them. The adult tiger took the young one, and dragged him to a pond, where he forced him to look at his reflection in the water, as he said, "Look! You are not a sheep; you are like me, a tiger. You are tiger, and you have a tiger's strength, courage, freedom and majesty. You are responsible for your future; you are the predator, not the prey." After that, the tiger roared, loudly and gloriously. This made the young tiger feel scared and excited. The tiger then said: "Now it is your turn!" The young tiger's first attempts

were pathetic, and resembled a bleat and a squeak. Soon, however, under the adult tiger's supervision, the young tiger developed his true nature and learned to roar, as the owner of his life.

When faced with a challenge in life, we always have the possibility to choose: sheep or tiger? One of them leads to a life of resentment and impotence, the other one leads to an extraordinary life.

*Who will you choose to be when life presents you with challenging circumstances?*