

# *Productivity Killers: The Victim Virus*

By Fred Kofman

The next time a colleague of yours is late to a meeting, listen to his or her explanation. Probably, it's another meeting's "fault", because it went over time, or maybe traffic is to blame, which is getting worse by the minute. These are valid reasons. If the meeting had finished on time, or if the highway had been empty, your colleague would have been on time. The story might be true, but it's ineffective. The reasons provided were not the only reasons for the delay. When the rest of the participants carried on with the meeting, your colleague decided to stay; or when estimating the departure time he or she did not take traffic into account. There are many reasonable causes, but not all of them have the same impact. Some promote the ability to respond, while others take away power from the people and the groups that adopt them.

The usual notion of responsibility is causal. You are responsible for the consequences of your actions. When applied to an unwanted result, this notion is associated to a guilt stigma. Who would be proud of their responsibility for a failure? Rather than responsibility, this is guilt-ability.

More powerful is to understand response-ability as the ability to respond in the face of circumstances. This responsibility is unconditional as we always have the chance to choose our behavior. Being responsible in this sense generates a sensation of power, as it focuses on that which you can influence. It is possible to feel proud of facing failure with integrity, repairing the damage to the greatest extent possible and learning from the experience.

When you play cards, you have no control on the hand you're dealt. If you're constantly complaining about it, you'll feel overwhelmed and resentful. But if you focus on how to play those cards, you'll feel powerful and serene. Even if you end up losing, you have the chance of proving your ability by doing your best with the cards you were dealt. Regrettably, many people choose to focus their attention on the aspects outside their control, claiming that "you can't

play with these cards". We call this tendency to "throw the ball off the field" the victim virus. It raises havoc in the lives of people, organizations and society.

In the first article of this series, we introduced five productivity killer viruses. In the second one, we dealt with ethical shortsightedness. In the third, we focused on ontological arrogance. In the fourth, we presented narcissistic negotiation and in the fifth we examined the lack of integrity in commitments. In this sixth one, we are dealing with the most pernicious of all viruses: lack of responsibility. The infected person feels victim of circumstances outside his or her control, incapable of doing anything about them. To alleviate their frustration, victims focus their attention on factors that they cannot influence. This makes them feel innocent, but the cost is that they are also left helpless.

Victims try to maintain their self-esteem proving their innocence. Their explanations focus on factors outside their control. When something goes wrong, it's always either fate or somebody else's fault. These explanations work as tranquilizers, helping the victim not to feel bad. The problem is that whatever is outside their control is indeed out of control. When attributing causality to uncontrollable factors, victims annul the possibility to change the situation. As they don't see themselves as part of the problem, they do not see themselves as part of the solution either.

From an early age, we are taught that responsibility is synonymous of guilt and therefore, something to be avoided at all costs. The other day, my five-year-old daughter asked me to fix a beheaded doll she had. "What happened?" I asked. "It broke". Michelle's dolls have the habit of "committing suicide." Likewise, when spilling her glass of juice, Sophie explains that "it fell," or when looking for his book, Thomas claims it's because "it got lost." All of these explanations lack a doer. Bad things "happen"

or are caused by others. I still remember how happy I was when I got home from school after “getting an A.” On other days I was sad because “the teacher gave me an F.” Clearly, many can succeed but very few will own up to failure.

Examples of victim behavior abound among adults. Let’s take the case of the systems manager that receives a complaint from a customer and blames the programmers. This may be true, but the explanation conveniently overlooks the fact that it was the manager that supervised the work. Or the case of the account executive that loses a client and affirms it was because the logistics department fell behind with their order. This is also true, but the explanation omits the fact that the executive never asked the logistics department if they could deliver in the terms he had promised to the client.

Unlike victims, players focus their attention on those factors that they can influence. Players’ self-esteem is based on doing the best possible instead of appearing innocent. They see themselves as an integral part of the system that generated an unwanted result and hence as a leverage point to change the system in a way that it produces a better result.

Players do not feel all mighty. They understand there are external factors outside of their control, but they take them as challenges inviting their response. According to Don Juan, the Mexican shaman in Carlos Castañeda’s novel, “the difference between an ordinary man and a warrior is that for the ordinary man everything is either a blessing or a curse. For the warrior, everything is a challenge. And challenges are neither good nor bad, just challenges.”

Going from victim to player entails a change of consciousness that requires we leave behind the attachment to “being right” and stop requesting that others take charge of our problems. I remember the case of Steven, a sales manager

who was furious because Human Resources had organized his employees’ vacations without asking him. Steven would be left with very few people during a critical period.

“This is unbelievable!” he ranted, “How could they have given vacations to my people in February? It’s our busiest month!” “Steven, whose problem is this?” I asked. “Human Resources’, of course,” he snapped back at me. “They should have asked me before organizing the vacation time of my people.” I insisted, “Who’s suffering for this decision?” “I am” “Then, whose problem is this?”

After a long silence, Steven protested, “But they are the ones who did not ask me, they made the mistake, why should it be my problem?” I answered “Who caused the problem is irrelevant. If it’s you that’s suffering, you have the problem. If you think those who did not ask you in the first place and who do not feel the same pressure you do are going to worry about solving your problem, I wish you luck...”

“But that’s not fair,” he argued. “Life is never fair. If you expect things to be the way you think they should be, you’re in for a lot of resentment and resignation. I suggest leaving aside the illusion that others are going to take care of your problems simply because you think they caused them. You’ll feel much better if you take charge of the situation. It doesn’t matter that they are the ones who “broke it”, you are the one who can fix it. Even if you fail, the mere act of taking charge and giving your best will make you feel proud and reestablish your sense of integrity.”

My experience with leaders from all around the world is that the victim virus is universal. Likewise, its cure is common to all cultures. When people start seeing themselves as the main characters in the story of their own destiny, of their organizations, and of their lives, they start expanding with a renewed sense of power.