



„That Was My Mistake“: Practicing Extreme Ownership in Business

By Christian Rook

“I take full responsibility.”

This sentence has become the soundtrack of failed projects. You hear it in crisis meetings, after missed deadlines, during budget overruns. Leaders say it with the routine of a mantra, nod solemnly, and then it vanishes into the political static. No consequences. No changes. Just words that long ago lost their meaning.

What you almost never hear instead: **“That was my fault.”**

The difference isn't just semantic. It's fundamental. And it explains why so many organizations are stuck in an endless loop of blame, shame, and finger-pointing.

The Paradox of the Responsibility Illusion

Research in organizational psychology reveals a fascinating paradox: leaders constantly talk about responsibility, yet most organizations are structurally designed to prevent true accountability. Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School, in her groundbreaking study *“Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams”* (Administrative Science Quarterly, 1999), describes how organizations systematically cultivate a culture of self-protection.

The problem goes deeper than poor rhetoric. It's rooted in the fundamental incentive systems of modern businesses: quarterly



reports reward short-term wins and punish failed experiments. Promotion cycles favor those with spotless track records. Performance reviews document successes but rarely failed attempts or systematic learning processes.

In this environment, “taking responsibility” becomes a rhetorical damage-control strategy. It signals political agility more than actual leadership, and demands no real consequences. It's the corporate equivalent of “thoughts and

prayers”: well-meaning, but ultimately meaningless.

Anatomy of a Systemic Leadership Failure

A few years ago, I experienced firsthand what it means to lead differently. As plant manager and authorized officer of a mid-sized pharmaceutical supplier, I was faced with an existential challenge.

Business had been booming. The company had grown rapidly, fueled by new projects. Hundreds of new employees were hired. Too many. On top of 450 permanent, mostly well-trained staff, we brought in 250 temporary workers to cover weekend shifts. We ran operations 24/7. Orders had to ship. But there wasn't enough time to properly train the temps, and turnover among them was high.

As expected, quality suffered, which, in the pharmaceutical world, is unacceptable. Complaints increased, which led to costly rework, which overloaded the production schedule, which triggered more chaos. The loudest customers (especially those who complained directly to the CEO or our new private equity owners) got priority deliveries. This only deepened the chaos and damaged relationships with “normal” customers who hadn't gone into “megaphone mode.”

Management, engineering, and QA spent all their time in emergency meetings with clients, leaving no room for strategy or new project acquisition. A negative spiral formed, eventually causing significant financial losses. The company was spinning in circles. Constant overtime and extra shifts drained morale and drove up costs.

Something had to change. The problems had to be analyzed. Costs needed to be brought under control. We needed a radical recovery plan.

As plant manager, I developed one: a fundamental turnaround. A complete review of all processes and departments. All of this while running at 230 km/h with a full order book. The critical condition: we had to do it

without laying off permanent staff. Instead, process optimization and organizational restructuring would allow us to phase out temporary workers. From 700 employees back to 450, but done responsibly.

We structured the project professionally. Hired CapGemini as external consultants. Conducted intensive workshops with the works council. Launched communication campaigns. Designed training programs. Textbook change management. The project dashboards all showed green. Milestones were hit. Steering committees were optimistic.

But on the day of implementation, chaos erupted.

The Day of Failure

It wasn't technical chaos from poorly designed processes. It was something far worse: chaos born from missing communication and missing buy-in. We realized that most employees, and many mid-level managers, didn't believe in the transformation and, despite all the communication, quietly planned to “wait it out.”

Most employees didn't see the reduction of temporary workers as a positive move to save the company. They saw it as betrayal and a signal that further layoffs were coming. And they couldn't understand how it was supposed to get easier with 200 fewer people. They expected to shoulder the extra burden themselves. We had talked about smart process changes, but hadn't yet shown they would actually work.

Mid-level management, uncertain themselves, sent mixed signals. Department heads who suddenly had to lead twice the number of people were overwhelmed, and passed that uncertainty on to their teams.

Production didn't stall because of technical issues. It stalled because people stopped cooperating. They entered standby mode. They waited to see what would actually happen, rather than doing what the plan said.

The Crisis Meeting

Monday morning after the disastrous first week, everyone gathered in the conference room. Plant leadership, department heads, project leads, HR, the works council. The COO flew in from headquarters. The atmosphere was icy. Everyone knew: this wasn't just a rocky start. It was a systemic failure.

I opened with the question you always hear in these situations:

"What went wrong last week?"

The answers came straight from the textbook: Employees hadn't taken the training seriously. The communication hadn't landed. The new processes were too complex. The timeline too ambitious. Some questioned if we should've just stuck with the old system.

Everyone looked for causes outside their responsibility. Everyone had documents proving they'd done their part.

Then I said:

"No. That was my fault."

Not: "I take responsibility."

Not: "As plant manager, the buck stops with me."

But: **"That was my fault."**

What followed was a raw dissection of my own leadership failure:

"I believed good planning could substitute for leadership. I trusted project plans instead of talking to people. I mistook compliance from middle management for conviction. I underestimated how deep the fear of layoffs ran. I confused communication with information. I thought managing risk technically would automatically build trust. That was naive."

"Worst of all: I left you leaders out in the cold. You were just as uncertain as your teams. But instead of seeing that, I treated it as a personal weakness, when in fact, I failed to give you the support you needed."

The room fell completely silent. Not with shame or discomfort, but the kind of silence

that happens when people realize something important is happening.

Why "That Was My Fault" Hits Different

Attribution theory helps explain why those words were so powerful. When leaders externalize failure, "The circumstances were tough," "The team wasn't ready", they subtly send the message:

"I'm not responsible for what happens in my area of responsibility."

The opposite happens when they internalize failure. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), in their work on prospect theory, showed that people are acutely sensitive to the consistency between words and underlying beliefs.

"That was my fault" signals something fundamentally different than **"I take responsibility."**

It signals **true ownership**. The speaker doesn't treat the issue as an external challenge to be managed, but as a direct result of their own decisions and actions.

Studies on transformational leadership by Bernard Bass and Bruce Avolio, particularly *"Transformational Leadership and the Falling Dominoes Effect"* (Group & Organization Management, 1987) and *"Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Transformational Leadership"* (Sage, 1994), show that this kind of vulnerability doesn't weaken trust in leaders. It strengthens it, **but only when it's followed by visible changes in behavior.**

The Mechanics of Change

What happened next was remarkable. I opened the floor, in front of my own boss, who had serious doubts about the success of the project. I asked each person in the room:

"What, in your view, happened last week?"

Slowly, one by one, the managers began to speak up. Interestingly, most started their answers by admitting their own mistakes. And

each time, I responded:

“No, it wasn’t your fault. It was mine.”

We created a new plan. Starting that very day, we went out to the production floor, constantly. We spoke with employees. Explained the changes. Corrected mistakes. Asked questions:

“How is the transition going?”

“What do you need from us?”

We adapted the concept based on feedback. We lived change management.

We launched weekly meetings with middle management. Not for status updates, but for support. The question wasn’t:

“Where are we?”

It was:

“What’s stuck, and how can I help?”

In one of those meetings, when a department head cautiously mentioned struggles with a new team setup, our response wasn’t:

“You need to figure it out” or “We expect results!”

It was:

“We’re not going to let you fail.”

It was a promise. And it changed everything.

Most importantly, we changed the **failure culture**.

When something didn’t work, the first question was no longer:

“Who screwed up?”

But:

“What can we learn?”

“What support is needed?”

The results were surprising. Not overnight, but within six weeks, the momentum shifted. Employees realized their concerns were being taken seriously. Mid-level leaders felt safe enough to voice problems instead of hiding them. The transition wasn’t perfect, but it worked.

And the organization? It actually functioned better after the “slimming down.” With fewer people, but mostly permanent, well-trained staff, everything became easier.

The Organizational Psychology of Failure

Why is real accountability so rare? The answer lies in the structural features of modern organizations.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schön described the concept of **“defensive routines”** in *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (1978), deep-rooted behavioral patterns designed to avoid embarrassment or threat. These routines are so ingrained in organizational culture that they’re unconsciously repeated.

The problem is amplified by the **fundamental attribution error**:

When others fail, we blame their character.

When we fail, we blame the situation.

For leaders, this means:

They see team mistakes as personal weaknesses, but their own as the result of bad circumstances.

This distortion is reinforced by structural issues: Hierarchies push responsibility upward, and blame downward.

Performance systems reward individual success, and punish systemic risk.

Reporting systems highlight positives, and filter out the bad news.

The result is what Edgar Schein (1985) called **“organizational learning disabilities”**, a system-wide inability to learn from mistakes.

The Alternative: Extreme Ownership

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin coined the term **“Extreme Ownership”** in their 2015 book of the same name, based on their experience as Navy SEAL commanders. Their core belief:

A leader is responsible for everything that happens in their area of responsibility. Period.

It sounds radical, but it’s backed by strong data. Google’s “Project Aristotle” (2012–2014) and other studies on psychological safety show:

Teams perform better when they know their

leaders will protect them, not punish them, when mistakes happen.

Extreme Ownership doesn't mean leaders are personally to blame for every operational mistake. It means they own the systems, culture, and conditions that made the mistake possible.

That means:

- **Ownership over attribution:** When a team member makes a mistake, the leader asks: *"Did I give them the right training? The right support? The right tools?"*
- **Systems thinking over individual blame:** Mistakes are seen as symptoms of flawed systems, not flawed people.
- **Learning over punishment:** The goal isn't to find the guilty party, it's to prevent recurrence. (In leadership training, I often ask provocatively: *"Is it about finding the guilty?"* The answer is always: *"No, of course not."* To which I reply, just before the room bursts into laughter: *"Right. It's not about finding the guilty. It's about finding the guilty."* Sometimes humor is the clearest way to make a point.)

The Cost of False Safety

Organizations that externalize responsibility become fragile. They fail to develop what Nassim Taleb (2012) calls **"antifragility"**, the ability to grow stronger from stress and volatility.

The reason is systemic:

Leaders who externalize failure don't learn.

If they don't learn, they repeat mistakes.

And when mistakes repeat, the organization's immune system weakens instead of strengthening.

What Real Responsibility Means

True accountability is not self-flagellation. It's not personally owning every operational hiccup.

It's the conscious decision to view yourself as the **primary variable in the system.**

In practice, this means:

- **Systemic self-reflection:**

When something goes wrong, the first question must be: *"What could I have done differently?"* Not the only question, but the first.

- **Creating psychological safety:**

Teams must know they can report problems without fear. That only happens if leaders model the idea that mistakes are learning opportunities, not career risks. It means saying: *"I'm not going to let you fail."*

That said, I'm not an advocate of blind "failure culture," where all mistakes are treated as good and learning just happens automatically. Too often, I've seen these cultures breed carelessness, where surface-level excuses replace deep learning and true excellence.

- **Inverting the blame pyramid:**

Real leaders don't push responsibility downward, they pull it upward. They shield their teams from external pressure and fix systemic issues at the root.

- **Consistent change:**

"That was my fault" without behavioral change is just as hollow as *"I take responsibility."* Credibility comes from action.

The Courage to Be Imperfect

Ultimately, it's a choice: Do we want to be leaders who appear perfect? Or leaders who are actually effective?

Appearing perfect means managing responsibility, minimizing risk, avoiding blame.

Being effective means owning responsibility, learning from mistakes, and building better systems.

That's leadership in its original sense: Not managing responsibility, but **owning the conditions under which others can succeed.**

It starts with a simple sentence. It's uncomfortable. It's risky. But it might be the only thing that truly separates management from real leadership:

"That was my fault."

Not as an admission of failure, but as a promise to change. As the foundation of a culture where people don't have to fear being human.

And as the first step toward an organization that doesn't just survive, but grows stronger with every mistake.

The choice is ours. Every day. Again and again.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Christian Rook".

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