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TAKE RESPONSIBILITY Don't Blame Someone Else For Failure

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It's always easy to blame someone else when things go wrong. Business leaders, politicians and athletes all have leaned on a host of excuses to explain away their failures. It feels a lot better to blame the ref than to say, "It's my fault."

Maya Angelou had every chance to point the finger at others when she was growing up. The author told a story that was reprinted in Stephen Covey's new book, "Everyday Greatness," about her grammar-school graduation in Stamps, Ark.

Angelou dreamed on graduation day about her limitless future. But the key commencement speaker was a politician who talked about improvements coming to the white school in town.

Not to be left out, Angelou's black school would also get some changes. But instead of science and art gear, the black school would get better sports facilities.

Drawing Inspiration

"We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that was aspired to was farcical and presumptuous," was the message, Angelou wrote.

Angelou took responsibility for her success and failure. She didn't get down about the white politician's view of the future. Instead, she drew inspiration from a song her class sang about the troubles their ancestors overcame.

"The lyrics ignited an unconquerable determination in Maya to take responsibility for her life and find success in her everyday pursuits," Covey wrote. "The key is in our decisions, not our conditions."

The same attitude of taking responsibility for your results is a key to success, says Bette Price, chief executive of the Price Group, a management consulting firm in Dallas. That's because if mistakes happen and no one owns up, profits suffer.

"A company that really lives accountability throughout its management and staff says, 'Mistakes happen,' " Price said.

That way, a company can look at how a mistake happened, correct the cause and move on. Those lacking that culture waste a lot of time getting to the source of the problem.

"If you don't have an environment of accountability, you get a lot of finger-pointing," Price said. "It

impedes growth, and then people don't want to take risks. They're afraid the finger will get pointed at them."

Take It From The Top

In Price's book, "True Leaders," she wrote that Yum Brands' Chief Executive David Novak looks at mistakes the way a basketball coach would. If a good shooter misses two shots, you can't stop passing to him. You also have to give good workers a second chance, Novak says.

Nordstrom is willing to admit mistakes. Price found that out when she received the wrong item when ordering a perfume that was out of stock. She told the Nordstrom rep that she'd take it back to the store. The rep called back and said it was her company's fault. The company would ship a new one for free.

The tone begins at the top, Price adds. The leader sets the bar for personal accountability or for blame.

Both probably will always exist, says Price, who sees a trend toward more leaders shouldering blame.

"I think companies see the damage when they're not accountable," she said.