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ROSS & VANNOY

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CRAIG W. ROSS & STEVEN W. VANNOY  
Edited by Drew M. Ross

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Rachel: The Quest for Responsibility*

“We don’t have a chance.

“Honestly, that’s what I thought when I arrived,” Rachel recalled. “You’d expect different behavior from leaders within a company this size. But if there’s one thing I’ve discovered over the years . . .” She stopped. “Can we be frank here?”

“Please do,” I said.

“The single greatest issue in leadership is so few people take responsibility. If you can’t get a team to speak up, act, and be accountable, you’re not going to win,” Rachel said. “Sure, when you get to this level, people are professional and have skills. But honestly, I’m often shocked at how irresponsible people can be.”

“It’s one of those key issues we hear about in our sessions with organizations around the world,” I said.

Rachel nodded at me. “If I’ve been successful at anything since I met you, it’s supporting people in their move from halfhearted efforts to taking initiative, saying what needs to be said, and taking action. That organizational mindset and capability shift changes everything.”

I recognized this and asked, “We hear different definitions of this. What do you mean, *halfhearted*?” (She looked at me with a face that said, “Really?”)

“By halfhearted I mean they’re not ‘all in.’ It means they’re not delivering their true potential. It means they’re waiting for someone else to do or say something before they take responsibility. And it manifests itself in countless ways. For example, everyone wants the organization to succeed, but too often that is translated to ‘only if I succeed first.’ They talk ‘one team,’ but then they don’t share their resources because they fear their department will be vulnerable and not look good.

“Or, I used to see this: Success doesn’t mean the team wins – it means achieving your department or career objectives. When that’s the definition of success, it results in few people willing to make the tough decision that’s necessary for everyone to win. Because making that choice means standing up, addressing the real and sometimes ugly facts about where we are right now, and leading us in an improved direction – even if that direction means giving up a piece of your pie. And this requires people to be vulnerable.”

I nodded and leaned forward. “There’s that word: *vulnerable*. It can be complicated. We hear leaders stating that it’s a necessary quality for growth – and yet other people distance themselves from the idea.”

“It’s certainly a double-edged word,” Rachel said. “There’s no way we want our team thinking we will leave ourselves exposed to flaws or liabilities. On the other hand, we need people to be humble, to admit they’re not perfect. Not for the sake of focusing on or allowing ourselves to be inadequate, but for the purpose of being able to take accountability.”

“As you’ve developed that ability in your team, what has it looked like in action?” I asked.

Rachel thought for a moment, then said, “In our meeting yesterday, Luc – you’ll get to meet him later – he interrupted me and said, ‘Rachel, before we deploy, I think we should run one more round of tests. I’m not confident we received accurate data with the earlier series.’ And then he added, ‘I apologize. And I promise we’ll improve the testing.’”

“It takes skill to seize a remarkable leadership opportunity that’s presented in such a way,” I said.

“Count me as one who used to be blind to such moments! Luc’s team is responsible for making sure the tests are accurate. In the past, I would have vented my frustration with him – another round of testing would delay our ability to hit target.” She laughed slightly, “But there he was, being vulnerable and providing full information, which ultimately would set us up for greater success. To seize the moment, I had to see the strength in his action and the situation and leverage it so we’d create greater accountability moving forward.”

As I expected, Rachel was thinking about and performing in her role as divisional president differently from when I saw her last. As is done with all the leaders who’ve been immersed in the Degrees of Strength technique, I was returning months later to support her team’s integration and sustainability of the skill. Given what she’d just shared about how she addressed Luc’s performance, I made a note to myself: Later, as I spent time with other members of her team, I would be curious to see if those around her interpreted her changed leadership approach as soft. Would they think that Rachel was letting Luc off the hook? Would she be perceived as not ensuring people were accountable?

Rachel seemed to read my mind. “Accountability is an individual choice. You’re not going to get far mandating it,” she said. “And it’s my job as the leader to improve Luc’s ability to make greater choices, as well as create the environment that encourages those choices.”

“That’s terrific awareness, Rachel,” I said. “It’s indicative of a paradigm from which we see the most effective leaders function. They resist the idea of trying to change people or rushing out in front of the team with a flag yelling, ‘Charge! We’re going to change!’ Instead, they create the conditions and an environment, as you say, for people to be great.”

“That’s an important distinction,” Rachel replied. “When a culture has been established where a person’s reputation has become more important than his or her character and values, you’re going to have problems. It results in people not doing or saying the things that will expose them to the burden of blame for some potential error in judgment. The instant teammates choose not to be ‘all in’ by withholding information or effort, they marginalize their value to the organization. In that second, they forfeit their potential and what’s possible because they’ve moved from wanting to do their best – to wanting to remain safe in the environment they’re in.”

“This means, of course, that it’s not really about the team after all,” I said. “It’s about their personal safety. And when people act on their own self-interest, the organization underachieves. This is a common comment on our pre-session surveys.”

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. “But you can’t blame people. This is what I see many of my peers doing – bemoaning how no one is accountable, how no one is stepping up. And frankly, that’s where I have a lot of work to

do. I've got to partner with the other divisional heads so they realize that *they* need to step up as leaders and equip their team with the skill to be responsible. Complaining, pep talks, and rhetoric won't change how their team is behaving.

“An organization can't sustain a winning trend, can't expect people to be 'all in,' to give their best every day, only for a paycheck.” Rachel sat back and laughed. “In so many cases, companies have trained people to pursue the carrot of a bigger paycheck or the corner office, which means the company then finds itself saddled with the burden of a huge payroll and thin margins. But they lack the one thing that will deliver exceptional, timely products to their customers: an *inspired* workforce, led by inspired people.”

“Yes, and the transformation . . .” is all I could say before she cut me off.

“It's a fact: If you're going to win in the market today, you have to equip your team members with the tools and the mindset that allows them to live the values prized by them and the organization. Doing so provides them with the foundation to act now – rather than later. When you do that, watch out: You're going to see serious acceleration.”

“Given how hard you've worked on this approach, what does that look like to you now, to 'allow them to live their values'?” I asked.

“Hey, people don't get out of bed each morning wanting to be irresponsible. Nobody wakes up and says, 'I can't wait to screw things up for everybody!’” Rachel said with a mock smile. “People don't want to go slow. These are good people we're talking about. Intellectually, everyone 'gets it.' But living and leading from your values is not an intellectual exercise. It's a function



of your emotions and your company's culture. For example, most people have the desire to serve others. But if you don't put tools and a system in place for people to be emotionally intelligent *together*, the desire rarely transforms into action. This is when things begin to break down. And we all know how bad it can get."

I recalled the first discussion I'd had with Rachel. "I believe you told me once that you and the team 'delivered results despite yourselves.'"

Rachel nodded. "I remember that conversation," she said and then paused. "You know, I'm compelled to share some information with you now that I didn't tell you before. It will help put into greater context how much progress we've made."

I set my pen down and sat back.

"After I had been in this position for about a year," she continued, "there was a defining moment for this team. My boss was pushing us hard, and between you and me, placing unreasonable demands on us. I think there's a moment in every team's lifecycle when it's severely tested and the team has to decide: Are we going to do this thing? Are we going to be responsible and succeed? Because if we're not, it's going to be toilsome for all of us and probably end painfully.

"To make matters worse, my predecessor was like a terrorist – pardon the expression." Rachel shifted nervously in her chair. "I probably should find a better term to describe him. It's just that in his drive to succeed, because he was always focused on problems and talking consequences, he injected fear into the organization. People were running around here looking over their

shoulders, avoiding the obvious, not saying what needed to be said nor doing what needed to be done.

“Don’t get me wrong, though. People were working harder than they ever had, but our productivity wasn’t improving. The issue wasn’t a lack of effort – it was a breakdown in our ‘values-to-action’ capability.” She paused and then added, “It was a breakdown in our responsibility to ourselves.

“And you know,” Rachel said as she looked out her window, “I got sucked into it. For a while, I forfeited my values, set them aside. I became so driven by *what* had to be done that I valued the outcome more than the method by which we got there. I began to rationalize my poor behavior: ‘If I’m going to be treated this way, then that’s how I’m going to treat people.’ It got so bad that when they told us about the drop in our employee engagement index, I coldly replied that those numbers would improve as soon as we returned to profitability.” Rachel shook her head. “I felt justified for leading like a pain in the you know what.”

I was deeply sympathetic. Her reaction to the intense pressures of the corporate world was normal. But she had survived and broken through to an improved approach. She could now speak clearly of the deep personal costs of winning in the short term by destroying that which is necessary for sustained growth: people . . . and the expression of greatness that resides in each of us.

“That’s about the time I almost lost what I cherish the most.” Rachel turned her gaze from the window and cleared her throat. “It was the middle of the week. I got home after my husband and the kids had finished dinner. I had the usual insane amount of communications to complete, and there was a

report my boss needed that was giving me heartburn. I snapped at the kids, told them to clean up after themselves, and started for my computer. Things cascaded, one thing after another. My son said an awful thing about his sister and, of course, she had to respond with venom.

“So I yelled at them – really loud. And I was going to yell more when my husband spoke up and said, ‘That’s enough.’

“I thought he was talking to the kids. But when I looked at him, I knew in an instant it was me.” Rachel looked at her hands. “And he was right. It was enough.

“That night my husband and I talked about what we’d been thinking – but not saying. The job, my work, was costing too much. The way we were living our lives was taking a toll that couldn’t be paid. I was out of energy. And as I thought about my relationship with our kids . . .” Rachel shook her head. “How had I lost a proper perspective? When did I get so deep into this thing that it began consuming me?

“Our first solution was for me to quit my job. We dreamed a bit about what it might be like to simplify everything, but that was an empty fantasy. Something told us that quitting wasn’t right. There were so many things about our life that we loved. We enjoyed the lifestyle, and – it was the first time I admitted this – I really *liked* the vision I had for my work. I told my husband there were aspects of leadership that were very fulfilling for me. I just didn’t like how I was leading.

“I didn’t sleep that night,” she said. “In the morning, my husband looked at me over his coffee cup and suggested I call his uncle, Will. Perhaps he’d have

some ideas.” Rachel gestured toward me. “And you know the story from there, though I suspect you don’t call him ‘Uncle Will,’ do you?”

I laughed. Will had been a client for years. As a CFO, he’d transformed two organizations with his innovative leadership style before retiring. “No, I don’t call him ‘Uncle Will,’ but I am honored to consider him a friend,” I said. “When I met with Will recently and told him I’d be seeing you again, he mentioned that he fondly recalled his conversation with you.”

“It was the most important call I’ve ever made,” Rachel said. “I described how tired I was, how miserable our family was, and how hard the team was working yet only accomplishing mediocre results. I shared my frustrations and how I just knew the team – especially I – was capable of doing so much more with our numbers.

“After listening, this man I didn’t really know did something I didn’t expect: He congratulated me. He said, ‘You’ve reached the point everybody gets to. It’s when you decide if you’re going to change how you’re creating change.’

“I guess my reaction was defensive,” she said. “I shot back to clear the record of how there were others involved.

“‘Yes,’ he said. ‘But will you be responsible *first*?’ he asked. ‘Or will you continue to be a victim of the illusion that you can change others without changing yourself and how you lead first?’

“Everything was quiet for a moment.” Rachel smiled at me and said, “I have to tell you, initially I was put-off by his comment. He was telling me what I knew was true but didn’t want to hear: I was responsible for the experience I was having – and the results I was delivering.

“Then he asked me, ‘So, have you made a decision yet?’

“With that, we launched into a conversation I should have had a long time ago. And as we talked, he did something I’d never experienced before: He assisted me in answering the question of my own responsibility . . .” Rachel paused as she searched for the right words “. . . by pulling something from me that I vaguely recognized but had forgotten over the years.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“It’s the story about me that I stopped believing,” she said. “As I spoke, I began to feel a confidence that I’d forgotten about.”

I sat still for a moment, watching Rachel search for her words, and then asked, “Confidence to do what?”

“To start moving forward again. I began to remember that I am bigger than the circumstances in my life. I’m bigger than late reports. I’m bigger than production and quality issues. I’m bigger than kids fighting.” She shrugged her shoulder. “I’m a bit embarrassed to say these things, because intellectually I *knew* all this. I just needed someone . . .” She chuckled. “I just needed someone to remind me, to ask me the right questions so I could return to the confidence necessary to do something about the circumstances in my life.”

“You said he asked you questions. What type of questions?” I asked.

“A specific type of question that immediately guided my focus, generated momentum, and provided clarity on how to move forward,” Rachel answered.

“At the end of that conversation, I asked Uncle Will, ‘How did you learn to do this? How did you learn to lead like this?’ And that’s when he told me about the one thing – just one technique – that changes everything. That’s when he told me about Degrees of Strength.”

Will introduced Rachel and me – and we began immediately. I wasn’t surprised to learn that Will was using Degrees of Strength to serve others in the transformation of their mindset and actions: He understood its principle that it is impossible for a person to have less than zero of any desired quality. And as you focus on the Degrees of Strength that are present in any given area – you accelerate the development of that quality.

Rachel’s story also revealed that Will had used Degrees of Strength to form the questions he used to serve her. When people are asked such questions, they experience a realignment of their perspective – and a deeper connection to what’s important. They are better able to regain their focus and take the steps necessary to move from clouds of chaotic confusion to deliver the excellence they long to realize. It’s very exciting to be part of someone’s life in this way. Like many, Rachel took to it with a ferocity that surprised family and colleagues.

“We haven’t wasted any time since we first saw you,” she said. “From the moment the team was introduced to this technique, we continue to advance our collective capability,” Rachel said. She sat back, “I believe we’ve had our acceleration moment.”

“That’s a new way of saying it. Why do you use that?”

“It’s the moment we became responsible. It’s when we *really* started to get work done around here. It’s when we decided to quit waiting for other

people to change, or for the market or our resources to improve, or for our customers to quit being so fickle, before we acted. Basically, we stopped waiting for things to be different than they are in any given moment before doing what needed to be done.”

She sat up, smiled slightly, and then said, “Personally, the acceleration moment is when I became responsible for the experience I was having. I took charge of my reactions to everything that was happening around me. That’s when I began to enjoy my job again. I got back to that mindset where work wasn’t work. And when this happened . . .” Rachel’s voice fell off.

“You started getting better results?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said with a slow nod. “But more importantly, I got my family back.”

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Forward Focus Questions*

- What does all-in (i.e. be responsible, take initiative, speak up and say what needs to be said, take action and be accountable) look like in your organization?
- What percentage of the time are you all-in? Your team? Your organization?
- What difference would it make if you were all-in 10% more of the time?
- If your team was more all-in 10% more of the time?
- What are you doing now to be all-in more of the time?
- To create even more of an all-in approach on your team?
- What is an example of when you or someone on your team took accountability – you were vulnerable – and it allowed your team to move faster and with better results?
- How are you leading that creates the environment where people can be accountable and vulnerable?
- Rachel supported Luc in being vulnerable and taking accountability. How is her approach different than letting Luc off the hook? What difference does Rachel's approach make?



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[info@verusglobal.com](mailto:info@verusglobal.com) | +1.303.577.0075