

RESPONSIBLE — a Faith-based Value at Work

“Responsible,” that word always sends at least a moment of dread to my soul when I hear it. I suspect it is because my first awareness of its meaning as a child usually meant I’d done something wrong and was due some punishment. That fear led to some easy lying and still tempts me to rationalize or excuse my actions, including trying to blame someone else, even today.

Fortunately and in the normal course of life, other meanings for being responsible came into play. First it was that as the oldest of 14 children, I was responsible to behave properly so as to model correct behavior for my siblings. Then, it meant I could be trusted to do the right thing when confronted with a choice among alternatives. Later, as I started working, being responsible meant I would accept accountability for tasks that were assigned to me. Still later, it meant that I would initiate action to resolve a situation or dilemma without being asked or told to do so.

Through all of these meanings there runs a common thread, that of being accountable or having to answer for my actions or inactions. Why are we responsible/accountable? And to whom?

I think we are responsible because we are free. We are free to choose and in choosing we choose not only the immediate action and results but all the consequences derived from that choice. We are responsible for those actions and outcomes to the being that created us and gave us the freedom to choose. We call that being God.

In the work place we seem to have a dual accountability: at one level to those assigned in supervisory/management roles over us and, on another level, an ultimate accountability to the expectations of our God, which we learn through the moral/ethical teachings of our faith. When the two are in conflict, we should be guided by the higher authority.

This dual accountability seems consistent throughout all the stages of being responsible as a person of faith. This is difficult. Often we think we can best be faith-based in our workplace by being quiet and infiltrating the decision structure until we can make or influence the decisions. Then we will act and change the moral/ethical climate. Another choice is to model the behaviors that our faith teaches. We can choose to act out the gospel of love within the confines of our ability to act.

In Baptism and Confirmation we made it our purpose and destiny to glorify God’s name by spreading his word and love to all. We don’t need to speak his word so much as to live it. Our faith teaches that we have free will. That is, we have the capability to choose. Our Church teaches us the principles or values that should guide our choices.

So how do we go about making a living and living to glorify God? I think it has more to do with the constant, little choices within each day than with the great, monumental decisions that are often chronicled in the history books. It is about acting consistently, honestly, and even creatively in all interactions throughout the day in the workplaces of our lives. It is about deciding what we want the workplace to be like in the future and then choosing the actions of today that would enable that workplace to become real. It is about respecting the obligations embedded in the social network of our workplaces, about fulfilling our obligations within the constraints of time, resources, and right action. It is about doing our jobs and doing them to the very best of our ability. It is about examining our co-workers’ situations and helping them, if in no other way than by doing our own jobs very well. It is about shaping the social interactions of the workplace by our support for justice, equality, solidarity, and joy.

We may all start with a child’s fear of responsibility as a source of punishment, but we don’t need to stay there. We can choose to live as faithful children of God, responsible to act with love for all.

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1. What does applying the faith-based value of responsible in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of responsible in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of responsibility in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based responsibility in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?