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2.5.

Never Forget Who's Driving

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that a constructive attitude towards our challenges in life helps us to find solutions more quickly. An important part of such a constructive approach is to look upon yourself as responsible for your own life no matter what kind of situation you find yourself in.

My first book was all about responsibility. I guess this was because I saw responsibility as fundamental if we are to live our lives in harmony. I still see it this way. The book is entitled *Your Responsibility and Mine* and was published in 1994. Unfortunately, the book is available only in Swedish, but by following the link below you will be able to read a summary in English:

www.bengtelsen.com/PDF/Utdrag.pdf

We often try to run away from our responsibilities at the first sign of trouble. It usually feels good to blame someone else for the troubles we face. By doing so, we try to fool ourselves into believing that it is not our responsibility to work through the difficult situation. But this only delays us from sorting things out and therefore makes things worse.

If we don't do anything about what's difficult today then the difficulty will only escalate over time. Imagine, for instance, that you are experiencing some problems in your collaboration with a colleague at work. If you don't talk with your colleague about the situation, it will only get worse, and it may turn into a really sticky situation. The efficiency of your collaboration will be affected and the quality of your work may come into question.

It is therefore much better to tackle problems at the earliest possible opportunity. To do so, you have to realize that you will get nowhere by blaming others for the situation. Of course, it is not always your own fault. But either way, it is your responsibility to find ways out of the situation.

You may, for instance, slip on a banana peel. Of course, it wasn't your fault that the banana peel was in your path, and therefore you feel you have the right to curse the person who put it there. But why? Will it make you feel better? Nevertheless, it is your responsibility to take care of your wounds so that you can go on with your life.

The same is true when you are in a hurry and discover that the copy machine at work is out of paper. You are copying an important contract that you are about to present to an even more important customer, who is waiting in the other room. You curse the machine and the person who was there before you who didn't refill the paper tray.

I have to ask again: Why? The copy machine is certainly not going to refill itself, just because you hit it. Unfortunately, you probably don't know who was using the machine right before you, so you don't know who to give a black eye. And even if you did know, punching that person wouldn't refill the paper tray. Also, people don't react rationally when under fire.

A constructive and responsible approach to this matter may include putting this issue on the agenda for the next personnel meeting. At the moment, however, there isn't much more you can do except to fill the machine with paper.

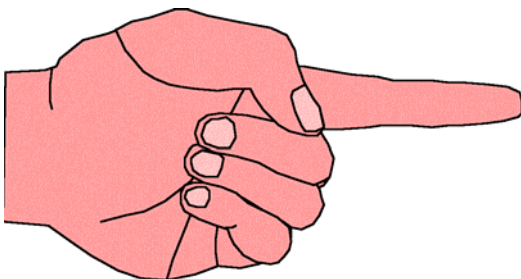
Hitting and screaming at the machine is just a waste of time. Sometimes you have to accept the world as it is. Sometimes you have to learn to live with not being able to change matters exactly when you would like to.

It is especially important at work that everyone knows who is responsible for what. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in the working world today, and I think that much too often this is the main reason that people don't feel comfortable at their work places. This may even explain in many cases why people quit their jobs.

If you don't know your responsibilities, then you don't know what is expected of you. It's almost impossible then to do a good job. You don't know how to measure the quality of your performance. The demands may shift from day to day, and this puts you in a vulnerable position. In the long run, most people are not willing to put up with it. It is almost like being a serf. For if you don't know the rules, you are not able to approve or disapprove of them. You have no say in the matter. Companies that treat their colleagues in this way will not survive for long.

The concept of *Clear Contracts* is one excellent solution to this. *Clear Contracts* means that everyone involved in a project knows what is expected of him. *Clear Contracts* contributes to a sense of security. When people feel secure, they do a better job. They no longer have doubts about their areas of responsibility. Conflicts are avoided and people can use that energy to do their actual work.

The tendency to run away from responsibility in difficult situations is perhaps even more significant when we experience hardship in our relationships. When arguing, for example, it's not unusual for one person to point at the other and say, "It's all your fault!"



Remember, however, that whenever you point at someone, three of your own fingers point back at you. This should remind you that there is never just one person to blame when something goes wrong in a relationship. Every rela-

tionship is a joint venture. Each person involved is equally responsible.

It is always so easy to blame others when something goes awry. By so doing, you don't have to take your own behavior into consideration. You don't have to consider making any changes in your own attitude or behavior. Maybe you are lulled into the false belief that you are already perfect. This attitude, of course, admits no room for improvement. Besides, you were born this way, so how can you be expected to do anything about it? The world just has to take you as you are. None of it's your fault. So no one should expect you to change.

This is an attitude that will make your every relationship impossible. For people change all the time and our relationships therefore also undergo continuous change. If you do not see this, you are definitely headed for trouble. If you expect a relationship to be the same from year to year, or even from day to day, then you'd better pull out now. With everything changing so rapidly around us, standing still almost certainly leads to catastrophe.

The above figure of a pointing finger can be understood to illustrate that everything taking place around us is a projection of what's going on inside us. The trouble you may be experiencing in a relationship can be seen as a reflection of your inner landscape. I realize this may sound strange to many of you. Please allow me to illustrate this with an example from my own life.

My personal assistants don't always understand what I mean, and sometimes I find this quite irritating. Having to ask for help with every detail of my daily life, and having to describe how everything should be done, can sometimes get tiring. Usually when I find myself getting irritated in situations such as this, it is about trifles. And I say to myself, "Why don't they understand this simple task? How can they be so stupid?"

Later on, when the irritation is gone and I take the time to think things through, I ask myself, "Did I actually give my assistant all the necessary information? Did I put the tasks into the right context? Did I explain why I wanted the task performed the way I wanted, or did I just take for granted that my assistant would understand what I meant?" When I ask myself these questions, I often find that I could have been clearer. I realize that sometimes it is I who communicates poorly.

In other words, the climate of our interpersonal relationships can be seen as a projection of our

inner climate. Realizing this, however, can be quite painful. Finding a scapegoat is much easier. You can test the soundness of this way of thinking by doing the exercise at the end of this section.

There are usually several persons or institutions we can blame when faced with adversity. At work we can always blame our boss or the company leadership. We can blame the new organizational plans that were introduced last month and we can blame the union for approving them.

In more serious adversity we can of course blame God, or our parents who brought us up so miserably. Some people like claim that certain bad events in their childhoods have decided everything that happens for the rest of their lives. That is why everything for them has failed. I would like to say, however, that a terrible childhood is never an excuse for not trying to improve your life now. Read something by David Pelzer and you will understand what I mean. His story is a marvelous example of how a man can survive and even thrive on violence, child abuse and torture.

It is also quite popular to blame politicians or the government. But this is taking the easy way out. This implies that all power lies in the hands of the politicians and that ordinary people have none of it. This, however, is not the way things work. Power is largely a question of attitude. If you feel powerless then you are powerless. If, on the other hand, you are able to take initiative, then you are powerful.

When we try to place the responsibility for our misery on someone else, it is usually a way for

us to avoid dealing with our lives. It is attempting to walk around our problems instead of right through them. Such short cuts usually turn into lengthy detours.

A more positive view of the word responsibility can help us avoid some of those detours. Unfortunately, responsibility is often seen as burdensome and restrictive. It's quite possible, however, to view responsibility as liberating. That you are responsible for your own life implies that you can choose to make whatever you want of it. No one else can tell you how to live your life.

In this way, taking responsibility gives you a sense of freedom. It highlights your freedom of choice. It can even create a sense of power, since you know that everything is up to you. You decide whether or not to take care of a particular situation. You can say that you own the problem. It's up to you to decide. And if you choose to ignore those problems, they will probably remain unsolved throughout your life.

This is how you have the possibility of shaping your life and of deciding how it will look. You are the artist and your life is your masterpiece.

Do you also usually blame your mistakes on circumstances?

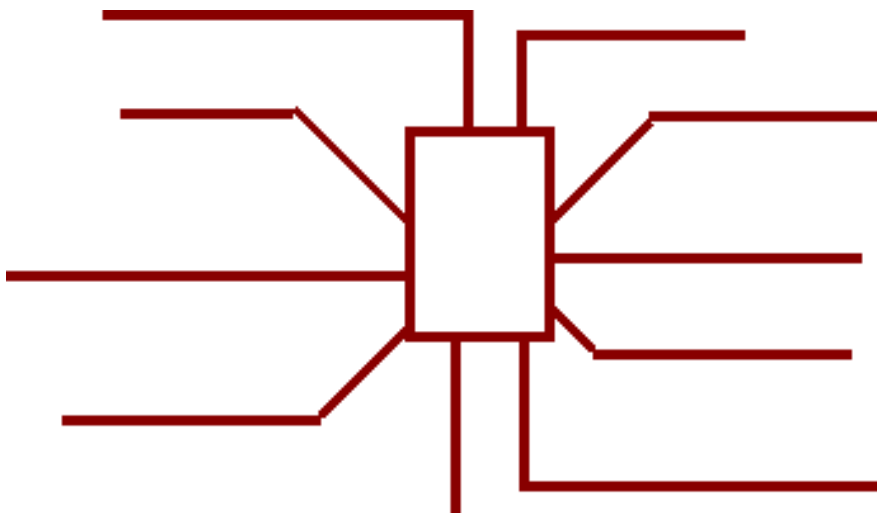
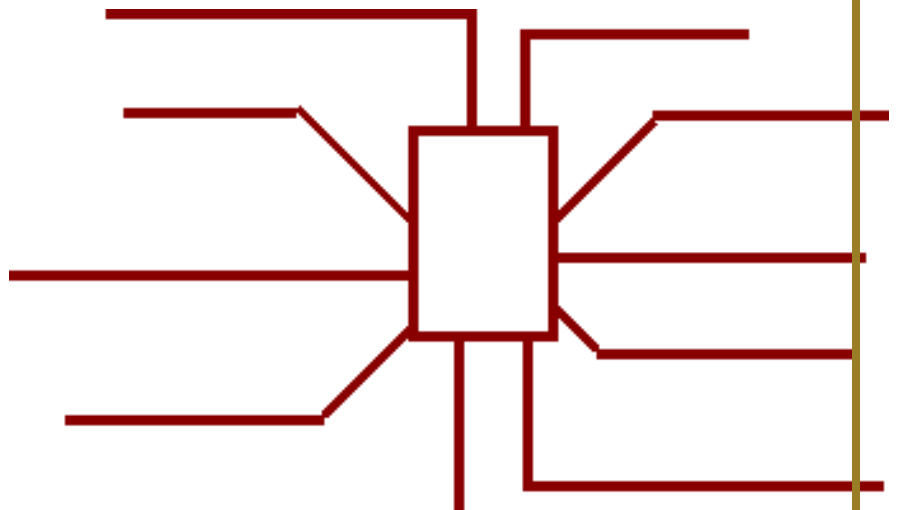
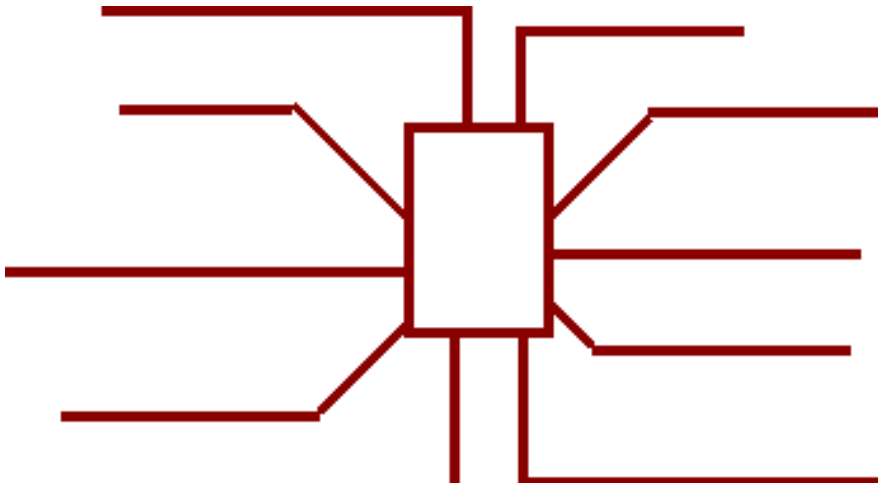
Have you ever asked "Why Me?" If so, when?

Is there really something new to learn every time we face difficulty?

Can you think of a mantra to use when facing difficulties, see end of section 2.2?

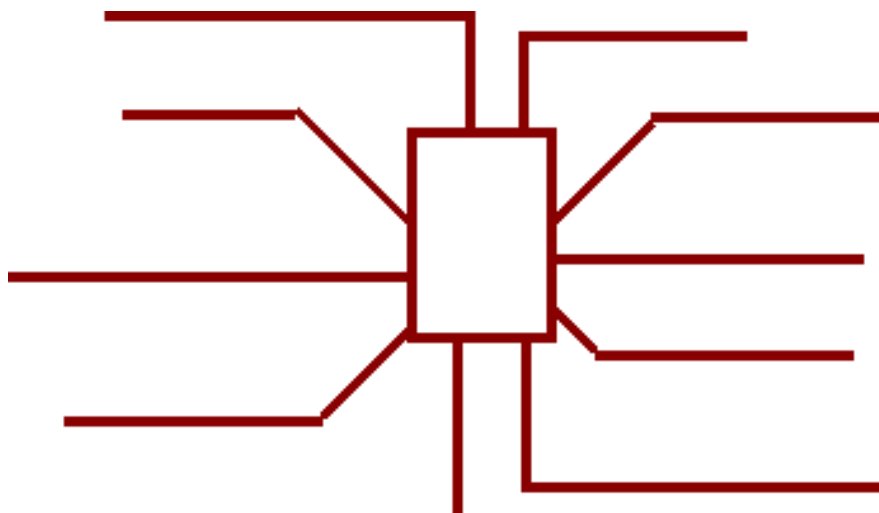
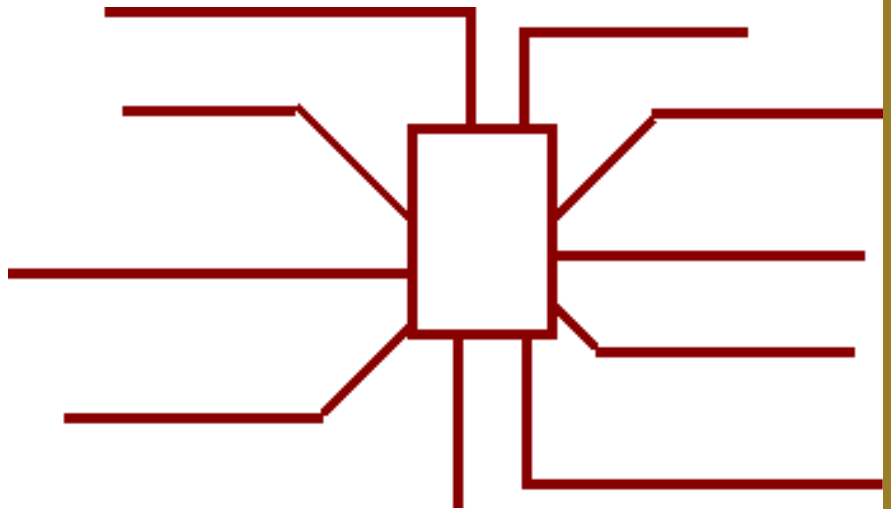
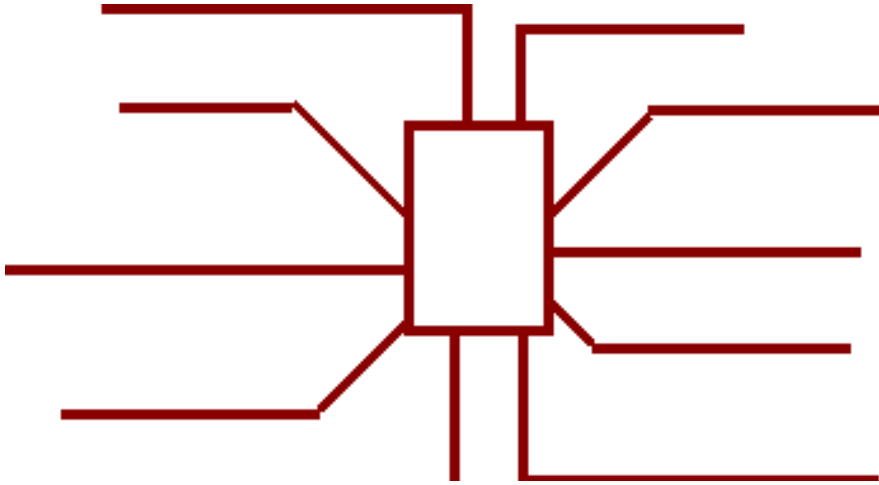
A. Reflection

Think of three people you really like. They can be people in your daily life or people anywhere in the world. Write each name in a square of its own. Also write some character traits that you admire for each person.



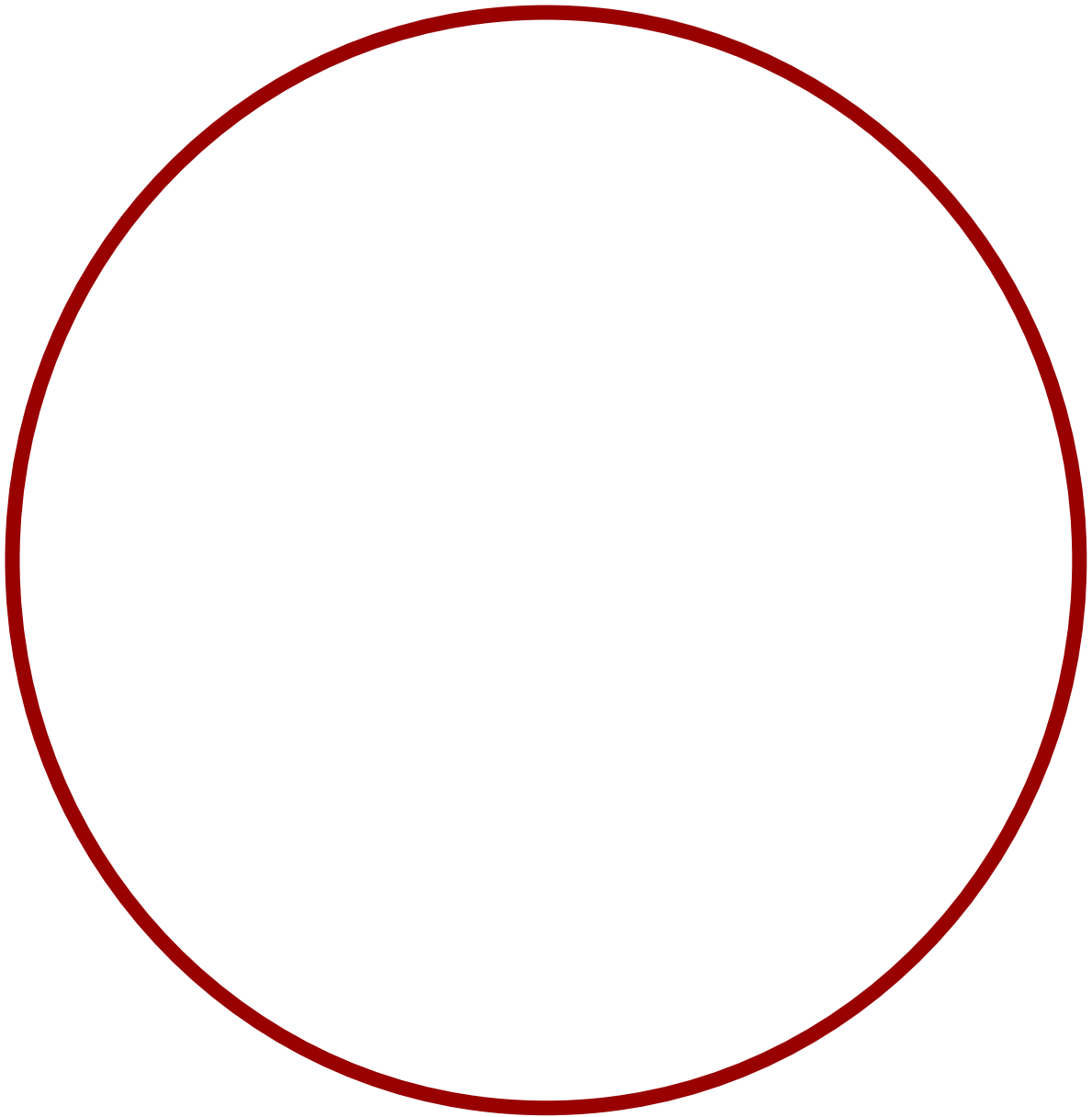
B. Reflection

Now think of three people you really don't like. They can be people in your daily life or people anywhere in the world. Write each name in a square of its own. Also write some character traits for each person that make you not like them.



C. Reflection

Now try to put all the positive and negative character traits from Exercise A and B into this circle.



Are there any of these character traits that you don't have yourself?