

Accepting Responsibility — a story of Bill Russell

by Jim Rohn

Most people dread accepting responsibility. That's just a fact of life, and we can see it in operation every day. Yes, we can see avoidance of responsibility all the time in both our personal and professional lives. And here's something else we can see just as often: we can see that most people aren't as successful as they wish they were. Do you see there is a connection between these two very common phenomena?

It's in your best interest to take responsibility for everything you do. But that's only the beginning. Many times it's even best to take responsibility for the mistakes of others, especially when you're in a managerial or leadership role.

Back during the years when professional basketball was just beginning to become really popular, Bill Russell, who played center for the Boston Celtics, was one of the greatest players in the league. He was especially known for his rebounding and his defensive skills.

But like a lot of very tall centers, Russell was never much of a free throw shooter. His free throw percentage was quite a bit below average in fact. But this low percentage didn't really give a clear picture of Russell's ability as an athlete. And in one game he gave a very convincing demonstration of this.

It was the final game of a championship series between Boston and the Los Angeles Lakers. With about 12 seconds left to play, the Lakers were behind by one point and Boston had the ball. It was obvious that the Lakers would have to foul one of Boston's players in order to get the ball back, and they chose to foul Bill Russell.

This was a perfectly logical choice since statistically Russell was the worst free throw shooter on the court at that moment. If he missed the shot, the Lakers would probably get the ball back and they'd still have enough time to try to win the game. But if Russell made his first free throw, the Lakers' chances would be seriously diminished. And if he made both shots, the game would essentially be over.

Bill Russell had a very peculiar style of shooting free throws. Today, no self-respecting basketball player anywhere in America would attempt it. Aside from the question of whether it's an effective way to shoot a basket, it just looked too ridiculous. Whenever he had to shoot a free throw, the 6-foot-11 Russell would start off holding the ball in both hands about waist high, then he'd squat down and as he straightened up he'd let go of the ball. It looked like he was trying to throw a bucket of dirt over a wall.

But regardless of how he looked, as soon as Bill Russell was fouled, he knew the Celtics were going to win the game. He was absolutely certain of it because, in a situation like this, statistics and percentages mean nothing. There was a much more important factor at work, something that no one has found a way to express in numbers and decimal points.

Simply put, Bill Russell was a player who wanted to take responsibility for the success or failure of his team. He wanted the weight on his shoulders in a situation like this. No possibility for excuses. No possibility of blaming anyone else if the game was lost. No second guessing. Bill Russell wanted the ball in his own hands and nobody else's. And, like magic, even if he'd missed every free throw he'd ever shot in his life before this, he knew he was going to make this one. And that is exactly what happened.

That is what virtually always happens when a man or woman accepts responsibility eagerly and with confidence. I've always felt that accepting responsibility is one of the highest forms of human maturity. A willingness to be accountable, to put yourself on the line, is really the defining characteristic of adulthood.