



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, MAY 1955

On Accepting Responsibility

WHEN the class of '55 applies for jobs the personnel people will pay special attention to the youth who showed evidence in his school and university years of having ability and willingness to accept responsibility. He may have held a post on the student council, or on the school paper, in direction of sports or in the organizing of class or school activities of one sort or another. In some way, not necessarily a big way, the most desired young man or young woman applying for a position in business will have shown capacity to shoulder responsibility.

It takes all sorts of people to keep the business of the world moving. One man can look after himself who could not guide others, and his is an important place in life. It so happens that young people — and men and women of the class of '45 or '35, too — who can be trusted with responsibility for managing and organizing and dispatching business are less numerous and are therefore eagerly sought.

No department in industry or business will run itself efficiently. It needs a leader. Even an orchestra with a skilled performer in every seat must have a man on the podium to lead. The greater the virtuosity of the musicians, the greater the need for a man who will be responsible for keeping them in harmony.

What fits a man to accept responsibility? He has to have intellectual ability, knowledge of men, imagination, energy, enthusiasm, the quality of prompt decision, and a personality that wins people to do his will. There is a proverb to the effect that an army of sheep led by a lion would defeat an army of lions led by a sheep.

Sorts of responsibility

There are two sorts of responsibility in business: the sense of responsibility of the man who is on his way up, and the sense of responsibility of the man who has arrived. As he progresses in years and position, a man develops a feeling of general responsibility instead of a spirit of private adventure.

There are three ways in which the young person entering business should try to prove his capacity to bear responsibility: he should accept accountability for his actions, he should demonstrate his dependability with reference to things — money, commodities or tasks — allotted to his custody, and he should show his competency to act on general instructions without detailed guidance.

Since he is a social being, depending upon his relations with other human beings for his existence and happiness, man has responsibilities to society as well as in his day's work. We have obligations, many or few, high or low, according to our talent and position. The greatest skills, the most profound knowledge, are likely to lead to failure unless we have the balance-wheel of social responsibility.

This means, in effect, keeping in touch with our environment; giving all with whom we come into contact a square deal. The responsible person does not centre the universe in himself and relegate every other living soul to playing bit parts in the personal drama of his life.

Every person has family responsibilities. In a practical way this means maintaining the family in health and comfort, paying debts, saving, increasing the welfare of family members as opportunity offers.

Basic to these responsibilities in business, society and the family, is a man's responsibility to himself. He is a very brave man who accepts liability for all he does, who does not seek to escape the consequences but is willing to accept them. That is a creed calling for patience, courage, and faith in oneself — three virtues that seem necessary to acceptance of responsibility in any arena of life.

A man's personal code is the greatest thing in his life. We all have faults, but there are things we will not do. Our personal code puts them beyond consideration — for us. On the other hand, we build our personality

with positive bricks: the things we do, the good we direct our energies to accomplish.

A person who is attaining peace of mind by avoiding things that are contrary to his code and developing self-expression by living his life in a dependable way will find himself winning his way by no man's favour. He is building, brick by brick, toward becoming a distinctive personal character, a man of responsibility.

In business

In business life, as in the very process of growing up, to learn obedience is a fundamental need. The man who has not learned the importance of carrying out instructions is not fitted to command.

Executives have the right to expect implicit obedience, but they should keep in mind the imperative needs of morale building. They will allow and encourage subordinates to try their wings. They will recall what Alan Fairford said in Sir Walter Scott's *Redgauntlet*: "I wish my father would allow me a little more exercise of my free will, were it but that I might feel the pleasure of doing what would please him of my own accord."

Everyone should accept responsibility within his sphere and according to his capability. There is a vast difference between the part played by one who is subordinate and the part played by his superior. The manager may put to hazard much on his own responsibility that must not be ventured by his workman.

It is generally accepted in business life that a worker is responsible to his immediate superior for doing the job, while the superior remains responsible for getting it done and for the policy of doing it.

It is a mistake for a person to overreach, as Churchill found out. In his book *Their Finest Hour* he wrote: "I was ruined for the time being in 1915 over the Dardanelles, and a supreme enterprise was cast away, through my trying to carry out a major and cardinal operation of war from a subordinate position. Men are ill-advised to try such ventures."

Don't lean on others

One principle for everyone is: Do not lean on the boss or on others.

No person in business, whether a youth or a veteran, should expect his manager to attempt to make him over. The manager is quite right to use the worker according to the firm's interests and the worker's demonstrated capacity.

Instead, the ambitious man will seek to learn the how and the why of his business. He will understudy his boss, so as to get the feel of his decisions and see the reasons behind them. He will leave no cause for his boss to follow up to see that he carries out each detail.

When he gets into a position of management, he faces a somewhat different set of circumstances. He needs, then, to learn to stand close to a job that is being done by his subordinates, with a vigilant eye, but without impairing the authority he has delegated to them.

The executive's responsibility may be summarized in this way: he should organize his work, deputize his subordinates to carry out his clear instructions, and supervise the finished job. He will keep busy on vital problems, surrounding himself with the best brains and hands to carry out the work leading to their solution.

Accepting responsibility doesn't mean becoming a dictator. Persuasion is an indispensable skill if the best efforts of workers are to be won to the doing of a job. Persuasion is not a method of argument, or of abstract demonstration. It is much more a skill that finds out the essential interests of people, and imparts to them information of the resources open to them and the needs that have to be met. This is a tried and proven way of getting jobs done well and enthusiastically — and getting the job done is the executive's aim.

Everyone, executive and worker, has responsibility above and beyond that of doing a job. We must be creative. We must try to make the job better. We must evolve, in the interests of both ourselves and our employers.

Responsibility is a live thing, always growing or decaying. Its growth in a man is shown by his seizing an opportunity to operate his machine or his department in a more efficient way, by his making savings through improved methods, or by his drawing opportunities for improvement in operations to the attention of his superior if these fall outside his personal limit of authority.

Obligation of this sort is commensurate with ability. Every man seeking to be regarded as a responsible person is under bond to do his best in whatever position he occupies. Talented people, by the doctrine *noblesse oblige*, have a special accountability. It is, for them, not alone an obligation of duty or of opportunity but an obligation to themselves.

Some men are handicapped

There are people who shun heavy responsibility, and their reasons are many.

Some are lazy. They put their personal comfort above the necessities of their work, so that there arise within them none of the spacious thoughts and clear vision that impel men to shape their lives responsibly.

Some are disinterested. One of the most provoking persons in any factory or office is the man who coasts

along, doing only the jobs that he is expressly directed to do.

Some lack ideals and ambition. Instead of thinking: What quality or talent have I that can be used by this company? they ask "What is your pension plan? Do I get raises regularly?" These do not know that a free man would rather take his chance in an open world than be guaranteed in a closed world. They are like the ox in Gibran's inspirational essay *The Prophet* who loves his yoke and thinks of the elk and deer of the forest as stray and vagrant things.

Some are selfish. When a youth or an adult starts giving in to the "I want" type of thinking instead of the "I will" type, he is on the verge of disastrous self-pity, the deadly enemy of responsibility.

Some doubt themselves and are timid. If you wait until the utmost outcome of your movements is certain you will never move. Loire Brophy puts it pungently in the book *There's Plenty of Room at the Top*: "A man who never goes out on a limb may preserve the safety of his position, but he will never rise above it." Timidity causes weakness of will, and leads to the sort of thinking that refuses to become responsible for anything except with others who might bear part of the blame in case of failure.

Obstacles to progress

Besides the traits that handicap people who would benefit by accepting responsibility in business life, there are certain habits of mind that are enemies of the man who does accept responsibility.

It is the peril of the executive that he is alone. He is not subject to the honing down that is given by daily rubbing shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men. He may fall victim to trying to support a notion of his importance to which he has not brought a fitting sense of humility. He may become so obsessed by his feeling of responsibility that he loses his grip on reality. He may become arrogant, a good man with a flaw.

Arrogance is more dangerous than mere conceit. "It is," writes Lord Beaverbrook in his recently-published book *Don't Trust to Luck*, "the sense of ability and power run riot." The man who assesses power at its true value is satisfied, like Robespierre, to possess the essence of power without seeming to desire its rank and trappings.

Such a man knows that there are few absolutes in nature or in human life. He does not regard some men's judgments as wholly good and others as wholly bad, but leans to the more defensible position that none are completely right and none are completely wrong. The temptation to arrogance and undue pressing toward power is less for such a man.

Everyone needs the support of others in his group if he hopes to achieve success, but this does not excuse a man's running to others constantly with questions regarding matters for which he has been made responsible. The man who says "Do you want me to do so-and-so?" is trying to use someone else's head and keep his own skirts clear of criticism.

The wise man concentrates on getting results within his sphere of responsibility rather than on perfecting excuses. "Alibis" are so distasteful that some executives refuse flatly to listen to them, while some workers refrain from offering explanations for failure even though they are reasonable and true.

To expand ability

The only way to develop a sense of responsibility is to practise being responsible. This demands sound use of one's qualities of imagination, so as to see the wide horizon beckoning; perception, to detect the chances immediately at hand; and judgment, to decide that this is the way of mature life one wants.

Anyone may be diverted and enlightened by this little experiment. Take any problem, tiny or big, occurring in your daily work, a problem that is just a little ahead of your present job and responsibility. Get the facts, for and against; put them in the scales of your judgment, and weigh them; decide what action you would take if the responsibility were yours; check your results against what actually happens; go back over your reasoning to see whether, in the light of what happened when the decision was put into effect, you have reason to change your mind.

The man who seeks to qualify himself for positions of responsibility will master the disciplines of thoroughgoing and patient analysis of questions requiring his answer. He will learn to differentiate quickly what is significant and what is inconsequential. He will train himself to appraise human motives and to assess probable and possible results with dispassionate precision.

Training under pressure in a group is the finest discipline in the world. In a disciplined group there is no room for the fidgety and easily irritated person. People learn to conceal their dislikes and their disappointments and to maintain their composure. They get on-the-spot knowledge, an invaluable help to the man who accepts responsibility. They rid their minds of many false images, thus clearing the way for straight thinking when they attain higher rank.

The acceptance of responsibility demands courage. Men grow up with different degrees of courage, but every natural disposition may be improved by training and exercise.

The leader seeking to achieve ends does not shut his eyes to dangers. He appraises them carefully, makes sure of his authority, and then acts as though there were no doubt of the outcome. Courage makes opportunity, it doesn't wait until circumstances are in every way favourable. In a day's business there arise questions that must be answered regardless of the state of the evidence, and courageous judgment is demanded of the man responsible.

A man must be bold, and he must not let inertia or habit or prejudice hinder his positive approach to resolving a problem when he has reached as close as he can to the truth concerning it.

The greatest courage needed is that of making decisions and accepting the outcome. Said Nelson to the Admiralty: "The whole blame of ignorance in forming my judgment must rest with me"; Northcliffe told his subordinates: "Better a wrong decision any time than no decision at all"; and Churchill, when some of his decisions seemed to be questioned, told the House of Commons "It is because things have gone badly and worse is to come that I demand a vote of confidence."

Justice and judgment

The man responsible for the work of others must be on guard to see that no one is wronged by injuries or deprived of benefits. A broadminded executive will take a tip from Genghis Khan who rode with one of his generals, defeated in a battle, over the scene of the action, asking him what had happened and pointing out the mistakes he had made.

Executives waste little time finding fault, but spend much time making sure that insofar as their constructive review and forecast can help there shall be no future similar mistakes. At the same time they are not so generous as to forget to be just, for in pardoning offenders too much they might do wrong to non-offenders.

Chester L. Barnard, President of the Rockefeller Foundation, told a graduating class at Massachusetts Institute of Technology a few years ago: "The willingness and the ability to exercise judgment in time of need, like the awareness of immediate situations, is inseparable from the concept of responsibility. Anyone can bet on a sure thing. But few are both capable of expert judgment and ready to run the risks of decision."

To assist judgment, the responsible man calls upon experience. He will be required frequently to travel unmapped trails, and must lay his own course without aid of chart or compass, but wherever there are aids available, telling how other men fared in similar circumstances, he will use them. He must keep one eye on the lessons of experience, and the other on conditions as they exist around him at this minute. And then?

Well, the freedom to make one's own mistakes is a most important factor in developing a feeling for responsibility.

Consistency

There may be times and occasions when consistency is a jewel, but the business man who boasts that he never changes his opinion is not giving irrefutable evidence of reliability. Those are wiser who are quite ready, upon presentation of new evidence, to repudiate their yesterdays with indifference to criticism.

Whether to be consistent or not depends upon careful thinking, the comparison of one's present with one's past conduct, of one's self with others, and of the environment today and yesterday. Truth is not an eternal resting, but something to be hourly achieved.

The man who aspires to be considered responsible will confess to uncertainty where he is uncertain. He will not pretend to knowledge he does not have. He will not ignore the strength of the case against the course he is contemplating, any more than the strength of the case for it. He will not make promises he does not keep.

A man like that will find that duty leads to the acceptance of responsibility, and that in turn leads to power and authority. That is the path from mediocrity to world fame. But no matter how high a man climbs in the professions or in business he will still remain responsible for getting things done: he cannot, even if he would, delegate that.

The sort of responsibility we seek does not always come to us with copy-book precision. The advent of its demands can be unexpected, even capricious. Our opportunity may be hastened by hard work, by endurance, by self-denial, by observation, by learning. Our acceptance includes the will to do disagreeable things if we ought to do them, and the will not to do things that are agreeable if we ought not to do them.

Before deciding to seek responsible positions, we might trace a path mapped by F. C. Haddock in *Power of Will*: learn what the proposal involves; learn what defeat means; learn what success signifies; understand your own weakness; understand your own powers; weigh one method of procedure against another; and understand, before starting, how to proceed. Then get started, and keep moving.

Accepting responsibility is a straightforward thing. All the shades of words and phrases are flattened out when the summons comes to stand up and be counted. Here is a situation or a challenge: do you or do you not accept responsibility? Even people who do not believe in the black and white of formal logic must accept the nature of this question: you can't accept and not accept responsibility.