

MAKING MASTERS

It is not easy for employees to contribute in an environment which is disempowering; when the organisation's structures are dysfunctional and its systems suffocating.

What really disempowers people in organisations, however, is not their surroundings but themselves. As a General Manager on one of South Africa's platinum mines commented "The real shackles which bind people on this mine are not external but internal; they are on the inside not the outside."

This implies that the leader's empowerment job comprises two tasks, not one. The first is "barrier busting"; instituting a freedom rather than a control based environment. The second is 'making masters'; confronting and addressing victim behaviour whenever and wherever it occurs. The former empowers through cultivating an empowering context. The latter does so by nurturing powerful people, irrespective of the setting that they are in.

Of the two tasks, it is the making of masters which is most important. This is because strong people not only withstand but often overcome their circumstances. Weak people, on the other hand, can wane in even the most benign environments.

The focus of this article is on the leadership task of making masters. It deals with the practicalities of enabling people who are weak to become strong; to reclaim their power.

THE ANATOMY OF A VICTIM

Spotting a victim is not difficult. We all know a victim when we come across one. This is not because the biographics of victims are the same. On the contrary being a victim bears no relationship to age, gender, nationality, culture or life circumstances. Any person, regardless of their station in life, can be a victim.

VICTIMS

- **GRIPE**
- **BLAME OTHERS**
- **BEHAVE INAPPROPRIATELY**

Across the world what distinguishes a victim from a non victim is first and foremost that they are unhappy, they are miserable and aggrieved by the situation in which they find themselves.

Some victims suffer in silence but more often than not they give voice to their concerns. They complain or gripe about whatever is causing them pain and dissatisfaction.

Behaviorally victims do very little' if anything to relieve their own suffering. The primary action of the victim is no action. Rather than take ownership of their plight they spend their time blaming others or the world in general for their unhappiness.

Victims very often behave in ways which are inappropriate. In their view, others or life itself has been nasty and unfair to them. As a consequence, to this, they feel entitled to act in

similar vein. They do whatever they like back; their misbehaviour, if they acknowledge it at all, is seen by them to be not only acceptable but absolutely justified.

A victim's misery, anger and bad behaviour are notably not a function of what has happened to them in their lives. It is their response to the negative events which have impacted on them which makes them a victim. The source of any victim's gripe(s) are, by definition, events in the past or the present; to what has happened or is still happening to them which is making them so disaffected. Consequently a victim is literally stuck in or trapped by their history.

VICTIMS

- **Stuck in / defined by the past**
- **External locus of control**
- **Sense of entitlement**

A classic case of this is a woman I met whose husband walked out on what she believed was 25 years of happy marriage to move in with his 20 year old blonde secretary. Understandably she was devastated. Her level of anger and bitterness led me to assume that this was a recent tragedy. In fact he had left her seven years ago! Similarly there are people at work who cannot get over something which happened to them in their past much earlier in their working life. They cling to the past disappointment and hurt and in effect allow what has happened to define them now.

Whatever the specifics of the case victims' gripes boil down to one of two things. Victims are unhappy in essence because they did not get what they wanted to get (a promotion) or they got what they didn't want to get (the end of a marriage).

Since what a person gets or does not get is never entirely within their control, victims feel themselves to be at the mercy of forces beyond their control. They have what psychologists like to refer to as "an external locus of control."

Stephen Covey puts it slightly differently when he makes a distinction between what he calls a person's "circle of concern" and a person's "circle of influence." Victims typically focus on what concerns them rather than on what they can influence. They are overwhelmed by their concerns quite simply because they have no power over them. They fail to focus their attention on what they can influence; on the power that they do have.

Finally, victims believe that they have a right to get what they want from other people and the world at large. They therefore have a deeply rooted sense of entitlement. If they do not receive what is owed to them, someone or something other than themselves is accountable. Consequently they neither feel accountable nor take accountability for their lives.

WHY VICTIMS ARE A PROBLEM

CONSEQUENCES

- INSECURITY
- DISCONTENT
- WEAKNESS
- CONFLICT

Victims are a problem both to themselves and others. In the first instance victims concern with what they are getting / not getting in any situation leads them to try and control the outcome. This is a futile exercise because outcomes, no matter how well engineered, are never guaranteed.

The world is not setup to provide everything that people want just because they want it. The world is certainly not designed to deliver what is wanted exactly the way

and the instant it is desired. Consequently victims end up anxious and insecure.

Allied to this, because it is not possible for a person's expectations always to be met, victims consistently experience what they get as falling short of or not exactly in line with their expectations. There is always something for a victim to complain about, something which has disappointed or let the person down. As a result the victim is generally left feeling unfulfilled and discontented.

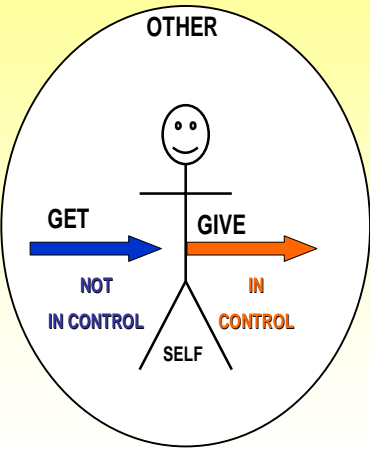
Victims need to have their desires met by sources outside of themselves moreover makes them manipulable. Both the situation that they are in and the other people in the situation have control over them; in the sense that they can withhold from the victim what the victim wants. As a result, victims find themselves in a position of weakness not strength.

Finally victims are in conflict with other people and with the world in general. Their fear that what they want will be withheld from them makes them feel under threat. The people they want to get something from equally feel under threat because they experience the victim as predatory. This being the case there is conflict, not harmony, in the relationships that victims have with others.

Victims as members of a group constitute a problem for the immediate group and the enterprise at large. This is because victim behaviour is contagious. Victims infect others with their victimhood such that the victim virus ultimately takes over and brings down the organisation as a whole.

The degree to which victim behaviour prevails in any group is easy to ascertain by simply asking members of the group the question: "what stops or constrains you from making a contribution?"

The answer to this question clearly differentiates victims from non victims. As shown below, victims' constraints are about "other"/ "getting" while a non victims' concerns are about self" / "giving."

<p>VICTIMS CONSTRAINTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing of the goalposts / inconsistent behaviour from management. • Production makes unreasonable demands on us (engineering). • Uncertainty due to sale of the business. • Have to get too many signatures to get things done. 		<p>NON VICTIMS CONSTRAINTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't trust others. • How will I grow people to be the best they can be? • I am too soft on my people. • We haven't put the right structure in place. • I cannot say no to requests.
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In any leadership group, when the percentage of “other” / “get” constraints outweigh those of “self / give” the prognosis is poor. This is because victims in leadership roles beget victims. If there are victims aplenty at the top of the organisation you can bet your bottom dollar that there are victims to the power of ten lower down in the organisation.

TURNING VICTIMS INTO MASTERS

VICTIM TO MASTER

- **PAST / PRESENT** →
- **TAKING** → **GIVING**
- **NOT ACCOUNTABLE** →
- **ACCOUNTABLE**

For a Victim to transform into a Master requires the Victim to make three changes. The first change is in attention. This amounts to a fundamental shift in attention from the gripe which is in the past / present to the goal which, by definition, is positioned in the future. The Victim becomes a Master by looking forward, by focusing on the future not the past.

The second change on the way to becoming a Master has to do with a change in intent; with what a person chooses to make significant to themselves. Masters give priority or importance to what they want to give / to their contribution rather than to what they want to get. In doing so they become givers not takers.

The third change is from the known and secure to the unknown and insecure. What makes the Victim state so attractive is that it is devoid of risk. As the saying goes “better the devil you

know than the devil you don't". To become a Master necessitates taking a risk and then accepting accountability for having done so. Master, in contrast to Victims, take full accountability for the situation that they are in.

These three shifts in attention, intention and accountability can be made in four steps.

The first step is to get to the heart of the matter; to determine the problem which sits underneath the gripe. This is because the gripe is the presenting problem not the cause. The next step is to restate the problem as a goal. To change the problem causing the complaint into a goal that the victim can pursue. With a goal in place it becomes possible to brainstorm ways in which the goal can be achieved; to

GRIPE TO GOAL PROCESS

- **Determine Root Cause / Problem**
- **Restate Problem as a Goal**
- **Establish Action Plan to Achieve Goal**
- **Establish Accountability**

generate a list of possible actions which, if taken, would achieve the goal. Then, from all the possibilities; to distill out those actions most likely to deliver the goal and to sequence them into an action plan. The final step is to commit to the action plan. To turn the plan into reality by taking full accountability for making the plan happen.

These four steps, taken together, constitute a process which we at Schuitema call the Gripe to Goal process. The Gripe to Goal process is not complex. It can be and is applied to both minor gripes, like the weather, and to major concerns such as the global economic meltdown. Individuals can and do apply the process to their own gripes just as group(s) can and do to theirs.

The problem, however, is that neither individuals nor groups use the process all the time. Most people get stuck in victim mode on occasion. The person for whom this has never been true is exceedingly rare. Others, the chronic victims, seemingly get stuck and stay stuck most of the time.

This is when another person can be of assistance; can help the griper negotiate their way through the process and reclaim their power. In the work situation that other person should ideally be the boss. In a Care and Growth leadership environment, bosses confront and address victim behaviour whenever it arises. They consistently help weak and powerless individuals and groups to become strong and powerful.

There are many examples of disaffected employees, seemingly intractable victims, who have been helped by a boss who cared about them, to regain their motivation and will to contribute. An Operations Manager once used the Gripe to Goal process with a seasoned Quality professional on a Friday afternoon. Having "retired on the job" for most of the past decade the employee came back a changed man on Monday and went on to win a coveted service award within a year. Similarly, a Plant Manager (and later CEO) was able to make willing and productive, employees out of a militant and destructive workforce in a matter of months; again by essentially following the four steps in the process.

Unfortunately the above examples are not common place. Many managers avoid using the process altogether and tacitly accept the victims in their midst. Ironically, those managers eventually end up victims themselves, endlessly griping about the failings of their people.

Other managers attempt the process but are frankly not very good at it. They feign interest in the concerns of the griper but the real message is “voetsek” (Afrikaans word for go away) implying that, as managers, they have more important matters to attend to.

Some managers “take the monkey” and make the griper’s problem theirs or, alternatively, provide the solution for the griper ensuring a lack of commitment by the griper to the proposed action plan. Worse of all managers fall foul to something called the “Ag shame syndrome”. This is shorthand for “you think you have a problem, let me tell you about mine”. Now there are two gripers in the room, not one.

With some training, followed by deliberate practice, managers can however become very skillful at the process. It is imperative that they do so. A leader who doesn’t have the ability to cultivate accountability in his/ her people, in essence enable them to accept responsibility for the situation they are in, will ultimately fail at the job of leading.

GETTING THE STEPS IN THE PROCESS RIGHT

STEP ONE: LISTEN

AIM

To identify root cause

RULE

**Seek to understand
not to be understood**

The first step in the process has been successful when the griper has uncovered the real problem which sits behind the gripe. If the listener has blinding clarity on the problem, but the griper has not then Step One is not complete.

Only when, in response to the question: “So is what really concerns you? the griper says “yes it is”, is it time to move on to the second step in the process.

A patient rarely walks into a doctor’s room and announces an illness. Instead the patient describes the symptoms’ such as “I have a headache and my tummy hurts”. The doctor’s task is to make a diagnosis starting with the patient’s presenting symptoms. Similarly, the griper’s initial gripe is an expression of concern, not a determination of the problem. The role of the boss, as helper, is not to pronounce the problem but to help the griper to work out the problem, get to the root cause, themselves.

After listening, the initial gripe statement and the actual problem statement are rarely the same. Two recent examples make the point. In a banking environment the gripe as first presented was that “decision making authority levels are unclear and slow me down.” The problem finally acknowledged by the griper was that “(some) Branch Managers are not empowering their Account Managers.” In another case, the employee’s concern was “an office relocation and concomitant unaffordable increase in transport costs.” The real problem pertaining to the change however was her “children’s safety now that she would arrive home later than before.”

The role of the helper at this stage is to seek to understand not to be understood. This requires the helper to exercise patience; to really listen and listen some more. In the first instance the listener has to give full and undivided attention to what the griper is saying. This only happens when the listener is able to silence his / her inner dialogue. Only then does the listener become truly and unconditionally present in the moment and available to the person with the concern. In doing so the listener is genuinely suspending his / her own agenda for the agenda of the other.

Listening, however, does not imply total silence. Nor does it suggest a reflecting back verbatim what the person has said. Listening means to ask the right questions of the griper. This is necessary because the griper very often does not present the full story at the outset. The information given is frequently incomplete (I was promised a promotion and not given it), exaggerated (every time he says he will do something he doesn’t) or based on assumptions (I am being underpaid).

Skilful listeners do not refute or argue against what is being said. Rather they ask the griper the kind of questions which enable the griper to become more specific and to check the validity of what is being said by him / her. The questions useful to the griper may include “who / how specifically?”, *never ?*. “compared to what / whom:”, what stops or constrains you?” It can also be helpful to simply ask “why” and to keep doing so until the griper has got to the root cause; to what is really the stone in his / her shoe.

Most important of all for Step One, however, is not to rush through this first phase. The purpose of Step 1 is for the griper to get to grips with what is really bothering them. This insight takes time. The listening phase is in fact the step in the process which takes by far the most time. In a good Gripe to Goal process Step One can account for up to 70% of the conversation. When the Gripe to Goal process is not very effective, most often it is because not enough time was given to the first step in the process.

STEP TWO: PHRASE GOAL

AIM
Focus Attention
Forward
RULE
No new content

Unlike the first step, Step Two is very quick. It literally consists of getting the griper to restate what he / she now understands to be the problem as a goal. The problem statement and the goal statement are in fact the same. All that has changed is that the situation is no longer phrased as a problem but as a goal.

The problem that “(some) Branch Managers are not empowering their Account Managers” becomes the goal of “getting these Branch Managers to do so”. The problem that “my child is not safe when I come home later than before,” translates into a goal of “ensuring my child’s safety until I get home at a later time.”

The golden rule in Step 2 is simple but critical. The rule is no new content. All that is required is to flip the problem statement over to a goal statement, without introducing new content by for example offering a solution to the problem. The problem “I am lonely” should become a goal “not to be lonely”. When the goal is given as a solution - “get a pet” , “join a dating club” , “make friends” – new content has been introduced.

In rephrasing the problem as a goal the person is being empowered in two ways. Firstly the nature of the problem itself has changed in the sense that it has become an ability problem or a matter of skill. What the person is facing has been translated into a “how do I” issue. How do I persuade Branch Managers to empower their Account Managers or how do I ensure my child’s safety?

Secondly the person is empowered by the fact that their attention is now focused forward. Rephrasing the problem as a goal has taken the person from past to future. In a brief moment it has also released all the negative energy which has been tied up in the problem and re-channeled it into something useful; namely the pursuit of a goal.

STEP THREE: BRAINSTORM

The purpose of Step Three is to enable the griper to embrace some new possibilities which hitherto have not been considered or if they have, have been dismissed by the griper.

AIM

**Establish an action plan
to achieve the goal**

RULE

**Cook a rich stew
Get your ducks in a row**

Sometimes a victim knows what the real problem is and has a goal in mind to achieve it. The reason that they have got stuck however, is that they have tried something and it hasn't worked / they have not achieved their desired goal.

Their lack of success has immobilized them; in that, they have literally sat down on the white line and become inert.

Step 3 of the gripe to goal process is designed to do the following:

- To generate new ideas or ways of progressing towards the goal which have not been tried or thought of before.
- To discard those ideas which are immoral, illegal and impractical in that order.
- To sequence the ideas which remain into an action plan which stipulates what actions will be taken by the victim, in what sequence and by when.

Let's say that I have unresolved difficulties in my relationship with my mother in law. My goal is to resolve those difficulties. The possibilities for doing so are endless. They may include hiring someone to take care of my problem (it has been done), get a divorce in which case she is no longer my problem, be a "nicer" daughter in law or change my attitude towards my mother in law. Editing the list is not difficult. It is clear what I should do and in what order.

Notably as long as a person has breath and is not brain damaged there is always something they can do. That something is to change their attitude towards or perceptions of the situation that they find themselves in. There are countless stories of sufferers of horror who have avoided being victims by exercising control over their thoughts and feelings; sometimes the only thing they still have power over.

Step Three seems very easy; it is after all about facilitating a classic brainstorm. Yet, the Gripe to Goal process can be derailed at this stage by a number of things.

Firstly, the boss, as helper, tries too hard to proffer solutions on the premise that if the victim knew what to do to solve the problem; they would have already done so. Unfortunately by being overly helpful, the boss makes the griper passive if not resistant. The griper is now in a position to shoot down the ideas put forward by the helper. There are always reasons why X, Y or Z won't work. The griper typically has a fine time delineating the reasons "why not" while the helper tries desperately to find a solution which will satisfy the griper.

The rule cook a rich stew applies here. The helper can provide some ideas but, at the same time, make the victim work at options also. From experience with the Gripe to Goal process, most people actually know what they need to do. They have the answer already and just need to be prompted to voice it.

The process can also derail at this point by what can best be described as the “soap in the bath” problem. Just when the victim seems to have got to grips with what they could do they deviate from the task of determining what could be done. Worse than that, they dive back across the dividing line between Victim and Master and go back to Step One. In a single backwards leap, the almost Master has regressed to a griping Victim. The reason for this is obvious. The person has gone back to their comfort zone, back to the known. From this place of safety there is no risk to them. Everyone else is accountable.

The helper, if this happens, needs to be firm. He / she needs to bring the griper back out of their place of safety / the known to confront the unknown. The way to do this is to remind the victim of the goal and to insist that they at least give countenance to ways of achieving it.

Finally Step Three can literally fizzle out because the victim resists nailing down the workable ideas into a concrete and time bound action plan. Now the helper needs to be persistent. “So if this action is the most viable option when can you do it?”

It must be emphasised that the Gripe to Goal process is a process for restoring a person’s sense of accountability for the situation in which they find themselves - in their best interests. What is required by the helper is tough love; that is, benevolence in the heart but steel in the hand.

Step Three effects the second shift in the transformation from Victim to Master. It enables the shift in intention from being here to get to being here to give. It does this by focusing the person on what can be done; what sits in their hands. It is simply not possible for anyone to simultaneously be occupied by what they are getting and what they are giving. The shift in focus to giving thus effectively nullifies the focus on getting.

STEP FOUR: SEEK COMMITMENT

AIM
Establish
Accountability

RULE

**Get a clear decision and
make its consequences
clear**

Just as Step Two is quick so is Step Four, the final step in the Gripe to Goal process. This Step consists of a single question for the griper: "Are you committed to this action plan or not?" In response to this question, the person can only really say 'yes' or 'no'.

If the person says 'yes' then clearly they have ownership of the action plan and are accountable for executing it. If their answer is 'no', the person is still accountable. He / she has simply declined to pay the price that has to be paid to achieve the goal. The person has weighed things up and decided not to take the risk(s) inherent in the action plan.

Clearly this is their choice and they are entitled to make it. If this is their decision, however, the helper needs to indicate that this decision by the person implies accountability for the situation they are in.

This is tough for both the griper and the helper to do but it is ultimately what is empowering for the griper.

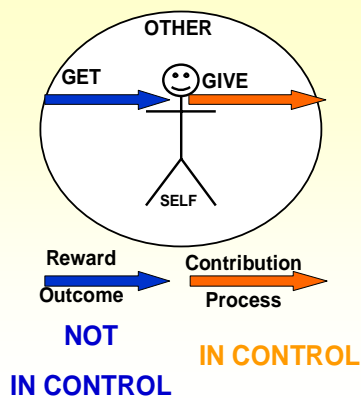
It is so much easier not to mention, more politically correct, to collude with people in their victim hood rather than confront them with it. As David Cameron (leader of the Conservative Party in Britain) was quoted as saying in response to the high levels of obesity in the United Kingdom: "It is time that we stopped referring to people as being vulnerable to excess body mass and started to say madam / sir you are fat and the reason that you are fat is that you eat too much and take too little exercise!"

SUCCEEDING WITH THE PROCESS OVERALL

From experience, with using and assisting leaders to use the process, the following has become evident regarding succeeding with the process overall.

- It is critical, throughout the process, to keep the end in mind. The end is a person who is accountable, who is strong and has reclaimed their power. The end is not the resolution of a problem! Nor is it to make a person feel better, although this is often a by product of the process. Individual(s) can and often do emerge from the process walking ten feet tall.
- The helper does not have to have any knowledge of the content to be helpful. Too much content knowledge may in fact be a hindrance rather than a help. This is because the helper then tempted to be pulled into and get involved in the content. The Gripe to Goal process is in fact an opportunity for the boss to be most useful when he / she is being useless.

- The Gripe to Goal process does not have to be done all in one sitting. It can be very effective to do Steps One and Two and then, at another date, Steps Three and Four. Sometimes it is appropriate to meet several times to just listen (Step 1) before progressing with the remainder of the process.
- The process itself is rarely a once off event, done and then it is over. It is critical for the leader/ helper to follow up in any case after Step Four. This not only convinces the griper that the leaders care is genuine but will make the griper realise that the leader is holding him / her accountable for what he / she undertook to do.
- Before embarking on the Gripe to Goal Process, the leader needs to take self interest out of the discussion. If the way out for the griper, and there always is a way out if the person is prepared to pay the price, is to get another job it is entirely appropriate for the boss to support the person to do so.
- If the helper lets his / her own interests intervene, then they stand the danger of being viewed quite correctly as manipulative by the griper. If the leader feels that it is too difficult for them not to have a vested interest in the process, then they should reclude themselves from it.



Finally it becomes apparent from doing the Gripe to Goal process that the problem / goal statements that are derived from the listening phase can be of two types. They can pertain either to 'other' or to 'self'.

The problem that "my husband is not treating me nicely" and hence the goal "to get my husband to be nicer to me" is about 'other', The problem that "I am unhappy in my marriage" and therefore my goal is to "regain my happiness in the marriage" is about 'self'.

Of the two, the problems / goals which relate to self are the ones that the person has more control over. It is feasible to act in ways which may influence the 'other' but ultimately it is not possible to change the 'other', only the 'self'.

The Gripe to Goal process is designed to enable a person to make the shift from outcome to process. It is most successful however when the person stops seeking to change 'others' but rather pursues a change in self.

The Gripe to Goal process does not take the person to full maturity because the very pursuit of a goal is, by definition, a giving to get. Nevertheless the more the goal being pursued has to do with a change in self, the further the person has progressed in terms of their maturation. The closer they are to finally escaping all goals and giving unconditionally.