

THE LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

PART FIVE

Why Don't People Take Ownership



Introduction

We often talk about ownership as though it is something people either have or don't have. When someone follows through, we say they took ownership. When they don't, we assume ownership is missing.

But what if ownership isn't simply a personal characteristic?

What if it is also influenced by the conversations we have, the questions we ask, and whether people can recognize themselves and their future in the plans we invite them to follow?

This reflection invites a different way of seeing.

An Experience

Sarah leaned back in her chair as the probation officer finished speaking.

“I don't know what else to do,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Jasmine says she wants to graduate, but she's missed school three times this week. She's skipped appointments, barely says two words when she comes in, and every time we talk about her goals, she just shrugs.”

He paused for a moment. *“We've adjusted her case plan. I've connected her with tutoring. We talked about transportation. I reminded her what could happen if she keeps missing school. I even asked if there was anything she needed. Every meeting feels exactly the same.”*

Sarah nodded. She had heard versions of this conversation more times than she could count.

The probation officer wasn't frustrated because he didn't care. He was frustrated because he did. He had done everything his role had prepared him to do. He followed policy, documented each meeting, coordinated services, updated the case plan, encouraged school attendance, and looked for resources that might help Jasmine succeed.

Still, nothing seemed to change. Finally, he sighed: *“I guess you can't help someone who won't take ownership.”*

Sarah didn't respond. The room was quiet for a few moments. Then she asked, almost conversationally: *“Walk me through your last meeting with Jasmine.”*

He didn't hesitate: *“We reviewed the missed school days. We talked about her probation conditions. I reminded her why attending school was important. We discussed tutoring and transportation again. I updated her case plan. I explained the consequences if things didn't improve. Then I asked if she had any questions.”*

Sarah nodded as he spoke. Everything he described was appropriate. Everything.

When he finished, she asked one more question: *“When did Jasmine talk about why graduating mattered to her?”*

He looked down for a moment. *“She didn't.”*

Another pause. Then, almost to himself, he added: “I never asked.”

Reflection

Most leadership conversations about ownership begin after someone has concluded it is missing. We hear it in different ways: *“She just won't take ownership,” “You can't work harder than the client,”* or

“Some people just don't want to change.”

After enough difficult conversations, these conclusions can begin to feel less like opinions and more like facts. But what if they aren't? What if they are simply the best explanation we have for what we're seeing?

The probation officer in this conversation wasn't careless, impatient, or unwilling to help. He was doing exactly what his role had prepared him to do. He reviewed expectations, coordinated services, documented progress, explained consequences, and looked for resources. Every one of those responsibilities mattered.

The question isn't whether Jasmine understood the probation plan. The question is whether the probation plan helped Jasmine see a future she wanted to build. That is a very different conversation.

When people can recognize hope for their future in the plan, accountability becomes more than compliance. The supervisor never challenged the officer's commitment; she simply asked a different question. One question created enough space for a different possibility to emerge.

Perhaps leadership doesn't always begin with having better answers. Perhaps it begins with becoming curious about the assumptions behind our questions.

The conversation wasn't missing accountability. It was missing Jasmine's future.

A Different Perspective

What if ownership isn't something people either have or don't have? What if ownership grows when people begin to recognize their future?

Most of us have known someone whose life changed after one conversation, one teacher, one coach, one supervisor, or one person who saw possibilities they couldn't yet see for themselves.

The conversation didn't change their circumstances overnight. It changed what became possible. When people begin to recognize their future, the plan becomes more than a list of expectations. It becomes a pathway toward something they want to build.

The court's expectations haven't changed. The plan hasn't changed. What changes is the conversation. The plan is no longer something done to Jasmine. It becomes something they build together.

Another Way to See It

The following week, Jasmine sat down across from the probation officer.

Nothing about her circumstances had changed. She was still on probation. School attendance was still a concern. The court's expectations hadn't changed. The plan hadn't changed.

The probation officer glanced at the case plan sitting on the desk. Just a week earlier, it had felt like a list of things Jasmine needed to do. Now it looked different.

Instead of beginning with missed appointments and school attendance, he asked: *“Last time you mentioned wanting to graduate. Tell me what graduation would mean to you.”*

Jasmine looked surprised. No one had ever asked her that. After a long pause, she shrugged: *“I don't know...”* Then, quietly, she added: *“I guess... I'd be the first one in my family.”*

The probation officer nodded. *“Then let's look at this plan differently. Every day you show up at school isn't just meeting a probation requirement. It's one more step toward becoming the first person in your family to graduate.”*

The conversation was different now. Not because accountability had disappeared. Not because the court expected less. But because the plan finally had somewhere to go.

As they talked, attendance wasn't just about following the rules. It became one step toward graduation. Tutoring wasn't another service to complete. It became support for a future Jasmine had begun to imagine. The case plan hadn't changed. Its purpose had.

For the first time, it wasn't simply a list of expectations. It had become a plan she could use to build the future she wanted.

YOUR LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Tomorrow, someone will begin a conversation. It may be you. It may be a supervisor, a manager, a team leader, or a frontline professional. Someone will sit across from another person with a plan to discuss. In that moment, a choice will be made.

The conversation can focus on **explaining the plan**. Or it can help someone **discover how the plan connects to the future they want**.

Every organization teaches people how conversations are supposed to happen. Over time, people learn which conversations are expected in the organization.

What kind of conversations is your leadership making possible?

Because the conversations leaders make possible become the conversations organizations begin to have. Over time, those conversations become culture.
