What Does "Taking Ownership" Really Mean?

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As we've described in pieces like "Self Management: A New Architecture" and "Why Is Micromanagement So Infectious?," the crux of management exists in the meeting of the minds between what we term a sponsor and an owner. The fundamental act of delegation occurs when sponsor and owner agree upon a brief, giving the owner responsibility and authority to chart the path independently to the goal (with oversight from the sponsor). Within this construct, the "owner" role is understood somewhat narrowly within the context of this transfer of responsibilities.

In the way we work at Incandescent, we see ownership more broadly as a stance that firm members in any role should aspire to take toward their own work, the firm as a whole and the other institutions they engage with. The stance of ownership means:

- Seeking to understand the broader context of the work and the biggest goals at stake, and seeking to make one's specific work into an instrument to advance these larger goals
- Reaching upwards toward the next higher level of responsibility, reliably delivering what one is formally responsible for while trying to add value beyond this scope. This isn't just "doing something extra," but going deeper: deepening insights, deepening relationships, and deepening the connection between the work at hand and other work
- Asking what the important questions are, rather than being satisfied with questions as they've been posed
- Advancing the deeper interests of clients, partners and collaborators, not just delivering on their stated or apparent needs
- Pushing to make lasting progress, rather than achieve an objective in a way that risks being fleeting because it leaves deeper root cause issues outstanding or solves a problem in a way that could easily be swept away by future events

Taking this stance of ownership, we are accountable to others but most deeply accountable to ourselves. The values at stake are intrinsic ones: our belief in this way of working and our identification with the deepest goals of others.

The stance of ownership is as relevant at our highest-stakes moments as it is in the most everyday moments of our work. For instance, our clients often have a picture of what our work should achieve that we believe is at odds with the deeper demands we believe their goals should place on them and us. A client might be focused on a strategy document as a mechanism to reassure their board, cultivate investors or reduce friction on their team, where we might believe they face a true strategic dilemma. Taking ownership means being willing to make our clients (and ourselves) uncomfortable in order to put the essential questions on the table – and being willing to put our own interests at risk to do so, including taking the risk of being fired by the client.

That said, stridency can also be a trap. It isn't only "getting along" that can be a lazy way out of a tough situation of this kind; there's a form of laziness too in just insisting on how we see something. We need to do the harder work of taking where the client is coming from seriously, understanding the constraints and imperatives they see. We'll engage in the slower work required to actually bring them to a place from which they can meaningfully engage with the dilemmas we believe they face.

The stance of ownership applies no less to simple work like scheduling meetings or doing background research. A team member working with a client's administrative team encounters many clues about the company's culture and how executives manage their time. Being thoughtful about when meetings happen (what sequence, what time of day, etc.) can make a great difference to how well those meetings go. Similarly, a focused research question focused on fact gathering can yield unanticipated insights – e.g., we might identify thought leaders we should connect with, spot an opportunity relevant to a venture we're working with, or realize there's a lively discourse going on about a subject where we could express compelling views.

It isn't just that taking ownership leads to better results in any given situation—although generally it does. Taking ownership reflects a better way of being, and it's a powerful habit for each of us to cultivate individually. As we practice this stance of ownership together, we create an environment in which all roles have dignity, all work has importance, and all relationships take on meaning.