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Learn to Complain. The Ultimate
Responsibility is with the Individual,
not the Corporation

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There is an important lesson to be learned from the now widespread consumers' movement. People like Ralph Nader have reminded us that it is possible for individuals to accomplish a great deal. The study of history should have been a sufficient reminder that individuals have always been able to accomplish a great deal. But somehow history and the every-day world seem very different. In addition, the increased size of government bureaucracies, large corporations and other institutions, conditions us to believe that the individual is powerless.

How many times have you complained to an individual employee of a corporation or government agency only to have him say that, "It is not my responsibility. I only follow orders."

When such an "explanation" is offered by soldiers as justification for crimes against civilians,

we are less willing to accept such irresponsibility. This is true in the Calley case as it was for German war crimes during World War II.

Recently, as I was sitting in an airport, I heard an elderly couple complaining bitterly to an airline representative. Although they had confirmed reservations they were unable to board the plane. It had been overbooked—by the computer, it was alleged. The wife demanded of the agent an explanation for this overbooking. She did not understand computers or any other nonsense. The agent pleaded, "I have just been brought into this. I do not know why. Please do not hold me responsible."

I believe this lady's indignation and rage were not only justified but that the passenger agent shares the responsibility, morally if not legally, for the policies of his cor-

poration. Certainly any officer of that corporation is legally responsible for its actions. But to my knowledge this has not yet been extended to the rank and file employees. I see no reason why the moral responsibility should stop at the office of a vice president. If you work for an organization and accept its benefits, including your salary, then you accept a degree of the responsibility for whatever acts it commits. If you are accosted by a customer who has been denied his due, then it is your job to deal with that person's legitimate complaint; ultimately, if your supervisors are not responsive to such complaints, then it is your moral responsibility to quit. If you don't, then you are as guilty as they are and you cannot plead that it is not your responsibility.

For academic people, if a student has a legitimate criticism then it is the obligation of the professor to take it up with the department chairman and ultimately, if necessary, the president of the university. It is not enough to say that it is someone else's responsibility. You must make the ultimate decision, if you agree with the student, and

if the higher authority refuses to deal with the problem fairly. Obviously, we cannot stake our futures on every specific complaint that is made but sooner or later if these grievances mount up we must take a stand. Indeed, it is the better part of wisdom to act on small grievances so that they do not become major causes.

On the other hand, we must also teach people how to complain constructively. This must be done at the same time we teach them to accept responsibility. For as many airline representatives as refuse to accept responsibility there are far more passengers allowing them to get away with shoddy service--or misleading advertising--or whatever.

At ISI® I do not allow our employees or representatives to absolve themselves of responsibility when presented with a customer complaint. Naturally, they are sometimes caught off-guard and do not have an immediate explanation. But every complaint, to my knowledge, is dealt with. I only wish that more readers would learn to complain. Every opportunity of this kind enables us to demonstrate that ISI cares.