

Accountability... **and the Role of Leadership**

James L. C. Taggart

Accountability has become one of those words used in organizations that make people wince. Some years ago, when I was getting initiated to the leadership field, it seemed that almost every second word emanating from people's mouths was 'accountability,' tangled up with another popular word: 'empowerment.' The two became almost brother and sister, rolling off people's tongues as if to signify their enlightened understanding of leadership. However, if accountability is to have any substantive mean in organizations, a lot of work is needed to restore its credibility.

To begin with, we need to understand just what is meant by the word accountability. Perhaps we need to reposition it in the vocabulary of organizations. In some ways it has become a pejorative word. When organizations introduce initiatives aimed at empowering employees while ensuring that they are accountable, they are in effect bureaucratizing the effort to foster initiative.

To engage the hearts and minds of people requires, among other things, the creation of an environment in which they want to take initiative, be creative, and accept the consequences for their actions, both positive and negative. This points to the dominating factor in organizations, and it is leadership: how it is espoused and practiced.

To advocate accountability among employees while in the same breath not modeling the necessary behaviours undermines management's efforts. When employees truly believe that they are able to share power and decision-making, there will be the beginning of a torrential release of creativity and innovation. People cannot be empowered; instead, people empower themselves. Creativity and innovation will only happen when people feel safe to experiment and take calculated risks to improve work processes and serve clients and citizens better.

The overarching umbrella to all of this is the creation of learning cultures in organizations. The emergence of a learning organization means that everyone—managers and staff—are in the process of co-creating a shared future. Running in parallel with this is the growing acceptance of personal accountability as people empower themselves.

It's important to underscore the distinction between empowering people and people empowering themselves. Too often, we hear about staff being empowered by managers. But are people really 'empowered?' Or is it a process of self-initiation, in which the individual personally assumes the responsibility to take initiative and to motivate herself? Managers set context, an enabling environment. Reflect on the words of author Harrison Owen: "If I empower you, to some extent you are in my power."

In his book *The Oz Principle: Getting Results Through Accountability*, Roger Connors presents a definition of accountability:

“An attitude of continually asking ‘what else can I do to rise above my circumstances and achieve the results I desire?’ It is the process of ‘seeing it, owning it, solving it, and doing it.’ It requires a level of ownership that includes making, keeping, and proactively answering for personal commitments. It is a perspective that embraces both current and future efforts rather than reactive and historical explanation.”

The essence of what he is saying is that we need a paradigm shift in how we approach accountability. Attempting to solve today’s problems with yesterday’s solutions only leads to further frustration and stress on the part of everyone. Senior management becomes frustrated with how long it is taking to change behaviours and see results. Staff are suspicious of new initiatives, riding them out until new ones come along. Middle management feels torn between the two groups as it tries to respond to the needs of both. The consequence is stressed out middle managers.

To transcend to a new state of co-creation means that the culture of victimization must end. Connors describes this culture as the refusal to take ownership for one’s behaviour and actions. Excuses are the norm, with blame being attributed to wherever it flows the easiest. There is a creative tension between the rights of employees, which is well established, versus responsibility and accountability, which is less well developed.

Until we collectively achieve a common understanding of the issues surrounding accountability, it will be exceptionally difficult to realize the creation of strong learning cultures in our organizations. Here are some questions that will contribute to the dialogue that is necessary in organizations. Of particular importance is to approach such a dialogue from an integrated perspective, in which the elements of the learning organization are included.

1. How do we get off the turntable and begin to collectively co-create organizations that are founded, in part, on the principle of personal responsibility and accountability?
2. If we fail to embrace the idea of individual accountability, what is the impact on service to customers and clients?
3. What are the long-term consequences of not paying heed to this and initiating a dialogue and action to make change?
4. What is the role of managerial leadership in this regard, and in particular, what are the consequences when managers abandon their staff who take risks but who make mistakes?
5. How do we distance ourselves from a culture of blame and embrace a culture of learning from mistakes?

6. How do we transcend from the level of personal accountability to one of *mutual* accountability (i.e., among teams)?

As we proceed along the path towards personal and collective enlightenment, we need to continually remind ourselves of the interconnection among the many elements that are affecting the future of our organizations. Accountability is intertwined with the components that form the basis for the creation of learning cultures. Of utmost importance is that we must constantly remind ourselves that accountability is not a thing; rather, it is about people. And as such, accountability needs to become part of this important conversation.