



# talking about...

October 2009

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

## Holding Others Accountable

*"It is an immutable law in business that words are words, explanations are explanations, promises are promises but only performance is reality."*

... Harold S. Geneen (1910 - 1997) US businessman

Last month, we began to explore the idea of accountability and how this shows up in an organisational context. The key points were that although the configuration of accountability lies in the organisational structure, accountability ultimately lives in the domain of conversation. For example, you haven't done something you said you would do and I have a conversation with you to address that breakdown. This month we promised that we would share some thoughts on how to enhance accountability within your organisation and in our interpretation the answer lies in conversational flows and practices. Although, we do not have the space in this e-zine to deal with accountability in depth, let us look at some of the principles of what can be done.

The first key idea is that the basis of accountability is found in creating a clear promise for which to be accountable. In our interpretation it is not possible to constructively hold someone accountable for something they have not promised to do. A promise is a commitment by one person (the provider) to another (the customer) that they will do something by a certain time. This distinction is critical. It is essential to understand that there can only be two people involved in a specific promise. It is this dynamic of the two people that sets up the future conversation relating to accountability because it is clear who has to have the conversation with whom; that there is a shared understanding in regard to what the accountability conversation involves; and an agreed point in time when that conversation can take place if it is needed.

The idea of accountability being based in promises can lead to a different view of the organisational structure as it relates to conversations. Rather than seeing an organisation as a mechanistic structure, we can observe and design an organisation as a web of promises. These promises are created in a way that provides for the flow of process where there is always a customer and a provider. The organisational structure is then formed to systemically ensure the delivery of promises throughout the web. In this interpretation, organisational leaders have a primary role to look at the viability and health of the chain of promises for which they are responsible not simply their part of the organisational structure. In

principle, there are promises made to the organisational leader by his direct reports about maintaining the flow of process and promises made between the direct reports to ensure the timely outcomes in the flow of the process. Any breakdowns in this web will likely provide breakdowns in accountability.

One of the reasons that people do not hold others accountable is that there is no promise in place, so any conversation about accountability will not have a clear and shared context for accountability. This often leads to someone simply using force or manipulation to try to get something done and generally leads to breakdowns in relationships and by default breakdowns in the web of promises.

The second key idea we would like to share goes back to an idea we have covered in previous e-zines; the theory of the promise cycle and the practice of "complaining". In our interpretation, complaining is not whining, bitching or nagging. It is a structured conversation that seeks to take care of relationships by the ensuring the existence of a promise, which has not been kept and making a request to have the unfulfilled promise addressed. (See the article entitled "The Anatomy of a

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Complaint" at our web site for a more extensive explanation of this conversational practice.)

To sum up, accountability lies in clear promises being made and then engaging in conversations around those promises. If you have issues of accountability, you may well start by looking at how well structured is your organisational web of promises and how healthy is it. Address that and you create a greater chance of obtaining accountability.

***"Promises may fit the friends, but non-performance will turn them into enemies."***

... Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790) US statesman, diplomat & inventor

## **A Lesson in Brass Monkeys ...**

*Thanks to Greg for this one ...*

It was necessary to keep a good supply of cannon balls near the cannon on old war ships. But how to prevent them from rolling about the deck was the problem. The storage method devised was to stack them as a square based pyramid, with one ball on top, resting on four, resting on nine, which rested on sixteen.

Thus, a supply of 30 cannon balls could be stacked in a small area right next to the cannon. There was only one problem -- how to prevent the bottom layer from sliding/rolling from under the others.

The solution was a metal plate with 16 round indentations, called, for reasons unknown, a Monkey. But if this plate were made of iron, the iron balls would quickly rust to it. The solution to the rusting problem was to make them of brass - hence, "Brass Monkeys".

Few landlubbers realize that brass contracts much more and much faster than iron when chilled.

Consequently, when the temperature dropped too far, the brass indentations would shrink so much that the iron cannon balls would come right off the monkey.

Thus, it was quite literally, cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. And all this time, folks thought that was just a vulgar expression?

***"I suffer whenever I see that common sight of a parent or senior imposing his opinion and way of thinking and being on a young soul to which they are totally unfit. Cannot we let people be themselves, and enjoy life in their own way?"***

... Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882) US philosopher, poet & essayist

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