



talking about...

September 2009

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

Creating Accountability

"Life is not accountable to us. We are accountable to life."

... Denis Waitley (1933 -) US Navy pilot & motivational speaker

Accountability is a word that commonly pops up in an organisational context and generally in the context of that there not being enough of it. A simple definition of accountability is to be responsible to someone for something, which is obviously a key to the level of organisational effectiveness and success. Given the importance of accountability to organisational well being, it is surprising at some level that accountability is often seen as an issue. Why is this and what can be done about it?

Although often spoken about, it would seem that the concept of accountability is not well understood. Given exploration of this topic could take up a book, let us just look at a couple of basic ideas that take us down two distinctly different paths when it comes to setting up and dealing with accountability. Both of these ideas relate to how an organisation is seen in the first place. The first comes from a mechanistic world view and sees an organisation as a well ordered structure to be manipulated to create the desired outcomes. Much of the corporate world subscribes to this view largely without question. The second view sees an organisation as a dynamic flow of conversation – a view developed through a more post-modern world view and based on the idea that organisations are made up of human beings and are therefore basically organic in nature.

Using the metaphor of an organisation as a machine, accountability exists in the structure. Get the organisation structure right and higher levels of accountability will follow. The assumption seems to be that accountability is defined in position descriptions and once that is clear everything will fall into place. This can often be seen when organisational leaders decide that a restructure will deal with issues of accountability. Unless there is more to the effort than the restructure, this will invariably create little change in the day to day observation of accountability in the organisation and is usually followed by another restructure in a couple of years in another attempt to readdress the issue.

The key to the second and more organic approach lies in an understanding that accountability exists in the conversational practices of the members of the organisation. Accountability exists when conversations occur where one person holds another accountable. In other words, accountability is a conversational not

structural phenomenon. To understand this better, we can go back to the definition of accountability – to be responsible to someone for something. From a conversational perspective, accountability can be seen as the capacity of an individual through a request to establish a promise (commitment) with another and then ensure they fulfill their commitment. There are a number of aspects to this idea that have to be fulfilled to generate effective accountability. Here are some of the key ones. Firstly an unambiguous promise has to be made; secondly, it has to be clear who has made the promise and to whom the promise was made; and finally, one has to be able to engage in the effective practice of complaining (otherwise known as holding someone accountable) when a promise is not kept.

Invariably, it is the lack of these conversational practices that lead to poor accountability. How we can better address this will be the subject of our next newsletter.

"Polite conversation is rarely either."

... Fran Lebowitz (1950 -) US journalist

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Some Presidential Humour ...

Bill Clinton: On Running a Country

So if you are having a problem with people you are not alone. President Clinton in a speech at Galesburg, Illinois said running a country is a lot like running a cemetery; you've got a lot of people under you and nobody's listening.

Theodore Roosevelt - On Being a Republican

While delivering a campaign speech one day Theodore Roosevelt was interrupted by a heckler: "I'm a Democrat!" the man shouted. "May I ask the gentleman," Roosevelt replied, quieting the crowd, "why he is a Democrat?"

"My grandfather was a Democrat, my father was a Democrat and I am a Democrat."

"My friend," Roosevelt interjected, moving in for the kill, "suppose your grandfather had been a jackass and your father was a jack-ass. What would you then be?"

Alas, Roosevelt was thwarted by the quick-witted heckler, who promptly replied: "A Republican!"

"Only mediocrity can be trusted to be always at its best."

... Max Beerbohm (1872 -1956) English essayist, caricaturist, parodist

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