

Improving leadership accountability begins with a look in the mirror

This business of leadership is full of fads and trends. A word or concept bubbles to the surface, we all grab a hold of it as “the answer,” books are written, blogs are posted, tweets are tweeted – until the next big idea comes along. It’s not a bad thing, providing that the concept is well founded and helpful.

Lately I’ve been noticing that one word is increasingly gaining favour: accountability. I recently did a survey in a number of organizations, and which behaviour did respondents think others needed to demonstrate more of? Accountability.

At first blush it’s a no-brainer. If only people were more accountable, organizations would be healthier, morale would be higher, those poor performers would be dealt with and, yes, life would be better. Surely accountability is the answer?

But hang on. Is it really? Who do we want to be more accountable? And for what?

Typically, when people refer to accountability they talk of their desire for others to do things differently. To do their share, to follow through on things, hold themselves and others to a higher standard and to “walk the talk.” All very laudable.

However, rarely does anyone talk about holding him or herself to a higher standard. I have yet to hear an individual pronounce that he or she is not accountable. And therein lies the problem with this concept of accountability. By focusing on it we typically turn our attention away from our behaviour. Of course we’re accountable; the problem lies with everybody else.

Despite the fact we all know that self-awareness and humility are critically important when it comes to effective leadership, the default of many in organizations continues to be looking to others for fault rather than facing up to the reality of their own contribution. I recently conducted a survey in an organization in which I asked leaders to assess their performance and that of their colleagues. Without exception, everyone reported that they believed they were leading effectively. However, they were far less complimentary when it came to assessing the leadership of their colleagues.

It is this unwillingness to hold oneself to personal account that’s contributing significantly to unhealthy organizations and frustrated employees at every level. Rarely is anything productive accomplished when we invest our energies into critiquing what others are doing “wrong.” Efforts would be better spent in holding ourselves to account.

Real personal accountability is not easy – which is why it’s in short supply these days. It requires a mature sense of self as well as a healthy dose of courage. And I’m not talking about simply working hard and trying to do a good job. Rather, if we really believe in accountability, then each one of us should hold ourselves to account for creating healthy, honest and sustainable organizations. Which, for many, requires playing a bigger game.

So how do you get started? Start by asking yourself a few questions.

- What are you tolerating and why? Isn’t it time you stopped tolerating and started changing?

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- Where are you looking for others to change? Are they looking at you in a similar manner?
- What are you willing to be personally accountable for? Your own happiness? That of your colleagues? Your organization's health? Remember, criticism of others with no accountability of self is a fine example of pathetic leadership.

We need to be careful about jumping on this accountability bandwagon. There is a danger it will do more harm than good as we merrily look around us to identify those who need to be more accountable. We would do better to first look in the mirror.

This article was first published in Business in Vancouver June 7-13