

Accountability as Covenant: The Taproot of Servant Leadership

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Why do we monitor rather than mentor people? Why does accountability end up last rather than first in our priorities? Why do we spend less time with those who we expect might “miss the mark” while giving those we expect to succeed our full attention? Is accountability as concerned with a person’s development as with what they produce? As a leader in a research team working with many corporate clients, we have been both curious and suffered anguish in pursuit of meaningful solutions to these questions.

In this current climate of accelerating change, we are surrounded by shifting paradigms. One of these is accountability. The “current reality” of boss controlling and judging defines accountability as an obligation to account for and give an explanation of one’s actions and to bear the consequences for those actions.

However, a new paradigm is emerging which begins with covenant. By creating a shared vision, agreeing upon core values and mission, these become the shared map of where we want to go as a team. Accountability then becomes the rudder to keep us on course. If it is mutually created up front through the process of establishing Servant Leadership, a whole new paradigm emerges of what accountability means. Our deepest sense of self defines this new relationship. We lay out the role of each of us...how each can best support the other in achieving this shared vision. Both will be leaders AND followers, both will answer to the other on promises made. Failures will be explored as opportunities to learn and grow. Each will expect to unlearn and change.

EXPLORING THIS NEW PARADIGM – A NEW WAY UNFOLDS

We all know well the old paradigm of not being personally responsible or accountable. Our American culture is saturated with a “victim consciousness,” entitlement mentality, and codependence. Simply turn on the television and see the amassing of talk-shows dedicated to giving those who have been “dumped on” a voice and a million-viewer audience, feeding on this belief system. Examine the leaflets and billboards encouraging you to file a lawsuit. Listen for “bashing” of polarized groups used as negative humor or “politically correct” discounted as a social tool to avoid consequences rather than acknowledgment of the need to correct past unfairness. Note the strategy of dirty politics, labeling, and blaming with sound bite slurs and innuendoes...short-term thinking, finger-pointing, and projecting blame on others rather than looking inward for solutions. “They are doing it, so we will too” is seen as the way to get ahead and those who stick to the high road are labeled naïve.

Yet, when all is said and done, there is still ultimately accountability. Talk-show hosts become accountable as witnesses in murder trials for the outcome of public “surprises” which explode into violence; voters become accountable to vote “yes” or “no” on tort reform; consumers become accountable for the kinds of businesses we support with our dollars. We may not see our participation in the bigger picture and thus think of accountability in a much smaller context of one person answering to another. Yet stepping back to consider the connections, how one’s behavior impacts another, opens profound new possibilities and awareness.

ACCOUNTABILITY PARADIGM

Hierarchy, Boss as Judge over Employee

Top down, one person judging
“boss” controls “when”, “how” and even “if”
accountability happens

REACTIVE

Punishment/reward
Accountability a “have to”

Seen as judging failure rate
Win/lose
Based on Distrust

Legalistic
Monitor
Expectations Fixed

Accountability as excuse/Justification

Extrinsically driven

Servant Leader/ Coach/Mentor

2-way, open ended
INTERdependent, teamwork
Open flow created proactively

PROACTIVE

Celebration/Fail Forward
Accountability a “want to”, “get to”

Seen as discovery process
Win/Win/Win
Based on Trust

Holistic
Mentor
Expectations in constant flux
(growth & change anticipated)

Accountability as dialogue to raise
level of “Collective Intelligence”

Intrinsically driven

In the old paradigm, “bosses” periodically judge the performance of each employee, controlling when, how, and even if these so called performance reviews happen. Calling someone on the carpet, checking to see that each person is performing, and measuring and monitoring progress was seen as the job of the manager.

We have begun to learn that one MANAGES things but not people. It takes LEADERSHIP to inspire the best and most effective performances within people. And this comes from the new paradigm, which is two-way, open ended, and on-going. The Servant Leader asks to be coached and given honest feedback as well as offering the same to those served. Making it safe for team mates to be honest and being accountable to change, grow, communicate, and resolve differences in a spirit of mutual respect is the foundation of this new paradigm. Either party can initiate accountability, seen as skillful discussion or dialogue. “Help me understand...” or “Could we get curious together about why or how...” is the spirit of this new mutual dialogue.

Coaches ask,
What am I doing that helps you succeed?
What am I not doing that you need to succeed?
Where and how am I micromanaging?
What am I doing that you would like to do?
When and how do I shoot the messenger?

By becoming accountable to our team members in all directions, we signal a new level of shared trust and INTERdependence. Strength through difference begins to take root. And, a collective intelligence begins to replace a competition or hierarchy of singular intelligence (putting the “smartest” person in charge or competing on each issue for who has the “right answer”). In either case, much is lost because building on collective intelligence will always go significantly beyond what the single brightest individual might propose.

REACTIVE VERSUS PROACTIVE

In a punishment/reward mindset, accountability is a “have to.” It can be seen as unnecessary with good performers and something distasteful to have to do with lessor performers. But still, it is seen as one-way and done reactively, looking back on the performance of one person by another.

In the new paradigm, this process flows daily, as partners create shared goals, celebrate shared accomplishments and harvest “lessons learned.” Each so-called failure is seen as an opportunity to learn and used to “fail forward.” What does this teach us? How can we each benefit and leverage our collective resources to become more successful? In place of a hierarchy, each person’s role is defined. Though the Servant Leader may initiate this process, if it is truly successful, soon any team mate will call for an accounting **BECAUSE IT IS REWARDING AND SAFE TO MEASURE PROGRESS, CELEBRATE, RECALIBRATE AND LEARN FROM MISTAKES.** Identifying problems early brings valuable lead time for all. Problems can quickly be turned into opportunities because the focus is on solving rather than blaming. And, because the coach is seen as a resource rather than a judge, s/he is invited in early and often or as needed.

WIN/LOSE VERSUS WIN/WIN/WIN

If accountability is seen as searching out failure or level of success, a person’s self esteem is directly proportional to how much success is recognized. However, if accountability is seen as a mutual discovery process, then each person is recognized as highly important to the process before it begins. In the new paradigm, high self esteem is continually nurtured. Within this context, the Servant Leader and team work together to create a win/win/win. Rather than competing for who gets a raise, bonus or other rewards, why not work collaboratively so that each gets what they identify as important to them personally? If this happens, not only do these primary partners win, but the customers, families, team mates and community will most likely also benefit. This is the true definition of synergy where the whole is worth more than the sum of the parts. In win/lose situations, there is always distrust because the assumption is that only one party can win. If I win, you lose. However, in the new paradigm, we commit to stay engaged until we find a way for all to win. This calls for “thinking outside the box,” for discovering paradigm shifts, for making creative leaps. “Grow the pie instead of merely dividing an existing pie.”

LEGALISTIC VERSUS HOLISTIC

In the old paradigm there is an adversarial relationship. “I am the boss and it is my job to make you honor your commitments.” A contract implies that each of us will only honor the specifics as spelled out. Loop holes are painstakingly sought out. Distrust underlies this paradigm.

In contrast, holistic thinking tells us that the whole can be no stronger than the weakest link. If we invest major energy trying to “cover our backside” or litigating differences rather than searching out more imaginative solutions, we all lose. In the first situation, expectations are fixed and we assume that we are only accountable to the letter of the law. However, in this new time of fast change and in this

new paradigm, we know that we need to operate at the level of covenant, by developing a high level of mutual trust. We establish a broad definition of shared goals and individual roles and responsibilities. Knowing that the situation will be in constant flux, we expect to renegotiate our needs and solutions as the situation changes. In this paradigm the level of shared trust is key. No person or party can be seen as more important. Each person is a potential leader of that about which they know the most. Yet simultaneously, each must equally be a follower of all others, synergizing and supporting the areas where others lead and know most. This is precisely why Robert Greenleaf's concept of Servant Leadership is so powerful!

He challenges us with, *"Anybody could lead perfect people--if there were any. But there aren't any perfect people. And the parents who try to raise perfect children are certain to raise neurotics.*

It is part of the enigma of human nature that the "typical" person--immature, stumbling, inept, lazy--is capable of great dedication and heroism if s/he is wisely led.

Many otherwise able people are disqualified to lead because they cannot work with and through the half-people who are all there are. The secret of institution building is to be able to weld a team of such people by lifting them up to grow taller than they would otherwise be.

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted." (pg. 13 *The Servant as Leader* published by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. Copyright 1970)

EXTRINSIC VERSUS INTRINSIC

In the old paradigm, accountability contributes to an extrinsic definition of self worth. "I am valuable if my boss and my company or others in authority (teacher, parents, critics, etc.) think I am." In the new paradigm, accountability encourages each person to begin with unconditional love and acceptance of self and others. Intrinsic definition of self worth causes each person to be guided by personal values, then personal and shared vision. Because each is free to speak openly and honestly, accountability is about asking, "Are we on course?" If anyone has information that the ship is headed in the wrong direction, a storm is coming up or the sails need mending, early discovery is celebrated and acted upon by all. The goal is a successful journey and great joy and satisfaction comes from shared progress. Consequences impact all and are shared.

This is dramatically different from the old paradigm, which leaves all internal partners essentially competing with each other for power, position, rewards and recognition. In this new time of fast change, collaboration is replacing competition. We may compete for clients and markets but still, our behavior must be collaborative. Our competitor for *Job A* may become our partner as we team to perform in high risk markets on *Job B*, where neither can afford the level of risk alone. Our resources of air, water, earth and biodiversity are shared no matter what. Awakening to this implication demands a new and more complex awareness of shared accountability.

In the old paradigm, accountability involves laying blame and offering excuses. Whereas, in the new paradigm, accountability is more often centered on dialogue to raise the level of "collective intelligence" and therefore to create more fruitful options. It is more about learning together and changing synergistically. Rewards are more about collectively achieving something of tremendous intrinsic value than they are about money, profit, or bonuses. Dollars, profit, and bonuses are the result of intrinsic accountability but not the motivator.

THE CORNERSTONES OF THIS CHALLENGING NEW PARADIGM ARE SHARED LEADERSHIP, SHARED VISION, AND PROACTIVELY ANTICIPATING CHANGE.

Everyone must become both Leader and Follower, taking full responsibility for what they know best and the unique talents and perspective belonging only to them. Meanwhile respecting that those balancing talents and perspectives of all others must be considered and integrated. It is fascinating to discover that within teams who know how to dialogue, creating much richer shared meaning, their collective intelligence rises to become much higher than the brightest member of their team. However, in teams where individuals compete to be right and have the last say, the collective intelligence falls below the level of the least bright team member because the brighter members begin to cancel each other out with power plays and intimidation. Others duck and choose not to surface their insights because it is not safe to do so. Negative humor is often used as a power tool to coerce and control. Teams who use or allow negative humor will stay stuck in the old paradigms and may not realize why.

Creating a shared vision is primary and central to all else. As noted by Peter Senge in *Fifth Discipline*, creating a personal vision must precede the creation of shared vision. If not, the power of a compelling shared vision will co-opt those who have not defined themselves with a personal vision. They will eventually feel coerced by the group because of the void of self identity and personal meaning. However, once each has clearly created and aligned personal vision with a shared vision and purpose, this alignment becomes a powerful motivator and energizer. Now great energy comes from being accountable to this passionate shared vision. But with something magnificent to achieve, even people's immune systems become engaged and stronger, based on internal bio-chemical changes triggered by the commitment to something inspiring. This fascinating connection first emerged in "Man's Search for Meaning," a true story written by Dr. Viktor Frankl, a prisoner in a World War II Nazi concentration camp. Dr. Frankl observed that those who carried a burning purpose in their lives were far more likely to survive than those who may have been younger, stronger or in better health but lacking this strong personal vision.

WHAT RESULTS CAN BE EXPECTED? WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES FROM NEW PARADIGM? DOES IT WORK?

Most of us thrive on and relish meaningful challenge as we grow stronger, more capable of managing risk and stretching personal performance when being supported by committed partners. It is not only much harder for most to perform alone in fast change, but we pay the price for our blind spots by learning of them too late. When we each proactively and intentionally partner with opposites and balance weaknesses with strengths, we each have enormous opportunities to change and grow positively. In today's world, if you DON'T change, you get left behind and that's far more painful and damaging. As leaders, if we don't give the people we serve every opportunity to grow and change, we are hurting them more. We are also betraying our sacred trust as leaders, not only to those we lead but also to those we collectively serve.

When people are empowered to achieve shared goals, accountability takes on a new meaning of purpose and commitment. At the conclusion of a recent meeting, one of our close colleagues asked the group in a Servant Leader style, "What kind of accountability do you want to create?" The leader did not impose her ideas or give a hard date when results were due. Rather, she deferred to them this decision. The surprise was that they wanted accountability and imposed an ambitious timeframe on themselves even though all were at a very busy time with other work. "If we don't put this up front, it won't get done. It's too important to let slide. Let's commit to completing this by the end of December (six weeks hence)." Because the vision was shared, because this team created and owned the plan, because the

purpose and outcome was believed to be pivotal, this team chose to hold themselves and each other accountable for results. The Servant Leader was asked by the group to circulate the results on the agreed upon date. Roles were defined and consequences spelled out.

We begin in life confronted by the challenge of learning to be accountable to oneself. Until that is mastered it is far more challenging to participate with others. Think of accountability as the tap root which reaches deep into soil and rocks, drawing precious nutrients and life quenching water while anchoring the plant against wind and storms. Is this not the role of accountability in our lives? Without this process, dreams, goals and promises go unfulfilled, which may discourage further dreaming. But by closing the loop and choosing to learn from all that happens, whether pleasing or disappointing, we send a tap root deep into the soil of shared experience. With each accounting we learn and grow stronger.

“The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or, at least, will he not be further deprived?”(pg. 7 *The Servant as Leader* published by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. Copyright 1970)