

leadership instalments

The Heart of Accountability

By Dan Gaynor

BY FAR THE THING I HEAR MORE ABOUT THAN anything else these days is accountability – most leaders want more of it. These days there is a near obsession with the topic. It has spawned books and seminars all playing to a soft spot for most leaders. It's as if some think, "If I can just get them to commit to it on paper – it will happen."

Here I want to introduce the idea of reciprocity. Reciprocity is defined as a mutual exchange or a relationship and that's an important idea for all leaders. It suggests we should not look at accountability or any other facet of a leadership relationship one dimensionally. We should look as closely at what we're doing as we do at the employee's behaviour. As I continue to emphasize, teams are always a reflection of leadership and accountability falls squarely into this category.

Let me illustrate with a tale of two leaders. I knew a leader some time ago who had a near obsession with accountability. This leader read books and had employees write accountability agreements. He set impossible targets under impossible circumstances and cared not at all about the hardship they entailed. Because he worked 80-hour weeks he thought everyone else should as well. When their best efforts came up short he regularly lost his temper, banging on tables or other furniture and reprimanding and often belittling employees very publicly. I think he missed the idea that his behaviour may have been the biggest part of the accountability problem.

As a newspaper publisher I worked for a man, then Southam COO Don Babick, who was truly one of the best leaders I have ever worked for. I met Don early in my career and from the onset of our relationship it became clear that he had an interest in me and wanted to help me succeed. Don cared about everyone who worked for him. He was fair and caring but he was also demanding. Don set the bar high but

he always made sure it was within reach. Although we never talked about it, I believe he valued balance as well. He never asked anything that demanded lots of my family time, although I worked long hours when I needed to, and there were times like the eight month strike at the Calgary Herald or the integration at the St. Catharines Standard, when I needed to. But those were always the exception and not the rule.

My bet is that you've worked for each of these bosses. They had different names and places but one was fair minded and caring and the other seemed completely unreasonable. Take just a minute and think about the good boss. Recall who he or she was and the way you felt about working for this person. If you felt anything like I did, you'd have done whatever you could not to disappoint this boss. Isn't that really the heart of accountability – employees who will do whatever they reasonably can not to disappoint the man or woman they work for? This kind of accountability doesn't require faddish written agreements – it evolves naturally when genuinely caring leaders make and uphold reasonable demands – when they are demanding, fair and caring.

Now it is also true that at times caring leaders – those who value a more collegial environment – can tip over the line at times and allow people to forget they are serious about responsibilities. I've made this mistake and had to redraw the lines once or twice. But just as often I see unreasonable leaders treat employees poorly and then complain about accountability. These leaders need to look first in the mirror.

This brings us back to the upside of reciprocity: When a leader genuinely cares about his or her employees, when he treats them fairly and does not ask the impossible, when she treats them as

though she values them even when things are not going well – then these employees will care about the leader. They will do whatever they can not to disappoint leaders like this. This is accountability that is powerful and lasting.

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