

WHY ACCOUNTABILITY MATTERS

This is one of a series of occasional papers prepared by The Dilenschneider Group to bring clients and friends a different perspective. We hope you find it of interest.

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What do you think of when you hear the term *accountability*? The typical dictionary doesn't offer much insight.

The Merriam-Webster definition states: *The quality or state of being accountable; especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions.*

Interestingly, both examples of "accountable" provided by Webster's present the concept in a negative light:

1. *If anything goes wrong, I will hold you personally accountable!*
2. *The owner was held accountable for his dog's biting of the child.*

Actually, this shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Think of the contexts in which accountability has arisen recently in public awareness. Do these sound familiar?

- *"Who was accountable for the American lives lost in Benghazi?"*
- *"Who is accountable for the financial crisis or the high rate of unemployment?"*
- *"Who is accountable for the questionable activities of the IRS in Cincinnati?"*

It seems we have come to use “accountability” and “culpability” almost as synonyms.

Finger-pointing is rife in America. Political parties blame each other for economic and social woes. Our divorce courts are crowded with spouses blaming each other for the failures of their marriages. Teachers are blamed for poor academic performance.

What good can come of this?

A BETTER WAY OF LIFE

We suggest it is far more productive to focus instead on the *positive* connotations and implications of accountability.

In this perspective, look at accountability in terms of taking *responsibility* for one’s actions. There are many examples of individuals who have accepted responsibility for their mistakes and misdeeds and emerged relatively unscathed.

Don’t just look at accountability as a final scorecard (did you succeed or fail?), but as a principle to guide everything you do.

Accountability should be approached as a mindset—one that shapes our goals and the action you take to achieve these goals.

World religions have preached accountability for many millennia. In Christianity and Islam, entrance to heaven is predicated on a positive accounting of one’s life. In Judaism, accountability is seen as synonymous with adulthood and is celebrated by young people in the bar and bat-mitzvah services. The concept of karma is central to the Hindu faith, where all actions—positive and negative—are taken into account in determining a soul’s destiny.

One does not necessarily have to be a person of faith to incorporate accountability in one's personal and professional life. It is all about having an inner compass and following it. Morality may not be a popular word today, but it is at the heart of true accountability.

Looking at accountability from this perspective forces us to focus on the big picture. It makes us think of the implications of our actions not just as they relate to ourselves, but to the world at large and even to future generations.

A ACCOUNTABILITY IN BUSINESS

When one hears of accountability in business, it often arises when someone is being fired, fined or sent to prison. But many ask where is the accountability when banks guilty of highly questionable lending and investing practices get bailed out and incompetent corporate leaders are rewarded with rich golden parachutes as they are sent packing?

Again, rather than dwell on accountability as *culpability*, focus instead on accountability as *responsibility*. In that light, creating a culture of accountability is not only the right thing to do in business, it is the smart thing.

We know that business can be done in a responsible fashion. Quality work, innovation and a commitment to all stakeholders, including the community, all pay off. Typically, Microsoft has been a paragon of social responsibility, donating time, money and endless resources to causes including health care and education, while never hesitant to acknowledge errors, accept responsibility and explore new pathways. The same may be said for iconic American companies such as Ford, GE and U.S. Steel. All enjoy very positive reputations.

In businesses and organizations, accountability should be institutionalized. Every project and assignment should have clear and measurable goals. Individual and group responsibilities should be clear to all involved. Progress must be tracked regularly so that issues can be detected early in the process and adjustments made long before “issues” turn into “problems.” In the end, all participants need to be evaluated and, ultimately, be held accountable (both positively and negatively) for their contributions.

A culture of accountability starts in the C-suite and is then transmitted to, and internalized by, the organization as a whole. It must be woven into the corporate DNA.

- In hiring, character should be as important as an Ivy League degree or a 4.0 GPA.
- Company handbooks must not only articulate the expectation of accountability, they must set out the mechanisms and processes by which accountability will be practiced and measured.
- Inculcating a sense of accountability should be central to all training programs.

With this standard of accountability in place, managers may be hearing a very different, quite positive, tune:

- “Wilson was accountable for bringing in the account.”
- “Johnson was accountable for our double-digit growth in the second quarter.”
- “Sanchez was accountable for cutting our energy costs by a third.”

Accountability in the workplace should not be seen as a way of preventing failure, but of encouraging excellence. When efforts fail, as they invariably will, accountable organizations will have mechanisms and attitudes in place that maximize learning from such failures.

In many cases, failures can result from the pursuit of excellence. Pharmaceutical companies invest billions in research, knowing the vast majority of initiatives will fail, but hoping one or two powerful new drugs will reward their efforts.

It took years and thousands of unsuccessful experiments before Thomas Edison developed the carbon filament electric light bulb. Rather than dwell on the negative, Edison explained: “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

Of course, not all failures have positive takeaways. Failures resulting from negligence, arrogance, self-interest or incompetency have no redeeming qualities. That’s why a thorough and honest evaluation process is so critical.

Accountability issues invariably arise in crisis situations. Those organizations built on a foundation of authentic accountability are going to weather the storm far better than those which have not. The former possess a trove of good will with the public and the media thanks to a culture of transparency and honesty. Organizations where there is little or no accountability, on the other hand, are particularly vulnerable when a crisis strikes.

M EETING A CRISIS

By way of illustration, Penn State University suffered terrible reputational damage from the Jerry Sandusky scandal. Sandusky, an assistant football coach, systematically abused young boys for years before he was finally convicted and sent to prison. When the first eyewitness account of Sandusky’s behavior was reported, the reaction at Penn State was to ignore the problem, cover it up and deny it was happening.

Now, finally, the this great University is starting to come back.

In contrast, remember the classic case of Johnson & Johnson some years ago. Through no fault of its own, someone replaced Tylenol capsules with cyanide-laced pills, killing seven people in Chicago. Johnson & Johnson responded by immediately taking 31 million bottles off of pharmacy shelves nationwide. It worked closely with law enforcement, offered up a \$100,000 award, and provided financial and psychological assistance to the victims' families.

The Company also learned valuable lessons from the crisis and completely changed its packaging to make the bottles far more tamper-resistant. The result was a very positive response in the media. Though Johnson & Johnson took a short-term financial hit, it built a wealth of good will and the Company was able to recover in a remarkably short time.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN GOVERNMENT

There is no simple way of dealing with accountability in government and politics. Faced with so many constituencies—voters, donors, political parties and myriad interest groups—it is hard to be fully accountable to each, but just how hard?

In a March 2013 Gallup Poll, Congress had an alarming 13% approval rating and only 21% of the many respondents were satisfied with the way things were going in the United States. Nevertheless, the vast majority in the House will be re-elected in 2014 because gerrymandering has assured them safe districts—hardly an example of public accountability.

One of the great things about America is the singular diversity of feelings and beliefs of the nation's population. Differences of opinion are an inherent part of the multi-party system. Most people enter politics because they hold strong beliefs and are willing to devote themselves to a life of public service.

However, what may be close to the core beliefs of one person can be abhorrent to another. Hot-button social issues like abortion, evolution and same-sex marriage have proven to be highly divisive. Gun control, tax policy and entitlements all elicit passionate, if wildly polarized, viewpoints. What role does accountability play in such a charged environment?

There is no simple answer here. The old "civics" book remedy was "to leave it to the American people." But America, as we well know, is an extremely diverse land.

DIFFERENT VALUES

The Americans represented in the U.S. Senate by New York's Charles Schumer do not necessarily share the values and political beliefs of Mitch McConnell's Kentucky constituents. In the House, Jerry Nadler's constituents in New York City's Greenwich Village and Coney Island share little of their political agendas with Michele Bachmann's supporters in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

These deep political, philosophical and religious divides have made our politics more contentious than perhaps at any time since the Civil War. The recent fiscal cliff and sequestration debates illustrate just how divided we are on key issues relating to the economy, to defense, education, health care, taxation and entitlements.

This Red Book on *Why Accountability Matters* is surely not going to solve these issues. We can talk about the importance of listening to other viewpoints, the art of negotiation and the practical necessity of compromising, but our readers cannot change this climate overnight.

We do know, however, that government can do historic and positive things. In the 30s, the New Deal built dams and power plants, created consumer and worker protections and established Social Security. In the 40s, we defeated our foreign enemies, helped bring peace to the world and rebuilt much of Europe. In the 50s, we created the national highway system. In the 60s, we sent a man to the moon and established civil and voting rights for all U.S. citizens.

Going forward, our vision must go well beyond the confines of the next election. In this context, government can no longer ignore its responsibilities to our children and our children's children. These responsibilities cover many fronts:

- The enormous debt we have already accumulated and continue to accumulate.
- Our crumbling infrastructure, including an antiquated electrical grid, ill-repaired bridges and tunnels and a dangerously antiquated rail system.
- Our failure to fully explore and exploit alternative energy sources to fossil fuels.
- Our dismal performance in educating our children in math, science and engineering, putting us dangerously behind in fields critical for a technology-driven economic future.

We must also strive to be more accountable to the global community. Advances in technology give us the potential for universal global prosperity. But with half the world still living in poverty, with clean water scarce in many places, with avoidable diseases killing millions, and with so many deprived of education, global prosperity may seem like a distant dream.

We can do better and should do better. Ours is the most powerful and generous Country in the world. We can be proud of what we have accomplished in the past and strive for so much more in the future.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN ONE'S PERSONAL LIFE

We have written about what businesses and governments can do in terms of accountability, but the heart of accountability is how we internalize and employ it in our everyday relations.

How we live our lives, how we treat people, how we feel about ourselves is what makes us human. Those with little sense of accountability live small lives. Those who understand what it means to be accountable—to spouses, children and parents—are the ones living more fulfilled lives worth emulating.

It all sounds so easy, does it not? Well, it isn't. Not by a long shot. Most of us live busy, even hectic lives. It is no secret that successful people work long hours and that time for family and friends is often sacrificed. Smartphones, computers, tablets, social media and mobile commerce have further encroached on what we used to call "free time."

Modern digital technology, although a great boon to society, has its drawbacks. Connecting and sharing is fine and desirable, but it can, in small and big ways, also undermine individual accountability and responsibility—especially in family matters.

- How often have you seen parents at their children's sporting events with their faces buried in their iPads?
- How many times do you see couples out to dinner with an iPhone either sitting on the table or in active use?

- How many family car trips pass in silence as kids listen to music while texting friends and parents catch up on e-mails, Skype with co-workers or immerse themselves in their Kindles?

All of this connectivity does wonders for productivity, but at what price? What about our accountability to those who love and depend on us? Many successful people become that way because they learn time management—how to prioritize effectively and how to focus on the issues that matter most. Too often, their personal lives aren't managed nearly as well.

What should accountability mean on the home front? It is all about being a positive role model, about instilling values, mutual respect, compassion and love. We must learn (or re-learn) to practice the arts of listening, sacrifice and empathy. It takes work—a lot of it.

President Obama tries to serve as a role model for a work-life balance. While some have argued that it has cut into his ability to lead effectively, he makes a point of taking the time to share dinner, sporting events and even parent-teacher conferences with his family.

Just as in the work world and the world of politics, accountability in one's personal life takes planning, dedication and constant effort. Will we always succeed? Of course not. Can we strive to do our best, savor our successes and learn from our failures? Absolutely.

Ironically, the absence of accountability—be it a cover-up, or indifference, or outright denial—is often self-defeating in unexpected ways. We live in a time when many of us are inclined to forgive wrongdoers when they accept responsibility and seek to make amends. Scripture wisely tells us that to forgive is divine.

Alas, human beings have always been guilty of unethical, immoral, illegal, and, yes, barbarous conduct. Those traits could well be part of human nature, which is precisely why accountability is so crucial—and essential. Whatever transgressions are committed, acknowledging responsibility can be an uplifting, cleansing act that, in the final analysis, reinforces trust and enables civil societies to endure.

“Why Accountability Matters” is the latest in a series of “Little Red Books” published periodically for our clients and friends. We hope our readers find them relevant and of value. Previous titles have included:

- “The *Underappreciated* Art of Saying Thank You”
- “The Age of Apology”
- “Managing Uncertainty”
- “C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y.”
- “The Lost Art of Listening”
- “Two Decades (1991-2011): The Words and the Deeds”
- “The Art of Disagreement”

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The Dilenschneider Group, Inc.

Helping Corporations Plan Ahead and Communicate Globally

MetLife Building • 200 Park Avenue • New York, NY 10166
Phone: 212/922 0900 • Fax: 212/922 0971

Three First National Plaza • 70 West Madison Street
Chicago, IL 60602 • Phone: 312/553 0700 • Fax: 312/553 0695

thedilenschneidergroup.com

