Creating a Culture of Accountability

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2013, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Mon., December 2, 2013

What comes to mind when you hear the word "accountability"? Many people think of being bound by a commitment to a person in a position of authority. That person, due to his or her position in the hierarchy, has the privilege of offering rewards for good performance and correction or reprimands for failed or otherwise inadequate performance.

The very word "accountability" often carries with it a negative connotation. The implied downside of inadequate performance causes some individuals to avoid accepting responsibility. Such reluctance rarely is seen in healthy organizations.

Does that mean that healthy organizations don't hold people accountable? Quite the contrary; vibrant cultures are filled with people who make commitments they fully intend to execute. The promises they make are to serve and support their customers and colleagues (peers, direct reports, and bosses).

How does such a culture develop? It starts with personal accountability. Whether building your culture from scratch or converting an existing culture, members of an organization would do well to study John G. Miller's modest 2004 book entitled *QBQ! The Question behind the Question: Practicing Personal Accountability at Work and in Life*.

The title of the book comes from an observation that our first reactions to undesirable situations often are judgmental. Out of our negative thoughts come what Miller calls "incorrect questions." His advocacy is that we become habitual lookers "behind" those thoughts to questions that lead us to better answers.

Miller offers three guidelines for creating questions that lead to greater personal accountability.

Begin questions with "What" or "How", not "Why," "When," or "Who." When personal accountability is lacking, the culture will likely tolerate (some even foster) complaining, procrastination, and blame. Let's look at how that occurs.

Asking "Why" leads to victim thinking, complaining, and unnecessary stress. "Why" questions come in all varieties, yet they all imply "Why are 'they' making this happen to me?" You believe that something "out there" is controlling your environment and constraining you. In reality, of course, you can choose your response to any situation. "Why me?" thinking simply disempowers you and delays action.

Asking "When" implies that you will have to wait for something "out there" to happen before you can take action. "When" questions lead to procrastination. Procrastination delays the creation of better situations, and waiting for some unknown entity adds stress for everyone.

Asking "Who" is a generic effort to find the cause of unwanted situations and leads to a mentality of blame and scapegoating. Potentially being the perpetrator is likely the source of the fear most people associate with the concept of accountability. In an organization, blaming is perhaps the most pervasive and counterproductive of all the forces leading away from personal accountability.

Questions that begin with "What" or "How" usually lead to better (that is, more personally accountable) answers than questions that begin with "Who," "Why," or "When." To see another (independent) perspective on this guideline, look at my website: www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives. Scroll down alphabetically to the article entitled "'What?' and 'How?' Are Better than 'Why?'"

Personal accountability questions contain an "I," not "they," "them," "we," or "you." Such questions turn the focus away from outside circumstances and other people. You'll be much more effective putting your attention where you have real control--your personal thoughts and actions! "Improvement" is an interesting thing. You often resist others when they want to change you, yet you seek to change others all the time. If I asked, "What could Ed do to be more effective?" you'd probably be able to offer a rather explicit answer. Yet if I ask, "What could you do to be more effective?" you'll likely hesitate, offering a quizzical look as you search for an answer.

Miller offers a twist on the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to focus my energy appropriately."

Questions that foster personal accountability focus on action. Good ideas are hugely beneficial, but outcomes occur only when you execute a behavior.

Miller points out several advantages of action over inaction:
- Action, even when it leads to mistakes, brings learning and growth. Inaction brings stagnation and atrophy.
- Action leads us toward solutions. Inaction at best does nothing except hold us in the past.
- Action requires courage. Inaction often indicates and perpetuates fear.
- The action builds confidence. Inaction sustains and fosters doubt.

Putting the three guidelines together. It's quite simple once you master the three concepts. Start the question with "What" or "How." Add an "I." Then specify an action.

Questions such as "What can I do?" and "How may I support you?" embody all three of Miller's guidelines. Memorizing those two questions alone will move you much closer to being a role model of personal accountability.

When a critical mass of influential individuals starts asking better questions, your organization's culture will quickly become more robust. We humans watch and emulate those we respect, so you only need to convince a few informal leaders. Organizational norms may change slowly, but they can change!
****

Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach, helping Atlanta organizations build future leaders, improve processes, and establish healthy cultures. Contact Dennis at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or call him at 770-286-2250. Access his leadership articles at www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.