

## WHAT IS A CULTURE OF BLAME?

“If all responsibility is imposed on you, then you may want to exploit the moment and want to be overwhelmed by the responsibility; yet if you try, you will notice that nothing was imposed on you, but that you are yourself this responsibility.”

**(Franz Kafka (1883–1924), Prague German Jewish author, novelist)**

That quotation from Franz Kafka sums up, I think, the subject of responsibility. It is something that we, mostly, accept or impose on ourselves when we accept the mantle of leadership; for example, readily accepting work or a task that we are set and doing our level best to complete the project as and when required and often to pre-determined timescales. We also accept responsibility when we readily acknowledge that we have a duty to our comrades, fellow-workers or subordinates to ensure that what we do helps them to complete their tasks to the best of their ability. This is particularly so in all military organizations for many obvious reasons. Accountability is accepting we are responsible to someone else for our actions to ensure that we conduct ourselves as effectively as possible in a professional, moral, ethical and socially responsive manner.

Accountability and responsibility are words that we tend to band about when referring to leadership because leaders, real leaders, do not shirk responsibility for the actions and efforts of others and accept accountability for decision-making. It is also implied or accepted that they are also responsible to someone above them for the work, output or provision of goods or services to meet the demands of internal and external customers. The fact is there is a difference between being accountable and being responsible but it is often blurred because the two are synonymous.

During the past decade we have heard, regularly, politicians, senior civil servants, senior managers and professionals in many walks of business and public service, and others who advise them, that we must move away from a culture of blame if we are to improve the way that organizations are managed. Unfortunately that attitude, most noticeably expressed by a politician who insisted he was responsible for policy and strategy but not for any operational matters, has led to the situation where few people in positions of power will either accept or acknowledge that they are responsible and accountable for the people who work for them and certainly not when something goes drastically wrong. What appears to have happened in Britain, over the last two or three decades, is that when something goes right politicians and senior managers crawl out of the woodwork to claim a share of responsibility, but, when something goes drastically wrong then no one is either responsible or accountable. The continuing problems with our NHS, failures at the Home Office and in the Prison service and the continuing problems with the state education system spring to mind. The bastions of Whitehall appear impregnable but isn't it strange how such ideas start at the top?

And, it has spread downwards through organizations, through the management fad of empowerment, which allows more senior people to wriggle out of responsibility. But let us be frank, empowerment simply does not happen because management, by definition, is responsible and accountable. It also allows many at the lower levels to deny any share of responsibility when organizations fail. And, it has led, in the case of politicians and senior business leaders, to the introduction of the humble apology, sometimes accompanied by 'crocodile tears', for having been caught out or caught wanting. That is why if and when a company fails it is important to know the reason and to apportion blame accordingly and not to avoid the issue.

But what is a culture of blame? Is it one in which everyone has very clearly defined job specifications and levels of responsibility and accountability for carrying out a particular action, at a particular time and in a particular fashion and if the process goes wrong one can see immediately who has failed to pull a lever, turn a wheel or push a button, make a decision or even kick a ball?

If the end result of something going wrong is to immediately push the blame down to the lowest level and remove a person from the process then it is quite possible that the company will not prosper or last long because people will not be prepared to work for an organization or for managers and a management system that reacts in such a manner. And, what if it is not their fault because it is quite possible that he or she was not trained correctly in the first place or a button seized or the wheel was too stiff or the lever broke or a computer crashed. Rather, it would make more sense to investigate why something happened and determine the weakness in the process and refine and re-define procedures and if there was a very clear case that systems, procedures or guidelines were deliberately flouted then that is the time to lay blame.

However, that sort of system reminds me, yet again, of Charlie Chaplin and the film 'Modern Times' but there are, surely, very few companies that operate in the manner portrayed in the film? Even in the mass-production manufacturing sectors the mechanized shop-floor assembly line is no longer so regimented, indeed the concept of team-working has replaced the old-fashioned bit where one man is trained to carry out just one task and lines of demarcation, so often favoured by some trades unions, no longer exists.

I digress, but it is relevant. Is a culture of blame one in which people in positions of power are held to be both responsible and accountable for their actions and the actions of their staff and more especially when gross mistakes are made? And, is this not what people in all senior positions in all professions are paid large salaries and perks for, to be both responsible and accountable for decision-making? If not then why are there huge pay differences between those on the lower and middle levels in organizations and those at the very top? To clarify the situation why don't we play the 'what if' scenario?

For example, what if an aircraft pilot did not pull back on the control column when the aircraft had reached take-off speed or V2 or whatever the technical term is? What if the Captain of a ship did not reduce the speed of advance of his vessel in high winds or high seas or in poor visibility in a crowded shipping lane? What if a doctor did not carry out the full range of medical tests available to him and which he should carry out when a patient complained of pain in one area of his anatomy or another? What if a nurse or other medical staff did not give an injection or a correct dose of prescribed medicine, as told, to the right patient at a pre-determined time? What if a train driver did not pay attention and drove his train through a red stoplight?

Or, what happens, for example, if social service directors and staff fail to carry out the appropriate inspections and checks and balances necessary to ensure that vulnerable people, whether young, old or infirm, are safe and secure and are actually being taken care of and are receiving the support, medical as well as physical, emotional and spiritual, that they need? I do not need to amplify but in each and every case the results can be and often are disastrous not just for individuals but also for families and communities.

Or, what happens if a doctor fails, or perhaps even refuses, to conduct the necessary tests for any number of reasons including financial, or a nurse or other medical staff fails to carry out instructions issued by a consultant or a doctor and a patient dies? Too often investigations come to the very unsatisfactory conclusion that everyone but no one is responsible or accountable for making sure things, by that I mean processes, procedures, guideline instructions or even directives happen when they should, how they should and in accordance with guidance, and far too often it seems that organizations and groups of people are wise after the event.

How many times during the past few decades have we heard one social services organization after another say that responsibility fell between two stools, that liaison with another organization such as the police or medical services, that no one is to blame and that they are about to change their policies and procedures? Too often bureaucratic incompetence ensures that those who are really responsible for taking decisions or not doing something avoid any kind of penalty and sometimes are even promoted.

All those examples relate to public services in the transport and medical professions and they illustrate areas where the demand for professional attitudes and training are paramount but there are other areas. What if a manager decided, for whatever reason, that he or she was not going to meet the demands of a regular customer? What if your milkman decided he was not going to get out of bed and make his deliveries one morning? What if a City fund manager did not pay close attention to the movement of a particular share price in which he or she has invested heavily? What if naval and military officers decided that the dictates of politicians had reached an unacceptable stage and that what was being demanded was either morally or ethically indefensible and could not be provided?

What if senior civil servants decided to ignore or circumvent the demands of their political masters and the elected administration? What if policemen decided to spend much of their time behind desks in police stations or in motorcars riding up and down motorways rather than out on the beat in the streets of towns and cities observing what was happening and acting as a clear deterrent to would-be criminals. Or, on a somewhat lighter but serious note, what if a politician decided to tell the truth? That in itself would be a shock but it would be a start.

And, whilst on that subject let us take a closer look at the responsibilities of politicians and the bureaucratic processes that support government policies and help to keep them in power. Politicians are, apparently, responsible and accountable to the electorate in their constituencies for ensuring that the interests of those people, individually and collectively, are pursued through the political system and government ministers are accountable to parliament, that is, in a round about fashion, they are accountable to the general public.

But is that really the case? When was the last time that a politician had the integrity, the backbone, the moral fibre and the balls to stand up and accept responsibility for a failed policy? What if, for example, a government minister and his department has knowledge of or is aware of a problem with foodstuffs or vaccines that is likely to affect the public but does nothing about it or worse suppresses the information? If and when the scandal comes to light should not public outrage demand a public hearing to determine who is to blame? And, shouldn't the division of responsibilities be clarified and more importantly, shouldn't the punishment fit the crime?

Whether they like it or not politicians are both responsible and accountable for what happens in their departments during their watch and senior businessmen are responsible for companies and it is time they all accepted the fact. The truth is that whichever way you dress the equation the public sector, and by that I mean politicians, Quangos, public bodies, public organizations, local councils and public servants are often seen, or even proven, as unaccountable, even when large sums of tax-payers money is mis-used. That is why there is a need to separate out what is done commercially, for gain and profit, and that, which should be done 'pro bono publico'.

Or, should we accept that people make mistakes and allow the danger, the difficulty or gross negligence to drift away? Too often politicians are the ones who are quickest off the mark to eschew the twin pillars of personal, economic and social responsibility and accountability. You see adopting the principle that everyone is responsible and no one is to blame means that those who do or should know better and are paid to know better can actually avoid being accountable. Truth is we get the politicians we deserve and by not holding them to account we end up with even more spineless politicians who live by spin.

The list of 'what ifs' is almost endless and the consequences of someone not taking responsibility for his or her actions vary enormously as does the level of accountability. But they all hinge on the concept of all of us accepting that we have a duty and responsibility to carry out tasks allotted to us at or in a given period of time and to the best of our ability. It is what a company, an organization, a community, society and a country is all about, acknowledging that we have a sense of duty, individually and collectively, to ourselves, our family and friends and our co-workers to act responsibly.

If we all decided, one day, that we were not going to do what was required or expected of us for 24 hours I guess the country would just about come to a standstill. If we all decided that, on one particular day, we were all going to do what we, individually, wanted to do and not go to work, not fly planes or drive trains, then chaos and confusion would reign and anarchy would, probably, rise. And, who would be to blame?

You see, at the end of the day society, whether we like it or not, does exist and part of the responsibility of society, that is you and I, is to ensure that social, moral, political, environmental and financial dealings are open, honest and above board. I am not, and neither are you, my brother's keeper but in any country with a social conscience every effort must be made to look after its young and its old. It is a primary marker of civilization and you can tell how civilized a nation is by the way it treats its' young and old. Uncivilized and selfish societies could care less; civilized ones ensure that people are cared for.

And whilst on the subject of responsibility just who are Chief Executives or Managing Directors and directors accountable to for their conduct and for the success of the company they manage and direct? Accepted wisdom, most notably and probably that of financiers, fund managers, bankers and economists, suggests they are accountable only to their shareholders which, in many cases, is or includes themselves. But, surely, Chairmen, boards of directors and senior managers should also be accountable to their employees for setting and observing the highest moral and ethical values and for ensuring that standards, and more especially in accounting principles and standards are being observed? And, should they not be responsible for ensuring that their staff is properly trained, motivated and rewarded?

As I have previously suggested in 'The Importance of Corporate Ethics' it is important that boards and companies act responsibly by establishing a set of corporate values for the way they treat customers, employees and suppliers as well as shareholders, in other words society at large. The idea that corporate social responsibility is an optional extra no longer wears and adopting social, ethical, moral and environmental standards is paramount to establishing and maintaining a company's reputation.

I am not suggesting for one minute that all boards of directors should suddenly adopt charitable attitudes, not that they would, but I believe it is paramount that they achieve their financial objectives without cheating, stealing or defrauding anyone.

And, given the more recent spate, at the beginning of the 21st century, of poor accounting standards and procedures that have led to the failure and collapse of companies and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs and even individual pension schemes, it seems imperative that the guideline rules be changed and strengthened. Little wonder that investors are beginning to question the reliability of annual audit reports and invite directors to explain their decisions and strategies. To begin perhaps it should be paramount that companies change their auditors on a regular basis and further that a company's principle auditor should not also provide other forms of management advice?

Concern over the growth of multi-nationals and the way that they conduct their business dealings is not new and it seems that some things do not change. When referring to the growth of big business and its apparent lack of responsibility and accountability Abraham Lincoln wrote:

"I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country...corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavour to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed."

**(Abraham Lincoln, November 21 1864 – letter to Colonel William F Elkins)**

So often people at the higher levels in companies and organizations, and that includes politicians, are quick to seize a photo opportunity and take the credit when things are going well but quickly disappear from the scene, drift into the background or merge into the shadows when things are going wrong and look to put the blame elsewhere. In some countries, more noticeably Japan, when things go wrong in a company or an organization it is accepted practice for Chairmen, Chief Executives and senior managers to resign.

That does not appear to be the case in western countries and the lack of responsibility and accountability can be applied equally to politicians and businessmen. Even when things go badly wrong most senior managers try to ride out any storm and hang onto their pay, their perks, their pension scheme and options rather than accept responsibility and go. It is a long, long time since it was reported that a politician, a chairman or a director of a company resigned on a matter of principle because things had gone wrong and he or she accepted both responsibility and accountability for the poor performance or failure of an organization.

I know that in UK Plc we have many managers in all organizations and companies and that many of those managers are under the impression that they are capable and professional, simply because they tell us through the pages of professional management magazines, newspaper articles and in their annual reports that they are not only efficient but effective and that they treat their employees correctly. That may or may not be the case but clearly what we appear to lack in political and professional life are not managers but leaders with not only the ability but also the bearing, backbone, manner, appearance and most of all integrity of someone who is capable of acknowledging mistakes and leave with dignity when gross mistakes are made rather than seek to shift blame and prolong the process.

How many Chairmen, CEOs, Managing Directors and other directors, and of course politicians, are quick to seize the headlines and the photo opportunity when something positive happens like signing a big contract, launching new products or services or reporting healthy profits in the annual report?

But, how many of those same people lead from the front when things go wrong, when a company issues a profit warning, a products turns out to be less than safe or poor mergers and acquisitions leaves the company wide-open for takeover or worse, collapses? Increasingly this is happening because companies are outsourcing the manufacture of products or the provision of services to third parties and that allows them to “do a Pontius Pilate” and shift the burden of responsibility onto another organization.

Or, what politician will hold his hand up and accept responsibility if some political or economic or social initiative turns out to be a load of tripe and many man hours and a great deal of public money is wasted in the process? I believe you will always find that wriggling out of responsibility and accountability for the duties and actions of others under your control invariably starts at the top or organizations and politicians, directors and senior managers will always do their utmost to push blame down the management structure.

On reflection I am of the opinion that rather than move away from a culture of blame it has become increasingly imperative that where there are clearly defined levels of responsibility and accountability that people holding any and all such positions or authority, whether in business or in politics, should be called to task if and when things go drastically wrong.

There is a very definite need for politicians, of all persuasions, to return to the concept of ministerial or prime ministerial responsibility, learn to tell the truth and stop back-peddling at the first sign of unacceptable behaviour that is likely to lead to embarrassing questions. There is far too much drivel, by politicians and by directors and senior businessmen, about not adopting a culture of blame and far too little about acknowledging and accepting responsibility and accountability for people, for organizations and for society in general. As Marie Curie suggested,

“You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals. To that end each of us must work to his own improvement, and at the same time share a general responsibility for all humanity, our particular duty being to aid those to whom we think we can be most useful.”

**(Marie Curie (1867 – 1934), Polish-born French chemist and physicist)**

Further, the idea that ministers and senior politicians and senior businessmen and women should be allowed to beat their breast say sorry and continue in their positions of responsibility and accountability is nonsense. The notion that you can confess to some misdemeanour whether big or small, even weep tears in front of the public, and escape retribution is totally unacceptable.

And, whilst on the subject of responsibility and accountability why is it that our armed services are recognized as being one of the best in the world, why is it that they can be called upon to respond to developing situations and provide any and all kinds of support for national disasters and why it is that they can put on displays of military precision as well as conduct warfare when required whilst other public areas such as the national health service, education and public transport are something of a shambles?

I might go so far as to suggest that a healthy dose of military organization, administration, command and control and discipline might not go amiss in other public sector organizations but then again no doubt many would cry foul!

I suggest that it is basically about leadership, clear lines of command and communications and training coupled with commitment, professionalism and enthusiasm. Again, why is it that we seem to have entrepreneurs and people capable of inventing things but we do not have a world-class manufacturing base? I suggest that the fault lies with our financial organizations and institutions. Their demand for short-term profit instead of longer-term investment in companies and more especially in research and development is what has ruined our manufacturing base.

In my view, unless there are proper controls in place in any and all organizations and clear lines of accountability for people in positions of power and responsibility then there will always be political, economic and social scandals, especially in the public service sectors, and people will beat their breast until the next scandal comes along. It must be that glorious combination of 'laissez-faire' and apathy that allows people at the top of companies and organizations to avoid the 'chop' for the fundamental reason that they no longer understand loyalty and commitment and appear to have lost all sense of moral, ethical and social values that once permeated our society.

But, the buck should and must stop somewhere and no matter what the organization, what the company or what the management structure there should be clear lines of responsibility and accountability such that when anything goes wrong it is possible to apportion blame and pass it upwards in the chain of command. What is desperately needed is openness, honesty, reliability, communication and integrity, in other words what is required in public organizations is good old-fashioned leadership that embraces responsibility and accountability.

(4110 words including quotations)

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