

Personal accountability by Peter M. Cleveland

<http://www.networkedgovernment.ca/PersonalAccountabilityCleveland>

It is a sad reflection of today's business world, and society in general, that an employee who exposes dishonest behaviour is more likely to be branded a whistleblower – a crass euphemism for snitch – than be commended for his or her action.

There are many incidents in corporate and government organizations where fear of reprisal has prevented the exposure of the perpetrators of wrong-doing. When this occurs, truth and honesty are relegated to the sidelines while personal accountability rarely enters the discussion.

This was evident with the corporate exposures within WorldCom and Enron where billion-dollar malfeasances ran rampant for months before anyone at the senior levels understood the significance of the issues. And let us not forget the Bre-X gold mining swindle that cost many investors their life savings.

Even closer to home is the loss of faith in Nortel Networks, where shareholders have borne the brunt of the dizzying crash in share value at the same time as executives have departed with substantial severance payouts. The jury has still to render a decision on the once mighty telecommunication giant and some of its former employees.

But, once again, the words 'personal accountability' have not been heard. Surely, one wonders, there must have been something along the way that triggered suspicions that not everything was completely right. Or was everyone sightless at WorldCom and Enron before the blindfolds came off? Was it that however honest their endeavour, they simply didn't want to be labelled a snitch?

This may seem a far stretch from the issue at hand, but it is not. Most of us have grown up accepting that all governments, regardless of their political stripe, will shower us with hollow promises. But there we have some clout, as we have seen with the results of the recent federal election.

Only recently did corporate misconduct raise our ire. Perhaps the attitude was: if it doesn't affect us why should we care? Yet, when one considers that of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are corporations and 49 are countries, it's about time we cared!

If we are not prepared to forgive our governments' sins, why should we ignore corporate wrong-doing? Clearly we should not. All employees should be free to express their personal accountability in the workplace where often it appears that "accountability is the right thing, as long as it doesn't apply to me."

In government, there is not a culture of trust or openness. Hence, the desire to speak up against wrong-doing or inefficiencies is not inherently natural. The government seeks to make up for this deficiency with more rules which, in turn, intensifies the mistrust and, by nature, inefficiencies.

This gives no credit to civil servants who execute in good faith. There are many bright, intelligent and hard-working people in the civil service who are professional and, consequently, hold themselves accountable.

We all grew up with rules and spent our teenage years trying to get around them. Rules assume we have no ability to think nor discipline to execute – especially the more minute and inane rules. Rules will do nothing but slow down the operation of government and add more layers of inefficiency.

Accountability is multi-dimensional: team-playing, identifying efficiencies, adopting organizational goals as personal goals, as well as ethical behaviour. The sponsorship scandal gives the impression there were not enough rules to be accountable for. There were – people just chose to ignore them.

Much has been written about corporate governance as being the panacea for accountability. In reality it is only one small aspect of it. I consider accountability to be an organization's ability to be open, honest and committed to achieving its goals.

The problem is that everybody hides when a wrong-doing is exposed. People have a tendency to blame each other. Accountability is not finger-pointing; it is accepting responsibility for the organization in which you function. And it is going the extra mile for the shareholders, fellow employees, customers, creditors and regulators.

Most corporations believe they exist for themselves, as opposed to the shareholders. When something goes wrong, those at the top suppress information so shareholders are unable to fairly evaluate their position as to whether they should sell or hold their investment. It is disturbing that this bunker mentality exists in Canada's corporate corridors.

To address benign neglect is no small task. The EMBA Program of the University of Ottawa's School of Management recently determined business leaders are extremely concerned about accountability within their organization; accountability of their people and accountability of their teams and the organization to its shareholders.

The findings of the business leaders' survey has led to the founding of a Leadership Forum that will be directed and run by the University of Ottawa's EMBA Program as part of the School of Management. Forty of Canada's most promising young leaders are being invited to participate. The Forum is being financed with grants and services from sponsors Scotia Bank, Ernst and Young, Borden Ladner Gervais, the Ottawa Citizen, Ottawa Business Journal and CATA Alliance.

In designing the Leadership Forum Dean Micheál Kelly said, "What we hope to achieve is a forum that is practical, that gives realistic stories of what the most effective ways are to implement accountability, and to pass it from one generation to another."

The Forum will focus on the most effective ways to implement accountability. As young leaders rise through the ranks, it is hoped that they will pass on what they have learned and the message will filter down through their organization. For example, Rob Ashe, president & CEO of Cognos Incorporated, who is responsible for the strategic vision, direction and day-to-day leadership of the firm, will speak at one session linking accountability to business objectives. By listening to Ashe and the speakers who will follow, we hope the Forum candidates will return to their workplaces as disciples who will grow into roles where they will mentor their colleagues.

Personal accountability must be the driver for the next generation of Canada's corporate leaders. The Forum is a small start. We will see where it leads.

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