



Relational Accountability

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Many leaders are frustrated with accountability in their organizations, and this is the result of a broken model for responsibility that operates mostly in the background. Most of accountability occurs with assumptions surrounding it, differing perspectives, and an assumption that accountability is a punitive model. Fundamental to how accountability is initiated and managed is that there is an unequal power relationship, wherein one is the boss and the other one is the one who does the work (or is responsible for getting it done).

The issue is that **the current model shifts the accountability in one direction or makes the accountability transactional and not relational.** It typically shows up two ways:

1. I am the consumer, and I am right and you are indentured to serve me.
2. I am the boss, and I know the most and you must perform to my expectations.

Ouch! No wonder it hurts. And it dumbs down one, or even both, parties.

Consider this as **a new paradigm:** *Consumers and Performers as partners in success.*

Partnership between a company and a consumer? It already is done. Think about Apple, who commits to making exciting and innovative products that meets unknown wants and needs. Many of its consumers display loyalty and participation in Apple's success not by just buying their products, but by waiting in lines for products, creating clubs and chat groups, making suggestions, and by setting high standards that they expect Apple to reach and even exceed them. Other examples abound. Consider Amazon. Some credit unions do this well. Other examples abound.

Here is a real-world example of a power shift that creates breakdowns. Earlier in my career, as the manager of a hotel, I would, from time to time, sit in the lobby and just observe. One front desk exchange went like this:

"How was your day, Mr. X?" the front desk representative asked.

"It was good, except that my air conditioning didn't work well," he said.

This was an issue. It was Metro Phoenix in June. I was getting anxious as managing air conditioning issues promptly was both a near-911 concern in the summer and had been an initiative this year.

"Sir, I am so sorry that you encountered this problem," she said, with true sincerity. How long was the problem occurring?"

I was impressed. She was working to find out more about the issue so we could do something about it and to know how to satisfy our guest.

"Since I checked in."

She looked at the computer; a puzzled look came on her face, along with a pause before she spoke.

"You mean since *Tuesday*?"

It was *Friday*.



To this day, I still cannot recall the rest of the conversation as I stopped listening and started chewing on why a guest would live through three days of summer heat in Phoenix. Then I spent weeks being an observer of how we Americans behave as customers, and I realized that this is the typical *modus operandi*. Consumers often cruise along with a problem, even enduring it, and may be ready to just leave a product or service with a bad experience going with them.

American consumers often wait until a transaction is *complete* before seeing themselves in any accountability. The roles and powers of the parties is unclear in our economic society. Things progress until the moment of a breakdown, and frequently with the communication being in the form of complaint. What I observed in 20 years in the service industry, this relationship communication comes in three forms:

1. The experience/product was satisfactory or even great and will say so if only when asked.
2. The experience was unsatisfactory and the consumer lies and says it was ok.
3. The consumer complains and expects something from the complaint.

In some instances, business is complicit in this issue. They can tend to create what is believed to be a great product, deliver it to consumers, and then wait and see. It's a bit of a tossing of the product over the wall, and not seeing any tossed back, assume everything is ok. Many people who produce and deliver the product are not competent in managing a more sophisticated relationship. And, at the core, both parties are not fully engaged in building a *partnership toward success*.

But those in a position of power have the greatest responsibility. That power gives them the opportunity to share power and to coach the other parties about the roles they *could* play in reaching a better outcome. They have the opportunity to create a culture or subculture wherein the stakeholders have a voice in what accountability could look like, how the roles can best be defined, and what *ongoing* communication could look like for success.

Imagine, accountability as a relationship and not a transaction. Imagine the engagement possibilities. Imagine a future where accountability is an ongoing, dynamic conversation in place of a punitive and one-sided chiding.