Healthy Futures
GROUP

Shared Accountability:
Creating a Culture Where Truth Reigns

by Peter O'Donnell
President, Healthy Futures Group

What Went Wrong?

"What now?", Arnold Cooper wondered as he opened the letter from the foundation that funded Hope for the City's largest program initiative. He had been waiting for this letter since a brief phone conversation with the foundation's Director two days ago – a conversation devoid of the usual relaxed, friendly banter he had come to expect from their infrequent contacts. All she would say is that a letter was in the mail, and that she wanted a meeting with Arnold and his Board Executive as soon as possible. This couldn't be good news, and yet Arnold had no idea what was coming.

Pacing in front of his desk, Arnold's heart sank as he read of the foundation's decision to terminate funding after only two years of a proposed five year project. While lacking in details, the letter went on to cite three main reasons for the decision: failure to meet key deliverables, administrative and financial management shortcomings, and a perceived lack of open, honest communication concerning the project's growing list of problems.

After a few minutes, Arnold angrily tossed the letter onto his desk and picked up the phone. A few moments later, Dave Ferguson, Hope for the City's Director of Program Development, strode into his office and closed the door. He was met with a rush of angry words from Arnold, who demanded to know "How did this happen? Why wasn't I told about these problems? Who's responsible for this mess anyway? Why weren't you and the program managers on top of this? You could have prevented this? Isn't anybody accountable around here?"

Dave, taken aback by Arnold's outburst, could only sputter a few lame-sounding responses. "I had no idea. I'll find out who knew, and why they didn't solve these problems. We'll get to the bottom of this – we'll find out who's to blame."

Over the next few days, a disturbing picture emerged – a picture of an organization where no-one seemed willing to 'own' any of its problems. Front line staff complained that supervisors never had time to talk about the difficulties they faced daily, much less listen to feedback that certain promised deliverables were going to be late or sub-par. For their part, supervisors complained about being given their 'marching orders from on high', and being warned to 'do whatever it takes' to make the project work. "Failure is not an option, so stay on top of your people – don't be afraid to push people on this." Both management and supervisory staff also claimed that, despite their efforts to control every aspect of daily operations, they didn't really know how bad things had become. A few admitted that they typically stepped in whenever they saw a problem, and did whatever was required to 'make it go away.' Others simply pled ignorance – and promised to identify the 'culprits.'

Problems and mistakes were one thing, but Arnold was more disturbed about the pattern of 'cover up' he was seeing. And he was confused about how, with all of the 'command and control' efforts his leadership staff claimed to be making, there were still all of these performance failures. He decided that there must be something more to this - a deeper malaise – and he knew he had to get to the bottom of what was going on. He also knew he couldn't risk any more 'surprises' like this, which threatened the survival of the whole program.

Could This be Your Story?

Let's take a step back and look at what really went wrong, and whether there are lessons in this story for your organization. City of Hope is a pseudonym for a real organization – I was the consultant that 'Arnold' called in to help get to the bottom of the mess. The lost funding had a devastating impact on the organization, with major layoffs the most visible result. Worse, though, was the impact on the climate of the organization. Anxiety was up, enthusiasm was down, and no-one felt safe – not the best climate in which to take a fresh look at their problems.

Through a number of interviews with board, management and front line staff, and several painful group dialogues, a clearer picture emerged. For one thing, most front line staff and supervisors felt stifled under the constant scrutiny of their managers. They had also learned that 'mistakes are not welcome here.' and many had decided that talking to their superiors about problems was an invitation to even closer micro-management. And so, they just 'muddled through' whenever they encountered difficulties. When pressed to talk about how this made them feel, their responses included words like anxious, resentful and devalued. One supervisor, who had recently given notice that she was planning to leave, summed it up this way, "Management here tells us that we are this program's most important asset, but they treat us as if we can't be trusted to do our best. I guess we sometimes live down to their expectations. It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy."

In my work with the management team, we soon came to see that this program's problem wasn't that there was too little control – there was actually too much. The fruit of the 'command and control' culture was that most front line staff felt undervalued, underappreciated – even un-cared-for as people. They felt like cogs in a machine, and replaceable ones at that. Surprisingly, at least to management, was the fact that many said that the only reason they hadn't left the program was that they were so committed to its mission. They just wished they were free to make a bigger contribution to fulfilling it. It was clear that management's focus on 'compliance' was getting in the way of the free expression of people's 'commitment.' And this insight became our starting point.

It didn't take long for people at all levels of the organization to agree that they all wanted to work in an environment where people acted with integrity, where accountability was the norm – where 'everyone was committed to doing the right thing', as one supervisor put it. The key question then became, "What do we need to do to create such an environment?"

What We Know About Creating a Healthy Environment

There is a growing body of research that points to the importance of caring for employees at both a personal and professional level. This fundamental concern, so essential to building trust, has been shown to have a powerful impact on employee attitudes toward management, level of engagement, and willingness to share information and contribute to problem-solving. One senior HR manager recently commented that treating people well was a significant source of competitive advantage for his large company. This showed up in everything from employee morale to their willingness to refer qualified friends for positions the company was trying to fill.

Beyond treating people well – in reality, treating them as people and not just as 'hired hands' – there is also support for engaging them more fully in decision-making and planning, and trusting them to 'act like owners' when given the opportunity to be accountable for contributing to the organization's success. For many managers, accountability is really seen as 'holding others responsible for their performance', as if people wouldn't act responsibly if given more autonomy. This suits many managers well, in that they see their own performance in terms of 'making things happen.' Some are even threatened when their subordinates act too much on their own. In reality, though, the most capable managers work hard to develop their subordinates so that they can assume more responsibility and work more autonomously. The environment created by such managers is characterized by significant learning, and strong shared commitment to excellence. The environment created by more 'control-minded' managers is characterized by compliance and a lot of blaming.

Fundamental Change

Back to our story… A number of opportunities for fundamental change quickly surfaced at 'Hope for the City.' First, it was important that considerable learning take place, both to improve work processes and to build healthier working relationships. One of the most important goals in the latter area was to end the process of blaming that had come to characterize management's response to identified problems. In its place, management agreed to be more open and supportive – to work hard at creating more of a 'learning organization' where problems were seen as opportunities for individual and collective learning. That meant creating a safe community in which learning could happen.

A second important area of change directly addressed the matter of accountability, defined as 'willingly taking ownership for one's actions, making and keeping one's promises, and working collaboratively to solve problems.' This was a difficult area in which to bring about change, given the resentment many staff felt over being told constantly how to do their work. Setting ambitious goals was fine, but management needed to demonstrate that they 'believed in' their people enough to delegate the work to them, and then provide them with the authority, support, and non-judgmental feedback they needed to achieve the required results.

Implicit in this was the realization that an organization cannot 'hold' its people accountable for their performance – people must choose to 'be' accountable. The former is really about holding people 'responsible' for their work, and is more about ensuring 'predictable' behaviour through command and control management approaches. For people to choose to be accountable, however, requires a servant leadership approach. Only in such an environment will people be ready, willing and able to take full ownership of their work – to do the right thing even when no-one would know is they did otherwise. For this reason, only those capable of leading in this way should ever be promoted to positions of supervisory responsibility. This realization led to some significant restructuring of the program, and led to improvements in the selection and training of supervisors and managers all the way to the top of the organization.

A third key area requiring change was the organization's means of engaging people in its planning and problem-solving processes. The most obvious barrier here was the lack of open, honest communication, which led to a widespread perception that managers acted 'in secret' and handed down their decisions for implementation. Moreover, front line staff complained that there were few opportunities to get their ideas heard and so they didn't feel their input was valued. Over time, many had stopped offering their insights altogether. What they really wanted was a chance to participate fully in truly collaborative processes – planning, problem-solving, and long-term visioning to create a future in which everyone could feel a sense of prideful ownership. Tackling this required an intense effort to improve the quality of communication at all levels. But it also stimulated a creative redesign of the program's cumbersome, top-down planning and decision-making structures. It became much easier for ideas to 'bubble up' from anywhere in the organization.

There remained one even more fundamental level of change to be addressed, one that people were only willing to reveal as they became more convinced that the program's leaders were serious about changing the culture. That was at the level of basic trust in the organization's leadership, including board and management, who were seen as acting, at times, in ways that directly undermined staff morale and sense of security. At worst, it seemed to some – including certain managers and supervisors – that their leaders simply didn't care about them as people.

As evidence, they talked about everything from a lack of open, two-way communication to a lack of tolerance and support when faced with the inevitable work/life balance challenges that life brings to everyone. To this, others added their sense of frustration that 'time spent' seemed more important than real output. Still others spoke of the long-standing freeze on professional development and the lack of mentoring opportunities. As one supervisor summed it up, "It's hard to trust people who don't seem to care about you as a person. You have to wonder what is important to them, and whether you really matter beyond your willingness to do what you're told."

This was, for some supervisors and managers, the biggest challenge. For one, it took time – it was hard to care about their staff when they hardly knew them on a personal level. More than time, though, it took a new commitment to flexibility and work/life balance, and recognition that people had a life outside the walls of the organization. Not only did it require a wholesale revision of policies, but also the learning of new behaviour. But, in the end, the results were very affirming in terms of improved productivity, reduced stress and an improved working climate that everyone could feel. It was fun to come to work again.

The Journey from Control to Accountability: No Easy Road

The process of building a new culture didn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen soon enough for some people who, through the experience of opening up the issues, felt that they needed to move on. But for others, the growing sense of safety – being able to talk openly with people at all levels of the organization about difficult problems, as well as their dreams for a better workplace – convinced them to make the commitment to contributing to the change. 'Hope for the City' is a much happier, and more productive, program today.

There is clear evidence of increased collaboration, and that learning is once again valued as an important part of everyone's job. Passion and commitment are quickly returning to the program, as people feel valued and expected to 'do great things' as they commit to being accountable to each other and to their shared responsibilities. People are increasingly engaged in creating the future of the organization together. And, most importantly, people feel like they belong to a caring learning community – one in which people genuinely care for each other as people.

The key lesson for management in all of this actually was eventually distilled into three key elements:

- *You either care about your people or you don't, and that determines their level of trust.*
- *You either value their contribution or you don't, and that determines their level of engagement.*
- *You either believe in their capability and commitment or you don't, and that determines their level of willing accountability.*

On all three levels, whatever messages your actions communicate, be assured that people know where you stand, and they act accordingly. Ultimately, that's really what determines success or failure.

The choice is yours. Are you prepared to do what it takes to support the emergence of a caring, learning community of committed employees at all levels, or will you continue, through command and control leadership, to seek the false security of compliant, but unengaged, followers.