

Bill's Blog
Week of August 13th, 2007

Accountability is not a bad word.

This is the second in a series of Blog postings on topics I believe are critical to our growth as a company and as a community of dedicated professionals. For this posting, I want to expand on my previous discussion of the importance of communication and talk about accountability. To begin with, let's talk about the word and what it means.

“Accountability” has a great many negative associations and not nearly as many positive ones. We are “held to account” for our transgressions and our debts, and we think of judgment and punishment as natural consequences of accountability. But it isn't only about crime and punishment. It can also be a source of empowerment and fulfillment. I believe that job satisfaction, commitment, and accountability are all tied together. This more positive meaning is particularly applicable to HMS and it's a concept that should be internalized by every manager and employee.

I think that for a long time people have felt they were held accountable but were powerless. Employees may have been responsible for completing a specific set of tasks, but because those tasks represented only a part of a process, they didn't feel any ownership of it. Consequently, they felt less connected to the outcome. Today, we still struggle with helping people see that there can be more to their jobs than their individual transactions.

While managers and executives are typically viewed as being accountable, those lower in the organization don't necessarily see things the same way. From their point of view it's easy to say, “I'm responsible for this little piece, but I'm not empowered to change anything around here.” Or, “I don't like what's going on in my department, so I'll just quit, because I can't change it.” But, if you like your job and you like your company, you have to be part of changing it. You have to own it.

I don't think the situation at HMS is worse than at other companies and maybe it's even better. But there are going to be areas that need work, where people need to feel empowered to make a difference. If people don't feel empowered, if they don't feel like they can make a difference, then they're going to feel stuck and less capable of being accountable. Having been in that situation myself, I know that it can make you feel smothered. But, once you're empowered to feel like you can make a difference, it's very freeing. I started my career as a statistical clerk and if I didn't feel that I was empowered I wouldn't be here today.

How do we go about empowering people? I think the key is communication. People have to communicate up if they don't feel empowered to make a difference—and say why—and managers need to communicate down that everyone is has the opportunity to make a

difference. At HMS, everyone is expected to make recommendations. If you think things should be done differently, you are expected to raise your hand and say so.

We need to continue to find new ways to create a culture of accountability and empowerment. Part of the solution lies in our leadership development program. I think our new regional structure is going to help as well. Regional executives in the field are going to be responsible for visiting their smaller offices and making sure everyone is made part of the larger conversation. It's a critical part of what they'll need to do.

In the end, it's all about that larger conversation. If people don't get the chance to talk about their roles and their views, they don't feel included—or accountable. We need to remind everyone at HMS that they have the opportunity here to create their own destinies and accountability is where it starts. That means we each have to be ready to put into our jobs as much as we expect to get out of them.

So, be accountable. Own your role in HMS's business and be empowered to help create a more rewarding future for the company and yourselves.

Bill Lucia