

Freedom & Accountability

Whose life is it anyway?

Think for a moment about the people in your organisation. What proportion of their potential would you estimate they utilise in carrying out their work? 50%, 75%, 90%...? Probably you will find people fall along a continuum from 'working close to their potential' to 'just ticking over'.

How does that picture compare with how you would expect it to be if the organisation were running just as you'd like? (In answering this question be aware that in doing so, you are also setting the boundaries of expectation).

Even when roles are designed to be flexible and structures set out to allow growth, organisations find that some, often very loyal and good workers, hold back from empowering themselves. In some meetings where people are asked what they think the silence can be deafening.

But this phenomenon does not necessarily correlate with hierarchy. The same underlying issue manifests itself across the whole organisation. For example, the expectations of our stakeholders often creates severe pressures. The feeling of being constrained or compelled to act in a certain way is a common reaction to this pressure. In response to this feeling, of being somehow trapped in a 'fur lined rut', we think of what we would *like* to do rather than what we are faced with.

In both instances we feel constrained and would instead prefer to be free of the pressures that bind us. The irony is that we already have our freedom – we just often choose to deny it.

“...in this sense we are condemned to be free”

If that at first sounds hard to accept, here's how it works¹:

We all have free will. There is never a point at which someone can truthfully say 'I had no choice'. It may be that the alternative choices are stark but we could choose them nonetheless. Because we could make a different choice, we bear some accountability for the outcomes we experience. With accountability comes the anticipated guilt that things may not work out as we wish. The potential for feeling guilt makes us anxious about future decisions. This anxiety, being an uncomfortable feeling, in turn leads us to find ways to deny that we had a choice and with it, therefore, our freedom. It

is in this sense we are 'condemned to be free'².

If people are free to do as they please, what implications does this have for control within the organisation? This is a fundamental question as control exercised from above runs counter to freedom of choice. This traditional model channels decisions along prescribed lines allowing little or no discretion. But 'just following orders' has a hollow ring to it when used as a defence.

Control exercised from within is a different matter. In this model an organisation challenges it's people to think for themselves, provides context and information to inform decisions and holds people to account for them. It resists the temptation to make decisions on behalf of others even when to do so might be quicker or avoid an error.

“...there exists a Statue of Liberty but not one of Accountability”

Freedom and accountability are inseparable. We can't have accountability without accepting freedom of choice and nor can we have freedom without accepting accountability for our actions. It is this link, made explicitly as part of the organisation's culture that protects us from the anarchy of people acting without thought for consequence. Because we prefer to avoid our own accountability this link is often not drawn and the lessons left unlearned. It is not by coincidence that there exists a Statue of Liberty but not one of Accountability.

Wielding the double edged blade of freedom and accountability takes both courage and will power. It also takes a large amount of 'unlearning'. Many of us have learned over years of experience and conditioning that our bosses know best or that experts stand on hallowed ground. In some, these lessons have become beliefs that prevent them from challenging the status quo. Put another way these beliefs maintain a hierarchy that to outward appearance disappeared when 'bureaucracy' became a term of derision.

If your people are to realise their full potential how might you explore with them where they stand in relation to their own freedom How might you explore what constraints on their freedom you impose upon them and how might you begin the process of negotiation that redresses the balance?

¹ Koestenbaum & Block - Freedom & Accountability at work.

² Sartre – Being and Nothingness