

Note: The following includes Chapters 1, 2, 4, & 5 of the original dissertation with person and company names removed in order to honor the privacy of those who participated in the study on accountability. Accountability is currently based in the “mechanistic frame” and the responses of the participants reflected that frame prior to their hearing the benefits of accountability as a constructive context for working well together. For this reason, I decided to remove the names for inclusion of the dissertation on the website of the Taos/Tilburg PhD program. The second and third chapters include process and over 100 pages of the abbreviated “conversations on accountability.” In the interest of length, these two chapters are also not included.

Moving from Individual to Constructive Accountability

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Degree Granting University: University of Tilburg, Netherlands
Sponsored by: The Taos Institute, Chagrin Falls, OH
Chairman of the Granting Committee: Kenneth J. Gergen, PhD.

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Executive Summary

A qualitative study with standardize questions (yet flexible) was undertaken to identify (1) what accountability currently looks like in organizations today, (2) introduce the concept of *constructive accountability* (CA) into the thinking of top organizational members, (3) identify the interviewees' sense of the concepts usefulness in the organizational context, and (4) request the interviewees input on how CA could be introduced into today's organizations. The process included face-to-face and telephone conversations with twelve currently in a managerial role and two former managerial members of twelve organizations. The outcome suggested that, although some organizations are actively and purposely accepting the concepts of participation and collaboration (and many are not), accountability remains in a traditional mode. According to the interviewees, accountability is most often experienced as demeaning, punitive and, as managers, "something they do not want to do." Accountability has not moved into the paradigm of member involvement and the movement of decisioning lower in organizations. CA was acknowledged as "a new way to look at accountability," useful, and preferred—yet how to get to being a CA organization was a dilemma for these executives. One organization offered a model for moving toward CA in organizations.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Morally, it simply is not open to us to do what we want when we please.
John Shotter, 1984

This dissertation introduces a relational approach to accountability in organizations. This approach, called *constructive accountability* (CA), broadens and builds the strengths of an organization and its members moving accountability into everyday work instead of delaying and calling to account after the fault. Although there is no shortage of interest in accountability, academic literature has not been responsive to that interest (Frink and Ferris, 1998). This is an attempt to “remove the blinders” of traditional accountability while remaining sensitive to the effects of language on our practices of accountability.

Brooks (1995), in a popular press book, provides the following definition of traditional accountability within Western organizations: “*Accountability is a mechanism to ensure that individuals can be called to account for their actions, and that sanctions are incurred if the account is unsatisfactory*” (p. 12, italics in text). Brooks emphasizes the following words in his definition: *mechanism* as a procedural activity; *individuals* because the activity focuses on individuals while also noting the collective aspect of the term as reasonable and essential; *sanctions* being seen as essential to performance. *Unsatisfactory*, as an element of

accountability, brings in the personal element of holding offenders to account. He believes that “*the purpose of sanctions is not to act as a threat to you but as a guarantee to me*” (p.13, emphasis in text). Brooks also notes that since values evolve over time, there is a vagueness and constant flux and impreciseness within the mechanism of accountability in organizations. This flux makes it difficult to say precisely what an unsatisfactory account is, other than within the understanding of the person holding someone to account.

An account, according to Webster’s Dictionary, is a verbal or written description of a particular transaction or event; a narrative; an explanatory statement of conduct, as to a superior; a statement of reasons, causes, etc., explaining an event; a reason, basis, consideration. This puts accountability into a coercive mode practiced after-the-fault. As noted by Shotter (1984),

Our ways of accounting for things have a coercive quality to them; only if we make sense of things in certain approved ways can we be accounted by others in our society as competent, responsible members of it (p. xi).

According to Scott and Lyman (1968: 46), “An account is a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry.” They point out that, “An account is not called for when people engage in routine, common-sense behavior in a cultural environment that recognizes that behavior as such” (pp. 46-47). Although a “valuative inquiry” is not necessarily negative, the inference that it only occurs after non-routine or non-commonsense behavior suggests a punitive posture. Thus, this statement also sees constructive disobedience or deviation from the norm as a separating behavior that is not acceptable in the cultural environment of the organization.

Scott and Lyman (1968), as does the quoted dictionary account, clearly place accountability as an evaluative process *after* something has gone wrong. It is the functionality of

this definition in the workplace that I am challenging in this writing. I believe that the traditional penalties of accountability create an implicit and/or explicit constraint on virtually everything that is done in the workplace.

Lawrence and Maitlis (2005), after researching the writings, of Garfinkel (1967), Fairclough (1992), Mills (1940), Antaki (1994), and others, agree with Woodilla (1988: 11) that “accounts are constructed through practices of talking and writing.” In their study of accounts as a segment of sensemaking, they state, “Perhaps the most defining characteristic of accounts is that they provide an explanation of an event that has disrupted the flow of everyday life” (p. 14).

Goffman’s (1974) work on accounts focuses on the frames of accounts. Frames, according to Goffman, can be understood as a particular form of accounts—an account of the context in which some action occurs, which provides the foundation for making an action sensible and meaningful (noted in Lawrence & Maitlis, 2005: 8). This suggests that an account (frame) can be a motivation/justification for action, making it part of how people make sense of everyday life.

Unfortunately, as noted by Aram (1990) regarding the American perspective of accountability and individual performance, accountability is individualized; cooperation and collaboration have not been essential to achievement. Thus, accountability has been localized in the individual.

Historically, cooperation [and collaboration have] played only a supporting role in the value structure of American society. Individual struggles against nature and the life-threatening frontier (fight or flight) are dominant American images. Human relationships are primarily utilitarian. People join together for instrumental reasons, such as their

common defense. An unwritten motto in the United States is ‘live and let live’ (Aram, 1990: 175).

After-the-fault or end accountability, as currently practiced, includes account-demanding, account-giving and account-selection activities. *Account-demanding* is the act of a person in authority calling someone to account to explain something that has been said or done. The person being called to account participates by *account-giving*, the giving of excuses and justifications to a superior in response to the account demand—if an opportunity to do so occurs. After account-giving, *account-selection* by the person in authority includes acknowledgement/acceptance/non-acceptance of the given account. (Unfortunately, the person demanding the account may already have assumed a stance that is not adjustable, making it unlikely that authentic account-selection will occur.) The account authority (demander) selects what will be initiated as punishment for the accountable act or behavior. Because these accountings are usually held when it is too late for adjustment or redemption of the alleged misdemeanor, the event may be experienced as a “beating of the soul,” as even unfair, cruel and abusive. If not directly abusive, the accounting may include a judgmental “gaze”—a look that suggests a lack of feeling and presence on the part of the demander. Relationships, if they existed in the first place, dissolve through the receiver’s assumption of what “the gaze” means. Levels of mistrust become part of a continuing, unspoken phenomenon in future exchanges.

Within daily work practices there is a tolerance for some degree of ineffectiveness. When there is finally a failure, however, the demander sets in motion after-the-fault accountability “without,” according to Aram, “anyone being particularly caring” (1990: 175). Within this scenario, tolerance of ineffectiveness allows misunderstandings to go unexplained and little mistakes to go unaddressed until the resulting big mistake occurs. Then there are

assumptions that specific “bodies of reason” (Gergen, 1991: 12) exist that justify the traditional process of calling people on the carpet. This call to account is an effort to punish for doing something seen as “wrong.” At that moment the person(s) experiencing the demand for an account is seen as “out”—instead of being “us,” he or she is a “them.”

Unfortunately, calling someone to account in Western culture is all too often done in demeaning ways, both publicly and privately. Public, abusive accountability is particularly damaging because of the significance of the humiliation and exploitation experienced by the target. Credibility, relationships, availability of resources and, as noted above, levels of trust diminish. Even when calling to account is not meant to be demeaning, the results are often so because of the sense of it being unsafe to give information to the person in authority. This may occur even though the information might clarify, justify, excuse or explain a misunderstanding. “I’m being punished; this is unfair” is a likely internal response. The current prominent leadership orientation, I believe, maintains traditional accountability as appropriate. This leadership orientation includes:

- Treating the workers as children
- Limiting opportunities to perform and be involved in organizational outcomes and performance
- Putting specific frames with rigid boundaries around roles and responsibilities.
- Seeing accountability as a method of control, reward and punishment
- Planting and nourishing the seeds of conflict and divisiveness
- Using the “preferred few” to get things done
- Seeing employee choices as necessarily orchestrated by those in authority
- Limiting the opportunity for others to choose responsibility

- Seeing activities going beyond the leader's desire for "order" as disobedience and malpractice.

As a result of these leadership outlooks and practices, it is routine for organizational members to point the finger of blame elsewhere. Scott (2002) defines this as *the accountability shuffle*, activities attempting to push accountability upward, downward or sidewise (p. 3). The shuffler has "given them what they want," that is, aligned his or her actions around what is perceived as acceptable, but things went wrong anyway. Thus, in his or her mind, blame must be shuffled to someone else in order to remain credible. Often, the shuffler spends time recruiting others into a mass of employees who blame and shame "those others." Shuffling is also an attempt to maintain the status quo in terms of what is expected and safe. Scott's accountability shuffle may also occur when there are strong peer group standards that allow little forgiveness when doing things differently. Giving the excuse of "they made me do it" is a shuffle of accountability to avoid chastisement from peers—and to cull sympathy for being forced by "those above" to step out of line.

As noted, under this long accepted scenario, accountability occurs after the fault and is based in the assumption of *one-person being fully responsible and accountable* for particular actions and/or outcomes. Much effort is expended in locating this one person. If a group is identified as responsible for the fault, the group turns inward to locate the *one* at fault. Some *one person* must pay. In writing about "the logical and appreciative dimensions of accountability," Cummings and Anton (1999) defined accountability as "a calling to give accounts (excuses or justifications) to another (or others) for deviation between the event for which *one is responsible* and organizational expectations or norms" (p. 258, emphasis added). Even in discussing the appreciative dimensions of accountability, the focus remains on one person causing the problem.

The Collective Person

Holding one person to account suggests that *this one person is fully responsible for the action*. Yet activities in organizations are outcomes of past and present scenarios of collective practice. No one person is fully responsible for anything. One's perceptions knowledge, resources and actions are the result of collectivities of influence, thought, communications, performances with and observations of others. It is the *collective person*, relating with other collective persons, who takes action.

My focus is on the person as a collective being. I suggest that relationships are the forming point for the person. Persons are mutually and uniquely co-constructed.

The collective person (and the collective organization) is formed metaphorically like the Mississippi River: the water rushing to the Gulf of Mexico includes droplets that formed at its origin and in streams and tributaries along the way. The power of the river comes from sources such as the Ohio River and many other large and small rivers and tributaries passing through many states and many other small and large passages from fields and streams along the way. Each droplet merges with many others. It would be hard to identify where any drop of water originated...it just came along dissolving into a collective river as the water flowed toward the Gulf. Each person, like the Mississippi River, is altered with each contact, experience, learning, desire and action. This collective person is a unique person made up of the influences of other unique persons. The collective person is created through ongoing relationships; thus "personal" reflection and contemplation is influenced by multiples of others. Gergen (1991: 147) suggests,

As the self as a serious reality is laid to rest and the self is constructed and reconstructed in multiple contexts, one enters finally the stage of the *relational self*.

One's sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self.

This is not to suggest that the collective person does not make decisions and choices that bring occurrences about—sometimes positively, sometimes catastrophically. Yet, as McNamee and Gergen (1999: 8) state, “One cannot constitute meaning alone nor engage in a rational choice among competing goods without having absorbed the intelligibilities of a community.” It is in the conscious “heedfulness” (Langer, 1997) of others that we can envision the mutuality or interdependence of *relational responsibility* (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). People together design actions through relational processes of conversation. Although appearing to act singularly, diverse thoughts and actions are coordinated in ways that produce outcomes that cannot possibly be created or claimed alone.

Even the traditional practice of individual accountability is co-constructed. It is in Shotter’s (1984: x) “joint action” that the emerging flow of interaction produces accountability. “Joint action produces the conversational resources that enable people to account for their actions,” states Lannamann (1999: 87-88). As noted by Johann Roux, PhD, a professor, therapist, and organizational consultant from Vanderbijlpark, South Africa,

Millions and millions of relational interactions create the same amount of possible interpretations. Then in turn, those interpretations drive people’s actions in relationship and in the co-creation of accountability inside their relational interactions” (personal communication).

Toward Constructive Accountability

The weaknesses of traditional accountability and the recognition of the collective person suggest that a new form of accountability must be brought forward into everyday work. In the present

thesis I will attempt to re-form and reframe accountability as a relational, ongoing exchange among persons. Specifically, I propose a model of constructive accountability (CA), which I define as *an ongoing process of relationship that contributes to a mutuality of sensemaking and its outcomes, bringing a heightened willingness to be collaboratively contributive and responsible in the workplace.* Constructive accountability is an ongoing mutually beneficial process of sensemaking that leads to an increased willingness of participants to be collaborative and responsible. As I see it, constructive accountability exists in a context of shared and co-constructed thought, knowledge and action; mutually constructed synergies; open communication; and multiple connections and partnerships. It includes recognition of the importance of working well together over time.

Such thinking asks us to reassess virtually everything we have been taught about how we live, work and are accountable together. With the reassessment and re-valuation of accountability, new and exciting forms of action and interaction may be located. Most people see accountability as a picture of what happens if things go wrong or when he or she does not “behave right.” This picture includes the possibility of punishment, embarrassment and degradation and suggests the need for personal control. Such a picture degrades the possibility of meaningful relationships, contribution and support during the process of work. One “knows” that if things do not go perfectly, as anticipated or planned, he or she is alone and can be held negatively accountable. In contrast, constructive accountability emphasizes the *strengths* (skills, talents, knowledge, intentions, positive aspirations, collaborative tendencies, etc.) of organizational members and encourages members to seek and offer support, resources and cooperation. It is to participate at a higher level of involvement and learning, locating

accountability in ongoing communal action. If something goes wrong, others step up to assist in locating what has gone wrong and to identify an alternative, without placing blame.

As noted by Boyatzis, Stubbs and Taylor (2002: 150), “Beyond knowledge and competencies, the additional ingredient necessary to outstanding performance appears to be the desire to use one’s talent.” In the new form of accountability, “the desire to use one’s talent” expands when others are working beside you and punitive accountability is less likely. Knowledge, competency and the willingness to use personal strengths in the organizational context are positively driven. At the same time, the strengths of organizational members are enhanced through the ongoing practice of constructive accountability. Recursively, it also builds the strengths of other members and the organization served. The development and integration of strengths and skills in the ongoing practice of constructive accountability positively adjusts attitudes, expanding opportunities to communicate in meaningful ways.

Accountability that is constructive is based inside the activity of accomplishing assigned and non-assigned activities. It is the process of using the collective person’s and the group’s strengths in relationship to accomplish the expected and deal with the unexpected. In my view, accountability will stay within the architecture of traditional accountability practices (after-the-fault accountability) unless relational, collaborative action occurs; working together is the impetus to accomplishment. Unfortunately, the discovery of a strengthening hypothesis requires turning away from what is currently assumed as a rational organizational context of accountability. Turning to a new form of accountability that is moved inside the work will be difficult for many.

Accountability that is experienced as constructive supports the development of peer group collaboration. Collaboration provides peer groups with various forms of assistance,

including information, encouragement and a sense of safety. Yet, constructive accountability (CA) is more than collaboration. CA, as it spreads across the culture of an organization, blurs lines of status and title. It brings people together into the work, creating a mutuality of accountability for the work. It allows, even encourages, one to pull others into his or her work and then, ultimately, to join them in their work. Sensemaking becomes easier, and a pride in participation expands.

In her *broaden and build theory* of positive emotions, Barbara L. Fredrickson (2002, Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003.) suggests, “Positive emotions appear to *broaden* people’s momentary thought-action repertoires and *build* their enduring personal resources” (p. 122, emphasis in text). Assuming that CA exchanges are experienced as positive, the broaden and build theory of positive emotion would, although notably focused on the individual, be an appropriate model for reframing accountability as beneficial and constructive. Fredrickson (2002) also notes, “[T]hese broadened mindsets carry indirect and long-term adaptive benefits because broadening *builds* enduring personal resources” (p. 123, emphasis in text). Seo, Barrett and Bartunek (2004: 25) quote Fredrickson (2001) as saying that “thought-action repertoires include approaching, exploring, learning, creating and playing, whereas negative feelings narrow them by urging people to act in defensive ways (e.g., escape, attack, or expel).” These thought-action repertoires are synonymous with the positive, strengthening activities of constructive accountability. Strengths *flow naturally* in a CA environment. Strengths are broadened and built through the ongoing positive performative practices of CA. These practices create a sense that one has provided valued contributions. As noted by Bandler and Grindler (1982, p. 30), “It’s *positive* to be *useful*.”

Clifton and Nelson (1992. p. 56) state, “A strength is an inner ability.” They add, “Practice [of these strengths] is the classic activity of successful people” (p. 64). In these statements, Clifton and Nelson focus on the individual. Yet strengths cannot be broadened and built alone. “Inner strength” and knowledge strength is co-created *within relationships*. Unless a thought or action is recognized as positive and useful in the eyes of others, it will not be interpreted as an “inner strength.” Development of relationships with others expands the willingness of members to continue to be in a learning stance, to be involved in meaningful training and education, to build their own personal resources and to continually nurture positive relationships.

History and Writings About Accountability

In looking at the historical emergence of accountability practices, Dubnick’s (1998) writings discuss the origin of the term and the assumptions regarding accountability that currently support its practice. He states, “We take the need for accountability for granted and assume that everyone understands what the concept means and why it is so important” (p. 68). As Dubnick (1998: 69) argues, “Accountability is an anglican concept. It is particular to English speaking countries, and, too, it is quite distinctive. In most of the romance languages (French, Spanish and Italian, as well as Portuguese), various forms of the term ‘responsibility’ are used in lieu of the English ‘accountability.’” He notes that in Russia the term is distinct having roots in the term “report.” In non-English countries that have adopted the anglican version of accountability, the adoption has occurred out of forced necessity (e.g., Japan), or because of past Anglican governance (e.g., Israel).

According to Dubnick (1998), tracing the history of the term back in English history, “accountability” existed as far back as the 14th century, potentially tied to a French origin

(although it was not a French language term). It gained specific importance twenty years after the Norman Conquest with the publication of the Domesday Books in 1086. William I ordered a full survey of his domain in order to collect taxes. A survey, or call to account, was a new and innovative way to make sure collection was achieved from those who owed the Crown money (Douglas, 1964, noted in Dubnick, 1998).

Moving to the Civil War in America, according to Rodgers (1978, noted by Diddams, 2003: 509), “Most people were self-employed or worked in shops of fewer than five employees.” Based on individual achievement, working for wages was considered a temporary and somewhat objectionable condition. The goal was to earn wages until one could, in the case of women, get married, or for men, earn enough money to start their own business. Between 1870 and 1900, 25 million people came to America and a permanent wage class was created. This fueled a 150 percent growth and eliminated the personal connection to organizational success. The Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) was alive and well during all these changes even though a sense of alienation between one’s work and the outcome had become evident with the advent of technology, repetitive work and boredom. The PWE is reflected in the American culture that emphasizes the capacity and responsibility of the individual to act independently and effectively.

It is, in my thinking, in the pre- and post-WWII era that accountability, as we know it today, became more pronounced. The disconnection experienced by employees standing in long lines at machines increased “the need” in the minds of management to call people to account and set things straight. Individual success had become more remote and dependence on “those who know” in the role of administrator and manager, a now impersonal role, emphasized a command and control orientation.

Soon Heider (1958) did his research on explanations, later becoming a reference point for the above referenced work of Scott and Lyman (1968). Heider's work, to become known as *attribution theory*, emphasized "personal causation" as being "of great importance" placing attribution in the context of the individual. Heider (1958) identified ten prototypes that build a person's account of the social world (note the words in parentheses). He said,

People have an awareness of their surroundings and the events within it (the *life space*), they attain this awareness through *perception*) and other processes, they are *affected* by their personal and impersonal environment, they *cause* changes in the environment, they are able to (*can*) and *try* to cause these changes, they have wishes (*want*) and *sentiments*, they stand in unit relations to other entities (*belonging*) and they are accountable according to certain standards (*ought*) (p. 17, noted in Antaki, 1994: 10, emphasis in text).

Philip Tetlock (1985, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1998, 1999) is prominent in the few academy writings about accountability. His writings on accountability theory discuss the anticipation of responses to accountability. He suggests that accountability puts people in the role of the "intuitive politician"—seeking means to maximize status and self-image, to avoid negative judgments and to manage their responses. Accountability is a feature of judgment and choice, linking employees to the organization by reminding them that they need to (a) act according to the prevailing norms and (b) give accounts when they deviate from those norms. How accountability occurs in organizations influences decisions and behavior (Tetlock, 1992a). Because of this, members attempt to align their thoughts, attitudes and values in accordance with their organization.

In this thinking, each organizational member seeks positive evaluation by those in authority and their peers, even if it is felt there is a possibility of being wrong. An early research effort focusing on strategies for coping with accountability by Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger (1989) resulted in the emergence of “a robust, replicable, and theoretically interpretable pattern” of accountability. It revealed that, “Interpersonal goals and concerns play a key role in shaping the underlying cognitive structure of expressed political attitudes” (p. 640).

Their findings suggest that one’s activities are consciously and unconsciously focused on potential outcomes/consequences of his or her actions “as they relate to interpersonal goals and concerns.” There is special attention directed to avoiding negative judgments and/or impressions that would impact one’s social standing in the group. There is a focus on appropriate responses and activities, which adds to the stress of day-to-day activities. One must “stay in the loop” as much as possible in order to know (or guess) what the right or approved way to do things might be. Tetlock’s (1999) intuitive politician considers the relative justifiability of a response and the options based on acceptance of the outcomes that might follow. Thus, the central function of judgment and choice in the scenario of traditional accountability is neither to make causal sense of the world, nor to maximize profit, but to protect one’s social identity in the eyes of others important to the person.

As with Dubnick (1998: 68), noted earlier, Koestenbaum and Block (2001: 3) suggest, “We... have a small way of thinking about accountability.” They add, “We think that people want to escape from being accountable. We believe that accountability is something that must be imposed. We have to hold people accountable, and we devise reward and punishment schemes to do this.” Their focus for the book is located in the title: *Freedom and Accountability at Work*. They say, “[A] key task of management would be to confront subordinates with their freedom”

(p. 7). Essentially, they say, “In the end, our freedom and our experience of accountability may be all we have to hold on to” (p. 10). Koestenbaum and Block believe that employees have been defined as the problem and management as the solution. They add, “Our model of leadership is constructed in [an] engineering, cause-and-effect vein,” (p. 4) defining management as the cause of the workplace and employees as the effect. It is an instrumental transaction. This is unintentionally creating a breeding ground for entitlement.

The anxiety that results from attempting to escape (negative) accountability forces people to look for certainty. There is an attempt to follow specific ways of doing things in order to transfer blame to “the system” or others (inducing Scott’s [2002] accountability shuffle) who designed how things should be done faultlessly. Koestenbaum and Block (2001) see anxiety, real or imagined, as creating a limiting organizational culture. Here one can see shared elements with Tetlock’s (1992a) theory of political intuition and its emphasis on members’ attempts to align their thoughts and actions in accordance with their organization.

Cumming and Anton (1999) recognize the corrosive potential of the mechanistic orientation and offer suggestions for inviting new case scenarios, yet they propose that effective accountability systems include:

1. Clarity of the expectations,
2. A person to whom one is accountable,
3. Circumstances of the accountability,
4. Credibility of the act,
5. Proximity (whether it may occur today or the end of the year),
6. Significance of the reward or punishment involved for doing what is accountable
7. Expectancy of being rewarded or punished (pp. 274-280).

To propose that expectations, circumstances and who whom one is accountable can be specifically clear and understandable (#1 above) suggesting a limiting scenario of performance, stifling innovation and creativity outside of one's own area of accountability. Ericson (1995) also limits accounts to one's own area of responsibility, agreeing with Cummings and Anton (1999), stating,

Accountability entails an obligation to give an account of activities within one's ambit of responsibility... Accountable also means capable of being accounted for or subject to explanation. Such capability entails a narrative or record of events and an explanation of events—legitimate causes, justifications, excuses, blame, and remedies—that demonstrate one has acted in a credible manner (p. 136).

Hiebert and Klatt (2000) have a person-focused view of what accountability "is" in organizations of today. They offer "six principles [that] provide a foundation for accountability within organizations:"

- (1) Accountability is a statement of personal promise.
- (2) To be accountable means you are answerable for results, not just activities.
- (3) To be accountable for results, you must have the opportunity for judgment and decision-making.
- (4) Your accountability is yours alone, without qualification. It is neither shared nor conditional.
- (5) Accountability is meaningless without significant consequences.
- (6) Finally, and very importantly, every member of the organization is accountable for the organization as a whole (p. 200).

These six principles are the hallmarks of control in the mechanistic era. As noted by the date of the publication, year 2000, these principles are still alive, well and promoted in organizational practices today. There is a full focus on individual performance and significant consequences without acknowledgement of the mutuality of performance. The influence, efforts and effectiveness added by others largely go unrecognized and ignored. The above principles also contribute to competition for resources: “If I don’t get them someone else will and I’ll be lost” and “With no benefit for supporting and contributing to the efforts of others, why bother?”

Although Heibert and Klatt’s final principle stresses that all members are accountable for the organization as a whole, information flow and openness within this scenario may be hampered. Focusing on the one-person-being-accountable establishes “turf,” potentially eliminating the willingness of others to participate to the benefit of all—including the organization.

Culbert and Ullmen (2001) state, “The core problem is One-Sided Accountability”—as applied in *hierarchical relationships*” (p. 34, italics in text). They see one-sided accountability as the defining attribute of a hierarchical relationship and the crux of disorientation and truth withholding. Traditionally, the *hierarchical structure* is viewed as the mechanism for achieving corporate ends with the chairman in command and an organizational chart to designate who is responsible for taking what action. Culbert and Ullmen (2001) propose a process of ***two-sided accountability partnering*** which “conveys the image of goodwill reciprocity leading to straightforward communications, aboveboard politics, authentic teamwork, esprit de corps, and the type of accountability that produces high-quality corporate results” (p. 15). They add,

Two-sided cues people to consider a reciprocal obligation to help one another in the pursuit of company goals... **Accountability** cues people to constrain self-interested

pursuits that others might see coming at their expense. *Partnering* indicates a mutuality of interests that sets the stage for effective dialogue and interactive problem solving” (emphasis and bold in text, p. 15).

I agree with the suggestion of accountability being a partnership (Seiling, 1997) and the intent of what they term “two-sided accountability.” Looking more closely, however, Culbert and Ullmen (2001) still discuss a hierarchical underpinning, a lack of flexibility, the placing of the “boss” at the center of the relationship. They say that there must be a stand-and-be-counted approach to “*two-sides accountable*” relationships (p. 84, emphasis from text). These two-sides-accountable relationships are entered into with the general expectation that the parties will cooperate, act supportively and be socially pleasant.

Two-sided accountability, like constructive accountability, is a face-to-face activity, acknowledging the need to talk to and communicate with “subordinates.” Yet the term two-sided is problematic: the language suggests that the participants are on opposite sides and must work at “meeting in the middle,” and that being civil and socially pleasant is an obligation. The implication is that a participant is faced with the dilemma of disagreement with someone of higher status and worth, yet is expected to be a partner and provide information openly.

In many organizations, because of differences in rank and status, choices are made as to what information is shared. Feelings of safety and security may be a constant concern. The subordinate will look for “signals” of safety that heighten or diminish feelings of discomfort. He or she will also attempt to identify the level of approachability the boss is willing to allow (after all, bosses have long memories). The boss/subordinate relationship continues to dominate the exchange. Culbert and Ullmen (2001) continue by saying,

Two-sided accountability is possible once two or more parties recognize that their individual interests overlap, believe that the other party's self-interested pursuits can be conducted in a way that furthers mutual objectives, and are able to articulate a way of working together that each believes to be reciprocally advantageous because the political process supports it (p. 81).

I agree with this statement, yet achieving this element of a positive political climate, for some, will be difficult. Changing the political climate is a high level challenge if the mental environment includes feelings of threat and vulnerability. Also, moving to two-sided accountability requires a relaxing of the desire to be seen as credible, a hallmark of what is seen as performing as "the good leader," (Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Kelley, 1988). This jeopardizes the leader's desire to be seen as "knowing." According to Kelley (1988: 118), in order to be seen as credible, "We should have a positive reason to think [the person] is competent and objective. At the very least, we must not have any evidence that [the person] is *incompetent* or *nonobjective*." "Knowing" is the path to credibility in the traditionally accountable world.

In their analysis of accountability, Lebow and Spitzer (2002) "pass through" instead of placing an emphasis on relationships. Again, there is a focus on individualized accountability. The authors state, "Accountability is the issue! If you can't find a way to get people to be accountable, you're going to find it hard to make anything work, let alone your business" (p. 7). They define accountability as "taking personal responsibility for one's own choices and for the results of those choices to oneself and to others" (p. 241). Their emphasis, as with Koestenbaum and Block (2001) above, is on freedom and responsibility. Their thinking is exemplified by noting that in the control-based workplace leadership is based on 10 percent coaching and mentoring and, in the freedom-based environment, it is 60 percent coaching and mentoring

(Lebow and Spitzer, p. 173). “Freedom-based,” according to Lebow and Spitzer, suggests, “People work better when they’re free to do it their way” (p. 19). They suggest a visionary leader is required as a “wise counsel” who focuses on values while protecting the organization’s long-term financial health and looking for ways to help people make the freedom-based philosophy successful. The leader shifts the focus from performance appraisals to personal development plans that the individual creates. Throughout the book, Lebow and Spitzer discuss ten of the biggest control-based initiatives that *destroy* accountability:

1. Incentive programs and pay-for-performance plans
2. Internal competition
3. Performance reviews
4. Forced ranking systems
5. Personal improvement plans
6. Managing people
7. Restrictive policies and procedures
8. Traditional job description
9. Employee recognition programs
10. Missions, visions and values statements

This is a startling list of initiatives that destroy accountability, suggesting that leaders and members must be constantly alert to the ramifications of the design of organizational initiatives. In essence, people *choose* to be accountable when they are not controlled, treated with disrespect or tied to internal initiatives that invite competition. Lebow and Spitzer (2002: 64) also say, “It is in choosing that we become truly accountable both to ourselves and to the community we live

and work in.” Of course, choices are influenced by the way in which people are governed and “motivated.”

Frink and Ferris (1998) state that the knowledge base regarding accountability is remarkably scant. They also say, “Research has included accountability as a social influence variable with increasing frequency” (p. 1260). They suggest that the basic concept is that accountability is “the perceived potential of being evaluated by someone, and being answerable for decisions or actions” (p. 1260). As such, accountability for performance is a fundamental principle of organizational theory. They note that Ferris et al (1995) define accountability as an external (to the person) or internal perspective: “Accountability (a) emphasizes a system of review of behavior by some constituency, and (b) includes having salient rewards or punishments contingent upon the review” (p. 1260). In their study, Frink and Ferris suggest that the degree to which a person anticipates an accounting is related to the amount of attentiveness he or she will pay to an activity. They also see defensibility (the need to defend) as a factor in the amount of attentiveness given to an activity, as well as the specific criteria one perceives as being the basis of evaluation (either formal or informal).

Connors and Smith (1999) work extensively in organizations creating *Cultures of Accountability* (italics throughout the text). Connors and Smith are tightly tied to individual performance. They state, “A *Culture of Accountability* is the most effective culture and is defined as people being accountable to think and act in the manner necessary for their organization to achieve results” (p.7). They also say, “The culture generates results, which... reinforce the future and are part of the culture” (p. 13). A weakness of Connors and Smith is that they also focus on the individual being solely accountable, skimming over the relational processes that are instrumental to a culture of accountability. Leaders are in control of

transitioning to the new culture, de-emphasizing the role of the members as the designers and drivers of cultural realities. Their writings offer clear and definitive “steps to accountability” (See it! Own it! Solve it! And Do it!). They say, “We say these components ‘work together’ because *experiences foster beliefs, beliefs drive actions, and actions produce results*” (p. 13, italics in text). They outline ways to shift a culture to a results orientation.

In a recent article in *Executive Edge*, Connors and Smith (2004) define accountability as “a personal choice to rise above your circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary to achieve desired results.” They add, “This definition includes a mindset of asking, ‘what else can I do to rise above my circumstances and achieve the desired results?’” (p. 10). My concern is that this philosophy can bring competition to the forefront when efforts are not understood as relationship-based.

Finally, Redding (2004) writes about the need to hold oneself accountable. He states, “It seems that holding ourselves accountable appears to be a key step to helping others do the same” (p. 63). He suggests that it is “a shift from holding someone accountable to helping people hold themselves accountable, which includes holding ourselves accountable” (p. 64). He notes that holding people accountable includes each of us responding to what we are told to do, finding problems and mistakes, following up with interrogations, punishing non-performance and rewarding performance. This places accountability firmly in a command and control orientation.

In a more encouraging stance, Redding (2004) goes on to say that holding ourselves accountable is responding to what we see needs to be done; it is to inform people about what is going on and where we are struggling; it is to offer tangible help to resolve issues and achieve objectives and to ask for help as well; and it is to appreciate each other’s skills and contributions.

Although suggesting the relational aspects of accountability, he focuses on the individualized, internal aspects of accountability.

This limited review of traditionally-based accountability writings largely demonstrates the mechanistic form of management at work, justifying the stance of the knowing leader as the one who must know and who is there to hold the members accountable for doing what is expected. This approach to leadership is, unfortunately, perpetuated in many of our current teaching/learning practices of business schools.

Perpetuating Current Practices of Accountability Through Business Educational Systems

When the Harvard legal-case-based approach came to define the discipline of management as a science, the “founding fathers” laid claim to modern assumptions of rationality, universality and objectivity. Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996: 362) suggest that, “Most contemporary theory and practice in organization science is still conducted with a modernist framework.” Some academics are now suggesting it is time to revise the boundaries set forth in current management education and learning (Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003).

In my view, this commitment to a modernist, mechanistic conception of the organization continues to influence academic teachings in business. They both sustain the top-down accountability orientation and impede the development of a constructive, collaborative alternative (Donaldson, 2002). Recently, in the *Academy of Management News*, Mitroff (2004) called for the elimination of several fallacies that have been allowed to “infect our business degree programs,” (p. 7) suggesting that the very programs that teach organizational science are themselves toxic by nature. Mitroff notes that they demonstrate:

1. A mean-spirited and distorted view of human nature;
2. A narrow, outdated, and repudiated notion of ethics;

3. A narrow definition of the role of management in human affairs;
4. An overly reified conception of the “sub-disciplines;”
5. A sense of learned helplessness and hopelessness among faculties (p. 7).

Mitroff suggested these fallacies permeate the cultures of educational institutions in general. These fallacies may also be prevalent in the teachings that result from the cultures of these institutions. Roberts (1996) also sees business education as a vehicle for underpinning rationalization in organizations. He states,

The business school can be seen as one of the vehicles of what Weber saw as the progressive rationalization of the social world. In disseminating “best practice” to successive generations of students there is a usually implicit belief in the possibility of the progressive rationalization of action; a ready embrace of the modernist assumption of the progressive and cumulative character of knowledge (p. 55, in Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003, p. 86).

Because theories are often designed through the modernist eyes, it is time to revisit the accepted theories of the past still taught in universities. Among the current theories that add support and credibility to traditional “rational” practices of individual accountability are the following:

Agency Theory

The prevalent description of Americans for the past one hundred and fifty years has been and remains that they are individualistic and achievement-oriented. They place a high value on personal success and on the assumption that *all people* first act through self-interest. Agency theory justifies this thinking.

Agency Theory (Voorm, 1964) states that organizational leaders (and members) often act in ways that maximize their own personal interests at the cost of investors and owners (and

organizational members) who lose value as a result of these actions (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Mitroff (2004) suggests it is one of the prominent theories that “assume that humans are ruthless, motivated solely by greed, opportunism and selfishness” (p. 7-8).

Agency theory emphasizes the economic exchange relationship, which places little emphasis on trust. Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard & Werner (1998) state

An agency theory lens highlights the formal economic context and self-interest motive, as well as the behavioral consequences. It also delineates factors that contribute to the risk of opportunism and identifies how the exchange relationship can be structured to minimize this risk (p. 515).

Agency theory also offers an explanation for managerial activities such as monitoring and control (Whitener et al, 1998: 514). In the traditional mode of monitoring and control, the theory limits individual activities through micromanagement practices, limiting innovative thinking on the part of those doing the work. In focusing on who-specifically-does-what, the theory also limits collaborative action.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory states that organizations conform to internal norms held about sound organizing (Donaldson, 2002). It describes forces leading to a tendency to “sameness” across firms (Colbert, 2004). It “binds participants together with a common set of understandings about the organizational way of doing things” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 303). Such thinking, as with agency theory, emphasizes predictability and calls for maximizing control. It suggests suppression of variance, minimizes innovative action and ensures conformity. It may also be a barrier to the acceptance and expansion of out-of-the-norm action while strengthening the need for individual accountability.

Unquestioned acceptance of current norms perpetuates practices of one-way, individual accountability and limits opportunities to expand investments in relationships. Institutional theory itself is a prescription for rigid normalcy. In today's workplace, members are seeking opportunities to invest themselves in their work. A more flexible, ongoing, relationship-based model of sensemaking and a new, more open translation of institutional theory are called for in today's workplace.

The Resource-Based View Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, focuses on explaining competitive advantage as an outcome of the development and deployment of valuable organizational resources (physical and human). However, interpersonal resources, according to the theory, are unique, vague and not fully understandable; they defy identity and replication. Colbert (2004: 347) says,

Constructive, socially embedded resources are highly strategically important (in the sense that they are inscrutable to competitors) because of their inherent complexity, but they are difficult to deliberately build for precisely the same reason.”

In this thinking, socially embedded resources may be perceived as a personal way-of-working, a result of luck or related to a context. (An example might be Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric.) For this reason, interpersonal approaches are not seen as retrievable, transferable or repeatable (Teece, 1998).

This view may extinguish attempts to identify, expand and incorporate what is seen as unique approaches to working together. Consequently, this view might see practices of constructive accountability as based in the personalities and relationships of certain people or groups as beyond duplication. RBV theory makes it less likely that ongoing CA will be seen as a practicable, ongoing possibility across groups and organizations.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) theory (Bateman and Organ, 1983) suggests that “extra-role” contributions (working beyond the call of duty) are unique and beneficial. These activities are notable because of their not-usually-seen-here character and, as such, they are not expected in everyday activities on the job. The difference between organizational citizenship behavior and activities of constructive accountability is located in (1) the “occasionalness” of OCB (Bolino and Turnley, 2003) and the “ongoingness” of CA, (2) the individual focus of OCB and the “we-ness” nature of CA, and (3) OCB sees the potential of neglecting assigned work to perform praiseworthy OCB activities where the focus in CA is on these activities being part of normal work.

Within OCB there is an implication of demonstrating loyalty through the willingness to “step up” when needed. Although OCB is encouraged, it is not expected that one would perform these activities on an ongoing basis—nor are the activities seen as needed at all times. Also, OCB does not suggest that the people performing the extra-role activities are continually involved or contributive to decision-making, as in CA.

The CA approach does not suggest ignoring OCB. It does suggest that many of the practices seen as “stepping up” in OCB are characteristic to CA as an ongoing part of the workplace process of relating and accomplishing together.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) (Janssen and Van Yperen, 2004; Campbell, 2002, Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) states that leaders favor certain employees because they do things that “facilitate leader job performance” and demonstrate an above-average sense of responsibility. Janssen & Van Yperen (2004) suggest that “the quality of the exchanges that

develop between employees and their leaders are predictive of performance-related and attitudinal job outcomes, especially for the employees” (p. 371). Campbell (2002: 53) notes,

These employees form a core of individuals on whom the supervisor counts heavily and whose commitment to the leader and to work-unit goals far exceeds that required by the formal work contract. They become extensions of the manager and take responsibility for many of the work unit’s critical functions.

This suggests that the favored few are depended on while other employees are placed in the role of “less than dependable” and “less than committed.” Potentially, the “less-than” members experience less interaction and connection with the leader and opportunities to collaborate and contribute in meaningful ways are also potentially limited.

Clearly, the tendency in this theory is for more rigorous accounting practices for those expected not to perform as well. Instead of actively inviting all members into the process of contribution, the leader anticipates fewer contributive practices from those outside of the favored few. This is contrary to the relational elements of CA that invite all members to contribute their talents in interactive ways.

The focus and propagation of these and other deficit-based theories all work against open, genuine, collaborative practices. Such management theories were developed in the 20th century when managers alone were expected to plan, organize, direct and control. These theories-seen-as-fact continue in the 21st century to focus on the deficiencies of organizational members. They subtly call for command and control of the less favored instead of calling for real and deep involvement and relational participation between and across status and role.

Yet, according to Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996: 362), there is a ray of hope. “However, across many branches of the sciences and humanities—indeed, some would say

across the culture more generally—a new sensibility has slowly emerged.” Language is emerging that includes appreciation, relatedness, co-construction, relational responsibility. Harvey and Buckley (2002: 368) argue, “We must delete some of the basic wisdom of the 20th century and, at the same time, update the foundation concepts in management, as we enter the 21st century.” They add that looking through current textbooks “gives one the impression that current organizations still are concerned with old concepts, e.g., span-of-control, line/staff differentiation, and chain-of-command (many are not)” (p. 368).

A new appreciation of organizational members and the use of collaborative transformational approaches, such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987), are igniting positive change in organizations and cannot be ignored. Management theories are also moving to a more open model of exchange. Leader-member-exchange theory (LMX) is, for example, beginning to seek involvement and openness of the leader, leading to more extended input by all members instead of the favored few. George Graen, the originator of the LMX theory, noted this as “Stage IV” of LMX theory (personal conversation, 1997).

Unfortunately, many organizations, with the help of academics, “visionary leaders” and consultants, are just reframing traditional accountability into more “politically correct” language. For example, the words “two-way accountability,” as applied between bosses and subordinates, espoused by Culbert and Ulman (2001). Stringent hierarchical and bureaucratic relationships are disguised but remain in place, simply converting traditional concepts into a new language.

Toward Reconstruction: Constructive Accountability

For many, the term “constructive” appears to be paradoxical to today’s traditional form of accountability. How can something so often experienced as demeaning and painful be constructive? Missing in the current definitions and practices of accountability is the implicit

understanding that all members of the organization socially create their organizations together. Each person is working in partnership with others, even when it is not obvious in the moment. Co-construction is so very apparent in the organizational context, whether it is strength-based or weakness-focused, and yet it goes “undiscovered” and ignored—especially in the application of accountability. It is in this respect that I introduce the concept of constructive accountability. As offered earlier, I define it as *an ongoing process of relationship that contributes to a mutuality of sensemaking and its outcomes, bringing a heightened willingness to be collaboratively contributive and responsible in the workplace.*

A new understanding of accountability, as a positive, mutually constructive and responsible process, encourages people to say, “I am here and I’m going to work with others to make it matter.” When accountability is constructive, the role of organizational members at all levels is to work collaboratively and productively with others on an ongoing basis. In my view, when awareness of the constructive form of accountability is the norm, knowledge exchange, support and resource sharing are present. Collaborative learning opportunities are more possible, suggesting that accountability is not “performed by those above.” Accountability that is constructive is part of collaborative practice, spreading the role of making suggestions and offerings that positively impact the mutually constructed work of others; *accountability exists inside relationships with others.*

I will offer throughout this text the dimensions of accountability in the workplace. However, Figure 1.1 is useful in highlighting the contrasts between the two forms of accountability.

Figure 1.1: The Dimensions of Accountability

| <u>Traditional and Current Accountability</u> | <u>Constructive Accountability</u> |
|--|---|
| Activities performed after the incident | An ongoing process |
| Often a one-sided discussion | Co-authorship of outcomes |
| Focus on deficits (or deficiencies) | Focuses on strengths |
| Activation based on authority | Occurrences across status and title |
| Demanding, giving, taking | Offering, exchanging, advancing |
| Potentially lower outcomes | Stronger outcomes |
| Identification and punishment of the one who is at fault | Learning/growth benefits for participants |
| Focuses on “Don’t do it again” | Focuses on “What can <i>we</i> do?” |
| Borders around knowledge-sharing | Open learning and sharing of knowledge |
| Focuses on corrections | Focuses on relations, responsibility, support, informing and coaching |
| Lower participation, higher avoidance | Involvement and collaboration |
| Based on fear and threat | A sharing of accountability in relationship |

This study focuses on the possibility that organizational tactics can be used to affect the use of talents, skills and positive relationships inside organizations through the *understanding* that the movement of accountability into the mutuality of work is foundational and functional across member levels and title. The case for more attention to accountability and how it can be constructive is based on the recognition that a relational, ongoing process of work changes the “activity” of “being accountable.” Such a process *incorporates* accountability into participants’ ongoing activities. Thus, constructive accountability exists in a context of shared knowledge, mutual synergy, open communication, the development of relational connections and partnerships, shared sensemaking and decision-making. It is facilitated by a new understanding/recognition of the need for mutual understanding, relationship and action.

How an organization functions, its effectiveness and its responses to its external environment, are all tied into the interactive performances of its people. Constructive accountability, as a relational process, calls for the co-construction of accomplishment and consequences making integrative performance possible. Within CA, members have and give permission to actively bring others “into their work.” There is an appearance of being individually responsible, yet there is common, accepted, co-constructed knowledge and practice that recognizes action and outcomes are mutually generated. One calls others to engage in interactive sensemaking and action as needed. Seeking the resources, strengths, skills and knowledge of others is seen as part of a process that leads to best performance, decisions and practices. When a “bad” decision is made, all who have contributed (or have chosen not to contribute) have been part of the process whether they are directly aware of doing so or not. Recognizing and educating what CA “is” establishes the “we-ness” of sensemaking, decision-making and action—even when acting “alone.”

Examples of the practice of constructive accountability as an ongoing process of interaction include the following:

- Casual, even accidental, meetings of co-members: walking down the hall, seeing a colleague, and asking how he or she is doing on a project of mutual interest.
- Calling a colleague on the telephone and asking about past experience with a frustrating issue and asking about or brainstorming ways to approach the issue.
- Participating at a meaningful level in the strategic design of a process and planning.
- Reflecting with others over lunch about what could be done to make better sense of a past or current situation.

- Casually exchanging funny and relevant stories and metaphors that shape feelings of connectedness and unfettered exchange.
- Purposely contacting another department, group or person regarding how one's own department's anticipated activities or new thinking might impact the other department's work or how the two areas could work together to solve a recurring situation.
- Offering encouragement, input and support to others (including one's supervisor) when he or she is working under challenging circumstances.
- Advocating the best efforts of fellow members to others.
- Attending and contributing to meetings that are directly and indirectly connected to one's own work.
- Listening to learn at every opportunity.
- Being alert to resources, both known (seminars, journals, magazines, etc.) and unknown (accidental learnings and offerings of others) not currently obvious within and outside the company that might create new alternatives, awarenesses and conclusions.
- Noticing and hearing "something different" and asking questions that clarify, explain and educate.
- Noticing and hearing "something confirming" and doing the same.

Constructive accountability improves the effectiveness of positive, contributive, interlocked behaviors. According to Weick (1969: 91), "Interlocked behaviors are the basic elements that constitute any organization. They consist of repetitive, reciprocal, contingent behaviors that develop and are maintained between two or more actors." It is through the recognition that participants' work is interrelated, co-constructed and essential to the achievement of others that

interlocked behaviors ‘broaden and build’ opportunities to succeed for the members and the organization.

As interlocked behaviors of relationship, CA also improves the effectiveness of “constructive arguing.” Researchers know that conflict is natural and even necessary to innovative thinking and creativity. “The challenge,” according to Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and Bourgeois (1999: 172), “is to encourage members...to argue without destroying their ability to work together.” Toleration of non-constructive conflict cannot be ignored. Ignoring problems that need attention or not getting involved when attention is called for suggests negative behaviors are appropriate.

CA is not a one time “why-did-you-do-that” conversation or reactive confrontation. It is also not participating in win/lose activities. It is an ongoing, mutually valued process of exchange in everyday work life that helps participants achieve through continuous, co-assessment and expansion of workplace strengths. CA is essential to making sense of what can and cannot be done and to the expansion of the desire to work together effectively. Constructive accountability is about cooperation and collaboration, learning and serving, agreeing and disagreeing, and making sense through a foundation of valuing relationships.

Suggesting CA As a Social Constructionist Approach to Accountability

Freedman and Combs (1996: 1) say, “Using the metaphor of social construction leads us to consider the ways in which every person’s social, interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other beings and human institutions...” It is within these sensemaking provisions of social construction that I have entered into this study, thus influencing both my perceptions and the frame I put around the thought of moving from individual to constructive accountability. In this light, Gergen offers a series of criteria he calls “A Family of Criteria for

Social Constructionist Practices” (1996, Appendix A). These criteria (as seen through my interpretation) are very useful in identifying practices that may be viewed as constructively accountable. Gergen (1996) offers the point that social construction is “just a conversation that moves into the gray areas.” These conversational practices challenge realities, not setting up a final truth, acknowledging that there is continually much to learn and encouraging a focus on possibilities. They also honor traditions and the blinders they create while using the traditions to broaden, build and create. In the context of CA, social construction is an invitation to converse and continue in conversation about the “realities” and relationships that encourage conversations in organizations. We are invited to explore new possibilities of relationship in the workplace and in other venues of our lives where accountability is continually present. It is movement toward a future building of positively accountable action and relationship.

The Present Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to introduce, develop and support a concept of constructive accountability that is practicable and practical in the workplace. It is to shift the conception of accountability as constructive, moving it forward into the process of work. The following are my particular objectives:

- (1) To develop a conception of accountability that is both constructive and collaborative, and to illuminate a range of organizational practices that would realize this conception in action.
- (2) To explore the potential of constructive accountability for increasing the involvement and contribution of members to the organization, and ultimately the efficacy of the organization.

- (3) To develop and expand the idea that constructive accountability, when understood, appreciated and activated, can contribute to personal and group well-being and to a positive organizational culture.
- (4) To expand, even change, the perception and thinking instrumental to the practice and experience of accountability.

This thesis proposes a re-construction and reframing of this well-recognized and dreaded word, accountability, as a relational, strength-based broadening and building process within everyday work. It proposes to move accountability into the realm of beneficial relationships and the development of practices where we learn from each other and co-construct current and future performance. My hope also is to highlight past beneficial and workable yet unacknowledged processes of constructive accountability. It is also to make it possible for practitioners to experience more meaning and satisfaction within day-to-day work. To explore the concept and potentials of CA, I have carried out intensive interviews with fourteen high level managers in twelve organizations. I have asked them questions about traditional accountability practices, introduced the concept of CA and explored with them their ideas on its applicability and limitations. Chapter two includes a description of the research process, outlines the questions asked in the conversations, and identifies the participants in the conversations on accountability. Chapter Three will include the context and text of the conversations and presents the highlights of these contributions to my understanding of CA. Chapter Four will include the themes and interpretations of those conversations and will contain an enriched account of CA and its potential. The chapter is shaped around the “components of traditional accountability.” Chapter 5 will talk about ways of “moving toward constructive accountability” in organizational life, touching on suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

Research Procedures and Context

Valuable new management models are flowing into theory and practice that support the ongoing renewal, survival and prosperity of organizations. These models offer “new” forms of common sense that have revised management approaches to involvement of organizational members in running effective organizations. Regardless of what is offered, the basic principles of involvement, collaboration, flexibility, adaptability and contribution of members are present. Collectively, these new models call for a change in mindset of how people work together at all levels of the organization. Yet inside most of these new approaches, the traditional concept of accountability remains unquestioned.

This chapter covers the procedures used in my research, identifies the organizations and people who participated in the dialogues, and presents the questions that guided these discussions.

Research Procedure

To locate the thoughts and experiences of accountability held by organizational leaders and members, I chose dialogue for the methodology. The term “interview” was a bit more formal than I wanted to project to those participating, thus, I contacted the participants and invited them into a “conversation on accountability.” The participants appeared to respond positively to this

language, with one participant describing it as “less formal and more loose.” He was relieved “not to be interrogated”—or treated as if he “must know it all.” The purpose of the conversations was to explore the participant’s ideas and experiences of accountability and to introduce the theory and practice of constructive accountability. Special attention was given to possible practices of CA, that it might become a practical process of working in a learning-way-of-working-together. In essence, my hope was to offer the concept of how to openly bring accountability forward into the everyday activities of work. One person participated in each conversation.

One of the goals for identifying conversation participants was to have diverse types of organizations represented, preferably with leaders at the upper management level. I purposely included women; five of the fourteen participants in the twelve organizations were women. Also, insofar as possible, I wanted people who were actively involved in working with organizational members in an administrative or educational function. In one case, a VP of marketing was included because of his approach to working with both his own people and his role of influencing those who work directly with internal and external customers. One participant, although directly responsible for the operations of an organization, claimed to have no useful title. He felt titles are limiting and often counterproductive. Another person, responsible for “American Operations,” was approached because of his functional authority and influence on his organization.

The conversations were designed as an inquiry into the nature or “construction” of accountability inside the work worlds of organizational members. As an inquiry method, the attempt was to attend to both the awareness of the person and the social constructions of accountability.

Organizations Represented

There was a concerted attempt to have conversations with members of diverse types of organizations. Although manufacturing was represented by several organizations, I also succeeded in initiating dialogues with managers in organizations representing long-term care, government, a research group and a floricultural organization. The organizations included:

| Type of Organization | Communication Mode |
|---|---------------------------|
| Manufacturing, medical instruments | In Person |
| Manufacturing, marine products manufacturing | Telephone |
| A US federal consulting agency | Telephone |
| Long term healthcare | In person |
| Manufacturing, travel products | In Person |
| Manufacturing, wood home furniture | In Person |
| Floricultural organization | In Person |
| Manufacturing, home/personal products | In Person |
| Manufacturing, home window products | Telephone (2) |
| International call-center organization | Telephone |
| Manufacturing, office furniture | Telephone |
| South African para-governmental research org. | Via Johann Roux, Phd (2) |

A manufacturer of home/personal products, though an early leader in participative practices, when contacted, was reluctant to provide opportunities for a conversation. In response to my request, the comment was, “We’ve done so in the past and it turned out to be, from our standpoint, a disaster, so we do not do it anymore.” Thus, I turned to a past employee who values the company as a learning place for her own leadership practices.

My colleague, Johann Roux, Ph.D., held two of the conversations in South Africa. Roux consults on organizational issues and is a private coach and therapist. He is also a colleague who is familiar with my work and a dialogue resource. Constructive accountability is not a new topic to him. Furthermore, when doing research in another culture, it is a huge advantage to have the assistance of a local person who knows and lives inside the culture. I am ever grateful for his generosity in aiding my research process. As a social constructionist, he is especially interested in the topic. He says,

The conversations emphasize the importance of what can be accomplished, especially in the light of our country’s history. It is a very useful idea in regards to the strong ethics focus now present in South Africa. It provides a venue to bring ethics to ground level and to live them visibly. Constructive accountability must become part of the values and strategy of working together in organizations in South Africa (July, 2004, personal conversation).

Three completed conversations were dropped from the study. A conversation held in an electronics-manufacturing firm in Pittsburgh, PA, with three women at the manager level of HR was excluded because the company had implemented a major downsizing across all HR Departments just the day before the conversation. The cut back was very difficult for most of the HR departments within the division. Within their particular department, it was noted, it was not

as dramatic because they were already “cut to the bone” and was “handling it well.” In fact, because two of the three managers accepted an offered buyout, their department would be hiring. The conversation was dramatically candid regarding their ability to work for (not with) the “Japanese-culture and mentality.” They talked candidly of the struggles they experienced in dealing with issues that are an outcome of the culture—emphasizing the lack of accountability when working in the organization’s environment. I decided not to directly quote the conversation in the writings.

The second conversation dropped from the research dialogue was held by telephone with Frances Hesselbein, Chairman of the Board of Governors of The Drucker Foundation, now known as Leader to Leader, and noted editor and writer of leadership books. She is a former chief executive of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. Hesselbein was interested in the topic of the conversation, but, perhaps because the conversation was conducted by telephone, seemed to be dictating her responses, giving a sense of not thinking deeply on the subject. As a result, the conversation was brief and to the point, almost well rehearsed, as if she were using her “book” personality to say what she *should* say.

She did offer the following comments that seem relevant to accountability as related to governance in both nonprofit and for profit organizations. Hesselbein feels strongly that the role of accountability in nonprofit organizations is a vital one. Focused on the financial and inter-relational aspects of managers managing, she stated,

Social sector organizations have to be impeccable managers of relationships and money. One of the many exciting things about these organizations is that we have to be stringent in management because we have no margin for errors. We have to always be aware of

this. Everything organizations do helps to build a healthy and inquisitive community and hopefully encourages engagement, involvement and collaboration.

In an article in the Drucker Foundation publication *Leader to Leader*, Hesselbein wrote, “Social sector organizations have moved from expecting to have their good intentions rewarded to holding themselves accountable for results.” I asked her, “Why is this so important?”

It is extremely important. Maybe at one time we could say “please reward us [nonprofits] for our intentions.” Now those days are gone. Now the results must be measured and documented. We must be accountable. Doing it well is a very powerful message to our communities and us. Organizations cannot be effective unless they accept accountability as essential. Without it there will be no organization. Social sector organizations have to be impeccable managers of relationships and money. One of the many exciting things about these organizations is that we have to be stringent in management because we have no margin for errors. We have to always be aware of this.

Hesselbein’s statements, though focusing on the non-profit sector, adds relevance to the importance of accountability at the leadership level of all organizations. Although not at this point meant for non-profit organizations, ethics-focused legislation such as Sarbanes-Oxley most likely will soon move into that sector, focusing on accountability for governance and impeccable management. Although her comments were made prior to the legislation, her call for accountability for impeccable management is pertinent to management of relations and money in all organizations.

The original conversation held at the office furniture manufacturer was with a Senior VP who was also dropped. Shortly after the conversation he left as a result of the company's first-ever lay off. Because I could not locate him, I dropped the conversation from the process.

After completion of the conversations, the face-to-face and computer-generated recordings were transcribed and examined for purposes of interpretation and direct quotation within the thesis.

Conversation Protocol

The questions used in the conversations were designed to (1) identify the participants' understanding of accountability in organizations as it is practiced at this time, (2) attempt to locate the culture of accountability in their particular organization, (3) clarify what "constructive accountability" is or might be in organizations and (4) solicit information on the value and process of introducing CA in organizations. The language, order and primacy of the questions varied in the course of some of the conversations.

I opened the conversations by asking them to identify themselves and their company for the recordings. Then in an attempt to get some information about the participant, I asked the following question. In many cases, additional questions followed to identify their tenure in the organization and their previous roles in organizational life.

JGS: Could we take a moment for you to describe your role and responsibilities in [the company]? What is your interest/focus in your work and why is this important to you?

The goal, early in the conversation, was to get a picture of the participant's general understanding of accountability as it is presently practiced. This was done to create a benchmark of their understanding of accountability as it is applied at the present and to identify a comparison point, a place from which to move in introducing a new concept or understanding of what constructive accountability might look like in organizations. At this point, I did not ask the specific question of how the individual understood accountability but how organizations and

members in general perceive accountability. Nevertheless, many preferred to focus on their own organization. This was done in an attempt to avoid the participants being seen as wrong at a later time in the conversation.

JGS: How do you think the organizational members perceive accountability in most organizations today? And, why?

In order to further identify practices of accountability in the organization, the following question was asked regarding how accountability is applied and how effective the process is in the participant's organization. Many had to think about this question for a moment. Their answers often centered on performance review processes.

JGS: How is accountability utilized/activated in most organizations of today? How are people held accountable specifically in your organization? Describe how effective you think most of these efforts are.

Next, I turned the conversations toward relationships and the impact that current applications of accountability have on workplace relationships. In some cases, I asked them to think about an accountability situation that went well and to comment on that particular incident.

JGS: Within the current interpretation of how accountability is achieved, are relationships between the participants for the most part improved or depleted following an accountability encounter? If they are improved, what brings about the improvement? Or, if depleted, why does this happen and why?

In some cases, the participants used the word “feedback” when talking about accountability that is outside of the evaluation process. My own experience of “feedback” in the workplace was that it was often a one-way conversation about how something was being done right or wrong. I was curious as to how the participants perceived the word and what it might mean to those receiving feedback. Thus, the following question:

JGS: The word “feedback” has been much talked about in recent years in attempting to improve performance. From your viewpoint, is this an act of accountability and what are your thoughts on “feedback?”

Many see personal responsibility as a synonym for accountability. In some conversations, I added the following question:

JGS: Tell me your thoughts on the status of personal responsibility in organizations today. Why is it this way? Tell me a story that reflects these thoughts.

At this point, I offered into the conversation an extended description of the concept of constructive accountability. In some cases, I read the following twice or offered the participant an opportunity to read the information.

***Constructive accountability* is an ongoing process of relating together, of talking and working together in productive and responsible ways. CA conversations include the exchange of information in the form of questions and statements, sharing and looking at concerns and seeking new and different ideas or just talking about how things are going right now; the most casual and the most formal exchanges are accountability encounters that can have deep meaning in regards to individual, group and organizational**

achievement. It is not about deciding after the fact that things went right or wrong, it is looking at things as they occur and deciding now, with others, what needs to be done to correct and re-correct.

Many times I expanded on this definition and asked if they had any questions regarding what was being offered and requested. They would often pause and think about it for a moment to think about what the information really means to them. Eventually, we went to the following question.

JGS: As a new view of accountability, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace?

I wanted to focus on CA being an ongoing, everyday activity. For that reason, I asked the question,

JGS: As someone who worked as an internal person for 20+ years, I feel that there are pockets of constructive accountability already happening in our organizations—that the key is to make people aware of the definition of CA as something they do all the time, but are not aware of it. It is to make it possible for them to recognize accountability as not punishment but part of how we work all the time. This would make it possible for a culture of accountability to be present at all times in recognizable ways. What are your thoughts on this? Many times this was shortened or I expanded on it in an effort to clarify.

The following question was asked in order to continue to focus on the relational side of CA.

JGS: There is a strong interactive component to CA. Organizations can decide, through the interactive norms of the workplace, whether constructive accountability becomes a part of how people work together. How could an organization improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm of their organization?

It seemed important to address the relevance of constructive accountability to organizations in the conversations.

JGS: My thinking is that, CA, as an ongoing exchange process, supports the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes in groups and organizations. Some would say that an ongoing process of CA could positively impact the skills and attitudes of organization members? If so, how? And, if not, why not?

Also important to the conversation was the participant's thoughts on how CA could become part of the day-to-day actions of organizational members. How it could occur would be significant in carrying constructive accountability into practice in the workplace. This question revealed enthusiasm for constructive accountability and its value to the people involved and their organizations.

JGS: Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace. Describe what might be needed in the way of new ways of leading or training and development of organizational members?

The conversations included activities of constructive accountability. *Account offering*, *account exchanging* and *account advancing* (chapter 4), the core activities of constructive accountability, were present, making mutually constructed understandings possible. The conversations demonstrated the expansion of understanding, questioning, statements of position, and activities of seeking sense. Within these occurrences there were instances of confusion and learning. Without exception, the conversations flowed with interest and animation, containing opportunities for connection and the occurrence of “ah ha” moments. We were together constructing an awareness of what constructive accountability “is.”

During the conversation with the VP-HR of the travel products company I received a symbol they offer to employees, an object that highlights the company’s values that are integrated into their philosophy of management. The symbol is a marble with a quote that calls for treating others as you would like to be treated. Another organization arranged for a tour by a manager in the organization with the goal to illustrate “the way we treat our people.” Another insisted on a tour of their product room. These products were noted as innovations that occur because people work well together and “are accountable for their work.” These companies are proud of the way they treat their people. Nonetheless, most continue to apply accountability in the traditional way—and many continue to practice, although camouflaged, the traditional practices of command and control management. All of these leaders are well meaning and caring about the way people work together. My hope is that learning about the mutuality of CA and benefits of moving accountability forward into everyday relationships will affect their visions of the future.

Chapter three, while not including the full manuscripts, offers an in depth look at the conversations.

[In the interest of length (over 100 pages), chapter three is not included in this text.]

Chapter 4

Constructive Accountability: The Enriched Account

Constructive: constructing or tending to construct; helping to improve.

Accountability: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions.

Constructive Accountability: *an ongoing process of relationship that contributes to a mutuality of sensemaking and its outcomes, bringing a heightened willingness to be collaboratively contributive and responsible in the workplace.*

Social constructionism suggests that people have alternatives as to how “reality” is created—also how one’s own “truth” is constructed. It is concerned with the process by which people come to their understandings, not the understanding itself. Gergen and Gergen (2004) define social constructionism as “the creation of meaning through our collaborative activities” (p.7). This places CA firmly in the realm of social constructionism: it is within the existence of ongoing collaborative activities that accountability occurs beneficially.

It is in conversations, within ongoing exchanges of accounts, that relationships are created and sustained over time and that productive work becomes possible. Work life, because it is ultimately relationally situated, does not take place in a vacuum. Constructive accountability emerges within relationships through conversations that are collaborative and relational. These conversations create “accepted sense” and design co-created responsibility and action. It is in these relationship-based practices that constructive accountability becomes real. Significant to these activities, as noted by Sheila McNamee, is community. She said, “Unless we acknowledge

the communities within which we realize our possibilities and constraints, we end up in an individualized ideology” (September, 2004, personal communication). It is within the social interaction of the community that the organization continues to exist and evolve.

According to Margaret Wheatley (2002: 41-42), “Conversation is the natural way we humans think together.” Mutually acceptable perspectives are constructed in conversation, whether valid or not, whether of value or not, within a flexible framework of co-construction. Co-construction occurs through ongoing, dynamic interactions of relationship. Thus, it is in active discussion about what accountability is that people reflect on beliefs and assumptions and attempt to move to new thinking. Within this experience the construction of a “sensible” and sensitive form of accountable life occurs. The acknowledgements of others determine whether those beliefs are constituted as beneficial or not beneficial.

How do we get to accountability that is constructive, or, as a participant put it, “the other Big A, Acceptable?” He answered his own question by saying, “You have to get them to see [accountability] as a positive thing.”

It is also in interaction that it is decided what “constructive” means. These interactions allow the community to engage in a continuous process of discovery and renewal. Ultimately, people together arrange their language and experiences of events and relationships; they choose ways of understanding that are acceptable accounts of themselves and the world around them (White and Epston, 1990; Freedman and Combs, 1996). Assumptions are co-created, whether positive or negative, in which “one” and/or many see the world. In our conversation, a US governmental agency participant said,

If you believe the statement that we live in worlds that our questions create, then dialogue, which is really inquiry based, is always seeking clarification and deeper

understanding of the image of the world, the results, if you will, of what we wish to create together. They become construction conversations.

“Understandable” language is created and used locally and globally to get things done and to design shortcuts to do things quickly. CA includes the “centrality of language (multiple realities and multiple selves) and is performative,” as suggested by Gergen (1996).

These conversations were difficult for some of the participants. They all had a desire to be helpful, and yet moving to a new scenario of accountability was a stretch for some. For example, the conversation included lots of hesitations, such as, “I am thinking...;” “Boy, that is a hard question;” “That is a great question;” “All these questions are hard ones;” “This is deep;” “Uhhmms;” and other statements that indicated what one person noted as “mind stretches.” This is a new language and it is “tough to put your arms around it.”

It became evident in the conversations that **accountability is a mindset**, an overarching understanding (“metaconversation”) or, as noted by Langer (1989: 37), a “premature cognitive commitment.” And yet, within the mindset of accountability, there is confusion about how to “do” accountability, and there is little clarity as to how to “be accountable.” Accordingly, for some participants the understanding that accountability is done in a certain way determines its value, potentially constructing judgments of what is “the right way” to apply accountability. As noted by a manufacturing business unit manager, “Accountability is above and beyond metrics. If you have trust as a value, one person may look at trust differently than others.”

The commitment to a mindset determines how people will see, understand and act, in this case, in applying and experiencing accountability. What is valued also creates a context that influences perceptions of what accountability means, constructs how it is experienced and adjusts one’s perception as to whether it is effective. A VP-Human Resources of an international

travel products company, for example, resisted the “ongoing” aspect and exchange of accountability within everyday encounters. He felt it was “spearheading it too far to others” and “that would make them want to be even more involved in the other person’s work or not involved at all.” This appears to say that members prefer to stay out of the work of others, eliminating the opportunity to interact about mutual issues and concerns. I asked myself, does this suggest for this participant that control of each person and localization of his or her work is less problematic and to be desired? Is he suggesting that mutuality is a problem that must be controlled—and that control is essential? As a mindset, this places his thinking in the individualized realm.

Additionally, although intrigued by the concept, some did not seem to be willing to take it seriously. The Operations Manager of a medical instruments manufacturer was willing to talk about CA but felt the language would be hard to explain; it is too complex. The VP-HR of a wood home furniture manufacturing company conceded that it could be an “influencing factor” while stating that it is not “strong enough to stand on its own.” Others suggested the use of another name—although appreciating the offered description.

Unfortunately, the conversations made it clear, as noted above, that there is **confusion as to what accountability is** in organizations. It was as if they were saying: I know accountability when I see it...but I don’t have to like it. There were also those who claimed to “understand” and currently use the CA concept, although, in my thinking, for many a linear focus limited understanding of the concept.

An example of CA offered by one leader noted that, as a last resort, executives would go “out of a meeting to organizational members for input.” This reflects the “two-way accountability” referred to by Culbert and Ullmen (2001) that appears to maintain the status

issues of the hierarchical relationships developed in the past. The interactive and mutual sensemaking nature of CA was not there. People in this organization, it was offered, have permission to influence through asking questions and giving suggestions. The message I received was that asking questions and giving suggestions is fine as long as the leaders and managers are still in control. In other words, members have permission to influence decisions—when they are asked their opinion. Under these circumstances, a casual atmosphere is seen as pleasant, but the suggestions and questions of the members may not be taken seriously. Some offered stories that they felt characterized CA. These stories held the accoutrements of traditional, after-the-fault accountability.

The conversations further defined, for me, the components of both the traditional and constructive forms of accountability. In the following, I will use the *Components of Accountability* to create a “frame” for the traditional form of accountability and to create a model of constructive accountability. I will include comments from the conversations and research-based notations to emphasize my learnings from the conversations regarding these components.

As noted earlier, these components are: the underlying understanding, application in practice and social patterning.

The Components of Traditional Accountability

I am suggesting that the current form of traditional accountability could be noted as *economic accountability*—a form of accountability that is based in early 20th century mechanistic thinking. It is focused on efficiency and effectiveness, ignoring the collective person as contributor to the outcome, while placing those in authority as the ones to whom everyone is accountable. Those in authority are the knowers; they decide if something has been done right and/or if the person has behaved appropriately and according to rules and procedures designed by the rule makers.

Although much has changed in designing new forms of leading, accountability is still held in this mechanistic frame.

The Underlying Understanding of Traditional Accountability

There is an *underlying understanding* in traditional accountability of what accountability is, what it means to perform rationally, and why it is useful to govern performance. (An “underlying understanding” is the often unspoken cultural thinking of the organization that indicates how things are done.) This traditional underlying understanding component identifies what I call “end accountability” as necessary for leaders to control the workers. As the workers understand it, accountability is something to be avoided, even feared, and that it takes place after something has gone wrong. The understanding that discomfort will result when not complying fully with what is expected is daunting. The organizational member focuses on the possibility of punishment.

The *theory of system justification* suggests traditional accountability remains in place because people tend to accept existing institutions and procedures as fair, legitimate, natural, and inevitable. They do so in part because (1) they are motivated to conserve cognitive and behavioral resources, and (2) people are motivated to preserve the sense that the world is a fair place in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Jost, Kruglanski and Simon, 1999). Accountability is understood as important. People do not question what is seen as functional and justified. The VP-HR from the travel products manufacturing company suggests,

Without accountability it is ok for everyone to do anything they want over time, no synchronized goals and objectives. Accountability is the very core element that you have to have in order to have teams work effectively.

This suggests that accountability, as an organizational “need,” has not as yet been reframed or re-justified in ways congruent with the recent move toward participative and involvement-oriented workplace communities. Accountability remains individually focused and unquestioned.

The Chairman and CEO of a marine products manufacturing company indicated she has found clear signs of dysfunctional accountability in the organizations in which she has worked. The assumption is that the person being held to account has done something that does not fit the expectations of the person(s) holding him or her accountable. What has been done is perceived as “bad,” not permitted and/or not meeting standards. To perform rationally is to do what is expected within the boundaries or designations of the accounter. To be a “performer” is to follow the rules and do what is seen as acceptable.

Unfortunately, after-the-fault accountability is sometimes present in formidable forms. Members sense that there will be a price to pay if there is a misstep or they do not fully understand what is to be done. Yet some are afraid to ask for help or information when needed. To ask is to be seen as a problem or ignorant. The underlying understanding is that the accountee is at a disadvantage and should avoid blame at all costs. Furthermore, when one is called to account, it is going to be painful. The US government agency participant verified this when he said that accountability is perceived in “a negative frame – something to be avoided, something painful for both sides involved.” He suggests it is duress. It is based on trying to place blame and to find out who did something, how it has gone wrong and why. The VP-HR from the travel products manufacturing company said that some organizations look for scapegoats; they are playing the blame game. And a VP-Marketing in the long-term care industry noted the potential response of organization members as, “Oh, my God, this is my job and I’d better get it done because sooner or later somebody is going to notice it isn’t getting

done.” A former manager in a home/personal products company said, “When something went wrong there would be an investigation.” She added, “A lot of all the hunting for problems and the analysis was done half heartedly; they were just going through the motions,” suggesting no one really wanted to address the tough issues.

The conversations, either directly or subtly focused on individualized accountability. Several focused on performance reviews as the location of accountability. The underlying understanding of traditional accountability from management’s standpoint might be paraphrased as:

People need to be controlled and watched. The best way to control people is through fear and punishment, bringing them to do the right thing. When something goes wrong or fails, you must locate the one person responsible, demand an account and hold him or her accountable. This will solve the problem.

This underlying understanding of accountability frames the way interactive relationships do or do not happen. This frame also adjusts the productivity possibilities within relationships. Having a rational and measurement-focused accountability system, without including the relational exchange processes essential to doing one’s work well, affects the willingness to be responsible at a higher level. After all, one participant noted that people think, what if I make a mistake? Someone will notice. I’ll just do what is safe, their way. They ‘know’ best.

Measurement was emphasized by three participants as part of accountability and also alluded to by those who considered performance reviews as accountability. The CEO in the marine products manufacturing company sees measurement as valuable but sees it as being difficult in today’s matrix organizations. She said, “It becomes more difficult to hold people accountable because qualitative is more in use and it is more confusing; quantitative

measurement has less value.” The US government agency participant said, “Measurement and accountability take a lot more effort and take a longer-term focus, [when priorities shift] it gets dropped off the plate or done inconsistently.” A business unit manager of a manufacturer of window products manufacturer, in talking about measurement, said,

It is what we all have to do. When you do your long term strategic goals, etc., that is where the measurements that have to be in it come out so you have your quality goals, output goals, sales goals, etc., and those are turned into metrics that are measured. Those are the easy ones. They can be posted on the board and we’ve met it or not. That is when people dive in and start to making plans to correct issues. It is all tied to your pay, your bonus, monetary rewards; they are tied to meeting the measure metrics in most businesses today.

A VP-HR in an international communications organization noted, “Recently accountability is really becoming measurable and it is the deciding measure of an individual and the organization.” It is a “proving device” used without inserting the subjective to understand what the numbers fully mean. Measurement is also done for less than meaningful reasons without input from those who understand the context of the situation. The question must always be asked: Why are we measuring this? What do these numbers really mean? Who needs to be involved here? Does it really matter? Unfortunately, when holding someone to account, measurement is often used to prove what is already assumed—that someone or something is wrong.

This emphasis on measurement would suggest that the underlying understanding component of traditional accountability includes a linear metaphor of the organization. After hearing the description of CA, the VP-HR in the travel products organization, for example, said,

If it were me, it would be better to focus on deliverables. It must be tied to what is expected specifically. I won't say it is autocratic; it is making sure the subordinate and supervisor are clear as to what it is, how you follow up, etc, making sure the right resources are in place.

A linear view was present in many of the responses to the questions on accountability, especially prior to introducing the description of constructive accountability in the conversations. The VP-Marketing in the long-term care organization noted that most people react to the word accountability through a chain-of-command answer, "I'm accountable to my supervisor." A manager in an office furniture manufacturing organization focused her comments almost entirely on her company's review plan and review process; she could not be diverted to consider accountability in a different venue. Several others also talked of accountability being a performance review process. All but one of these participants altered this focus following introduction to constructive accountability.

There was an indication that hierarchical relationships are still strong and of great importance. Five of the participants emphasized the role of leaders, or specifically, the organizational hierarchy in accountability. Titles and knowing who is specifically responsible for making the final decision appears to be important to know. Thus,

- Accountability is only performed by those in charge, the "knowers" in the organization
- Accountability requires the location of the one person at fault and making that person pay
- Accountability is inevitably painful, thus, it must be review-based and unquestionable

- “Doing accountability” is essential but no one likes to do it or experience it.

The mindset of traditional accountability often includes a determination of deficiency and fault. When the fault occurs, the next action is to seek validation of the deficiency—and one usually finds what one is seeking. The one-way communication of accountability inhibits reflection, re-reasoning, positive projection and/or mutual clarification. The desire to re-think is quashed by finding what is sought: deficiency. Traditional accountability relies heavily on rules and regulations. When one does not perform as expected, the rules can be rigidly enforced or ignored. Members have to “sense” where there is flexibility, often leaving them open to unexpected enforcement. The business unit manager from the home products manufacturer noted the policy and procedures manuals on his desk. He said,

We also have the traditional things: policy manuals, procedures for the development of new products, etc. There are six notebooks here on my bookcase. It is an interesting thought on those things.... It tells us that you are only held accountable if you do something wrong.

Traditional accountability allows for facts to be presented and for the “cleanness” of being able to do something about it instead of having to talk. Conversing is too often discouraged or eliminated as an unnecessary activity. The accouter, according to an interviewee, has already decided what needs to be done. Also, because of the generalized underlying understanding of traditional accountability, titles and knowing to whom one is specifically accountable can be comforting. How accountability occurs and performed by who is embedded in the underlying understanding of what traditional accountability “is.”

Changing the process and understandings of accountability to a more constructive way of working will be significant to the participative and more generative work of the 21st century.

The Application in Practice Component of Traditional Accountability

In addition to an underlying understanding, there is an *application in practice component* of traditional accountability. This component is essentially a set of day-to-day activities that converts understanding into action. Application might include, for example, boundary-setting rules and procedures defining who can perform various activities (plus the infamous policy and procedure manuals). As one conversation participant, concerned that the culture of accountability in her organization was limiting, noted, “We clearly articulate the rules and we do accountability around those rules.” The application in practice component of traditional accountability identifies how and who gives and receives accounts in day-to-day organizational life. As noted above, when executed in the traditional way, accountability can be experienced as the placement of individualized blame and shame. It can be painful and relentless, leaving one feeling punished and beaten down. The activity includes a person in a superior position demanding an account. The accountee responds (if given the opportunity) with an explanation, excuse or justification. The accouter then selects/dictates an action to be taken. Agreement as to what is to be done is not required.

For those who saw accountability as a review process, I sensed an unmentioned understanding that reviews are deficit-identifying activities. Even if much has been done “right,” rewards may be limited by the things (often small) that went wrong. People conducting performance reviews have long memories. The business unit manager from the home products manufacturer mentioned a friend who recently had his review. He didn’t get his increase because he had had one altercation with someone--and he didn’t know it was on the table. He had reached all his goals but that single forgotten altercation had him looking for another job.

In the case of the manager from the office furniture manufacturing company, documentation is key to a “fair” review. She suggested that the reviewer and reviewee should visit the plan on their computer on a regular basis so “they know where they stand.” That way, “there are no surprises” in the application component when the review happens. The computer, as the instrument, provides “a place to go to” to verify why and what is happening. As she pointed out, the final overall performance review rating “leads to a compensation matrix which, based on where I am in my range and what my performance rating is, intersect that range where I receive an identified percent of increase.” There is nothing to discuss or challenge. There is a final outcome, a rating number that is produced by the computer. This suggests, I assume, that fairness has occurred and is unquestioned and unquestionable. After all, “the computer knows.”

“Responsibility,” in traditional language, is placed with the individual. According to the CEO of the marine products manufacturing company, it is being a “mature adult.” The VP-Marketing of the long-term care company noted that for most people, “They tell me what to do and I am responsible for doing it.” The former manager of the home/personal products company suggested that being responsible is a struggle when “employees are treated like juveniles.” The Operations Manager of the medical instruments manufacturing company said that, when working in a large corporation, the goal was to “make sure you had yourself covered and protected enough so you couldn’t be held responsible for anything.” The CEO of the marine products manufacturing company also said,

Responsibility is your scope of engagement...this is how you will engage in your responsibility role. Accountability is what you hold them accountable for, the results of what that person is accountable for contributing.

In the responses regarding responsibility in their organizations, it is apparent that “a new view of

accountability” could be beneficial to the willingness to be responsible. As Manager 1 in the South African para-governmental agency said, “[Personal responsibility] is assumed, but not nurtured. People get assigned a job and then their manager looks over their shoulders too much, or actually interferes with the actual job.” Moving into constructive accountability based on relationships could affect what “being responsible” looks like in the minds of organizational members.

Others also responded that personal responsibility is an issue in organizations. The VP-HR of a window products manufacturing company said, “Overall, I would say that there is a deficit of people taking personal responsibility for outcomes, whether it is for their career or their pay.” The business unit manager from the same company provided an interesting response:

That is one of the toughest issues. There are people who just don’t want responsibility. They just want a job. They want to do it 8 hours a day and go home. They just don’t want to think. I wouldn’t want to hold them to that because if everybody came in to do [his or her] very best, you would have people climbing over everybody.

The former manager in the home and personal products company suggested that people, even when “herded” like children, are not given the information they need to do their work responsibly. Ultimately, not having work enhancing information brings mistakes that are seen as a result of irresponsible behavior. Correction follows and one is called on the carpet to give an account that may be heard as insufficient.

The use of accountability as a **corrective tool** by those in charge was prominent. Early in many of the conversations, the participants were comfortable with this interpretation of accountability. The VP-HR of the wood furniture manufacturing company said,

Accountability in most organizations is pretty much focused on what you do wrong...people are watching and they decide if I've done something right or wrong. If they are my bosses, they will tell me so and make sure I understand that I did it wrong. Sometimes it is kind of hard to take. If it is someone I work with, I can ignore it.

Manager 1 in the South African para-governmental agency said, "Accountability is formally invoked when there is trouble... The tendency is to try to attribute blame." Manager 2, from the same organization, offered an enlightening suggestion that

an interesting phenomenon exists in which people at lower levels (where job outcomes are easier to define and hence "police") are more easily held accountable than at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy, where the "good" or "bad" of performance can be argued in various directions.

For those reporting to the leaders, it appears that when one does not act in ways that are seen as responsible, like a mature adult, correction and control will be the chosen action. It should be noted that considerable experimental evidence indicates that traditional accountability practices of correction and control can impact both *what* people think (the beliefs and preferences they express) and *how* they think (the strategies that underlie those beliefs and preferences) (Tetlock, 1998). As a result, accountability practices (applications) also influence the social dynamics in organizations.

Accountability, as part of the 20th century theory of control, has required rules, facts, threats, definitive procedures and designations of authority. The former American Operations Manager in a floriculture organization offered a description of "old school" accountability suggesting its purpose is inevitably to discipline. This approach assumes that people work primarily for self-interest and extrinsic rewards, justifying the need to control. Also according to

this manager, accountability is often formal and to be documented because, as the leader, “you have to be protected.” This statement mirrors the description of accountability offered by Brooks (1995). Brooks, as noted in Chapter 1, suggests that *sanctions* are essential to performance. He makes it clear that, for leaders, “*the purpose of sanctions is not to act as a threat to you but as a guarantee to me*” (p.13, emphasis in text).

The “function” of accountability—locating and dealing with the problem, seemed prominent in the conversations. Applications of traditional accountability seemed to include the accouter’s use of a linear approach. Typically, this approach focuses on “the incident,” de-emphasizing issues that may have contributed to the situation and/or the role of other members who, through their influence, contributed to the situation. The goal is specifically to locate blame and to make sure “it” doesn’t happen again. The accouter does not work with the organizational member to see what could be learned from the incident. Finding the one person to blame or shame is the primary role of traditional accountability.

The Social Patterning Component of Traditional Accountability

The *social patterning component* of traditional accountability refers to the social dynamics or social patterns resulting from beliefs about accountability and related action.

If one listens to the conversations that focus on performance reviews, there is a sense that the social component (which for one participant was 50% of the review process) is often addressed as something to be improved. Yet, when one feels threatened and uneasy about the political matters that are present in the review process and everyday work, it is natural to avoid asking risky questions regarding one’s work. It may even feel risky to ask one’s peers informational questions. One does not want to appear “not knowing.” There is a sense that one is limited and bound by social and mechanistic mores that are not sensible to gaining needed

information. When one feels threatened and uneasy, limiting social patterns of how work is accomplished emerge. The Operations Manager of the medical instruments manufacturing company noted this in talking about people hired from the automotive industry. He said,

Those people that come from an automotive mindset, all they care about is production numbers and volume. They don't care about the quality level and so they go through a shock orientation with us when we throw away parts we don't like just because they don't look nice. Most of these people come from places that say, shut up, hit those palm buttons, keep going and don't stop. And don't ever question us.

In the "shut up, hit-those-palm-buttons" environment noted by this leader, mutuality and the talk that goes with it are seen as a problem. Based on his experience of workers at these machines, Jones says that in some organizations workers, especially at the lower levels, do not experience dignity and respect. To assume that this relational dynamic does not impact the application of accountability is to ignore the stress of working in this environment.

Under conditions of control, conversational patterns become one-sided, with those held accountable limited to agreement and compliance. Assumptions regarding control insinuate acceptance, that questioning by the other is unnecessary and possibly problematic. If one-sided conversations become typical, it becomes integrated into the conscious and unconscious way of performing. Member silence potentially becomes the norm. Unfortunately, according to the former manager in the home/personal care products manufacturing company, "Sometimes it becomes more what I can get away with and, if I don't agree, what is the least amount I can do and stay under the radar."

A second manager in the South African para-governmental agency suggested that, as you go higher in organizations, you have more permission to say what you want to say. In effect, as

you enter control centers of the organization, you are finally able to contribute fully to organizational meaning making. And yet, according to two conversation participants, organization leaders who fail or abuse are often not held accountable. When an organization fails because of poor leadership, the management team is rarely held accountable for their poor management. Instead, those at the lower levels suffer and/or get blamed. The social element at the upper level grants immunity to those who fail, pointing fingers below to locate blame. The CEO of the marine products manufacturing company agreed with Manager 2. She said, “The poor people underneath the leadership keep asking why they [the leaders] are not being held accountable.”

Several participants mentioned organizational culture. The former American Operations Manager of the floriculture organization, answering the opening question regarding “what is accountability,” responded, “It is a cultural thing.” Accountability is different in different organizations. The VP-Marketing from the long-term care organization, in talking about his own experience, said that he had left his last employer because the culture was “punishing and unrelenting.” He also placed the design of the organization’s culture squarely in the hands of its leaders. The former manager from the home/personal care products manufacturing company talked of how her former company’s culture had shifted away from a highly innovative and collaborative culture of the 80’s—and not shifted back, because of the leadership.

The American Operations Manager of the floriculture organization emphasized that culture influences whether you meet your commitments or not and saw **commitment** as an element of being accountable. As a theme, commitment was largely missing from the interviews, except with this participant. Two HR-VPs mentioned it in passing, but for this

participant it was important. He tied it to integrity in talking about “doing what I need to do to get the job done.” He said,

We defined it [integrity] as “Honor thy commitment.” Then the discussion about commitment goes into accountability...you need to be accountable for honoring your commitment. Don’t make a commitment you can’t honor... What you see in old-line thinking is, you are not committing, I am committing you. I am telling you what to honor. You aren’t even being asked to commit. You are being told to commit.

Commitment is difficult to achieve when organizational members are struggling to cope on the job. Salovey, Gedell, Detweiler and Meyer (1999) point out that “coping is primarily a response to *emotions*, particularly negative emotions” (p. 141, emphasis in text). Positive coping through connection and involvement enables the building and utilization of patterns of social support. Positive coping also makes it possible to disclose issues that are causing discomfort. How committed people are and how work is mutually accomplished supports positive coping patterns. It appears that traditional accountability does not encourage emotional commitment, potentially jeopardizing positive social patterning.

Not getting things done and not “being good” or “responsible” can be painful in a social environment where find-and-punish traditional accountability is the norm. Someone may be abusively questioned or used as a “bad” example to his or her peers. Making excuses and justifying becomes part of how work gets done. In this environment, fairness and ethical treatment are often sensed as “not happening here” by organizational members. A *sense of unfairness* is invited when one feels unheard. Unfairness leads to frustration and a further loss of commitment. Continually being treated as “not knowing” and not being included as significant to group and organizational achievement impacts member perceptions of unfairness.

The CEO from the marine products manufacturing organization also mentioned issues of fairness. Without a perception of fairness, the accountee may feel victimized. This feeling can occur when one feels punished or unheard in accountability encounters that are based on traditional accountability. Perceptions of fairness in the workplace are a component of procedural justice identified by Greenberg (1990) as *interactive justice*. The term refers to “the fairness of the treatment an employee receives in the enactment of formal procedures or in the explanation of those procedures” (Niehoff and Moorman, 1993: 534). In this case, the formal procedure could be a performance review. Perceptions of fairness are also important in informal procedures, such as being called to account in front of others or not being given an opportunity to give an explanation or excuse.

For those working in controlling environments, there is a sense that social support is “not present enough.” The outcome of this social dynamic is a decreased willingness of members to form an in-depth commitment to being a highly responsible contributor to the organization.

Popular literature focuses on how corrective accountability is to be delivered by the person in authority. Whether traditional accountability includes politeness and an attempt to “deliver the good news first” or to sandwich the bad news between compliments, as some “how tos” suggest, does not eliminate the one-way attempt to “fix” the person-as-the-problem. Tetlock (1998) notes that empirical study suggests,

Accountability motivates people to be defensive—to think of reasons why they are right and potential critics are wrong. Both impression management and cognitive dissonance researchers have repeatedly documented the tendency for people to justify their conduct, especially when that conduct casts doubt on their competence or integrity and is public knowledge (p. 633).

As John Shotter (1993: xii) states, “[I]f one feels oneself reduced as a person, one feels oneself as living in a reduced world.” The prevalence of feeling “reduced as a person” suggests there is a need to revisit what accountability could be/really is in the workplace. The possibility of accountability being constructive and beneficial must be considered.

Traditional applications of accountability cannot be separated from the mechanistic form of organizational structure prominent in the 20th century. As an organizational form, traditional accountability is typically pyramidal, with the upper echelons practicing command and control and the subordinates working in the service of those in charge. With this thinking, it is useful to consider the critique by Anderson, et al (2001),

Such organizations are established as solid structure, pyramidal in form. Orders move from top to bottom, information is passed in the opposite direction. Participants function as individuals in competition for upward movement. Firm boundaries separate the organization from the world outside (p. 8).

The emphasis on the proliferation of competition is noteworthy. The authors further suggest that we consider the following major challenges faced by structured organizations. These challenges were also reflected in the conversations on accountability.

1. *Those in command attempt to establish a singular view of the organization, its goals, and the rational basis of its functioning.*

Multiple views and rationalities circulate both within and outside the organization. An attempt to establish a singular view of accountability pertinent to today’s world was evident in the discussion of the performance plan and performance review by the HR Manager in the wood furniture manufacturing firm as well as her CEO’s attempt to revise the company’s values, with a professional writer, around “Things that Matter.” Her

statement that the company would have to re-visit the plan and review activities after re-writing the “Things That Matter” suggests a desire to designate the president’s singular view as “the correct view.”

2. *Top down control undermines the initiative of all those below to deliberate on the future of the organization.*

There was an emphasis on hierarchy in most of the conversations. Manager 2 from the South African governmental agency made a discouraging statement when she said, “A Taylorist division of work is still very much in place in many (larger) organizations.” The manager from the US governmental agency, when talking about performance contracts and how accountability becomes explicit, said,

It works best when a manager and his/her direct reports, each year in the performance appraisal process produces their contract. [It is] explicitly written as measurable requiring a performance element so the manager and the employee have a very detailed discussion of what that means.

Inclusion of the membership in making decisions at a meaningful level appears to be infrequent. Representative of this is when Webster noted that there are times when the leadership group, in making a decision, uses a “stopgap measure” of going back and talking to their direct reports to find out what they think—to get a broader perspective. For many companies, it is not a routine activity of inclusion.

3. *Because the hierarchical structure heightens competition, individuals will tend to pass on only that information that favors themselves.*

Information can be a “commodity,” something to be hoarded or valued as important to gaining access to valued resources. In traditional accountability, the ability to avoid

negative accountability may require withholding detrimental information that may bring a call to account. To look good in the eyes of leaders may require less than truthful responses when one falls short of perfection. People may be called to account because of assumptions that are faulty or misinformation that is received and not questioned, bringing “bad” results. Ongoing, open conversation did not occur. In a competitive climate the result is a confrontation either along the way or after the work has been completed. Ceremonies of traditional accountability (blame and shame) occur affecting relationships and future involvements.

4. *Diversification of functions generates ignorance of all that is not in one’s assigned realm. Decisions within functional units are often self-serving and are not coordinated with other functional groups.*

Functional units are often internally focused, not attentive to how their work affects other units, potentially causing difficulty and disconnection. The focus is on making the work easier from the standpoint of the unit or an individual in that unit without external consideration. The lack of conversation or concern for the work of other functional groups can damage relationships and productivity for all involved. Cultures often design the constraints on communication between areas creating functional gaps that hinder performance.

5. *A fixed organizational structure favors fixed flows of communication; differing perspectives may never confront each other.*

The VP-Marketing in the long-term care organization, in offering how accountability is generally perceived by organizational members, offered what he sees as the common viewpoint, “I am accountable to my supervisor. They tell me what to do and I am

responsible for doing it.” The American Operations manager of the floriculture company suggested that in the old school, daily, there is very little interaction in organizations. Working in this highly “fixed” atmosphere reduces the flow of communication. Organizational units do not communicate except in formal meetings that limit conversation. Reports proliferate with abbreviated information. There is a sense that one is vulnerable to some disciplinary action when stepping beyond the boundaries. This makes excessive documentation of what is done and not done important “to protect ourselves” in the minds of many. Unfortunately, a fixed, inflexible structure is normal in most of today’s organizations.

6. *A strict boundary definition, distinguishing between what is inside and what is outside the organization, separates the meaning-making process within the organization from the communities of meaning outside the walls.*

Some organizations run the risk of blindness toward the context of meaning on which their future depends. When strict boundaries exist inside organizations, as noted above, messages may be missed from outside the organization. Organization members could “bring in” messages that encourage innovation and stimulate organizational learning and growth. The organization stagnates. When members are afraid to challenge the status quo and ask the tough questions, the boundaries become impenetrable.

The components of traditional accountability highlight the elements that have long been prevalent in organizational leadership. There has been an underlying understanding that people must be controlled in order to get performance. Application in practice focuses on deficiency and calls for punishment when someone gets out of line. As suggested by Anderson, et al (2001), a solid structure and pyramidal form creates major challenges for organizational—and

member, effectiveness. As noted by the business unit manager of the window fashions organization, “The punitive company becomes out of balance when it comes to how the company makes things happen and that is a problem.”

Attached in B, Table 1: Traditional Accountability, are highlighted statements made by participants related to key elements in the conversations on traditional accountability. They include (1) Confusion as to what accountability “is,” (2) As an act of control, (3) Individualized accountability, (4) A corrective tool and (5) Current methods are working or are CA. From my viewpoint, most of those statements are related to the pyramidal form of organizing.

The following segment offers the “components of constructive accountability.”

The Components of Constructive Accountability

Constructive accountability is a relational learning process, and, as a learning process, it is ongoing and generative. As opposed to the above form of *economic accountability*, CA could be called a form of *social accountability*, a term offered by Shotter (1984). “Social accountability” suggests, for me, levels of effective interaction that mutualize accountability. Gergen (1999: 144) states, “Patterns of action are typically intertwined with modes of discourse.” As people talk, they together imply and consider how action will be best accomplished. Robichaud, Giroux and Taylor (2004) suggest that an organization can be described “as a confederation of distant but not fully autonomous domains of practice and habits of talk” (p. 617). They also note that many different theorists are in agreement, such as the following (pp. 617-618):

- J. Krippendorff (1998) refers to talk as *an ecology of discourses*, differing domains of talk (objects, subject matter, vocabulary, context), each implying a community, institutions, and a boundary.

- L. Hawes (1999) says domains of language are used within a larger linguistic community characterized by special vocabularies and forms of expression—a *polyphonic world*, as suggested by Bakhtin (1981).
- H. Maturana (1997) suggests that organizing is, in effect, “intersecting networks of conversations” (p. 61).
- J. R. Taylor, C. Groleau, L. Heaton and E. J. Van Every (2001) use the analogy of computer programming to suggest local conversations as being *hyperlinked* with “links” being activated by the people who migrate between and participate in a variety of conversations.
- D. Boden (1994) borrows E. Goffman’s (1981) term comparing the organization to a *lamination of conversations*, with what she calls a “layering effect” whereby “decisions are *talked into* being in fine yet layered strips of interaction” (p. 51, emphasis added).

Robichaud, et al (2004: 619), state, “Language is fundamental to the sustaining of cooperative interaction: to the extent that social entities or organizations persist and evolve, they do so through the mediation of language.” *In order to make sense—and to participate in accountability that is constructive—in organizations, people must successfully converse.* It is the natural venue for moving toward a mutually thought full future.

Jackins (1991) says, “*Learning consists of evaluating new information in relation to information which we have previously understood*” (p. 115, italics in text). Although not directly talking about accountability, Jackins also implies the relevance of constructive accountability to learning. He says,

A human being cannot learn in the real sense of the word if s/he is hurting, is overtired, depressed, frightened, embarrassed, ashamed, angry, confused or bored. A learner must be *feeling good* in order to really learn (p. 116, emphasis added).

This also reflects Frederickson's (2002), *build and broaden theory* of positive emotions, as noted in chapter 1. She says, "Positive emotions appear to *broaden* people's momentary thought-action repertoires and *build* their enduring personal resources" (p. 122, emphasis in text). *Constructive accountability is proposed as an ongoing pattern of relational processes and action that becomes possible during activities of cooperation, collaboration, strength enhancement and contribution in everyday work.*

As a collaborative activity, constructive accountability requires a reframing of the context and practice of accountability. A new but implicit *psychological contract* between members is required, one that encourages open, communal exchange and action. A new "agreement" is needed of what members at all levels must contribute to facilitate the survival of the organization. According to Rousseau (1995), "*Psychological contracts are beliefs, based upon promises expressed or implied, regarding an exchange agreement between an individual and, in organizations, the employing firm and its agents*" (quoted in Rousseau, 2004: 120; italics in text). Rousseau adds, "Understanding and effectively managing these psychological contracts can help organizations thrive" (p. 120). Johann Roux, a consultant in South Africa, suggests psychological contracts are really "relational contracts." He says, "Beliefs are constituted through relational action; these relational contracts are established through language as relational action" (personal communication). Additionally, psychological contracts include implied agreements regarding accountability. Effective contracts anticipate accountability that is fair and constructive.

Psychological contracts motivate (or de-motivate) people to contribute in ways that make a difference. They also include agreements about what is “owed” to others, a critical piece of how people work together. To work in an environment where the contract is limiting and punishing is de-motivating. Patterns of exchange and interaction activated within the contract “decide” how people behave towards each other and the commitments that members have to each other and the organization (Rousseau, 2004). When accountability is perceived as limited to finding fault and punishment for non-compliance and non-performance, organizational members receive a signal that the leadership lacks commitment to them; a decrease in trust and belief usually follows. Since psychological contracts are “works in progress,” ongoing exchanges that create/exemplify meaningful action are constructive (CA in action). These activities help create and sustain positive psychological contracts. Also according to Rousseau (2004), there are multiple “contract makers” in organizations (managers, Human Resources, informal leaders, etc.) with responsibility for the messages that are sent to the members. All must be alert to the importance of sustaining healthy psychological contracts.

This concern with psychological contracts is a fitting preamble to a discussion of constructive accountability as enriched by the conversations on accountability with organizational executives. Let us turn, then, to these same components with regards to constructive accountability, making more evident the contrast in CA with their counterparts in traditional accountability.

The Underlying Understanding Component of Constructive Accountability

In accountability that is constructive, there is an *underlying understanding component* of what is to be achieved and why. Relationships and strength-based accountability is built into how *people work mutually to make sense*, communicate and accomplish together responsibly. The

American Operations manager in a floriculture organization said, “No one has full control... When it is shared, which it usually is, then there is shared authority, shared accountability.” The underlying understanding of what accountability means influences the patterns of action and patterns of relating as well as the learning processes that are part of those everyday activities.

At the outset, the underlying understandings and expectations of CA include the sense that one is a partner in the process of accomplishment; that accountability is, as noted by Manager 1 from South Africa, bi-directional. There is not an automatic attempt to look for what is “your fault” but to look for what can be done together to make things work. Attempts are made to locate what is presumed as “the best accurate” solution(s) while referencing present knowledge/understandings, past choices, standards and experiences that are alterable.

According to a former manager in a home products company, “To locate what is presumed as ‘the best accurate solution’ requires us first to attend to sensemaking” (personal communication). To make sense, according to Weick (1995), is to engage in ongoing conversation. It is to notice something, match the new information with what is already known or suspected, reflect on what is considered, gain the input of others (if there is time to get input), make a decision, take action and then to look back on it to see if what was decided really made sense—and to continue in conversation.

In recent decades new theories and practices are emphasizing the positive, relational spaces between people. The language of “community” is becoming more evident (Seiling, 1997). These developments recognize *the essentialness of relationships* in making accomplishment possible. No longer is top management seen as the sole source of the final decision. The ability of leaders to “know” and make sense of the day-to-day operations of the company is coming into question. It is those who are doing the work, designing new products,

seeking out customers and coming up with innovative ways to produce current products more efficiently that must be brought into the sensemaking process. It is also in these spaces that the communal practices of CA must be recognized, encouraged and proliferated.

Organizations and people in Western cultures have historically emphasized individuality and action. There has been a lack of appreciation of conversation. Yet conversation is a generative activity creating opportunities for moving toward understanding while also creating the space for locating new meanings. Organizational climate is always changing, thus conversation is essential for locating alternatives and “turns in the road.” Gergen and Gergen’s (2004: 7) definition of social construction as “the creation of meaning through our collaborative activities” suggests the movement that occurs through conversation. Within conversation people are constantly creating new understandings of what is happening around them and what actions are now possible and effective.

One organization that reflects such change is the manufacturer of medical instruments. In the six years the Operations Manager has been there, he has attempted to change how people talk together, helping them believe they have permission to say what they have to say and to do it without concern for ramifications. He learned the value of doing so in an organization where open communication was not part of the culture. The Operations Manager’s answers to my questions were laced with stories and examples of what and how “we” do things at [this company]. As an example, he said,

We are experimenters. When an area is not doing well, we go and work with the people and we all figure out why. Yes, we have people that will always be grumblers and complainers, but they will be worked around. Sometimes they even say things we should all hear. And sometimes, they even change.

There are many reasons why the old understanding of accountability must be discarded as an artifact of the past. In its place, the above manager inadvertently described the sense of safety called for as part of constructive accountability as follows:

As members of this organization, it is safe to contribute at our best, collaborate and be together in making sense of what performance and accomplishment is for others, my organization and myself. Together we make things happen by relating in ways that create open, ongoing conversations, effective outcomes and positive accountability.

This movement toward community, as above suggested by McNamee, cannot occur without a person sensing that a new form of metaconversation regarding accountability exists. This new metaconversation emphasizes a form that makes positive conversations, sensemaking, circumstances and outcomes possible. This metaconversation places CA inside the process of everyday work. As noted by the US government participant,

CA is going beyond just self to a willingness to engage the self in supporting the whole. That is deep. The exchange process, these emerging conversations, are focused on the continual process of creating, re-creating and constructing the world we work in, it is a continuous cycle, it is never finished. If people have willingness and an interest in self-improvement, then this process gives them a framework in which to exercise that.

The exchange process is fundamental to creating relationships that nurture learning and expand the underlying understanding of accountability. As noted by Manager 2 from South Africa,

In terms of interaction, it [CA] will deepen the quality of exchanges between people and provide a platform within which individuals are continually learning from each other and continually questioning and updating their own assumptions as to what is right, wrong

and appropriate in the context of what the organization as a whole is attempting to achieve.

When an underlying understanding of what CA exists, informal, ongoing, collaborative accountability is part of partnering together. The occurrence of end accountability is lessened. New patterns of relationship emerge to create a stronger sense of being together beneficially and safely.

The Application in Practice Component of Constructive Accountability

There is an *application in practice component* from which those who practice constructive accountability draw in day-to-day activities. Patterns of action emerge from the understandings of how ongoing, relational activities of accountability must occur inside everyday work. Significant to the application of CA is the language used and how that language leads to future action. The language-in-use creates the outcomes of conversing in which we engage with others. The language-in-use also constitutes the politics of being together and the actions that result. Relationships are constituted by the *collaborative practice* of talking and acting together. So it is also through agreed on language that people create, describe and advance the benefits of constructive accountability as an ongoing process of working and accomplishing well together.

In referring to the above discussion on “responsibility,” it would be pertinent to ask the question: What does it look like to be responsible in a constructively accountable organization? Or, how does one “be responsible” in collaborative practice? The word (language of) “responsibility” itself is from the Latin, “I answer” (*respondeo*). The “I” puts the meaning in the primacy of the unitary person. To make the adjustment to CA, “I” must be moved to what Lannamann (1999: 87) notes as Shotter’s (1984) “socially constructed agent” or the “social I.” Individual responsibility (and accountability), according to Lannamann, “is always, necessarily,

a social construction, one that plays a central role in the production of joint action” (p. 87). This places the responsibility for accountability into the domain of the collective person, what was referred to above as the “social I.” The “social I” in a collaborative environment works from a frame of being answerable (as in the Latin definition) for one’s own role as a collective person in maintaining a collaborative stance. To do otherwise is to be irresponsible, possibly not able to be constructively accountable—not able to be part of the production of joint action.

In reframing accountability as constructive, there are a number of linguistic practices promising potential. Among these I would include the following:

- ***Account Offering***: Activities of willingly offering an account to another or others as a place to start discussion regarding an activity or concern.
- ***Account Exchanging***: Together taking the account to others to further assess and co-construct a new or extended form of (or verification of) the account. This would include activities of *account checking* in order to make the best sense (considering/re-visioning/making adjustments/keeping/changing/reframing/eliminating) of the offered account, potentially but not necessarily leading to agreement and action.
- ***Account Advancing***: Those participating in account exchanging take their agreement(s) to a larger venue, to interested others. This advances the information to others, eliminating the secrecy element. These activities invite participation in another account exchange regarding what has been offered.

Let us examine each of these practices more fully.

Account Offering

“Offerings” are open-ended, casual or purposeful invitations to another (others) to question, make statements, and offer suggestions and to openly consider what is being offered. Ideally, offerings are purposely made based on the evidence of relationship. This offering affirms that the other person(s) has something to contribute to the development of an effective thought or action. Offering involves an account of a perspective or action under consideration and what is needed or desired, as well as a request for input. To make the request invites others inside one’s work while seeking input, clarification and enrollment in an idea or cause.

Involvement and collaboration, as strength-based activities, call for the location of the strengths of others in the process of co-construction. However, attempting to understand perspectives different from one’s own can be a struggle. The former manager from the home and health products manufacturing company emphasized this when talking about feedback:

I guess I feel strongly that if people whose opinion I value are giving me feedback on something, I care about it; it is a gift. If it is [someone] I don’t value and I don’t understand why they are giving it at all, on something I don’t care about, it is a waste of both of our time.

And yet constructive accountability asks us to willingly seek the strengths and examine the viewpoints of others. This requires us to openly and willingly consider, even take on, the perspectives of others. This also includes, after consideration of the other’s offering, the opportunity to turn away. However, according to Parker and Axtell (2001), little research has been done in the organizational area on perspective taking. Perspectives are often reflected in the language and action of others. Actions and outcomes of one become intertwined with the actions and outcomes of others in the interdependent systems in workplaces. The assumption that the actions of all workplace members are meshed is valid. When individuals are unwilling

to consider the perspectives and influencing gestures of others, conflict occurs. The potential for healthy relationships and honest perspective consideration increases when open interaction occurs.

The positive effect of account offering is based on building relationships with participants and broadening the possibility of expanded outcomes. The CEO from the marine products manufacturing company places responsibility with the leadership for enabling an organizational environment where constructive learning (and account offering) encounters can occur. She states,

The organization needs to create an environment and an operating structure so they understand there is interdependency. Encounters must be constructive instead of destructive. Sharing information and giving viewpoints must be possible.

Knowledge is exchanged. Productive and innovative outcomes become more possible when account offering is seen and experienced as constructive. The strength of conflictive exchange is lessened, even as it is appreciated as important to the examination of what is offered.

Account offering legitimizes the sense of “not knowing enough” and the validity of inviting others into the conversation. Going beyond that, even if one senses that “I know,” the account offering aspect gives permission to check, to make sure, to adjust and to share accountability. It confirms and seeks affirmation when uncertainty is present. It allows one to be safe in the knowledge that it is “ok” to be uncertain. It brings more effective discussion into the mix of the meeting instead of having it occur in the hall after the potentially less effective decision has been made.

Ideally, account offering would include a *reflective* and *projective* sensemaking process, a looking backward and forward. The *reflective process* includes looking back, comparing, re-

examining and potentially reconstructing. There is an exchange of assumptions, concerns and knowledge. This brings new interpretations and then possibly re-interpretation. Schon (1982) sees the entire process of reflection as “central to the ‘art’ by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict” (p. 50). Of course, one has to be aware that the reflective component can seem so compelling and so valid that it may forestall productive projective thinking.

The *projective process* of account offering also allows participants to look forward, to offer solutions, and to consider outcomes, ramifications and benefits of what is being considered. As noted above, in the reflective process, both before and during the offering, the offerer contemplates, attempting to make sense of what has been heard, read and learned in the past. The projective process considers what it might mean now and in the future. Considering the future suggests the question: Is what I am thinking possible or probable? Offering these contemplations for others to consider opens opportunities for further learning for the participants.

Account offering **occurs continuously** in organizations. It is stopping someone in the hall to “run by” something on the mind of the offerer. The need to create opportunities to offer accounts that create streams of learning is often left out of decision-making. To do so ignores the need to process “good sense” prior to making decisions or taking action. Account offering moves easily into account exchanging when the other person(s) becomes engaged in the discussion.

Account Exchanging

Seeking information from others, carrying forward unique or new information, absorbing information provided in concert with others constitutes the natural dynamics of account exchanging. It is calling someone on the phone to ask a question and then going deeper into the

conversation to clarify what is being said in order to perpetuate the discussion. It is talking over lunch about something and discovering it is relevant to something else that was not included in the conversation originally. It is willingly expanding a meeting agenda to include further pertinent, unconsidered discoveries. A climate conducive to account exchanging will create new or expand existing relationships. New learning opportunities develop and competencies expand. All parties are enriched through the process.

To achieve effective account exchanging requires participants to overcome the limitations of protectiveness and insecurity that are present in traditional forms of accountability. Breaking down those barriers brings participants to build participative relationships. The space is created for more automatic exchanges of information and opinions. People learn to recognize the benefits of open communication and understand the need for relational connections and partnerships. In the process, participants may exchange propositions, raise and examine doubts, identify and consider alternatives, argue constructively, discover insights. The process of exchanging accounts is significant to the outcome.

There are *strengthening elements*, visible and invisible, present when constructive accountability becomes part of the process of responsible interaction between members. The visible elements would include behavior, styles of interaction, collaboration and cooperation, writing, accepted language, skills (as applied), acted-on rules and procedures, etc., creating the interlocking behaviors of association. The invisible elements would include values, vision, assumptions, paradigms, responsibilities, personal and organizational goals, hidden or withheld skills and organizational culture, etc. Both the visible and invisible elements, and how people interact in the workplace, influence the group's collective activities and relationships. It is also within the exchange of these visible and invisible elements, based on positive relationships with

others, that constructive accountability is co-constructed and practiced. Through these activated relationships CA becomes embedded in organizational practice. As patterns of coordination, a strong component of the social context exists within these strengthening elements.

We are deluding ourselves if we expect our “conversing” to follow certain rules of “how to do it right.” The ebb and flow of exchange within conversations creates opportunities for sensemaking, decisioning and relationship building; all are essential to the social aspects of organizing. As noted by Lee Salmon, these conversations “become construction conversations.”

It is within account exchanging that sensemaking through narrative is facilitated. The role of narration in organizational communication and sensemaking is now widely accepted (Robichaud et al, 2004). As noted by Freedman and Combs (1996: 29), “Speaking isn’t neutral or passive.” Narratives provide a medium for capturing the past, linking it to the present and projecting it into the future. As participants negotiate the narratives of organizational life, they create new questions and new possibilities that call for considerations, estimates and forecasts. As noted by Heirs and Perhrson (1977),

For effective action we need “information” about the *future* as well... not merely rely normally on simple extrapolations from past and present information. The past, present and created *future* information that has been gathered must be *reassembled* into alternatives which seem best adapted to answering the question. It is during this reassembling effort that a great deal of creative thinking takes place as the *interrelationships* of all the assembled information are consciously sought in order to produce alternative answers... (p. 15, emphasis in text).

Account exchanging is the place where creative and innovative thinking occurs; it is a place, as noted above, where information is reassembled into best alternative scenarios. Although creative

thinking often occurs in the “collective mind” of the person, it is in the dynamic exchanges among organizational members that innovation moves to reality and action.

Account Advancing

The move into account advancing is essential to constructive accountability. It is the activity of taking the accounts beyond those involved in the exchange to open discussion within the larger group. Account advancing includes sharing the agreements and/or concerns identified during the account exchange activity and the communication of the acceptance or rejection of information under consideration. This does not necessarily imply a full understanding or agreement has been reached. As the fruits of exchange are shared, there may be even more complexity revealed in the issues being examined.

In account advancing, having two or more voices in sharing/advancing knowledge and opinion is especially important when new others are not fully aware of what is being offered. As with account exchanging, the messengers again enter into the process of offering and exchanging information. The cycle begins again each time there is a new audience.

An important element of account advancing is the research reported on the *common knowledge hypothesis* (Gigone and Hastie, 1993). This hypothesis suggests that the relevance of information and/or the amount of serious consideration given to new information is related to how many are familiar with the information *prior to discussion*. The research notes that previously unshared, unique information, whether significant or not, does not automatically impact the thinking of the group. This suggests that the presence of healthy relationships is vital to consideration. The presence of constructive arguing in CA also contributes to the facilitation of effective advancing of accounts. Effective account advancing would include:

- (1) Serious consideration by those it is being offered to.

- (2) Social validation by others, which is significant to the willingness of the messenger(s) to continue to offer information.
- (3) Repetition and focus by determined voices.
- (4) An awareness that novel/unexpected messages may be heard as threatening, particularly if there is a seriously considered decision already at hand (adapted from Stasser, 1999: 60-61).

Once an explanation has taken hold, it will contain “self-sealing logic” (Weick, 1995). Any other information to the contrary may be seen as delusional. The hypothesis emphasizes that the amount of expertise and/or the relationship status of the messengers can bias the willingness of those listening to the advanced account (Stasser, 1999). This makes the practice of CA relevant to the successful communication of difficult issues. Unfortunately, without the operation in practice of offering and exchanging making it possible to “grease” the wheels of the collective mind, advancement may be stymied. The combination of a “complex” idea and a lack of understanding, according to the hypothesis, will eliminate consideration.

In account advancing, those present have a *shared role in creating the environment and circumstances* of consideration. Along this line, as noted by one leader, those listening to messages make choices as to how or if they will respond, be part of and/or extend the account advancing process. When one participates in exchanging and advancing knowledge about what is advanced and what is at stake, his or her sense of vulnerability is potentially increased or decreased. Providing information about what resources are available to the person (or people) offering the previously unheard message is important to addressing this sense of vulnerability. Engaging with others before and/or after the main discussion is, according to the VP-HR from the travel products manufacturing organization, important.

I think there could be a lot of positives that would come out of [CA]. It [would be] open season to have off line conversations and collect more data and do more research through asking other people questions and what not.

With greater social and personal resources, members are typically more stable during stressful times. Account advancing brings others into the design of what can and is to be done to address the circumstances and situations. Of course, account offering, exchanging and advancing are often done with a sense of urgency. As noted by the Operations Manager of the medical instruments manufacturing company, going to the person(s) and holding a standup meeting with those involved can address issues “before they blow up.”

Thus, an added element in advancing messages to others might be:

- (5) A shared willingness to stay in conversation in order to reach clarity on what has been advanced.

Within account offering, account exchanges and account advancing elements of the application in practice component, questions (inquiries) and considerations are exchanged, sensemaking and decisions are articulated, and joint action becomes possible. Members offer their work to others, learn what others consider important and how it impacts their own work. As a result, *members become implicitly and/or explicitly part of each other's efforts and outcomes*; they become mutually aware of and contribute to the circumstances of the other's work. Thus, they become, as noted by a governmental participant, mutually accountable.

The willingness of members to offer, exchange and advance accounts generate what Barrett calls *collaborative competence* (Barrett, 1995; Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2003). Collaborative competence is the ability to engage in ongoing conversations that include the exchange of diverse perspectives, articulating concerns, actively exchanging information and the use of what I call, as noted above, “constructive arguing.” Constructive arguing is productive—

and, at times, provocative. Conflict exists in all relationships and cannot be eliminated. People offer and exchange strong points and stand by them because arguing is based on beliefs held by the participants, bringing out knowledge, experiences and positions of the arguers. But arguing does not have to be disruptive. The awareness that personal beliefs, when exchanged in constructive ways, can be productive and beneficial is important to collaborative competence.

The VP-HR from the international wood home furnishings company suggests that there are two sides to the willingness to address issues and concerns. I would also add that these two sides are important to the ability to have collaborative competence. He said,

There are two sides to this. One is the willingness to bring our emotions to the table and the other side is the willingness to accept the outcome [and] the consequences. From an HR perspective I might have a really strong certain course of action that we should take but there is a need for us to process. I have to be willing to recognize or see the world and the decision a little differently after hearing the dialogue regarding all the issues that are surrounding it. *I have to be willing to give in. I have to be willing to let go* (emphasis added).

Collaborative competence highlights the *recursive nature* present in talking about and applying constructive accountability in organizations. Recursivity suggests that a process is enfolded into other processes. Recursivity also includes the same conversational procedures that operationalize the co-construction of accountability (offering, exchanging and advancing accounts). These activities are present in embedding the process in the culture of the organization. This suggests that to talk about, represent or “act as if” a process is acceptable and appropriate is to socially validate its existence. As others use the language and co-create a narration of CA as reasonable, new sets of *rules of practicality* (what is seen collectively as

practical) and *levels of typicality* (what is seen collectively as typical) (Quinn, 1996) come into being.

In summary, the application in practice component of CA includes the purposeful and intentional involvement of members in relationships that calls others into making sense and moving toward outcomes that are beneficial and constructive to be involved.

The Social Patterning Component of Constructive Accountability

The *social patterning component* of constructive accountability facilitates the interactions and actions of the people in a social structure; it also emphasizes the acceptability of the person(s) performing an activity within the culture of an organization. These co-constructed patterns design the appropriateness of behavior and action. Thus, the social context of an organization includes the dynamics of the culture in which people work and the means by which they cope together over time.

The social patterns of constructive conversations, the language used and the learning and sustaining of connected conversations creates and supports or diminishes working relationships and outcomes. It is within informative conversations in a social structure that constructions emerge concerning what is considered to be right and wrong, good and bad, effective and ineffective, successful and unsuccessful, and in the gray areas between. It is also within constructive conversations that people decide how an organization will “do business” both internally and externally. It is within these conversations that order and disorder shape the context of the organization. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2000: 491), “Accounts or descriptions of a setting constitute that setting while they are simultaneously being shaped by the contexts they constitute.”

As there is an intermingling of the three components, much of what might be included in the social patterning component of CA has been included above in the underlying understanding and application components. Yet there is much to be said about the dynamics within the social action and practice of CA. These dynamics include mutuality instead of control, natural flow instead of ceremonies of accountability, continuous learning instead of stagnation and conversation instead of confrontation.

Mutuality instead of Control

According to the Webster's Dictionary, mutuality is experienced or performed by two or more with respect to the other or others; reciprocal; having in common; an exchange of some kind between persons. The US governmental participant stated, "It [CA] is going beyond just self and goes to a willingness to engage the self in supporting the whole. That is deep." Thus, mutuality in CA includes the exchange of strengths making it possible to work cooperatively and collaboratively. Expanded competence is the outcome of the mutuality of wisdom, action and exchange.

Mutuality allows people to test rules, question processes, challenge the status quo, appear to step out of line, to address issues of concern—and to do it in ways that may not always be appreciated. People more often look for understanding or overlook out-of-the-norm responses and behaviors within the experience of mutuality, yet much is also expected of each other. Mutuality calls for collaboration instead of competition. As noted by the CEO of the marine products manufacturing company, "People have to believe that you need others to get things done."

Control often includes the use of traditional, after-the-fault accountability; it does not include the benefits of exchange that are part of the mutuality of CA. Because of the element of

control, *traditional accountability decreases mutuality*. There are natural barriers to accountability that are perceived as appropriate.

In mutuality, *participants collaborate through relational processes* that yield ideas, innovation and action. As suggested earlier, mutuality creates opportunities for diverse thoughts and actions to be coordinated in ways that produce outcomes that cannot possibly be created or claimed alone. This suggests that control of each person and localization of “the expert” or “the knower” is problematic and undesirable. Mutuality is essential for collaboration and cooperation.

As noted by Peters and Armstrong (1998: 75), “Collaboration means that people labor together in order to construct something that did not exist before the collaboration, something that does not and cannot fully exist in the lives of individuals.” Their statement suggests the desirability of the social construction of mutual agreements and activities. The outcome is more than one participating individual could hope to construct. It is in these activities of mutuality that one learns from others and later acts on those learnings.

Natural Flow instead of “Ceremonies of Accountability”

In sometimes-contradictory ways, there is a natural flow toward sense in the conversations and activities of CA. Agreement and disagreement both contribute to the flow. In practicing CA, members seek information when needed and offer suggestions without being asked. Status and title are not obstacles to these accountability activities. More casual activities become typical, rather than exceptions; they occur routinely within the work of working. The expectation of being part of the work of others calls for these interactions to occur. This natural flow of accountability is in sharp contrast to the *ceremonies of traditional accountability* that occur when something has gone wrong inside traditional accountability practices. The business unit manager

at the manufacturer of window products company gave an example as to how CA often occurs at his company:

Something is not working right and you want to get together and look at this thing and say, you know this could be better, what is our end goal, what is our vision for the future of that product? It is happening in the here and now. People will start to bring up previous experiences and saying if we could do it this way or switch to that, those types of things. I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members. I don't think of it as accountability, I think of it as fun, brainstorming, but it is a form of accountability in that there is an expectation to resolve that issue. Things are not over when we leave. The discussion was a collaborative exchange but the end result hasn't happened yet. You have that collaboration and the activity takes place later. Whatever I do, the rest of the team is [also] responsible for that.

In this instance, a CA conversation occurred and the people present were aware of the need to participate in the conversation in order to resolve the issue. His statement, "I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members" and that "things are not over when we leave" acknowledges that accountability exists inside the activity and continues beyond the conversation. It was also an example of the "ongoing" conversational nature of CA. These *thinking conversations* embrace the mutuality of CA and how it adds to the provision of learning during a collaborative exchange as well as the action following the exchange.

The natural flow of CA calls for collaboration and cooperation instead of blame. When something goes wrong, people work together to address what has happened. Yet the natural flow of CA is also preemptive, addressing issues and concerns *before* something goes amiss. The

question is, “What can we do?” a natural flow statement, instead of “You did it,” after the fault, ultimately starting a ceremony of traditional accountability.

Continuous Learning instead of Stagnation

Organizations are constituted as the collective person engages in conversations of learning with other collected persons while being part of what Sugarman (2001:74) calls “attending to business.” Constructive accountability of necessity supports the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes, thus broadening and building the core learnings of an organization. As stated by the VP-HR of the international call center organization, “[CA] would have a good chance of *improving attitudes and perceptions* within the organization” (emphasis added). Useful learning activities are an extension of positive attitudes—and positive learning attitudes are an extension of learning activities.

Continuous learning is important to the “ongoingness” of CA. *Constructive accountability is a learning and sustaining process.* Activities that include account offering, account exchanging and account advancing of necessity include openness to listening to and learning from others. Learning new skills and openly considering previously unconsidered skills and understandings with others adjusts attitudes, expands sensemaking and enhances action.

According to Scribner’s research (1984) on *activity theory*, people adjust and adapt their skills according to the influence of contextual factors in the workplace, noting that contextual factors strongly influence how people learn and adapt their skills on the job (noted in Torraco, 2002). Activity theory suggests that providing opportunities to expand skills and knowledge advances contribution and the motivation (attitudes) to apply those skills. Regarding CA, the above VP-HR “wasn’t sure” what skills would be involved in the application of CA. He said,

The skill itself would be doing CA conversations. That in and of itself would be a skill in problems solving and communication. That in itself could build skills. It would happen one participant at a time.

Skills are underutilized unless the desire to apply them exists. Stagnation occurs when skills are ignored, underutilized, not scrutinized, not upgraded or not used by personal choice. Negative attitudes soon follow. The US government agency participant suggested,

The question is whether the person has a positive attitude, a willingness to see how they may act in a more consistent and constructive manner that supports the whole organization and what it has set out to be accountable for.

Good skills and positive attitudes are hampered less when contributive choices have been made. As suggested by a VP-HR, “It is really a fundamental choice as to whether you want to see it [CA] and be part of it.” CA activities can support the creation of a context where people choose to have a positive attitude. The natural flow of CA is dependent on the social patterning component of the organization and the desire of the participants to contribute to that natural flow.

Conversation instead of Confrontation

How people actively and successfully talk is the strongest element of developing patterns of positive coordination within CA. Conversing activities, whether casual or purposeful, are building blocks of organizing for members at all levels of the organization. As people talk, they discuss (make sense of) what is to be decided, built on, resisted, reconsidered and saved in the memory of the group or organization. As noted by Cotter and Cotter (1999),

Talk is how we most effectively take action with each other to coordinate our relating so that meaning, values, and our myriad of social behaviors and efforts can evolve and be shaped in the directions we prefer (p. 169).

People ask simple and complex questions that may not have simple or universal answers. In the best of situations, the mental-models-in-use are reinforced or challenged by the input of others. CA conversations also carry offerings, demands, healthy doubt, convictions, ownership and motivation that expose new discussions for use in sensemaking activities. These activities in turn lead to what is seen as beneficial and strengthening aspects of action or inaction.

Wisdom cannot happen in a vacuum. It occurs in the process of “individual” reflection and in thinking conversations with others. In the example above, people were called together to discuss alternatives. These wisdom-altering exchanges allow for what Langer (1997: 23) calls “sideways learning.” Such learning requires times when people are together considering practicalities and possibilities. According to the US government manager, “The exchange process provides an opportunity for people to step forward, to learn and change behavior.” It is also in the exchange process of conversations that people “size up” what is happening and consider potential consequences and outcomes.

Social patterns of CA evolve when elements of the interaction and relationship are present. Inside these conceptions of CA are social patterns of...

- Cooperation and collaboration [that supports...]
- The development of joint knowledge and action, conviction and continuous learning that is flexible and inviting [suggesting...]
- A knowledge that to succeed people must be supportive of others [while demonstrating...]
- The desire to perform in ways that reflect exchanges of respect and acceptance.

I see accountability that is constructive as an element of how we continually create our realities in the workplace. We coconstruct the “truths” inside our work and in life in general.

Constructive accountability assumes that we cannot accomplish alone and, therefore, we are not reasonably fully accountable alone. It is with others that we create and exist. Therefore, *it is with others that accountability occurs constructively*. (See Appendix B, Table 2: Comments on Constructive Accountability, for highlights of participant comments on constructive accountability.)

Chapter 5

Moving Toward Constructive Accountability

Members themselves determine what accountability looks like.
Everybody determines what he or she wants it to look like.
Operations Manager

As first outlined in Chapter 1, the major objectives of this study were:

- (1) As first outlined in Chapter 1, the major objectives of this study were: To develop a conception of accountability that is both constructive and collaborative, and to illuminate a range of organizational practices that would realize this conception in action.
- (2) To explore the potential of constructive accountability for increasing the involvement and contribution of members to the organization, and ultimately the efficacy of the organization.
- (3) To develop and expand the idea that constructive accountability, when understood, appreciated and activated, can contribute to personal well-being and to a positive organizational culture.
- (4) To expand, even change, the perception and thinking instrumental to the practice and experience of accountability.

The conversations and the deliberations provoked by my dialogue with organizational executives contributed significantly toward fulfillment of the first three goals. A concept of constructive accountability was offered and acknowledged. Each respondent considered and, for

the most part, valued the potential for increased involvement and effectiveness of their members through CA. They felt, if part of the culture of organizations, CA would contribute to the welfare of the organization and the personal well-being and contribution of the members. Several noted, either directly or indirectly, that to change the conception of accountability would positively impact organizational culture. The thoughts and explanations of the interviewees expanded significantly my ideas of accountability.

The fourth goal was only partially accomplished. For the participants, the conversations did offer “thinking time” on the possibility of accountability being an exchange. There seemed to be little meaningful change, however, in the perception of accountability as an ongoing process of interaction. Yet, this one short conversation with the participants did appear to stir curiosity about the concept. Some believed in and currently seek active involvement by organizational members at all levels and yet accountability seemed to be outside that venue. Several did agree, however, that there are currently unrecognized CA behaviors already present in organizations. Some may have seen the concept of CA as a justification for their current practices of leadership. The concept expanded their thinking regarding the relevance of involvement, collaboration and participation in accountability. The business unit manager from the window fashions manufacturer seemed to “go deeper” into the understanding of CA, at one point chastising himself for “slipping back into the old form of accountability.”

Within the conversations, there was some agreement on the potential of what CA could offer. As each conversation progressed, with only a few exceptions, the participants became more open to the prospect of moving accountability forward into the relationships required to do the best work possible. As noted above, participants see CA as beneficial and contributive, making such statements as the following:

- It would help people to step forward.
- [Leaders] could take a vacation and not worry.
- If people have willingness and an interest in self-improvement then this process gives them a framework in which to exercise that.
- It helps change the victim thing.
- I believe an understanding of this whole concept creates a freedom—it gets people more freedom.
- It applies in personal and family relationships, parent and child relationships, the same as it applies in organizations.
- It could help keep the morale in a corporation moving in a positive direction.

This chapter opens discussion regarding CA being a practical way of working together asking, “How can organizations move toward a future where CA is part of everyday work?” Also included are some of the impediments to moving toward CA in organizations. The concept of CA as a “movement” is offered, suggesting how CA can be taken into organizations as a recognizable and contributive part of the way to work effectively and collaboratively. The prospect is to move toward a culture of accountability that is constructive and beneficial for all participants.

Naming Accountability as Constructive

“Naming” or labeling is important to acceptance and identification of a new or reframed concept. According to Wright and Lopez (2002),

To label is to give a name to things grouped together according to a shared characteristic(s). Because labels stand for something, they are abstractions. They organize and simplify the world and seemingly make it more understandable (p. 27).

Once a new behavior or activity is named and the name becomes part of language, people more easily recognize “what it is” when they see it or consider practice. With this recognition people can more often see themselves performing in this way and can purposely choose to do so as part of performance. Eventually, it becomes part of unconscious actions. The naming ‘gives permission’ to act in certain ways. And yet, according to Mary Gergen (1999: 105), “Even when words remain intact linguistically, they can shift their meanings considerably.” As with the original anglican meaning of “a survey,” as called for by William I (Dubnick, 1998), the term accountability has changed over time. An example of the struggle of changing the label of the term accountability to a constructive mode was present in the discussion of the naming of constructive accountability. Two of the participants suggested the name is a possible barrier to acceptance based on the “bag and baggage” of the traditional form of accountability. The VP-HR at the window products manufacturer said, “I sort of struggle with the phrase but the definition makes sense so I accept it.” From the same organization, the business unit manager said,

I guess I am saying that the connotation of accountability is negative. Let’s call it something else so we don’t have to overcome that perception of individual accountability... Accountability has been drummed into your head since you were a child. You are accountable for knowing the laws. It is driven into your head. Constructive accountability is a collaborative effort.

Moving the meaning to a constructive stance is seen as difficult. And yet, the language of CA can contribute to a climate of transformation. I was even more convinced through the conversations that the design elements of CA depend on the language and processes that enhance

and construct positive activities of accountability. Thus, the naming and identification with the language used becomes significant to living CA.

I must also note that altering a name and adjusting meaning does not necessarily cause a change in behavior. A shift in language does not automatically cause a change in culture or eliminate certain kinds of speech and action. People must sense the organization is serious and that the shift is meaningful. Weick (1995: 109) states, “Language transformation can be a pathway to behavioral transformation. But to see this, we have to pay attention to substance as well as process.” In order to make new possibilities real, to make it part of action, it is necessary to reach a communal understanding and to take action on that understanding. Collaborative action by those compelling the change goes beyond linguistics and semantics. Related action gives the words legitimacy. For me, reaching understanding of CA includes: (1) a comparison to past experiences of accountability through recognizable language, (2) examining how those experiences relate to the offered new meanings and (3) having the hope that the new projected realities will become real.

My purpose in retaining “accountability” as language is to retain the “accounts” process by describing it as offering, exchanging and advancing—inside the daily work of working. Leaders and theorists have been attempting to move accountability forward into the work for generations. Using the word “constructive,” I feel, moves the meaning forward while notably maintaining the recognizability and validity of the term. I claim the following, as stated by Boje, Oswick and Ford (2004), as further justification for creation of this language in practice.

Language is not only content; it is also context and a way to recontextualize content. We do not just report and describe with language; we also create with it. And what we create

in language “uses us” in that it provides a point of view (a context) within which we “know” reality and orient our actions (p. 571).

Positive Practices that Reflect CA

The conversations on accountability showed that the language of constructive accountability is not alien—but the awareness of accountability as relational and constructive in practice is not present. CA currently exists in some forms of practice in many organizations, although these activities are not notably recognized as “accountability.” Identifying already existent applications can bring these activities into the light and expand the awareness and practice of CA.

Wortham (2001: 128), states, “[T]he meaning of words is traced to the active relationships in which they play a part.” Thus, in my view, the language of constructive accountability can, as noted by Boje, et al, (2004) above, “provide a point of view.” Organizations can use this point of view to create a new approach to accountability by orienting actions around the language that re-contextualizes accountability.

Interestingly, bringing this viewpoint (language and context) of accountability into the light honors and values existing taken-for-granted ‘realities.’ The CEO of the marine products manufacturing company believes that CA already occurs in organizations and yet one must visualize it to see it. She also said, “I think if the leadership [were] sensitized to constructive accountability and the power of this approach to accountability, they would be more willing to create that environment.” The experience of noticing and acknowledging obscure and previously undefined activities of accountability as constructive expands their existence and effectiveness enabling them to be nurtured and developed more fully. The following practices are earmarked as contributions to constructive accountability:

- *The willingness to contribute to the projects of others.*

Examples: In an information technology organization a co-worker recognized a co-member's urgent need to address a problem for a client and worked with her to identify what needed to be done. In a service organization, a marketing representative requested help from someone outside the department in designing a process that invited and supported important customers in serving their own customers.

- *Cooperation and collaboration.*

Example: As noted by the business unit manager of the window fashions company, "What you are talking about is collaboration. I also understand [a] component of the accountability portion is that you are expecting me to do what I'm supposed to do so we can all hit that end goal." An organization member in a manufacturing organization sought resources to address a problem, and approached an organizational leader for the funding of those resources. He found knowledge that, joined with his, identified an innovative way to address the issue without extensive funding.

- *Asking questions and making suggestions.*

Example: An organization member working on the floor in a manufacturing organization heard that a new machine was being considered for installation in his area. He approached the engineers and asked pertinent questions about whether the equipment would really meet the need. His willingness to ask the questions and the engineers' willingness to invite him into the process led to the purchase of a more effective and less costly machine. The cost to the organization was substantially lowered.

- *Spontaneous conversations with others providing information or reports on experience.*

Example: When attempting to identify the best resources for working on a project, an administrator informally sought information from various sources such as peers, outside experts, online information, etc., to meet the needs of the group. During a spontaneous conversation over lunch, a valuable resource not previously considered was identified.

- *Checking with others to see how a decision will affect their work.*

Example: When considering the elimination of a report, the accounting department in a centralized organization checked with current recipients of the report to see if the information was available from other sources or if the report should be kept or adjusted to meet additional needs. The report was eliminated and the needs of the receivers were still met.

- *Adding people across an organizational slice as part of the design and application of new processes.*

Example: An organization started with a few members and then involved others across the organization in the process of culture change. The expanded involvement created a foundation for change in the organization.

- *Listening with respect and offering collaborative openness by a leader.*

Example: A leader asked a person in the packing area “what is going on” and what suggestions she would make to keep production moving. She suggested changes eliminating bottlenecks that made her job and that of others more productive.

- *Recognizing the importance of leaders at all levels as important when changing the culture of the organization.*

Example: A service company initiated a quality process. Including a top member of the organization, the president of the union, three union members and three management

members as leaders/designers of the process made it more likely that the process would be successful.

- *Considering all types of information.*

Example: Measurement and facticity are not left behind. Coupled with subjective information, there are times when measurement is essential and not to be ignored. In a manufacturing organization, the measurement of product scrap, outcomes and customer comments provides information significant to the ability and opportunity to improve.

In the conversations on accountability other practices of CA were noted. The Operations Manager at the medical instruments company was an example of being a spontaneous, connected leader when describing instances of people approaching him in the isles regarding needs and making suggestions about meeting those needs. The former manager at the home and personal products company talked of the people doing the work being the ones who know how to do it and the need to listen to them. The US governmental participant talked of strengths, coaching and values—those things believed in the strongest. These statements are grounded in belief in the people worked with—a basic assumption that makes it possible for positive practices of CA to occur. Below, I include a specific example that emerged in the course of the research and study on accountability.

A Case of Constructive Accountability at Deere

The following was reported to me by Gina Hinrichs, Ph.D., Project Leader for Business Process Excellence at Deere and Company at the time it occurred. This story reveals several vital characteristics of CA. It is presented in Hinrichs' own words.

“Approximately 8 years ago [1996], as a Deere project manager, I attended a professional development course taught by Paul Axtell of Contextual Designs Company. The course

name was Foundations and, as its name indicated, it was a foundation for operating effectively in an organization. One of the key concepts in the three-day course was the concept of "X by Y." X by Y was an understanding or an agreed upon way of operating that was said to move a project forward; the members had to state what they would do (X) to move the project forward and by when (Y). In addition, it acknowledged that we were interdependent so if ever X by Y were at risk for not being delivered on time, the affected parties would be notified at the earliest point so they could respond. They had to leave finger pointing and functional silo behavior behind in order to operate this way.

“I immediately adopted this way of being because it was logical and effective. Fortunately, I could draw on the shared language of the many folks who had been through Foundations. We all understood the concept and agreed to operate that way. It had a very positive impact on projects, accountability, and respect. Unfortunately, X by Y had not spread to all of the Deere units.

“Later when I was on a large project at one of our largest units, I went there with my X by Y approach as a foundation to the way I now operated. At the end of every meeting I asked for the X by Y's. I quickly found out that this language did not exist at the unit. I talked about the concept but found that there was not a group buy in to the concept. I later found out that I was considered aggressive (read pushy) because of using X by Y.

“Years later, many of the individuals in the project attended Foundations and experienced the concept. I sense that it is now a culturally acceptable way of operating. X by Y became an acceptable story. X by Y is no longer a pushy project manager's way of forcing accountability but a shared norm. It took shared language, meaning, and

culture to get to accountability that wasn't considered negative but a positive way of working collaboratively towards a goal” (Hinrichs, 2004, personal communication).

Unfortunately, the X by Y was not a living concept across the organization at the time of the project. Later the process spread into other parts of the organization. Respect for the process and the leader using it was not the outcome until the language of X by Y was mutually understood and strongly in place.

Although shaped in somewhat linear language and action, X by Y, when part of a process, includes characteristics of constructive accountability:

- Information sharing is important to the process.
- When people come to an understanding, they agree on actions to be taken.
- The process acknowledges interdependent relationships.
- Finger pointing and functional silo behavior are left behind.
- There is a positive impact on projects, accountability and mutual respect.
- The process draws on shared language.

To identify CA as a practicable process suggests it is possible to specify and practice existing and new forms of CA, stories must be shared of its benefits. This allows CA to become real. As stated by Gergen (2000: 66), “As stories are told, forms are recreated. The content belongs to the forms, and the forms control the content.” As they are retold, the recursive nature of the stories expands understanding. And yet, some would say that CA is so complex and happens in so many different ways and instances, that it is impossible to note definitively the “practice” of constructive accountability. As alluded to throughout this writing, the complexity of CA *can* be reduced to recognized and learned processes of relationship, collaboration and co-construction. It is possible and imperative to understand “the what” of CA in order to create the potential for

recognition and expansion of these practices into “common sense” and common use ways of working together. To do so is to bring to attention that CA emphasizes the process of co-construction. CA includes the expansion and application of social practices, skills and attitudinal components essential to collaborative and contributive performance within the interlocked behaviors of working. The parties involved should experience positive practices of CA as practical and beneficial relational occurrences.

Impediments to “Moving Toward” Constructive Accountability

Although the purpose of this thesis was to introduce, explore and develop the concept and practices of CA, it became clear from the conversations-interviews that full implementation of CA would not be easily accomplished. The conversations identified for me a list of impediments that deserve attention. This is not an exhaustive list; there are undoubtedly more impediments not listed and possibly more severe cautions not included in this list. Nevertheless, I offer the following:

1. Deep relational connections are essential but can lead to ignoring current or pending issues or crises because of the reluctance to embarrass a leader or co-worker.

Chris Argyris (1990) has written extensively about organizational defenses and the reluctance to embarrass colleagues, potentially deepening or propagating errors. To be silent eliminates the “constructive” aspect and the mutuality of accountability. It is to ignore instead of address issues of concern. The observer has concerns but withholds them—after all, “possibly it will go away and I won’t have to bring this error to the attention of this colleague and others.” Or, maybe I’m wrong. I don’t want to get my colleague in trouble or call attention to her ignorance. Janis (1972) wrote of *groupthink* decades ago, discussing President John F. Kennedy’s decision to take action in Cuba (the Bay of Pigs). Because of deep respect and attraction to the charismatic Kennedy, his cabinet did not address pertinent issues or ask the tough questions regarding the

considered action. The group followed the leader too closely, eliminating deep questioning and evaluation of his proposals.

Additionally, within workgroups, “common ground” is often instinctively sought in order to reach agreement. Of course, communication cannot continue without at least some amount of common ground. Communicators, in order to identify common ground, often take the listener’s background knowledge and opinions into account and spontaneously tune their messages to be congruent with the listener. Called “audience tuning,” such information sharing takes into account what the audience knows, feels, thinks, and believes (Higgins, 1999). If impeding the sharing of information, this adjustment may not be beneficial. Accountability becomes fragmented.

Purposeful attention to examining alternatives and addressing the risk of audience tuning in a highly cohesive group is essential to the practice of constructive accountability.

2. Work behavior may unjustifiably be determined as deviant behavior.

Stepping out of line can be perceived as counterproductive work behavior (CWB). CWB has been described as behavior that is seen as passive or aggressive. Passive CWB is either working counter to acceptable work practices or purposely (quietly) failing to follow instructions. Aggressive CWB, on the other hand, comprises either intentionally doing work blatantly incorrectly, or overt behaviors, such as bullying, theft or practicing threatening activities (Fox, Spector & Miles, 1999). Overt behaviors obviously call for appropriate action. Passive behaviors are either ignored or challenged according to the perceived severity of the problem.

Beneficial disagreement and/or challenging appropriately adjust the issue of whether the behavior is CWB. This “constructive disobedience” may include CA behaviors such as asking tough questions or asking questions that have not been asked before. Yet, it may also appear to

be CWB when using a method one sees as a better approach or creating a new process when it was not requested. As noted by the US government participant, changing priorities as a result of a sense that current work is no longer a priority can also be seen as a counterproductive. This suggests that although some behaviors are unquestionably counterproductive, CWB behavior is often “in the eye of the beholder.” For one person, an activity can be seen as important. For another, it is a misstep. When “going outside the lines” of how things are done, a rigid, stability-focused orientation may see these behaviors as threatening and not see the benefits of these CA behaviors.

As noted by a study participant, an example could be a worker making a suggestion to a co-worker who considers the suggestion to be “nosing in.” There is an unwillingness to consider the suggestion; it is ‘different’ so it is rejected as not worth discussion or consideration. The co-worker soon learns to keep suggestions to himself. In some organizations this type of behavior is not seen as an intrusion; it is not seen as counterproductive work behavior. These activities would be seen as the normal activities of co-constructing changes that benefit all involved. What has previously been seen as counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) may, when seen through the lens of CA, initiate new or additional learning and action.

The invitation to be part of and central to activities of CA will be appealing to some, yet it also requires collaboration, involvement and patience, as well as tactful and responsible responses. For some, these activities might seem counterintuitive. Without proper awareness training, support and encouragement—and accountability that is constructive, negative CWB activities can be the response of choice for resistant participants. When such CWB occurs, constructive accountability calls for coaching and other strength building and awareness enhancement approaches. Unfortunately, for some, the ultimate application of end

accountability may be required, potentially insisting on compliance to get the person to experience the benefits of CA. The VP-HR at the international call center company offers the paradoxical statement that

CA should take away the stigma... so there are no punitive results associated with the notion of accountability. But you want to do that without taking away accountability. To use CA to better relationships in situations and projects while retaining “the buck still stops here.”

For the few, it may be necessary to activate the final accountability of separation.

3. Using constructive accountability as the only element in moving toward a relationally healthy and constructively accountable organization can ignore other elements that may be causing social upheaval in an organization.

There is rarely only one issue or one road to healthy workplace relationships and practices. Leaders must continuously ask themselves sensemaking questions that may highlight issues that impede CA practices, such as the following:

- Is the reward system based on individually focused performance, causing competition and estrangement?
- Is favoritism an issue?
- Are there ethics issues at the top and throughout the organization that are being ignored?
- Are there outmoded processes and procedures that put up barriers to contribution, causing frustration and anger?
- Are decisioning processes located with high level “knowers” who don’t know?
- Is development of organizational members on the bottom of the list?
- Do members feel safe or threatened?

- Are there “old-time” leaders who refuse to change because they have been successful using fear and punishment to motivate performance? Do they feel they are “entitled” to lead this way?
- Is leadership development seen as unneeded and time-consuming?

Organizations are complex because complex people inhabit them. Yet organizational leaders often see one thing as “the issue”—something that is a symptom instead of a core reason(s) for discontent and malfunction. Looking for the “one answer” is not reasonable. Asking the right questions of oneself and others in the right way—a CA activity—opens opportunities to address issues that impede progress. The US government participant emphasized the roll of questions when he noted that, “dialogue, which is really inquiry-based, is always seeking clarification and deeper understanding of the image of the world.” Organizational leaders must make sense by asking themselves and others the painful questions.

4. Attempts to initiate CA without the enrollment of key formal and informal leaders would be problematic.

The CEO of the marine products manufacturing organization sees leaders as the architects of organizations. Their influence is vital to membership understanding and enrollment in new ways of working together. Of course, having leaders who feign CA while practicing traditional accountability as their primary tool of leadership stalls/destroys advancement of the process. Organizational members will be watching for verification of commitment to CA and feigned compliance will signal failure. As noted by the former manager at the home/personal care products manufacturing company, “It is like being on probation for a couple years. I’ve seen people watch for the leader to trip to confirm that they don’t really mean it.”

Her company, it appears, is an example of an organization that has attempted to make changes and address issues from the top without getting the enrollment of managers in their

various plants and departments. This would be especially problematic for CA. This former manager noted,

A lot of [the issues] were really about poor leadership. Often a new program would be rolled out from the Division... and certain timing and phases had to happen. [The local leaders] would be truly just going through the motions because they really weren't participating in it in the plant... Often leadership would be telling people to do something they didn't believe in themselves. How can you hold other people accountable for that?

Addressing commitment issues within the education and practice of leadership will be an early and primary means for moving toward an active culture of constructive accountability.

5. CA may be seen as adding to everyday work.

There is an assumption that CA will be time consuming. However, I do not agree. If you look at the full picture of avoided discrepancies and malfunction through the use of CA, the issue is invalid. Yet at the same time ignoring the workload of organizational members can be disastrous. Unfortunately, in most organizations members are typically experiencing an increase in workload. When leaders do not address this issue successfully, the workplace feels merciless, leaving workers dejected, exhausted and caring less about patterns of relationship and connection. One participant said, "CA just means more work. These ideas do not fit into the time left in our workday; nor does it fit into the expectations of organizational leaders."

In the quest to survive, organizations are relying ever more heavily on the Western mainstay of individualized effort and the heroism of accomplishing the most in the quickest, most effective and efficient way. Too often the effort is to gain the most productivity with the fewest employees. To keep organizations "lean and mean" without considering the impact on

the workforce and the work culture is to ignore the resulting lowered productivity, turnover from exhaustion and lost time illness days.

Resentment and distrust ultimately rise to the top when people are feeling taken advantage of and overworked. In this climate, movement toward a new kind of accountability is doomed to failure. No one has time for heightened communication or efforts to support others. When they take time to do so, they are falling behind, not meeting deadlines and not meeting the punishing expectations of oblivious leaders. This crisis forces reliance on old habits of accountability in order to survive.

It is said that organizations must use sound managerial practices to nurture the mind and muscle of their organization. New awareness has arisen regarding where the innovative mind of an organization is located. Hiers and Pehrson (1977) define the organization's mind as *the collection and collaborative thought processes of the minds of the individuals who think on behalf of the organization* (p. 21, italics in text). Cotter and Cotter (1999), from a social constructionist view, would agree, saying, "We have come to believe that meaning making is a 'we' phenomenon, a relational process within a social context. 'Mind' is social" (p. 163). Today members at all levels are recognized as thinking on behalf of the organization. As noted by the US government participant, a "reality factor" comes up: Do we have enough resources to do this project or achieve a certain result? To be scrupulously "lean and mean" may lessen collaboration and creative exchange.

6. Understanding that relationships and conversational involvement are beneficial may be difficult for some organizations.

To presume that people are wasting time when casually talking is detrimental to constructively accountable performance. Members must have permission to communicate informally in their work. Finding information, checking possibilities, *pulling others into one's work*, asking

questions not asked in the past, challenging status quo and being creative, innovative and supportive all require ongoing, progressive conversations. Remaining with one's head down at one's work limits opportunities for such conversations.

Recently I learned of an organization that is requiring each person to insert a code to use the outside telephone lines of the company. The intent is to "monitor how long and how often people talk and to whom." I would suggest that the stress, fear and need to make excuses for talking to others, to justify exchanges as "only business," is to encourage people to limit how their work gets done. Being treated like children, as noted by the former manager of the home/personal care products organization, justifies the desire to look for a position where people are valued as thinking members instead of organizational hands.

7. There is generalized ignorance of the psychological costs of individualized accountability.

Participants frequently alluded to, although no one specifically mentioned, the *psychological costs* of individualized, anticipated, negative accountability. Also, the stress and sense of separation experienced in traditional accountability was also not explicitly mentioned. Organizational members, when feeling the possibility of punitive accountability, hold back. Productivity is jeopardized. "Them" vs "us," "you" or "me" divisiveness occurs, limiting relationships. The limitation of relational connection both inside and outside of local groups creates pockets of people who blame specific others for issues seen as problematic.

Among these psychological costs is the possibility that people may resort to unethical behavior to avoid being held accountable. Research on goal setting has recently suggested that the construction of "counterfactuals" (that is, imaginary accounts), such as overstating performance by a small or large amount, may occur when failing to meet a goal (Schweitzer, Ordóñez and Douma, 2002). This is especially true, I suggest, when people are faced with

potential social or economic costs for what may be seen as lack of performance. Shifting accountability to being an ongoing communicative activity inside everyday work has social, application and economic benefits that will lower psychological costs. Enlisting active and responsible involvement of others would also be beneficial to both avoiding unethical “counterfactual” activities and accomplishing higher levels of performance. The psychological costs for all involved, including the organization, could be lowered.

Pertinent here is CEO’s (of the marine products company) viewpoint on the failure of organizations and how it relates to accountability.

If you look at it, while a company fails from a business strategy and cultural perspective, what really drove them to this failure? I believe that many companies fail because they go to a somewhat negative accountability system that is destructive and *they don’t see it*. People begin to hide and rationalize performance because they feel alone and cannot achieve. Or incentive structures cause people to go outside of ethical boundaries because they want increased incentives and do unethical things to get them. It is the core of accountability that breaks down ... Accountability is a key player [in failure when] it is not constructive (emphasis indicated).

This would suggest a tie to negative emotions—an issue that could result in increased psychological costs. Emotions were mentioned three times in the conversations. The VP-HR from the wood furniture manufacturing organization, as noted earlier, suggested there has to be a willingness to bring our emotions to the table as well as the willingness to accept the outcome, the consequences. Manager 2 from the South African para-governmental agency talked of the development of skills that relate to ‘emotional maturity’ and interpersonal efficiency rather than

technical skills, suggesting that development and training are important to timely use when needed. The former national Operations Manager (floricultural organization) suggested

Relationships are improved through... daily exchange but there are times when [relationships are] definitely depleted. There are some that say there is an emotional bank account where you are making deposits and taking withdrawal. That even smacks of old school thinking, that there is an equation and it is a zero sum game.

Emotions typically emerge from interactions with others and substantially determine the outcomes of interactions (Miller and Leary, 1992). To overlook the psychological costs of ignoring the emotional context of accountability can be problematic. Unfortunately, when psychological costs are high because of the ramifications of traditional accountability, these costs impede relationships and organizational achievement.

8. Competing commitments impede the movement toward CA.

I believe that Kegan and Laskow Lahey (2001a: 86) were correct when they proposed the reality of *competing commitments* as a significant reason why valued employees “behave in ways that seem inexplicable and irremediable.” Competing commitments are defined as “*an active commitment to keep the thing you are afraid of from happening* (Kegan and Laskow Lahey, 2001b: 49, italics in text). Their research revealed that unrecognized competing commitments are opposing agendas that make achieving change like “shoveling sand against the tide” (2001a: 85). In the case of moving toward CA, reasonable people appear unreasonable, undermining the organizations efforts toward transformation. Kegan and Lahey state, “Competing commitments cause valued employees to behave in ways that seem inexplicable and irremediable, and this is enormously frustrating to managers” (2001a: 86) and others.

When competing commitments exist, leaders may say one thing and do another. There are fears of loss of something valued. An example might be when organizational leaders say, “Our people are our most important asset”—and yet the talents and skills of organizational members are ignored or undervalued. The fear may be of feeling less than skillful themselves. Or: “We practice an open door policy for our employees and our customers”—and yet people are not treated respectfully when they raise concerns. The fear may be that they will hear something that they do not want to hear. Or, a leader claims to want involvement of subordinates—but treats them like children when they attempt to become involved. Manager 2 of the South African para-governmental organization offered another example of competing commitments in her reference to those at the top not being held accountable for bad performance suggesting that redundancies [layoffs, restructuring] almost always impact those at lower levels in the hierarchy (i.e., lower than business unit management team level). She added, “The management team is hardly ever held accountable for the consistent lack of good management practice that leads to the situation in the first place.”

The fear may be of loss of control or credibility. As noted by the former manager of the health/personal care products company, when executives are compelled to do something they do not believe in “by the Division,” they are not committed. There is the possibility, even a probability, of a competing commitment.

Holding competing commitments can jeopardize the willingness to collaborate—even while feigning encouragement of involvement. Recent research has replaced the need for achievement with “the need for power.” It is suggested that high-level managers “strive hard to reach positions where they can exercise authority [power] over large numbers of people” (*Harvard Business Review*, May, 2002[5], p. 136). Stohl and Cheney (2001: 111) say, “Sharing

control among workers and managers is an essential aspect of participatory processes.” For those practicing command and control leadership, a strong “need for power” may cause them to be reluctant to engage in behaviors that support others in exercising their own. They might micromanage or not delegate to others. Or, there may be an attempt to hoard information in order to remain knowing. Asking leaders to be inclusive, open, collaborative and consultative may be, for some, asking too much. The competing commitment of a need-for-power may cause CA to appear unreasonable. Those with competing commitments can threaten the sustainability of an organization’s movement toward change. Peers and others must be alert to these occurrences and address it through constructive accountability.

These impediments to CA also suggest that moving toward CA requires the introduction of a “metaconversation,” a “larger,” overarching conversation that creates a collective identity of what accountability is. These conversations create and support an understanding of the new approach to accountability. Without this metaconversation, an organization will slide back into traditional accountability even though the concept of accountability that is constructive is preferred and has been “trained” as the organizational language and process of accountability.

Creating a Movement Toward Constructive Accountability

Given this array of impediments to developing an organizational culture in which constructive accountability is fully embraced, what steps can be taken to move in this direction? How can broad movement toward CA be accomplished? Nadler, Shaw, and Walton (1994) suggest there are two types of organizational change: incremental and discontinuous. *Incremental change* is noted as fine-tuning; the need for *change has been anticipated* and is located in seeking improvement. Incremental fine-tuning and adjustment is permanent but the organization, for the most part, stays the same. It is tinkering with the current system, the internal environment. In

incremental change, adaptation is called for and occurs when external conditions in the environment require some response. Something has changed that requires new equipment, technology, a new product or way of thinking.

Discontinuous change is often a reactive change. It is quick. It is without alternatives. In some cases, it is a response to an environmental shift that requires quick change in order to survive. Nadler et al (1994), although promoting discontinuous change as advantageous, state, “Discontinuous change is more traumatic, painful and demanding on the organization.” And, “It is often a radical departure from the past” requiring the organization to respond immediately (p. 23).

Incremental change is problematic for Nadler, et al (1994), because “a piecemeal approach gets bogged down in politics, individual resistance, and organizational inertia” (p. 26). And yet discontinuous change can be wrenching, causing feelings of loss and disconnection. There is no time to prepare the membership. It is, “Today we are dramatically different.” As noted, it can be disruptive, punitive and relentless.

To attempt to change an organization into a constructively accountable organization with people practicing CA “overnight,” to announce, “This is the way it is going to be,” can bring confusion and disorientation. To become a culture of accountability that is constructive requires both an “overarching” significance (as suggested in discontinuous change), and a focus on local significance (an incremental change). It is an ongoing, overarching *movement toward change* and a reconceptualization, as noted above by Boje, et al, (2004), of the way people accomplish together. Small and large issues must be addressed continuously in order for the metaconversation to change.

In CA, change that is relationally brought forward calls for introduction organization-wide. It must have the determined focus of those-who-matter in changing the larger issues related to CA. Policies and procedures, leadership styles and rewards are examined and changed. There is no turning back. New behaviors, practices and old assumptions are addressed with a sense of urgency through training and action. *All* training, whether technical or behavioral, includes re-visiting elements of CA. Work is to be accomplished in a new way.

Incremental change includes *a movement toward change* that constitutes a series of actions directed to some purpose: *a series of progressive and interdependent steps that allow an organization to become different* in the way things happen. It is ongoing; it is never over. As noted by Max DePree (1997: 27), “Movements tend to create a wonderful breadth of mind in the people involved, whether the group focuses on human relations or engineering or financial affairs.” It continues on toward an ever-emerging goal that is known and yet allows for the unknown (Seiling, 2001).

Unfortunately, a move toward constructive accountability is a difficult thing to ask of leaders and organizational members who, presumably, have worked successfully using traditional accountability as the impetus for performance. Thus, it is useful here to return to the participants in this study. How did they see the possibilities for transformation? In fact, there was hesitation on the part of some of the participants when I asked the question, “Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace. Describe what might be needed in the way of new ways of leading or training and development of organizational members.” The following includes participant answers to the question. Many of the participants said in one-way or another: *Start with the leaders.*

- “It is the leaders’ role to start the language and to completely reframe the performance appraisal process for it to be appreciative; they also have to build in more and more ways of recognizing people when they are doing right and moving toward. It is not to say that we may not have to deal with the negative, but hopefully we can turn it around and use an appreciative process.”
- “Talk about it at the top. Talk about what are the stigmas of accountability; talk about your definition of what CA might be. And you ask, how do we do this? Your point is that it has to be continuous, how do you make it happen? Heighten their awareness, have them reinforce each other. And when there is misstep, Oh, here is an opportunity.”
- “I think you have to have the managers buy into it from a philosophical standpoint. And then it will permeate every level of the organization. It has to because it doesn’t do any good for the manager alone to be accountable. For me the first step is to develop shared language... you know, what are you talking about? What does this mean? Shared stories.”
- “The critical piece is the leader...what is the personal style of the person leading the group? If you follow a participatory and collaborative model, you are going to have a different perception of accountability than in the old style management model.” Also from Sadighi, “It probably depends on the organization and how they embrace it. Some combination of leading by example.”
- “I can see this to be a topic among other topics about how you provide leadership. When you get into the decision making side of leading and managing, this could become a fundamental part of that in terms of a module or whatever under decision making.”

- “The environment has to be created and, obviously, if it doesn’t exist now, it has to be top down to see it as a good thing to be constructive and talk to people about anything... as long as it is working in a positive direction.”
- “If people talk about [accountability] openly and understand that there is another way to approach it, perhaps they would be willing to listen. It starts with seeing how powerful is the concept and how can we apply it best for our own success. When an organization thinks about that and talks about it openly and will consider what it takes to run their organization in ways that they have never thought about before, it creates all kinds of opportunities.”

Yet not all those interviewed emphasized a “top down” approach. Three emphasized that you have to “enroll those in the middle.”

- “You have to, I think, enroll those in the middle. It has to be a micro organization, within a certain area, I’m going to go ahead and let them do it. I’m not going to get in the way.”
- “I think that, if you were introducing something like [CA], you have to start at the supervisor level and you have to get them to buy into it.”
- “We need to talk about all the hidden assumptions about accountability. We need to discuss interdependency and how it plays out in the workplace, organisationally. Rotating line people into management positions for short periods and vice-versa could develop increased understanding of the different contexts and how the different thinking about accountability develops.”

The leader-focused comments suggest that the introduction of a new form of accountability could gain energy when it starts at the top. The mid-level-focused comments suggest the need to enroll leaders at multiple levels in the process of bringing into recognition a new understanding

of how accountability looks when it is constructive. According to Schein (1980), commitment and change at the top can facilitate change, but if you study cases of major change in organizations, “learning often begins in a small group and only gradually spreads across the organization and then up” (noted in Coutu, 2002: 105). Green (2004) suggests that managers, from a rhetorical perspective, “play an active role in the diffusion process, because what managers say and how they say it matters a great deal” and “can... shape the social structure through which these practices diffuse” (p. 654).

Schein’s (1980) statement above underlines comments in the conversations about “have organization members willing to sit down and talk about it;” “it has to drive a lot of conversations;” and that it must be a “bi-directional thing.” And, according to Green’s (2004) rhetorical perspective, broad diffusion is critical. Thus, a movement toward CA would be best served to purposely and determinedly engage members throughout/across the organization. Broadly speaking, we might say that the continued evolution of a movement will depend on an ever-expanding domain of collaborative talk.

Recently an interview in the *Harvard Business Review* with Nestle CEO, Peter Brabeck, offered his thoughts on “evolutionary change” (Wetlaufer, 2001). Brabeck suggests, “Big, dramatic change is fine for a crisis... But not every company in the world is in crisis all the time.” He added, “You know, all this talk about reinvention in business reminds me of 1968, when a whole generation thought you couldn’t have social change without a revolution” (p. 114). Brabeck believes that collaboration is the key to continuous improvement, his form of evolutionary change—and, “People who are unwilling to accept that collaboration is necessary for continuous improvement are a different matter. You have to be relentless about getting them

out of the organization” (p. 119). He also notes that collaboration stymies people in the middle levels the most.

Getting the message about collaboration across at the top is relatively easy. And it’s easy, too, with the blue-collar workers... But where you have the layer of concrete heads is in the middle management. They feel that we are taking away their hierarchy, that they are losing power. Many of them are not willing to collaborate, and some of them don’t know how (p. 119).

In light of these commentaries, how might we view an ideal process of moving toward the implementation of CA in an organization?

The Movement Toward Constructive Accountability

As noted, a movement is a series of progressive and interdependent steps that lead to a new pattern of action. A movement is ongoing; it is never complete. It continues on toward an ever-emerging goal that is “known” and yet allows for the unknown. What might a movement or evolutionary change from traditional accountability to constructive accountability look like? A movement toward constructive accountability might include the following:

Step One: Someone becomes uncomfortable with the way accountability is currently occurring.*

“Movements” often start with one person choosing to go down a different path. This person can be the organizational leader or someone located “south” of that leader. This person is experiencing or observing limitations that he or she feels must be changed. This person cannot shake the sense of discomfort and misalignment with the traditional form of accountability. This person sees the pain of traditional accountability and sees the impact it has on the attitudes and productivity of good people and the organization.

* My thoughts on movements are influenced by the writings of Max DePree (1997) and Parker J. Palmer (1992).

Step Two: Feelings of discomfort regarding traditional accountability create a need to engage others in discussion. Others join in the discussion.

There is now a sense of urgency and a clear commitment to address issues of deficiency and limitation that impairs how things are done. The need for change has, for this person, become a conviction. It is suddenly intolerable to remain controlled by the intolerable (Seiling, 2001). He or she openly seeks alternatives to traditional accountability in one-on-one discussions with others. There must be a better way. These people talk about it with others, bringing them into their thinking and together they explore the possibility of moving accountability into everyday work.

Step Three: Collective conversations lead the group to translate their beliefs into feasible practices that can be taken to those (or others) in leadership roles.

New language is designed around this thinking. This language is given meaning and integrated into the “talk” of how their work could better be accomplished. Formal leaders, if they are not the initiators, are approached and enrolled as well as others who are recognized as informal leaders. Stories are told about what “it” is and what it can mean to the organization. At this point enrollment of diverse, energetic and influential members across the organization is vital to moving forward. These change agents begin to trickle in. The conversations continue with the encouragement of sensemakers and meaningmakers. If ultimately recognized as significant, these conversations will be moved to a larger venue. The initiators of the movement are enlivened by the possibilities that lie ahead.

Step Four: Decisions are made as to policies on moving toward a culture of constructive accountability.

The movement is beginning to move ahead. Activities are designed to bring others throughout the organization into the movement. Now there is an even stronger sense of urgency. Determination now exists on the part of leadership. Open action is taken that outlines new

expectations of performance and behavior; they are verbalized from the top. Policies, procedures and rewards are re-designed around application. The decision-making process is conceptualized as a collaborative sensemaking activity. There are clear goals for integrating CA into performance and behavior. The awareness of CA as a positive, beneficial concept of performance occurs through education across the organization. In the meantime, there is a call for collaborative applications of the process. Leaders apply and emphasize constructive practices of accountability and acknowledge successes. These activities are designed into the system. The original thinker(s) are rewarded by the support and affirmations of others and CA is starting to permeate the organizational context.

Step Five: Sustaining the movement toward CA is an ongoing, ever-expanding process of learning, application and education regarding the strengths essential to the new workplace culture.

Participants are becoming bolder and more energized by their involvement and contributions to their organization. The traditional form of accountability moves into the background because people are rewarded for practicing constructive accountability in their daily work.

As CA becomes part of the organizational culture, performance of CA becomes part of the habits of how people work together. The members themselves deepen the culture of CA as real and realistic. Yet in order for it to become part of the metaconversation of the organization, there must be an ongoing overarching conversation affirming CA as important to organizational success. Learning opportunities include recognition/affirmation of CA as part of how things work, reinforcing past learnings and building toward future educational offerings.

The effective hiring of new members who will willingly become part of the CA culture is significant to continuing the movement toward CA. CA becomes part of orientation. Current organizational members advocate CA to these new members and coach them in the process.

People who have difficulty making the change are coached and encouraged to change. In rare cases where change is problematic, they are asked to leave. To ignore the continuation of traditional accountability practices is to approve the behaviors as appropriate.

The process must continue as leaders emphasize what works and acknowledge successes. Unfortunately, challenging and changing traditional beliefs of accountability will encounter the determination of some members of the group to keep things the same—even if it hurts. At least the current way is known; changing belief systems is likely to be uncomfortable. It is moving into the unknown. By calling existing concepts into question and causing positions to shift, other assumptions will also need to shift, calling for new understandings and the courage to live and promote CA. Determination is essential to move toward CA. It is important to bring on board strong, informal leaders who can influence others to someday look back and say, “Things have changed; there is a difference.” These people are important to sustaining the process.

In the words of Margaret Meade, “Never doubt the power of small groups of committed people to change the world. Indeed, nothing else ever has.” These ideas are illustrated in the following example.

Moving Toward Change at Hunter Douglas

Todd Steele at Hunter Douglas WFD offers an example of a related movement that occurred in the company many years ago. It still influences how work is accomplished. The movement is now part of the underlying understanding of how to work at HD-WFD. An Appreciative Inquiry was carried out because management saw a need to re-think how work was being accomplished. They wanted to bring back the kind of innovation that had been present when the company was smaller. Steele said,

You have to design [the process] from inside, turning it into something that fits your organization and is designed to work in your organization, something you can live with. Something that works, or it just dies a quick death. *It takes training and education.* As we filtered down into the organization every employee was talked to about it, it was a large investment of time away from the job and knowing that everyone isn't going to embrace it. You get fanatical about it. (Emphasis added.)

The movement started small and then grew, reflecting Steps One and Two of a Movement Toward CA. A few worked to justify the process and to keep it moving forward. Step Three, above, is also reflected in Steele's words,

We had to start small with only a few people. We had to ask the question, "Why should I do this?" It is natural to protect yourself and not stretch yourself. We asked why would we want to do this? We started with five [people] and expanded it to the influencers, not necessarily the managers; [we went to] the ones others looked to. We ended up with about fifteen and went through the process of deciding how it has to work.

In taking such a movement into the organization, there has to be patience and the determination to stay with it. Designing new policies and procedures and applying the learning processes in Step Four are essential parts of the process. Some people will not buy into it while others are willingly going to take it on as something they have been waiting for. Steele added,

To the majority of the population it doesn't look like a lot to them sometimes. They are going to take it or leave it. You have to just keep reinforcing it. It has to drive a lot of people's conversations, structure bonuses and merit increases around what you want to happen, to drive some of the behaviors you want to happen. [He repeated,] You have to

keep in mind that influencers are not necessarily managers. Most people would say I have to have my managers involved in it.

Step Five includes sustaining the movement while knowing that it is an ongoing, ever-expanding process of co-construction. There has to be a commitment to establishing the skills and strengths essential to expand the underlying understanding, application in practice and social patterning components of the concept. Steele said,

Yes, the senior managers were the first go-around, but when it went “below,” it didn’t go by title. It went to, hey, this guy influences people. Or, hey, that guy wouldn’t add value to the process. It could be anybody. You have to look at who the people are that people in the organization look to, who are “cultural icons.” Those people who represent what they want to emulate.

It matters as to who is representing the concept to others. Influencers continue to influence when they are living the process. They work in ways that say more than words about their belief in the benefits of the movement and what it means to themselves, the group and the organization.

When movements are significant they become part of organizational culture. As noted by Steele, the results may no longer be visible in everyday work. It is “just there” as part of the way to work together. Regarding the HD-WFD movement, Steele said, “That was in 1998. I don’t look at it as being AI anymore but there is a strong component of it in our organization today.” Practices are integrated into the thinking and continued growth of the company.

A Vision of Possibilities

Conversations on accountability were held in diverse organizations in the USA and South Africa. Early in the conversations, understandings of accountability varied in context, but for the most part, followed Scott and Lyman’s (1968) rendition of accountability, clearly placing

accountability as an evaluative process *after* something has gone wrong. The dissertation was initiated based on my belief that a more effective, relational form of accountability could change the thinking of organizational members regarding how work is accomplished. The elements of collaboration, sensemaking and cooperation would be key elements of this new form that moves accountability forward into the work. According to the conversations, it will not be easy. According to the CEO of the marine products manufacturing company, “If people can’t think about something differently, there are limitations about what you can do with it.”

Sustaining constructive accountability requires multiple strategies, projects and training, as well as an everyday focus on the process. An emphasis, understanding and coordination of CA processes are key to transforming the conceptualization of accountability. It must be moved from an after-the-fact, rational focus on weakness, to an ongoing, strength-based, mutually activated relational process during the work.

Constructive accountability calls for the recognition that work is co-constructed. As such, mutual engagement is essential, making the integrative nature of CA possible. Within CA, members have permission to actively bring others into their work. There is an appearance of the collective person being individually responsible. Activities of offering, exchanging and expanding the resources are seen and experienced as processes that lead to the design of best decisions and accomplishment.

The understanding, application in practice and social patterning components of constructive accountability broadens and builds the strengths of the organization. When a “bad” decision is made, it is understood that many have contributed to the process, diminishing the find-and-punish accountability activities of the past. Recognizing and educating what

constructive accountability “is” establishes the “we-ness” of accountability—even when one is acting “alone.”

The form of accountability described, whether occurring in the workplace or in personal life, as suggested by one VP-HR, is based in valuing others. As noted by Streatfield (2001: 78), “Organizations are what they are because of the people in them. It was human persons, the people who constituted the organization, who evolved collectively and individually.” It is also people who orchestrate meaningful transformation through valuing relationships. Positive relationships encourage people to, as noted by Gergen (1999: 148), “create our realities together” into “comprehensible worlds” that over time develop “special kinds of relationships in which change, growth, and new understanding are fostered.”

To summarize, a movement toward constructive accountability would ideally result in the following:

- *Accountability would be an interdependent activity within everyday work that has positive consequences for the welfare of the person and the group as a whole.*

Constructive accountability, when activated through interlocked relationships, recognizes that the interdependence and engagement of relationships expands opportunities for the effectiveness of people and their organization. Every exchange and action has consequences for the collective person, the group and organization.

- *Accountability, when constructive, would include the language of co-creation and collaboration, creating a metaconversation of what accountability “is.”*

Moving the understanding of accountability to a language of acceptance and collaboration broadens and builds the strengths of organizational members and the organization itself. Thus the organizational language and, ultimately, the organization’s metaconversation about accountability will change. As the language changes, collaborative habits and connections will be seen as essential. The interlocking connections of relationship, as related to performance, will be enhanced. The metaconversation (culture) is created through open conversation of what accountability

is, how it is accomplished, what it achieves and where it is located in the organization. This reduces the confusion of what accountability is and how it works in the organization.

- *Sense would be co-designed.*

No one makes sense alone. The collective person has been influenced by others and through experiences with others, affecting the reflective and projective thought patterns of the person and the group. When one offers and exchanges an account, whether casually or formally, the others become part of the process; they become mutually accountable for the sense that results. Steele offered an example of exchanging information at Hunter Douglas. The Operations Manager at the medical instruments manufacturing organization talked of “stand up meetings.” What is seen as sensible action becomes part of the common language and understanding of what occurs in the organization. Attention to the thoughts of others adjusts underlying understandings, thus adjusting what accountability means. CA activities become operationalized, part of the social reality of the group. Attitudes and skills are co-designed around this new relational form of accountability. Thus, when the individual acts on his or her own, he or she is unconsciously observed as being a collective person acting as part of the collective group.

- *End accountability would not be eliminated.*

When a person is demonstrating a perpetual set of difficulties with the process and is not responsive to participating within the group—or to the resulting coaching, there will be repercussions. The group has been listening to the needs, beliefs and actions of this person as there may be learning opportunities within the experience of the person. Yet it is recognized that there are consequences if the person does not move toward positive change. End accountability, when applied selectively and appropriately, can be constructive. It is certainly called for under circumstances of negative behavior and dysfunctional activity. It is recognized that there are times when the most constructive place for a person is outside of the organization.

There are many pathways to designing what constructive accountability can be—and, for some people, confusion may remain as to what it is. This confusion does not hamper the co-design of

a metaconversation of acceptance and relational collaboration. As noted by Gergen and Gergen (2004: 19), there is no “Truth for all,” but instead “truth within community.” Thus, regarding CA, while the metaconversation is ever changing, activities of CA expand through the acceptance of the community of the co-constructed realness (small ‘t’, truth) of accountability as constructive, affecting the culture and character of the organization.

Directions for Future Research

I have offered a conception of an ongoing process of accountability that is constructive and socially constructed. In addition, I have tried to make more visible the less than constructive elements and outcomes of the current application of traditional accountability. I am not in any way claiming that there is a clear and logical progression from individual to constructive accountability. I am, however, suggesting that accountability can be reflected in a metaconversation that leads to more open, inclusive relationships that enhances sensemaking practices. I am also suggesting the attempt to move toward accountability that is constructive must be made in order to create more open, flexible and productive organizations. In saying this, I suggest, as does Todd Steele above, that the process itself must be co-constructed. Thus, I encourage and anticipate future research that elaborates on this framework.

Investigation (and justification) of how to move CA into the culture of organizations is called for. As a social construction, CA will certainly be difficult for some people and some organizations to absorb. This suggests that the activation of constructive accountability may be more possible in some organizations than in others. Future research must determine whether and when CA is most valuable for organizational adaptation. It was suggested in the conversations that CA, as a recognized component of organizational leadership development, would positively

influence the conversations, circumstances, sensemaking and outcomes of the leaders and the organization. Research into the best applications in leadership training is suggested.

I would also like to see the positive approach of Appreciative Inquiry used as a way to gain conceptual thinking and investigation around the relevance of constructive accountability to schools. Accountability has been an ever-present theme in talking about schools in the last decade. And the subject is daunting for administrators and teachers. I am wondering what the process would look like and what benefits might be evident to the community.

CA recognizes the need for shared realities and ethics, as called for by Gergen (1996). Even though ethics is a topic of conversation in media and workplaces today—and our courts, only two brought up ethics. I had expected it to be more openly discussed, but it only appeared in passing in two conversations. The VP-HR at the international wood furniture manufacturing company talked of his company's commitment to the surrounding small community and CEO of the marine products manufacturing company talked of organizational values and people knowing their "moral and ethical boundaries."

There is also a paucity of connection between accountability and ethics in writings about both subjects. In a recent *Academy of Management Executive* Special Topic Edition on ethics (January 2004), of the twelve articles, only two briefly referred to accountability. Martini (2004) offered the question, "So what has happened to the roadmap of accountability on the landscape of corporate America?" (p. 55). The second said, "We would hold executives accountable for including this ethics bottom line in their personal performance commitments as well as in those of their organizations" (Thomas, Schermerhorn and Dienbart, 2004: 64). Several times it was mentioned that executives should "model" the importance of ethics, but it was only mentioned this one time that they should be held accountable to do so.

I see ethics as in peril when the traditional form of accountability is the relevant way of finding and punishing the one person at fault. When organizational participants feel threatened with negative repercussions, ethical standards are at risk. Moving from individual to constructive accountability is essential in order to increase ethical practice in organizations.

One of the early books that indirectly promoted my thinking on accountability as constructive was *The Art of Judgment: A Study of Policy Making*, by Sir Geoffrey Vickers (1965/1995). Two statements that caught my attention were: “Reality judgments and value judgments are inseparable constituents of appreciation,” (p. 54) and “Accountability is a section of the field of interaction and dialogue by which reciprocal relations are regulated” (p. 169). Since what is appreciated is co-constructed with others, designations of “reality” and “valuable” are flexible and generative and related to what is seen and experienced as constructive. Vickers argued that appreciation is an inherent and essential part of human activity from the level of individual consciousness to that of human cultures.

Attention to appreciation has gained prominence in today’s managerial writings. There is increased understanding of appreciation in academic and practitioner language; it is spreading throughout the writing and practice of scholars, writers and practitioners. An example of the awareness of appreciation occurred in the conversation with Salmon. Unfortunately, such awareness hasn’t, it seems, reached into the thinking of the ordinary leader working everyday in the workplace. Appreciation was mentioned by one VP-HR (where Appreciative Inquiry was utilized several years ago). He mentioned it in passing when he was struggling to “find appreciation” in any past experience of accountability and in his conversation on how AI was utilized in his company. A research question that comes to mind is: What role does appreciation have in the application of constructive accountability?

Erich Fromm once wrote, “If hope, faith, and fortitude are concomitants of life, how is it that so many lose hope, faith, and fortitude and love their servitude and dependence?” (1968: 19). My hope is that a movement toward constructive accountability can return some of that “hope, faith and fortitude” to our everyday efforts together in the workplace. Constructive accountability is a re-design of what accountability could be in collaborative, relationally aware, strength-based organizations. An attempt has been made to alter the traditional theoretical foundations of accountability and organizing that markedly still remain committed to a find-and-punish model. It is a direct attempt to replace the traditional, command and control structure of accountability practiced at all levels in today’s organizations with a collective orientation to building a more positive future.

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Appendix A

A Family of Criteria for Social Constructionist Practices*

- Centrality of Language [Vocabulary of emotions.]
Is the practice sensitive to the centrality of language in creating the sense of the real and the good? Is the practice also sensitive to the limitations of language alone in creating realities?
- Multiple Realities [“I” come out of many realities.]
Does the practice recognize the potential for multiple constructions (vocabularies, rhetoric) of the real and the good?
 - Multiple Selves [“I” am many pieces.]
Does the practice recognize the potential for multiple constructions of the self, or for multiple voices of the person?
- Language as Performative [Based on traditions.]
Is the practice sensitive to the uses of language within relationships, how differing accounts draw people together, force them apart, generate hierarchies, suppress, coordinate, etc?
- Socially Constructed Realities [Our way of putting things]
Does the practice take into account or promote reflection on the historical and cultural (or local) constitution of what counts as real and good?
- Language as Future Building [Openness to new conversations]
Does the practice enable language to be employed in generating more promising futures?
- Realities and Ethics as Functional/Dysfunctional [There must be some agreements.]
Does the practice recognize the need for shared realities and ethics, but as well the limitations of consensus in relationships?
- Sharing of Constructionism [Heightening awareness]
Does the practice share with others its own premises and its limitations?

*Pass out for presentation by Kenneth J. Gergen, Conference, 1996, The Taos Institute, in Taos, New Mexico.

Appendix B: Comments on Traditional and Constructive Accountability

Table 1: Comments on Traditional Accountability

Table 2: Comments on C

Table 1: Interviewee Comments on Traditional Accountability

| <p>Confusion as to what accountability is</p> | <p>As an act of control</p> | <p>Individualized accountability</p> | <p>A corrective tool</p> | <p>Current methods are working or are CA</p> |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •They will eventually get around to telling you they don't believe in it. •I have to think about it. •Relating it to performance review process. •Accountability meant making sure you had yourself covered. •People wrestle with the issue of accountability. •Accountability is important. The reality is it is seldom done. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The whole process is about control. •We assume non-accountability in subtle ways, e.g., by the processes we set up. •A negative frame. <p>Something to be avoided, something painful, for both involved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •A hierarchical relationship. •The relationship is defined by titles. There is little interaction. •People need to understand the boundaries. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The whole process is about control. •We assume non-accountability in subtle ways, e.g., by the processes we set up. •A negative frame. •Something to be avoided, some-thing painful, for both involved. •A hierarchical relationship. •Relationships are defined by titles. There is little interaction. •People need to understand the boundaries. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •There needs to be strong, definitive expectations of performance. •It's purpose is preparatory to discipline. •It is based on trying to place blame and how something has gone wrong. •People are watching and they decide if I've done something right or wrong. •A continuous mind-set of reviewing what people are doing within objectives. •One assumes there is punishment, de-gradation coming. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I think it already happens in many organizations. •This is pretty normal here—at least it sounds like what we do. We just haven't put a word to it. •We are already applying it here through our performance plan and review. •Management by walking around is the same thing. It is informally interacting. •It feels to me like it is how my department is run. |

Table 2: Interviewee Comments on Constructive Accountability

| <p>As a relational activity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It boils down to having a trusting relationship with those you work with. •Interaction is so important. •It would increase the focus on relationships across groups in any process of getting work done. •They do not understand the relational side. •It is working off each other's skills and strengths. •It is bi-directional. •Develop a team approach – we are in this together. | <p>An exchange process in day-to-day work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •This exchange process taps into a belief that we want to do our best and use our talents in the best possible way. •You will possibly save a lot of angst when you move accountability into every day practice. •Your point is that it has to be continuous talk about how you make things happen. •It makes it sound as though accountability is part of every interpersonal encounter. •In terms of interaction, it will deepen the quality of exchanges between people and provide a platform for continually learning from each other. •I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members. | <p>As collaboration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What you are talking about is collaboration. •Doing it within the conversation is the constructive part of it. •We are accountable together, helping each other succeed. •It is in the here and now, the problem solving issues, when CA is really a collaborative thing. •People collectively take charge of what their mission is and they are not afraid to step out because they are collectively dealing with things. •They have to learn to believe that we need each other to get things done. | <p>CA is beneficial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •They would have better harmony in the groups and they'd get their stuff done better. •It will help them feel good about politicking. •Could be a lot of positive that would come out of it. •It sounds like a cultural issue. •It will assist building trust, ownership and commitment. •This philosophy will transcend down through all the individuals at even the lower levels. •It would have a good chance of improving attitudes and perceptions. | <p>Suggestions for Initiating CA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I think it is a leadership program because it embodies leadership, what it is, the whole thing. •Take it in through leadership training. •You have to start with the supervisors. •You have to enroll those in the middle. •It has to start with the leaders. •The environment has to be created and it has to be top down to see it as a good thing. •It has to continually be reinforced by the leaders. •It is a pretty lofty goal. |
|---|---|--|---|--|
|---|---|--|---|--|