

Whose fault is it?

In a far away hockey-mad country, a 29-year old hockey player has recently claimed that his coach told him to viciously beat an opponent up. And so he did... When questioned about his actions, the aggressor claimed he was simply “following orders”. A politician in Ontario has recently offended an entire (and very large) community with insulting remarks related to that community’s working habits. He was mandated to publicly apologize and so he did, taking exactly one second and saying simply “sorry”. He claimed he did not know that his choice of words would be considered offensive...

What has happened to acknowledging our mistakes and learning from them? After all, did we not grow up with our parents and teachers telling us that accepting responsibility was an integral part of a sound character? Somewhere along the road this important value lost its way and today we have become very good at the “blame game”. Is your boss on your back because you are 15 minutes late every day? Blame public transit... Is your teacher challenging you regarding your falling grades? Blame him for not spending enough time with you. Does your hockey team stink and has not won anything for the past 40 years yet you (and your city) continue to purchase season tickets year after year? Blame management, blame the League, and blame the other teams for being better.

The above examples validate that it’s much simpler and easier to find a culprit than to take responsibility for our faults. But if we were not born this way, how did we end up in “It’s no my fault” land? How did the word *accountability* disappear? Perhaps it’s because accountability means being responsible and when we have responsibility over something we have to account for it with facts, actions, and figures, and not with excuses and fairy tales. The mortgage industry is not immune to this phenomenon; a couple of months ago I was involved in a mortgage transaction that illustrates how convoluted things have become. A customer called our call center to question the penalty he was being charged to payout his mortgage before maturity; he did not understand why there was any penalty at all since, in his mind, he had an open term. After some investigation this is what I found:

- The broker thought the client understood that his mortgage was a closed one
- The underwriter thought the broker had gone over the deal with the client in detail
- The solicitor thought that both the broker and underwriter had fully explained the product to the client
- The client thought that the solicitor should have alerted him about the prepayment clauses of a closed mortgage

In the end the client was satisfied with the arrangement we came up with but all the parties involved could have done better. The mortgage industry has come a long way with the introduction of legislation and regulation, mandatory testing, and a greater emphasis on ethics and responsibility. But it is naïve to think that permanent and long term-change will happen simple because a test has been written or a course taken. We all want that to be possible, but that’s not realistic.

Accountability does not happen because you talk about it; you have to practice every day, in every action, and in every interaction. As Marshall Goldsmith, executive educator, properly stated, “Americans get fatter and fatter, and yet they read more and more diet books”.

One of the most successful ways of ensuring accountability is by measuring it; after all, “what gets measured gets done”. There are 4 basic steps to facilitate this process:

1. **Make sure you and your client understand the big picture** – What is the end goal? What are you trying to achieve?
2. **Set clear expectations for everyone involved** – What, who, when, and how. The SMART acronym will never be outdated: Specific, *Measurable*, Achievable, *Realistic*, *Time-bound* objectives
3. **Set and explain consequences** – Without consequences most people don’t take things seriously, including your clients!
4. **Post-Transaction assessment** – Solicit feedback on how you conducted yourself and don’t take criticism as a personal offense, learn from it.

Nothing in the history of mankind was ever achieved by simply thinking about it or by spending “5 minutes, 3 times a week” ; *we have to act in order to change*. If we want to be seen as ethical, responsible, and knowledgeable professionals we have to act this way, every day. Otherwise we will continue living in a society where people have to be reminded of the most basic of things. I swim almost every early morning before going to work; the other day I noticed following note placed over the sink in an Oakville Public Pool:

“Be Careful, the hot water is hot”

Duh...

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