

BEST OF BILL ZIPP'S BLOG

Top 10 Posts of 2011

#1

The Perils of Jumping to Confusions

You're leading an important business meeting. Two people in the back row whisper in each other's ear throughout the entire meeting. You're convinced they're talking about you. Are they?

You need an important piece of information to finish a report that's due by the end of the business day. You've sent multiple emails to a team member asking for this information. She hasn't sent it. You're convinced she's trying to sabotage your work. Is she?

You present your sales plan for the next fiscal year to your sales team. One of the senior members of the team remains quiet during the entire presentation, not uttering a word. You're convinced he opposes the plan. Does he?

In the course of a leader's day scores of situations like these present themselves, and we're left trying to understand what they mean. Much of the time we commit what psychologists call attribution errors, or, what I have called in the title of this blog post, jumping to confusions. Jumping to confusions occurs when someone does something we don't understand and, instead of asking about it, we draw a conclusion. A conclusion that's usually wrong.

My Most Embarrassing Attribution Error

One of the most embarrassing times I committed an attribution error was when our church was sending a busload of teenagers off to summer camp. I had showed up to wish them well and was flabbergasted by two sisters who were crying profusely, clinging to their mom before boarding the bus. "C'mom," I thought to myself, "You're high-schoolers. It's just a week. Get over it."

I then went into church and heard the announcement that the night before their dad had a heart attack and was in intensive care. He didn't want his daughters to miss summer camp, so they were going anyway, but with heavy hearts. The pastor asked us to pray for the family, and I felt like a fool (eternally grateful that I had, for once in my life, kept my mouth shut).

Here's what's so destructive about attribution errors. Human nature being what it is, when we draw a conclusion without having all the facts, that conclusion is usually a negative one. The whisperers are talking about me. The team member is trying to sabotage my work. The senior sales representative is opposed to the plan. None of these conclusions may be true; yet when we draw them, our relationships are poisoned and the potential for constructive communication is cut off.

What Do Exceptional Leaders Do?

Exceptional leaders believe the best in their people and remain neutral in conflict. Believing the best in people means rejecting our natural, human impulse to fill a vacuum with negative content and trusting that the people we work with are as committed to the success of the organization as we are. Remaining neutral in conflict means when circumstances present themselves that we don't understand, we simply ask about them without any preconceived ideas or fore-drawn conclusions.

"But what if," you say, "they really are opposed to the new sales plan?" Great question. Same answer. Believe the best in your people and remain neutral. Ask for information and seek understanding. Together agree on what's needed for an effective sales plan (a report, a meeting), and move forward with respect and clarity. Continue the discussion until all of you are on the same page.

I know this may sound like a lot of work (It's really not, but for the sake of argument let's say that it is). What's more time consuming is having another meeting to go over the same agenda items you covered in the last meeting, sending repeated email requests for information that are not responded to, and having to rework the sales plan halfway through the year because your senior sales rep wasn't on board with it.

Situations like the ones we have been discussing are really gifts to leaders to more completely clarify the work at hand and more deeply develop trust and respect. Accept them for the opportunities they provide and refuse to threaten your organization with the perils of jumping to confusions.

#2

Got Grit? True Grit?

True grit, as it turns out, has an official definition. Not the one given by the 1969 movie where John Wayne won his only Academy Award, or by the recent Coen brothers' re-make. The grit young Mattie Ross found in the aging "Rooster" Cogburn was an ability to stand up to bad guys and shoot a gun. Important, maybe, in the wild, wild west, but not helpful for today's business marketplace.

So Dr. Angela Duckworth and her research team at the University of Pennsylvania have performed an incredible service by giving us this succinct--and profoundly useful--definition. True grit is "perseverance and passion for long-term goals." Grit is courage, not just in the moment but sustained over time, in the ongoing pursuit of challenging objectives. And, according to research, it outperforms both talent and intelligence in activities as diverse and graduating from military school and competing in the National Spelling Bee.

The team identified 17 distinct elements to the perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Some of these are predictable, like not being discouraged by roadblocks or setbacks, having a strong inner drive, and working hard. Others I found surprising, like enjoying the latest and greatest innovations and having an array of outside interests. Turns out, while these things may make you a better cocktail party guest, they distract you from achieving long-term

success. How gritty is your grit? Go to the web site and see: Grit Survey <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/default.aspx>

The Window or the Mirror?

With due respect, however, to the researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, I would like to add one more item to the list. I'll pose it as a question, "Where do you look when things go wrong?" I've found when things go wrong that people look one of two places: out the window or in the mirror.

When people look out the window, they blame external forces for things that have gone wrong. It's the economy, the competition, your stupid boss, or your lame web site. The list is endless, but the outcome's the same. When results don't meet expectations, looking outside the window seeks a solution external to one's self, yielding power to forces you cannot control. Long-term goals languish because victims don't climb mountains, finish marathons, or bring revolutionary products to market.

When people look in the mirror, just the opposite occurs. They discover solutions to problems that lie within their power to control. Instead of being overwhelmed with guilt, they are empowered by the steps of action they can take to change the status quo. They reach their long-term goals in spite of the roadblocks in their way because they refuse to allow external factors to become an excuse for inaction.

Please Don't Stop Reading!

And here's a very, very important final point. Looking in the mirror doesn't mean committing intellectual suicide. Yes, the economy has been challenging and your competition may be cutthroat. You may have a stupid boss and a lame web site. So what? Stop letting external forces dictate your success and stop being a victim. Perfection never exists, so get over it. And get on with it. Grit, true grit, find the guts within oneself to get things done, in spite of any obstacle or excuse.

#3

Value, Added Value, and Unexpected Value

Average doesn't cut it anymore. People don't tell their friends about an average restaurant, an average contractor, or an average consultant. Remarkable, now that's a different story. At the heart of the word remarkable is "making remarks." Remarkable service and remarkable products generate remarks from customers, otherwise known as referrals, the most powerful and reliable way to build your business

Here's how to be remarkable: Provide value. Provide added value. And then provide unexpected value.

I have a financial advisor who handles all my investments and has produced outstanding returns even in the middle of recent market meltdowns. That's the value he provides me. As an

investor with his firm, he provides added value by taking care of both my personal and corporate taxes and my company's payroll, all at a reasonable rate. He also handles the correspondence related to the the inevitable mistakes the IRS makes and sends me every quarter a detailed breakdown of my portfolio's distribution and the performance of each fund. That's added value.

The Element of Surprise

But he provided unexpected value two years ago when he took over the investment responsibilities of my parent's estate. He was beginning to adjust the portfolio, which had a large amount of cash sitting in a savings account at Washington Mutual Bank. He called me at 5:30 PM one evening and told me he thought Washington Mutual might close its doors. He suggested we get our money out of the savings account immediately. Which we did by 5:55 PM. The next day, Washington Mutual went under.

That's unexpected value and didn't cost my financial advisor a penny. Unexpected value is a personal, thoughtful, and customized act of service. "According to a recent poll, the vast majority of people prefer gifts that are unexpected." best-selling author Tom Rath writes in *How Full is Your Bucket?* "Expected gifts do fill our buckets, but for some reason, receiving things unexpectedly fills our buckets just a little bit more. It's about the element of surprise. And the gift doesn't have to be anything big to be successful.

"Luxury retailer Saks Fifth Avenue conducted an experiment in which sales associates surprised customers who were known to shop infrequently with a small gift. Although it was a mere token of Saks' appreciation, the customers loved it, and the sales associates did too. The program helped grow the stores' business by transforming causal shoppers into regular shoppers."

It's Your Turn

Go through you current client list and complete this exercise: Ask yourself how you're providing value to them and how you're providing added value. Then determine how you can provide unexpected value for each client. Identify a simple, personal, and surprising act of service you can take. Now do it.

#4

All Tasks Are NOT Created Equal

I love how technology handles tasks. Instead of writing and re-writing the same thing over and over again on pieces of paper, technology allows me to create a task once, assign it to a specific day, make it repeat as often as necessary, and have it roll over to the next day if I don't get it done.

What I hate, however, is the fallout from this technology. I've opened my laptop and viewed a list of tasks no human being could accomplish in a week, let alone a day. What most of us do

when assaulted with such a list is close our laptop and do whatever we feel like doing. Not good!

Here's where technology must be our servant and not our master. Sift through your tasks using the green-yellow-red process described below. Begin every day with five minutes of green-yellow-red filtering and you'll quickly overcome the overload that's giving you a splitting headache at the end of the day.

GREEN: Top Priority, Time Sensitive

A green task is something that's a top priority, personally or professionally. It's also a task that has a deadline associated with it that must be met in the next day or two. In other words, it's important and it's urgent.

Green obviously stands for "go," and designates tasks you should do first in your day. You don't have to color code them or categorize them as A1, A2, A3, etc... That's waste of time. Place them at the top of your todo list and take action on them immediately.

YELLOW: Top Priority, Not Time Sensitive

The color yellow stands for "proceed with caution." This designation is given to tasks that are your top priorities but don't have pressing deadlines. The caution of this color is this: if you don't attend to these tasks, their deadlines may sneak up on you, and you'll live your life running from crisis to crisis.

Assign a few yellow tasks to each day and get them done. Technology allows you to do this quickly and easily. You'll discover by completing a handful of yellow tasks every day that you'll have fewer and fewer green tasks to do and rarely miss a deadline.

RED: Everything Else

And, of course, red stands for "stop". It doesn't matter whether a task is time sensitive if it's not a top priority. Urgency is irrelevant if an action is unimportant. These tasks need to be eliminated from your life, or it, too, will become irrelevant. If there's an organizational reason a red task can't be eliminated, it needs to be delegated to someone else to do. End of discussion.

"Most of us lead busy but undisciplined lives," Jim Collins writes in *Good to Great*. "We have ever-expanding 'to do' lists, trying to build momentum by doing, doing, doing—and doing more. And it rarely works. Those who built good-to-great companies, however, made as much use of 'stop doing' lists as 'to do' lists. They displayed a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk."

Your task list should provide you a simple way to execute on a reasonable set of activities for each day that are fully aligned with your top priorities. One of the key differences between those who succeed in business and those who don't is the management of their time. This goes for succeeding in life as well, because all tasks are NOT created equal.

#5

Seven Ways I Use My iPad for Business

Okay, I'll admit it. I bought it on a whim. Being a bit of a gadget guy, I had to get the iPad 2. There it was in the store, and it looked so cool and slim and professional (In a word, so Apple). It spoke to me, and I ponied up the bucks and bought it.

What began as a whim, however, has quickly become an indispensable business tool. Here are seven ways I use my iPad for business:

1. Meeting Notes

Being an executive coach and business consultant, my week is full of meetings. I prepare for meetings, conduct meetings, and record my thoughts during and after meetings. Apart from the cool factor of opening up an iPad instead of a manilla folder in a meeting, I've found my iPad unbelievably easy to use to quickly jot notes and capture random thoughts. The pre-installed iPad Notes app is okay, but not robust enough for what I needed. For awhile I used an app called Notability, but (inexplicably) it didn't have spell-check, so emailing meeting notes to clients was unwise. What I now use for all my meetings is an app called Notably:<http://notablyapp.com/index.html>. It's incredibly elegant, well-designed, and automatically synchs with Dropbox:<http://www.dropbox.com/>.

By the way, with your iPad video camera you can easily conduct virtual business meetings anywhere using WebEx, GoToMeeting, or Skype. My favorite, however, is the multi-user, multi-screen app from video upstart ooVoo:<http://www.oovoo.com/home.aspx>.

2. Tasks and Projects

I'm a raving fan of a software called *Things* by Cultured Code:<http://culturedcode.com/> and have it on both my laptop and my iPad. From the first day I bought a MacBook Pro, I've used *Things* because iCal task management is just deplorable (Let me tell you how I really feel). The iPad app is even better than its software cousin. At \$20 it's a bit on the expensive side for an app, but, in my opinion, *Things* is worth every penny.

Things allows me to closely manage the dates and deadlines for both my tasks and projects, set reoccurrences, assign tasks to areas of responsibility, and tag them for quick reference--all quickly and easily. The underlying architecture of *Things* is based on David Allen's immensely popular book, *Getting Things Done*, but it's not overly dependent on it. The iPad app automatically synchs with my laptop via the wireless network in my office and allows me to stay on top of everything I need to do everyday. Cultured Code's:<http://culturedcode.com/> online support and resources are second to none.

3. Appointments

Speaking of synching, you can't beat iCal and Mobile Me for keeping track of appointments and meetings. I put an appointment in my iPad and it's automatically posted online, on my laptop, and on my iPhone. From all reports, Apple's IOS 5 and improved cloud service will only

make this better. For me the best part of this iPad functionality is that my wife can check my calendar at any time and know exactly what I'm doing. She can also schedule appointments for me, which is how I ended having a colonoscopy recently (but that's another story).

4. Document Management

The big concern, of course, with using an iPad is reading and managing documents and fulfilling the quest for a paperless workplace. Enter GoodReader:<http://www.goodreader.net/goodreader.html>, the best five dollars you'll ever spend in your life. It reads every conceivable document, from Word files to TXT files, iWork files to PDF's, allowing you to mark them up as well. It also views pictures, plays audio and video, and reads maps. I haven't even scratched the surface of what it can do on my iPad, but it's amazing. In addition to all this stuff, GoodReader:<http://www.goodreader.net/goodreader.html> synchs with a half a dozen different remote servers to keep everything up to date. Technology expert, Mashable, calls it, "the Swiss Army knife of awesome."

5. Travel

When you travel, you have your airplane ticket, your hotel, your car rental, and God knows what else to keep track of. My iPad helps me keep all that stuff in one place through an amazing app called Tripit:<http://www.tripit.com/>. Download the app and forward your travel info to Tripit:<http://www.tripit.com/>, and, voila, it's all there for you to see along with other great things to do in the region you're traveling to. If anything changes in your itinerary, Tripit:<http://www.tripit.com/> will send you an email alert and text alert to your phone. Almost makes those body scans worth it. Tripit:<http://www.tripit.com/> is provided free from a company called Concur:<http://www.concur.com/>, who also has an excellent app for business expense tracking that fully synchs with your credit card. Check them both out.

6. Books and Magazines

My Kindle was cool when I first got it, but there's nothing like reading a book in vivid color like you can on an iPad. In fact, Amazon's Kindle app for iPad is simply amazing and their book selection way beyond what's available for iBooks. The coolest of the cool, however, is an app called Zite:<http://zite.com/>. Zite:<http://zite.com/> is an online magazine that crawls the internet for articles that match your personally customized categories. Read an article and rate it, and you'll get more of what you like. In other words, the more you use Zite:<http://zite.com/>, the smarter it becomes, all for free. Who needs magazines?

7. Background Music

No, I don't want music gobbling up the memory of my business devices. But there are times when I want to listen to music as I read, write, and reflect at work. If you've ever listened to Pandora, you already know how online music streaming works. But Pandora's become a commercial wasteland, so I listen to the app IHeartRadio:<http://www.iheartradio.com/main.html>. There's tons of commercial-free music of any genre, as well as live streaming of radio stations across the country. All for free. A nice set of Bose headphones almost makes the workday seem like a vacation (Not really, but Bose headphones are pretty great).

I'm sure I'm just getting started using this post-PC tool for business. I love the exceedingly responsive touch screen and find the keyboard easier to use than the mechanical ones we've all become used to. With cloud computing advancing at an amazing rate and ubiquitous wireless networks, look for your iPad to become even more useful in the future. BTW I tried out about three or four different iPad covers to protect my investment, and landed on this slick leather one from Snugg:http://www.amazon.com/Snugg-Leather-Elastic-Premium-Interior/dp/B004QIPH5U/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1313026490&sr=8-3. It's perfect!

#6

Your Team is Just a Committee. Here's Why.

Teams are all the rage today. We have executive teams and sales teams, product development teams and cross-functional teams. Most teams, however, are not teams at all but mere committees. Not only do these groups waste precious time and energy, but they miss the powerful synergy that real teams achieve. Here's why your team is just committee and what you can do about it.

1. Your team is just a committee because the people on it don't really know each other

Team effectiveness is based on trust. Everything flows from there. Committees don't take the time to build that trust, they jump right into agendas and action items irrespective of the people in the room. As a result the relationships at the table remain superficial and trust virtually nonexistent.

If a group of people is going to engage in solving serious problems--be they commercial, social, or even spiritual--that group must know each other, and know each other well. Depth of relationship forms the foundation for the building that will be built upon it. The taller the building, the deeper the foundation must be. To forge real teamwork you must take the time to forge real relationship. There is no shortcut to trust.

2. Your team is just a committee because it doesn't fight fair (or at all)

When team members trust each other, they talk openly and frankly. Committee members passively listen to one or two people drone on and on, disagreeing with decisions made behind their backs. That's not fighting fair. True teams actively participate in dialogue, discussion, and even debate without incrimination. Not really fighting, per se, but iron sharpening iron. By default, committees protect the status quo. Teams change the world.

3. Your team is just a committee because it's overly dependent on the formal leader

Committees have chairmen, and women, whose job it is to schedule a meeting, call it to order, direct the agenda, and follow-up on decisions made. A committee is entirely dependent on the chair for its success. Teams may start in the same way, but very quickly transform themselves into something quite different, a dynamic small group that's mutually accountable to one another for results. The formal leader, while present, doesn't drive the agenda, but all the members of the team take full responsibility for success. In fact, the formal leader could step

aside, and the team would keep functioning at high levels of productivity. Not so with a committee.

That's why Patrick Lencioni has made this audacious claim about true teams, "Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare. A friend of mine, the founder of a company that grew to a billion dollars in annual revenue, best expressed the power of teamwork when he once told me, 'If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, any time.'"

#7

Nice Customers Ruin Business

It's an amazing statistic from a customer satisfaction study conducted by The Strategic Planning Institute. The average business never hears from 96% of its unhappy customers. In other words, only 4% of the time people will tell you when something's gone wrong with your product or service. Everyone else will be nice.

And that's a problem. Because when people are nice, they suffer and endure when an issue comes up and quietly get their needs met somewhere else. So you can forget about repeat business. You can also forget about referral business. Nice customers very politely say nothing to their family and friends about your company. Repeat business and referral business, two critical elements to success, both gone. Bottom line: nice customers ruin business.

When Customers Aren't Nice

That same study discovered that 70% of customers who register a complaint will do business again with that company *if the complaint is resolved*. If that complaint is resolved quickly, the number jumps to 95%. Yes, you read that right, 95%. It's not the presence of problems that sours business, it is the lack of resolving those problems. When the problem is solved professionally, customer satisfaction soars, and, along with it, repeat and referral possibilities.

This even goes for bad reviews on the Internet. Honestly and humbly respond to your bad reviews, even if they're not nice. Sincerely apologize and fix the problem. The watching world, again, knows that stuff happens in business, so when you own your stuff--which very few businesses actually do--they're attracted to you.

How Do You Solicit Customer Complaints?

I must admit, this is not easy to for me to do. I like to be liked as much as the next guy. But I've been bitten badly by nice customers who never told me about a problem, then never used me again and never recommended me to others. So here's a simple habit I've made a part of my consulting practice. I sit down with my clients mid-project and ask, "On a scale of 1-10, how well is this engagement meeting your expectations?" And then I take a big gulp and dig down deep for details.

I've become convinced that a key reason people don't freely give referrals is this: there are unresolved issues in the business relationship. Even small things, like a pebble in a shoe, can be irritating over time (and easy to fix). That's why I ask for input mid-project, so issues can be resolved and clients can become raving fans.

And, if you'll forgive a moment of self-help sophistry, when you have a life outside of your business, rich relationships with family and friends and an active faith, your identity is not defined by what you do. You can more readily accept criticism and feedback, knowing that you are fully loved and accepted in other areas of your life. Instead of making you "soft," a rich personal life gives you the courage to do what you need to do in business.

Mining for Conflict

So before asking for repeat business or for a referral, ask for complaints. Request input. Get feedback. Stir up discussion. Generate debate. Or in the words of the brilliant Patrick Lencioni: mine for conflict. The gems you'll find possess immense value. Don't let nice customers ruin your business.

#8

Time Management is Broken Beyond Repair

Traditional time management says this: Do you have 10 things to do today? I can show you how to do 15. Do you have 15 things to do today? I can show you how to do 20. But what happens when you have 30, 40, and 50 things to do every single day like we do now? No amount of efficiency can get this much done in a day.

So let's say it aloud, boldly and brazenly, traditional time management is broken. Focus, not efficiency, is the key to managing our time.

I once owned a house on six acres of land under the grand delusion that I was a gentleman farmer. Year after year I had the most beautiful grapevines with long flowing branches, big beautiful leaves, and no grapes. One day a nosey neighbor came over and growled at me, "You gotta prune dem things!"

And he was right, because when I did, magically grapes appeared on the vines. Wonderful, juicy, delicious grapes. I learned that for grapevines to produce grapes, the energy of the plant needs to be spent on growing grapes, not branches and leaves. To achieve that objective, grapevines need to be rigorously pruned so the plant can do that which is essential to its purpose, bearing fruit.

In business and in life, pruning is cutting back what is secondary so that which is primary can thrive. It's going through our endlessly long lists of things to do, identifying the few things that are vitally important and doing them, letting everything else go. Pruning is, fundamentally, a counterintuitive yet liberating concept: doing more by doing less. In short, focus.

The prophetic words of Peter Drucker written over four decades ago declare, "Concentration—that is, the courage to impose what really matters most and comes first—is the executive's only hope of mastering time and events instead of being their whipping boy."

Concentration and courage. Words to live by in today's crazy busy world. So farewell time management. I really won't miss you that much. Hello focus. Let's do business (and life) together.

#9

It's Not about You

Marketing today is like going to the circus. Everyone is shouting at the top of their lungs how amazing, revolutionary, life-changing, (or whatever) they are. And, just like at the circus, their claims don't hold up to the harsh light of reality.

Smart marketing embraces an opposite approach. Instead of loud, chest-thumping bravado, smart marketing listens to customers, understanding their challenges and meeting their needs. To do this, however, you must have a different mindset. You must have a customer-driven mentality that focuses on the people you're trying to reach, not the products and services you're trying to sell.

Marketing in an Age of Ego and Exaggeration

Just like when you were dating, if a person sat at the table and talked about themselves the entire time, it was a turn off. The same is true when all we do is talk about our latest award-winning service, cutting-edge technology, and super low, low pricing. Turn off! Ego and exaggeration gets us nowhere with people. It's time we give it up.

Here's a different approach. Build all your marketing and sales efforts around asking and answering each of these four questions:

1. What are your customer's critical objectives?

In other words, what do they want? What are they accountable for delivering? What are they responsible for providing? If you can't state in a simple sentence or two exactly what your current customer's objectives are, you're marketing with a blindfold on and wasting precious time and money.

2. What are your customer's biggest challenges in achieving their objectives?

Obviously, the objectives your customers are responsible for achieving would be completed already if something wasn't standing in the way. What is it? What keeps them from fulfilling their best intentions? What are the roadblocks, the detours, and the complete breakdowns on their path? Some of these things happen year after year after year in your customer's life. Find out what they are and help overcome them.

3. What is your customer's status quo for the products and services you provide?

It's Newton's first law of motion: a body at rest stays at rest. This is a law of marketing as well. People are creatures of habit and stick with what they've grown accustomed to, even if it's not working. The status quo is comfortable, it's safe, and it doesn't take any time to install. The status quo, not the new business down the street, is your biggest competitor.

4. What trigger events would move your customer from using the status quo?

How do you fight the status quo? Trigger events. A trigger event, like the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, is an activity or a series of activities that initiates a buying decision. Knowing what these are for your customer and talking about them consistently is key to customer-driven marketing.

About 10 years ago my wife, a national sales rep at the time, had a terrific sales year. When her income was combined with mine and our taxes were completed, our accountant turned to her and said, "Congratulations, you just worked for 49 cents on the dollar. You should think about a different legal structure for your business." Which we did, immediately.

How much better would it have been, however, if our accountant had said to us a year earlier, "I work with a lot of independent sales reps and found that when they have an exceptional sales year and their taxes are done, they actually make less money for all their hard work not more money. I wouldn't want that to happen to you. Let's talk about a different legal structure for your business." That's a customer-driven approach.

The Vehicle and the View

One of the most important words in the lexicon of business is this: customer. You must never forget that your products and services are merely a vehicle for helping customers get to where they want to go. They are not the destination. Your interactions with them must not be about the vehicle--however cool you think it is--but the amazing view they'll enjoy when they get to their destination. Because, after all, it's not about you.

#10

How to Create a Culture of Accountability

My favorite scene from one of my favorite movies, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, takes place below deck in the gunnery section of a 19th century man-of-war. Russell Crowe's British sea captain, Jack Aubrey, is preparing his men to attack a bigger, better armed French privateer. Literally outgunned and outmanned, the crew of the H.M.S. Surprise is drilled by their captain in firing efficiency and accuracy.

Aubrey has determined that the Surprise's guns must be loaded and fired in less than two minutes to defeat the enemy. They time themselves, and the results are dismal. So over and over again the crew fires their guns and gets their time, fires their guns and gets their time. Until finally they break the unheard of two-minute barrier and the dirty, grimy, sweaty,

exhausted men explode in thunderous cheers. Aubrey lavishly praises his crew, who swell with pride, and doubles their ration of rum for the day.

I've played this scene for many of my clients and discuss these essentials for creating a culture of accountability in their companies:

1. Know your critical number

There are a lot of things that could have been measured on the H.M.S. Surprise, but there was one number that mattered above all: two minutes. If they couldn't load and fire their guns in less time than that, nothing else mattered. All would be lost. Here in a very clear and succinct way the crew knows what exactly it takes to execute successfully. Do you provide your people with this kind of clarity?

I'm convinced that most leaders do not bring strategic focus to their business and drown their employees with endless detail, making the path to execution incomprehensible. Every position within your company and every person in every position within your company must know with certainty what their "two minutes" is. That is, what number, percentage, ratio, or multiplier is central to their success. Not everything is covered in this number, of course, but that's not what makes it critical. It's critical because it's core to the business and predictive of future results.

2. Keep score

It's not enough, however, to have a critical number for your business. You must also track it. Here, too, the H.M.S. Surprise teaches us how to create a culture of accountability. Watches are pulled out and seconds are counted, over and over again. Bad news is received without blame and good news is celebrated joyously. And here is a most important point: it's done in public for all to see.

The public nature of keeping score is essential to creating a culture of accountability. Most people have no idea what's really going on in the companies they work for. Inexplicably, management keeps vital information under wraps, like a closely guarded secret. But I believe an ill-informed employee is an ill-armed employee. You don't have to divulge confidential data, but let people know the key numbers that drive the business and ongoing performance against those numbers *on a regular basis in a very public way*. What you'll receive as a result is an enthusiastic, inspired workforce.

3. Have fun

What strikes me most about this scene in *Master and Commander* is how much fun everyone is having. Yes, they are working hard, but they are also enjoying themselves. The men are hooting and hollering, clapping and cheering. And at the end of a very long day, they are praised lavishly and rewarded generously. Accountability must never become a way to brow-beat people into submission. It's a way to have fun. That's why we like playing games, because we keep score and know when we win. The shooting competition we witness here, however, is not one man competing against another, but the entire team competing together against a seemingly impossible goal. Winning this way as a team is the most fun of all.

4. Connect metrics to mission

Between firings, as the crew gets closer and closer to the two-minute target, Jack Aubrey shouts to his men insulting wisecracks about Napoleon and the hated French. They shout back with equal vigor. What's going on here? Vision casting. All metrics must be given deeper meaning or enthusiasm around measuring them will wane. It's a pain in the neck to beat the two minute timer, but worth it to defeat the enemy. Purpose fuels passion and is the intention that drives the intensity that's needed to achieve world class results. Without a deeper cause and an abiding commitment in your people to fulfill it, accountability quickly becomes an irritant, or worse, coercion. Mercenaries and conscripts don't win wars, or bring revolutionary products to market.

This is not what you see, however, on Jack Aubrey's man-of-war. His passion is palpable and inspires the entire crew to possess the same. Creating a culture of accountability is not an outside in model of performance management (The beatings will stop when morale improves), but rather inside out. Metrics make sense because they are the natural extension of the mission, lived out for all to see by the group's primary leader.