

## **Is Toxic Bureaucracy Tainting Your Culture?**

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Be honest. Do you ever feel that your organization is “weighed down by bureaucracy and make-work paperwork” or that it suffers from a “culture that discourages risk-taking”? If you could be “more flexible, agile and mobile”, would you get further faster towards your biggest goal?

If so, you're not alone. These very words are part of the FBI's self-assessment underway in Washington. Before you dismiss this uncomfortable comparison, take a closer look at your own organization. How certain are you that front line voices are getting through the system? How well do you fend off the constant busyness of e-mails, meetings, deadlines and crises to listen, reflect, integrate and modify your course of action?

The comforting discipline of accountability may lull us into believing that the progress we're making will add up to achieving the big, fat goals we are going for. We've successfully divided up the pieces of what/by whom/by when, and we will surely deliver the results. Or will we? The provocative management thinker Peter Block turns accountability upside-down when he redefines it as an act of stewardship: “To be accountable is to care for the well-being of the whole,” says Block. Rather than fragmenting and parsing, he urges us not to lose sight of the big picture and to collectively maintain responsibility for the overarching goal, the one that the smaller achievements add up to.

Want to help clean out toxic bureaucracy festering within your culture and refocus it towards greater accountability for the whole? Here are three things you can do today:

1. **Ask different questions.** In his latest book, The Answer to How is Yes, Block recommends replacing standard management fare with questions that stimulate a deeper conversation. For example, typical questions of “how long will it take?” and “how are others doing it successfully?” feed our natural resistance to action. Reframing these questions to ask “what commitment am I willing to make?” and “what do we want to create together?” can draw us into meaningful change.
2. **Get useful feedback every day.** Create formal and informal ways to get input from the front-line. Make it fast, risk-free and easy for people throughout the organization to be heard, and let them know you expect them to play in for the benefit of the whole organization
3. **Share your power.** Instead of running employee-generated ideas through a succession of checks and balances that make it easy to say no, ask yourself “why not try it?” And take a lesson from Ritz Carlton's policy of having workers solve problems on-the-spot with guests. You might be pleasantly surprised by the outcomes when you follow the lead of those on the front line.

Each of us can take responsibility for chipping away at bureaucracy that keeps different pieces of the puzzle hidden away in their own organizational boxes. What next step will you take to make a positive difference to your organization?