



## Seeing True to Break Through

Thoughts from Ron Chapman

September 2006

Greetings,

In a recent client interaction, I caught a glimpse of a major impediment to personal and professional effectiveness. Before exploring it, here's the story.

The setting is a large educational institution. They're undertaking a major alignment process that includes long range and strategic planning at all levels of the organization. Historically, they've had little rigor in aligning staff activities toward the mission of the institution. As my client says, "the cows are out of the barn, and don't want to come back in." In a university, intellectual freedom and thought are the most valued currencies. It is hardly surprising those who have been able to mostly do what they want would be unwilling to sacrifice such latitude, even in the interest of serving more important institutional aims.

As the "internal change agent," my client is responsible for designing and implementing this extensive alignment process, despite the reticence of many of the staff. Needless to say, there are significant challenges.

As the client chatted with me, it became apparent that in an effort to behave responsibly, she had overstepped a proper range of accountability. Wherever she encountered irresponsibility or lack of accountability, she was inserting herself as the responsible party. This included some highly placed senior management roles. Slowly but surely she was taking on far more than was appropriate. Ultimately, that approach cannot possibly succeed. It will be unsustainable, or those who she accommodates will resist.

For those of us who are zealous about our performance, or are deeply committed personality types, it is very easy to overstep the bounds of appropriate responsibility and accountability. Borrowing from the therapeutic field, at worst we become "enablers" who support dependency and incompetence. At best, we carry levels of stress that undermine our lives – personally and professionally.

In reality, what is it to "be responsible and accountable?" Think of their literal interpretation, i.e. "being able to respond appropriately to time, place and circumstance" and "being able to account for one's decisions and actions."

These are hardly the more conventional understandings. Generally, we are seen to be responsible or accountable when we are performing or taking action. Regrettably, these notions are too often used to assign blame or find fault.

Here's the point. By misunderstanding what it means to truly be responsible and accountable, we can overstep our bounds in ways that can be dysfunctional and unsustainable. By being overly responsible or accountable, we can undermine our peers and friends, to say nothing of compromising ourselves.

How do we know when we have appropriate balance in these critical areas?

Nothing short of rigorous self-examination will suffice. We must scrupulously seek evidence of our effectiveness or ineffectiveness, then tell ourselves the truth. We must strive to incorporate that information and insight into our lives.

I remember a long ago therapy session with my now ex-wife. She was describing some challenges she faced, but before long I was interjecting myself into her situation. After a few such incursions, she turned to me with a scowl and asked, "Can you just let this be about me for once?" (Okay, it wasn't really that nice!)

I turned to the therapist for support. He nodded his head in agreement with her. I winced as recognition surged through me. It became apparent I overstepped my bounds much more than I was comfortable admitting. So began a long process of finding a more effective way of operating in my life.

Too much of anything can negate even the finest virtues. In all things... moderation. Yes, even with responsibility and accountability.

As always, thanks for your feedback and insights. Remember, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Perhaps more importantly, "The un-lived life is not worth examining."

Ron

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