

Employee Accountability versus Culture of Entitlement

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During our many years of practice, one question we continually pose is whether or not there has been a dilution in the concept of employee accountability. On occasion, from our position as management consultants, it does appear that employee accountability has been supplanted by a culture of entitlement. The famous quote from John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural speech resonates when the term "employee accountability" is spoken. The quote from that speech states the following: "...ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country." Should this not be the same attitude of employees? (Ask not what your employer can do for you, but what you can do for your employer). In a sense, employers in many sectors of our economy have been plagued with a loss in their workers' sense of responsibility and accountability in regard to their contribution to the workplace.

We have noticed this culture of entitlement manifest itself in a number of ways. For instance, a major problem plaguing North American employers is the abuse and/or misuse of sick leave benefits. The cost of this misuse is measure by the billions, not only in the actual cost of the benefit, but also in terms of lost productivity, replacement costs and erosion to employee morale. We often hear that employee have the right to sick leave and therefore should not be questioned for taking them even in situations where the absence may be somewhat suspicious. Should this be the case? Are employees indeed entitled to use their sick leave without question?

In unionized workplaces, a collective agreement outlines employee benefits and rights; however sometimes it is felt that these negotiated benefits are taken advantage of. Many individuals feel that since a right or benefit is outlined in a collective agreement, they are forever entitled to it without question. Moreover, there are situations where employees feel that they can work less hours but continue to receive a full day's pay. In both examples, the collective agreement is often used as a shield in defending an employee's abuse of benefits or work schedules/arrangements. Without casting blame on either party to a collective agreement, it is not unusual to see the collective agreement used a means of advocating rights at the expense of accountability. We must consider the original purpose of these negotiated benefits, being that they are in place to aid/protect the employee *should the need arise* or in *unforeseen circumstances*. For example, a common benefit is that employers will pay for employee eyeglasses. The purpose of this benefit is to help employees who *need* eyeglasses pay for them; however an employee who does not need eyeglasses is not going to purchase eyeglasses they do not need simply because the benefit exists. However, in many cases we see employees taking sick leave, not because they are sick, but instead because the benefit exists and therefore they feel entitled to it. Conversely, countries like Japan, through the use of management tools such as Total Quality Management or Continuous Quality Improvements, the sense of worker accountability is a fundamental element in fostering a productive and functional

organizational unit focused on producing quality products or offering excellence in services.

Lack of employee accountability certainly can not be blamed solely on employees, and employers must take some responsibility for their contribution to fostering such attitudes. Fortunately, there are various organizational development and human resources management methods which may remedy an existing culture of entitlement. Employers have a number of tools at their disposal in order to re-establish a sense of employee accountability. The following list provides some of these tools that are readily available and can be implemented in fairly short order:

- create a strategic plan that embodies the importance of employee accountability as its central theme;
- develop an recruitment and selection procedure that allows the organization to screen out candidates who do not possess the requisite characteristics and ethics that comply with the employer's culture;
- implement of a comprehensive orientation program, in which the employee is provided with a clear understanding of his/her job and organizational expectations;
- implement of a clear and well-balanced performance management program that regularly monitors and evaluates employee performance throughout the year;
- provide information sessions on regular basis, which provide positive messaging on the employee's role in making a difference in the provisions of the employer's goods and/or services;
- implement a self-directed or self-managed team environment where employee have greater role in decision-making regarding their job and/or work unit;
- implement a group bonus structure or reward structure that recognizes the sum of individuals' contribution to group efforts in achieving organizational goals and objectives – the emphasis here is to praise generously when achievements are met;
- implement a consistent progressive discipline policy and procedure, which clearly delineates consequences for breaches in standards of conduct or performance deficiencies;
- provide developmental opportunities to employees who show promise of achieving greater potential;
- publish an internal newsletter that regularly highlights employee accomplishments and achievements.

Although, the above list captures some very important elements in creating an organizational climate that fosters "employee accountability", it is not exhaustive. From an organizational behaviour/development perspective, the organization can do so much more in terms of creating the right organizational culture. As employers, we often lose sight of "*quid pro quo*" in the employment relationship. This fancy Latin term essentially means "something given in exchange for something else" and this defines the fundamental component in the employment contract between employee and employer. In exchange for a wage, the employee contracts his/her services to the employer. This is what ultimately defines the contractual obligation between employee and employer. The notion of "*quid*

pro quo” essentially implies that the employee is accountable for ensuring the provision of his labour to the employer in exchange for some form of compensation. In some cases, the culture of entitlement has eroded this concept to the extreme point, where rights supersede the sense of accountability that constitutes the foundation of the employment relationship.

As employers and as a nation, we can no longer be driven by the concept of employee entitlements. Responsibility and accountability are the elements that will allow us to maintain a leadership role on a global scale. This is not to say that employees are without rights as all employees should be protected from unfair practices. However, it is important that we preserve the true intent behind the benefits and work arrangements we see being currently misused and that we strive to create a higher degree of accountability across the board. We can no longer function in an insular manner, given that globalization is here to stay and complacency has no place in our ever-evolving world. It starts one step at a time. As employers and employees, we share a joint duty to take ownership in terms of our contribution in creating a society that proudly assumes responsibility and accountability as its *modus operandi* (the way we operate).