

# From Accountability To Stewardship

By Jerry Wilt

On May 1, 1992, I arrived at my office at 7:30 am to find all the April month-end financial statements on my desk, including footnotes and references. I thought it was a joke. I had recently taken over as CEO of a hospital credit union located in the Texas Medical Center in Houston, and it appeared that my new VP of Finance was having fun with me since it usually took a week or more to analyze all the raw numbers and produce the reports. As it turned out, he had stayed up all night to impress me with his efficiency. Also as it turned out, the credit union was close to insolvency, which was why the former CEO had been replaced. I later told my admirably efficient VP that if things kept going as they had, he'd have the most accurate balance sheet in the bankruptcy court.



Okay, accountability is better than blame. We were encouraged to go from blame to accountability about the same time we learned to embrace empowerment and be proactive. This was in the 1990's. Remember them? Now it's 2008, and today's horizon looks as different from the dot com days as the industrial revolution did from the ice age. To navigate through global recession, we'll look to add another dimension to accountability.

I can be accountable, work within the legal boundaries, honor the terms and conditions of contracts, and still run an organization into the ground if I ignore the principles of stewardship. Rather than be merely accountable, I should treat the assets and sustainability of my organization with an holistic sense of integrity, as though I had been given the honor of defending the President of the United States.

In the most basic sense, to be a good steward means to take good care of something one does not own. Merriam-Webster defines stewardship as "careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care." In an organization, it means to properly utilize and safeguard the people, the assets, and the mission. This may sound like sacrificing personal interests to the company. It's not that at all. The principles of stewardship shine a light on the connection between organizational success and personal growth. If the company succeeds, I will succeed.

Can I personally succeed if the company doesn't? If by personal success I mean the ruthless and unbounded acquisition of money at the expense of everyone else, well...yes I can. As recently as December 21, 2008, the Associated Press reported that top executives at banks that are getting taxpayer bailouts were awarded nearly \$1.6 billion in salaries, bonuses, and other benefits last year. This was legal and accountable, but is anyone ready to praise these bankers for their stewardship, for their careful and responsible management of bank assets? If there is, I'd like that insightful individual to loan me half a million dollars based solely on my credit report and my heartfelt promise that my annual income is twice what I need to live on.

So what does stewardship mean to you and your company? Let's consider a pathway to stewardship from accountability:

## Accountability + Interpretation + Inspiration – Ego = Stewardship

Accountability should be systematic. Policy writers were building dual control, defense-in-depth, and other self-regulation principles into operations manuals long before the Enron-triggered Sarbanes-Oxley act of 2002. Let's not forget that the aforementioned banks (and car makers, and others) complied with the slew of SOX requirements and still sucker-punched the economy. To be accountable is to capture and communicate data, and a good system of accountability must be the foundation of any successful organization. So where do we go from there?

To the foundation of accountability, we add the time and a framework for interpretation of what we know. Why did a certain initiative underperform? Is there a pattern in our outcomes? Can we describe a problem or a successful effort without bias? Is our judgment consistent? I know; we don't have time to do all this critical thinking, we need to be critically doing! But it's good to remember that the data is worthless unless we use it to refine and enhance our work.

And now that we have interpreted the data to understand the world around us, we move forward: weighing possibilities, quantifying risks, teambuilding and rebuilding. And somewhere along the line, we'll be frustrated. The possibilities are endless, the risks defy measurement, and the individuals on the team indulge in too much self-awareness. These barriers form not so much a wall as a maze, and wending our way through it may look tiresome. We could simply drift into our fall-back stress behavior and bark at the world that doesn't seem to understand us, or we could find inspiration and move on.

Where do I look for inspiration? I don't. Rather, I shed that which prevents it. I divest myself of my own ego, the image of who I think I am, and that very act opens the door for the inspiration that has been patiently waiting just outside. Instead of wondering how I'll look to others, I envision the delighted attention I can give to their ideas. Rather than worry about my job, I take stock of my abilities and live in the present moment. I, myself, do not have to have all the answers. That's my ego. It's better to live in the question and let the answers arrive as inspiration.

So we begin building success with an accountable foundation, then we erect a solid framework through interpretation, and finally we defy the gravity of ego to scrape the sky with an inspired creation. And this is by no means a top-down formula. Each of us in the organization, from the architects and engineers to the framers and the drywall guys will be inspired once we are released from chains of ego, because we are all stewards of the opportunities that present themselves.

And what became of that nearly insolvent credit union? Two years later we were so well-capitalized and healthy that the largest credit union in Houston approached our board of directors with a merger proposal. Our stewardship of our members' money (and of their financial well-being) was rewarded through that merger with lower interest on loans, higher returns on their savings, and better service, including drive-in windows.

The due diligence process required by the merger proved that we had been accountable. The merger offer itself was proof that we had been good stewards.