

Structure without Stricture



Creating a culture of agility and accountability

The recent spate of disclosures regarding dubious ethics in Corporate America has shaken investor confidence. The stock market has sunk, and quick to respond to things that dampen stock prices, a cacophony of ethics chatter is sure to arise. The concern is not limited to businesses. Major charities have similarly been criticized for mishandling of donations following the 9-11 tragedy. All this has led to a wave of public posturing by corporations that has a “we are accountable” ring to it, while lawmakers hurry to pass new legislation that will supposedly prevent abuses. Accountability is the watchword. There are entire organizations given to the issue of corporate accountability, which is defined in a statement submitted to the United Nations in 1997 as “the legal obligation of a company to do the right thing. The aim of corporate accountability is to be sure a company's products and operations are in the interests of society and not harmful.”¹ Recent studies show that those corporations with strong ethics and self-governance do a pretty good job, but conclude that we can't rely on companies being nice. We need laws to force multi-national corporations to get on board.

Ahead of the game

In the faith-based community, talk of “accountability” has long been the rage – pastors preach accountability, we want individuals to be in accountability groups, and we position accountability as being some lock-safe, sure thing, fireproof reality. Not a bad thing, but for all the talk about accountability, when it comes to corporations on either side of the profit line there is much room for interpretation within governing laws. Further, many good-hearted charitable organizations are relatively loose in their daily practices. Having spent about seventeen years in public accounting firms and having worked with many non-profit organizations (including local churches) over the past twenty years, I have to conclude that there is not much difference between missions organizations and businesses when it comes to accountability, except that the laws governing business are far more precise. The Church is not ahead of the game when it comes to accountability.

There is an added complication. Despite the well-known concepts of grace and faith, many of us are blind to the possibility that we are practicing Christian humanists. We apply faith to the matter of eternal salvation, but we apply something else to everyday living. What is this something else that we live by? Let me suggest that it is a lethal combination of rationality and a new set of laws. In our rationality we are humanists. In our legalism we don't follow the laws of the Old Testament, but the laws of our denomination, our autonomous group, our Harvard Business Review laws, and our by-laws. Of course we don't trust these laws to get us to heaven, but we trust them to run our organization; we trust them (while adding a dose of common sense) to govern the everyday events at our churches.

What's wrong with this? Don't we need solid operating principles? And don't we need something tangible to which we can be accountable? Before we embark on the renewal of wineskins we should pause to note our relentless tendency towards systematizing things. In the church we even make the mistake of giving these things noble sounding

Structure without Stricture



Creating a culture of agility and accountability

labels like doctrines, values, tenets of faith, and traditions. Meanwhile they can be thinly veiled laws that obviate the need for us to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. We so quickly emulate the cycle of the Galatians – from law, to grace, to law again – by failing to follow the Spirit. We systematize the wrong things for the wrong reasons. We confuse the building of a functional Operating Model with the institution of a new set of laws.

New laws: guaranteed to waste your new wine

Scripture doesn't devote much space to explaining what the new wine is. It would be funny if it weren't sad to see how many organizations claim that what they are doing is "the new wine", and the way they are doing it is "the new wineskin". The fact is, Jesus simply makes an assumption that new wine happens. It is a kingdom of God phenomena when a confluence of any number of things – trends, cultural changes, new leadership, tragedy, joy, fresh revelation, teaching, new people, etc. – together with God being up to something results in the dynamic called new wine. Where there is new life, there is new wine. And new wine demands new wineskins. So if so much new is happening, why is it that we are so characterized by outdated, outmoded, inflexible wineskins? As quick as God gives new wine, we make new laws. And one sure way to make new wineskins old is to surround them with new laws.

Every denomination, church or mission organization quickly develops a set of cultural norms that can easily attain the standing and effect of laws. That which comes to live under those laws may have a semblance of life, but it soon lacks the dynamic of new wine. So new initiatives such as new programs or church services are started. In time, they can meet with death by two methods:

- Death by smothering: those uncomfortable with change and fluidity are inclined to do what they can to "stabilize" (as in kill) a situation of new life by smothering it with an old operating model that they understand, and control. "What you are doing is fine," they say, "but you have to play by the rules."
- Death by stripping: those hopeful of taking some of the new life and spreading it around the decaying wineskin will unwittingly tear strips off the new garment to try to pretty-up the tattered organizational garment.

"No one tears a patch from a new garment and puts it on an old garment."ⁱⁱ Maybe Jesus meant to say, "No one *in his right mind* tears a patch..." because churches and other organizations do it every day. We take a thriving Saturday night service, cut it up, and tack it onto a struggling 9.00 a.m. service. We take a thriving outreach led by a non-conformist, and give it to a by-the-rules manager. We take an innovative process, and straightjacket it with corporate policy. Then we wonder why it dies. Both of these deaths happen – by smothering and stripping – because we get our eyes off the end goal and onto the wineskin. We were not called to be custodians of dusty old bottles or curators of the wineskin museums. We were called to practice flexible supply chain management practices as a necessary condition to continuously getting new wine to new patrons, in a

Structure without Stricture



Creating a culture of agility and accountability

hurry. Jesus has compassion for the people, not for the by-laws and religious traditions that excuse us from following Him.

Accountability to a higher law

Accountability is essential, and for the Church, it is accountability to a higher law. Of course that law encompasses the lesser laws of earthly governments and social responsibility, but it is taken to a higher level. Jesus never gave his followers tax-exempt slips as they went to worship at the temple or walked past the Rome-controlled tollbooths. He called them to a higher law and to a greater level of accountability than simply obeying the IRS code.

When we fail to live by a higher law, we have wineskins with a very short shelf-life. My personal guesstimate is three to five years. This is not to say that every component of an Operating Model falls apart that often, but taken as a whole, we go from flexible to crusty in 18 months, and crusty to cracked in another year or so. Remember that the injunction for new wineskins was addressed to John’s disciplesⁱⁱⁱ who were in a movement all of two or three years old. It is very easy to go from flexible to blown-out in under three years.

If you want a sanity check on the shelf-life of wineskins, ask yourself how long a senior leader lasts in the new job before the cracks appear; and then how long before they are rescued or forced out? Those leaders who cycle through faith-based organizations quickly often cannot expound a philosophy of ministry that is compelling enough to transform the wineskin of the church they have come to lead. This results in a misalignment between their leadership and the organization’s Operating Model. Once this becomes apparent, there is a small grace period where each tries to get the other to change, and if change doesn’t happen, either the custodians of the old wineskins are removed, or it’s “on the road again” for the new leader.

Continuous renewal

Which brings up the principle of perpetual renewal. God is always working on some aspect of the Operating Model. Our job as leaders is to figure out what he is working on this month. This quarter it may be Process that has his attention; it may even be a subset of Process, such as the decision-making processes. After all, God is intent on our having integrity in our processes. What is he focusing on in your organization? The 10 components of a wineskin seem to fall into three categories on God’s schedule (which is illustrated in the adjoining table):

1. Radical Renewal: God is undertaking a comprehensive plan to get it back to basics. This could include a change of direction for the organization, and an expansion of purpose, for example, when Mission Aviation Fellowship added Telecommunications to their mission statement.^{iv}

P	Radical Renewal	Minor Maint.	Broke & on hold
Purpose			
Product			
Presence			
Position			
Partner.			
Process			
People			
Place			
Planning			
Profit			

Structure without Stricture



Creating a culture of agility and accountability

2. Minor Maintenance: regular check-ups, routine reporting and quarterly oil changes.
3. Broken, but not on God's change agenda right now.

There is no “Everything’s fine and dandy” category on this schedule. How do I know this? Because we know that man and the organizations we run have a tendency towards getting out of alignment. At the personal level, we call it a bent towards sin, and we accept that we need daily forgiveness and renewal. At the corporate level the issue may be less about personal sin, but every aspect of the organization still has a tendency towards shifting out of alignment with kingdom principles. All tend to drift away from the mark over time. Bit by bit they come under the smart laws of “best practices”, new “church growth principles”, and “seven habits of whoever”.

What does this misalignment look like, practically? Our purpose becomes more us-centric than Kingdom centric. We perpetuate programs (our products) that Jesus gave up on a long time ago. We start making decisions either autocratically or by consensus, and stop inquiring of God. We rely on strategies we read in an article on how to grow attendance, and so we pray less. We fear congregants with influence more than we fear God. We compromise on biblical organization models by placing unqualified people in leadership positions. We undertake what we can afford, instead of trusting God for finances for what he told us to do. We inwardly scoff at young staff members who say we should pray about our problems. We jockey for position, instead of laying our lives down for our colleagues and our congregants.

As in human development, growth carries with it the dynamics of ‘new wine’, which creates disequilibria, followed by a period of consolidation. If the consolidation phase continues for too long, we can fossilize and have old wineskins.

Think of a wine barrel with ten planks making up the sides. The ten planks are the ten drivers of corporate Impact. If they are not aligned with each other, the wine will spill out. And if the barrel is not kept full, the wood dries up and it is useless except for sawing in half and planting geraniums. We keep all components of the Operating Model fresh through a radical commitment to inquire of and obey God. Our job has been described as a “ministry of reconciliation” that extends beyond just personal reconciliation to include “all things”^v. No aspect of life, let alone an organization, should be left untouched.

What do I do next?

You may be saying, “I recognize the tendency towards organizational drift. I know that we are probably not focused on the right things. And we have no doubt wrapped ourselves in a modus operandi that not only doesn’t comply with the principles of the Kingdom of God, it doesn’t even comply with our own by-laws and denominational guidelines. Further, I sense that God is doing good things and there is a disconnect between the new life I see and the ability of our infrastructure to serve it. Give me a

Structure without Stricture



Creating a culture of agility and accountability

practical plan that does not leave me just relying on a formula that worked for someone else.” Let me suggest steps your organization could take:

1. Get a clear understanding of the extent to which your people are aligned with each other. The quickest way I know how to do this is to conduct an Impact Assessment^{vi} that evaluates perceptions of a cross section of all staff across the entire Operating Model. Where there is lack of alignment, there will not be blessing.^{vii}
2. Next, evaluate the reasons for misalignment. Determine what is cause, and what is a symptom. Have consultations where stakeholders can talk through their differences in perception. This is not a focus group, but an exercise to define the “as is”. Max De Pree says “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality”. Steps 1 and 2 will give your organization a finer read on reality. Inherent in this is getting unspoken values, assumptions and foundational principles on the table. If you don’t surface the invisibles (usually with outside help) you will re-invent around them in your next round of law making.
3. Where misalignment stems from failure to implement eternal truth to some aspects of the operating model, set that right as quickly as possible. But remember what Chuck Colson said: “Every human being has an infinite capacity for self-rationalization and self-delusion.”^{viii} The same is true for organizations. So don’t strive for elegant solutions that are hard to explain; strive for radical change, i.e., change that gets back to basics. You will know you are there when there is peace: “Of the increase of his government and peace...”^{ix}
4. Establish a short list of principles that will guide renewing efforts. For the Operating Model to stay in alignment, there must be an aligning principle, a point outside of itself that is a Magnetic North as we traverse change. The only such principle powerful enough to bring about sustained alignment is this: what will bring God the most glory. Understand the underlying kingdom principles that apply to each spoke in the corporate wheel so that you deliberately renew your thinking around areas such as profits, place, planning and people.
5. A sub-principle is also crucial: keep a line of sight to your end customer. I know, churches and missions organizations don’t have customers. Who then is your target audience? Who has your organization been called to serve? Every plank in the barrel, every spoke in the wheel, every panel in the wineskin must be designed to serve the customers, not the curators. This is not about taking eternal truth and twisting it to suit this generation in a market-driven fashion; it is about becoming all things to all men so that many can be won for Christ. It is about being willing to do what is needed to get the job done and please Jesus, rather than doing what feels comfortable to us and pleases our tastes and past patterns.

Conclusion

We can only have structure without stricture when (a) our hearts are intent on actively following Jesus, and (b) we have the rigorous determination to continually renew the operating model consistent with kingdom principles as he systematically leads us. His leading will be both deliberate and systematic. Further, accountability that matters – that

Structure without Stricture



Creating a culture of agility and accountability

goes beyond the letter of the law, beyond what we can persuade our colleagues of, beyond the questions we answer at our small group meeting – will be rooted in a fear of God and the deep desire to do what we see the Father doing. To be sure we will measure alignment and submit such measures to our community so that we can be accountable and re-aligned as we progress. We will submit to alignment today so that we can hear the ultimate “well done” from him to whom we will all eventually give an account.

i “Minding Our Business: The Role of Corporate Accountability in Sustainable Development, An NGO report to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development”, Revised March 28, 1997

ii Luke 5:36, Holman Christian Standard Bible

iii Matthew 9:14

iv I-Operations: the Impact of the Internet on Operating Models, Daichendt and Johnson, page 86

v 2 Corinthians 5:16-20

vi For more information on Impact Assessments, see www.inst.net or call 1-866-9INDABA

vii Psalm 133 “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity... there the Lord bestows his blessing...”, NIV

viii The Line between Right & Wrong, Charles Colson, Barbour Publishing, Inc.

ix Isaiah 9: 7, KJV. Note that peace comes with Christ’s government.