



Sometimes
when people
hear the word
accountability
they might recall
a bad experience.

If the folks
at Synergy
Solutions Group
have their way,
this stigma will
be eradicated.



NECESSARY CHALLENGES

by W. D. Elliot

“We believe that accountability should be *to and for* each other as members of a team,” explains David White, Synergy’s president. “All stakeholders need to stand for each other’s success within the one mission that the company serves to uphold.”

Synergy Solutions Group provides consulting and facilitation services to organizations seeking to improve their team performance. In the words of the leaders at Synergy, they “optimize the culture” within the organization.

Ward Hepting, White’s main business partner, explains, “Optimal culture is connected to the manner in which people within the organization engage each other. It’s about aligning them with their purpose and their mission – and then helping them to navigate through all the challenges that exist in achieving that by giving them tools like the values template – a decision-making tool – which helps them overcome ambiguity and come to a place of clarity.”

In plain language, it seems that people do not always get along at work. There is often conflict and disengagement – even opposition. It shows up in avoidance, finger-pointing, eyes-rolling, and in the worst of cases, harassment and abuse. Having said this, the two suggest that most organizations are not functioning optimally due to a simple lack of clarity, which would otherwise help them to overcome the frustration of ambiguity and inconsistency. The key to changing this, according to White, is that leadership must come to see team building within an organization as much more than a program or an event. They must come to understand the importance of consistently living values (as decision-making filters), of accountability and of the need for grace.

According to Hepting and White, leaders will often recognize when change is necessary within their organization, but not always see how their actions and character has been a part of forming what the organization has become. They don’t see what they need to change within themselves to change the culture and to lead the development of the team.

“If the leader won’t lead by changing first,” explains Hepting, “then others look at them and ask, ‘Why do I have to change?’”

“This leads to disengagement,” continues White. “Change efforts fail when leaders don’t realize how their lack of personal engagement, vulnerability and authenticity, affects the overall.”

White initially formed the company in 2005 as a solo practitioner. Though he had been growing a close relationship with Hepting for nine or 10 years, Hepting only officially joined Synergy in the spring of 2012.

“I went into this work kicking and screaming,” exclaims Hepting. “Many of my team-building efforts – usually as the guy who went into start-ups and/or turnarounds – have been taxing for me, but it seems to follow me. If I quit and took up driving a truck for a living, I would likely end up having the same conversations at truck stops with others! I think I stay engaged because I see the transformational impacts in others and also in me. I have benefitted greatly through my relationship with Dave.”

White, nodding in agreement and chuckling, adds his own history to the mix. “This has been more of a natural progression for me,” he explains. “I didn’t really plan out the whole path from where I started. I just took the next most logical step. I have been a labourer, a manager and a CEO. All of my life experiences appear to be forging a deep desire to know purpose and experience resilience in the pursuit of it.”

“My greatest challenge is personal,” confesses Hepting. “I don’t get to share in the reward at the end. I can help others clarify, partner, engage, hold accountability, launch out in strategic directions, and improve their bottom line results, but in the end it is not my company. It’s a difficult line to walk – to take ownership of my responsibility in the right spirit. We partner with our client in a deeply meaningful way, but we are still on the outside.”

White explained that his challenge stands a bit different. “I have to keep reminding myself that I cannot be the initiative for ongoing implementation. I add my strength by being objective. As Ward says, it’s a difficult line to walk. If you own too much, you get too close and you risk losing perspective as to how the team is functioning.”

In addition to challenges, there must be a few successes along the way to stay motivated, so I asked them what their greatest success has been to date.

Hepting chuckles. “One comes to mind for me immediately. It was the most chal-

lenging and the most successful. It was most successful because of the way that David and I worked together formally – the depth of our own relationship. We had to trust each other and to model what we preached. We worked within every single aspect of our client’s business – within relationships at every level. We spoke with shareholders, family, employees, suppliers, bank and customers – even about marriage.”

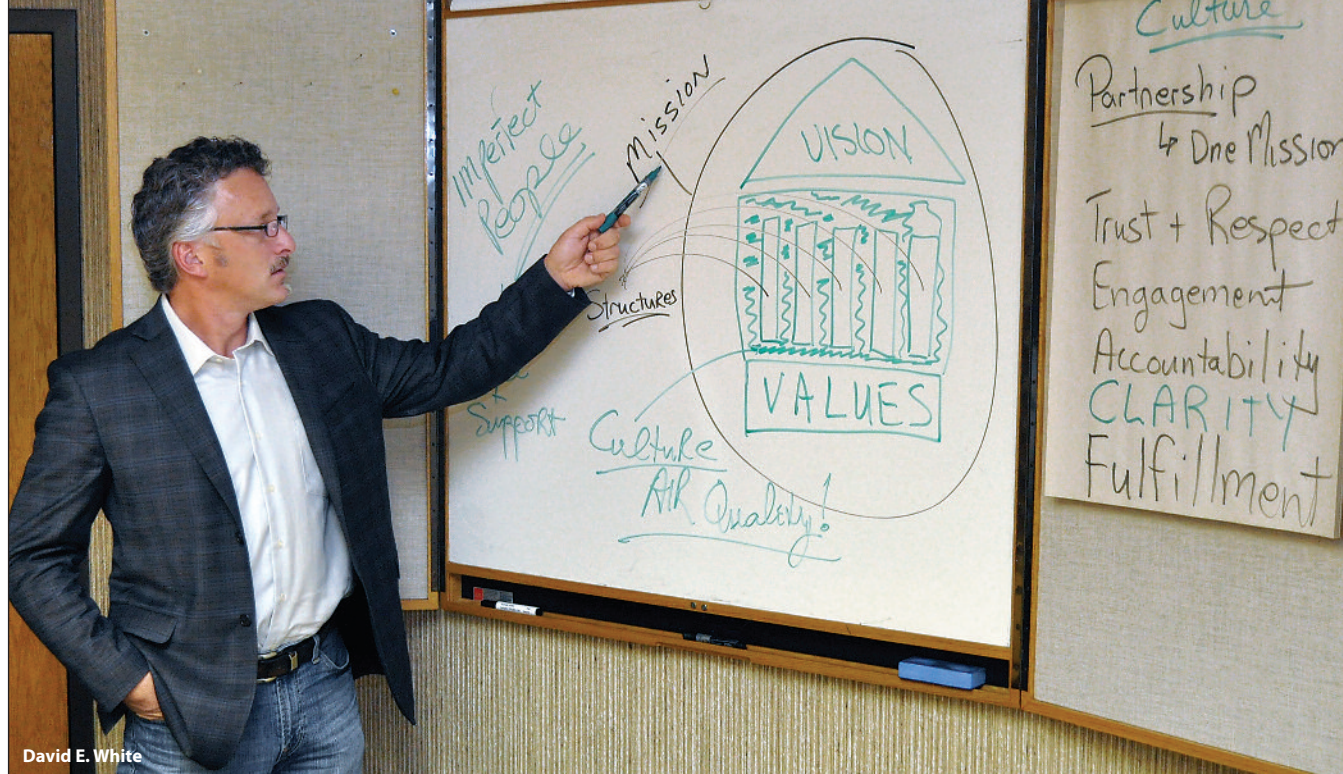
“Every relationship is important,” adds White, “in building a holistic team; all stakeholders have a role within the one mission that the company serves.”

“In the end,” summarizes Hepting, “we helped to position them for better service, greater efficiencies and loyalty in relationships. Our efforts created the opportunity for the company to reduce their top line by 20 per cent while doubling the bottom line.”

“I think we are still defining the optimal client,” muses Hepting. “We have worked with organizations in service, distribution and manufacturing industries, and within many different sectors, even some international work. Our exposure has been very broad. It might seem like it should be impossible to meet the needs in this many sectors, but that speaks to the power of using the principles; they apply to all.”

“Generally speaking,” continues White, “we seem to be most urgently needed by mature organizations that find themselves either in a state of duress, or being presented with an opportunity. They have a felt need for change. Any organization would benefit from what we do, but most only take the initiative to call when they are up against something big.”





David E. White

"It's not for everyone," concludes Hepting. "Some leaders are simply not ready to be held accountable by their employees, or to be vulnerable enough to hold themselves accountable to them. It takes true strength of courage to be humble and vulnerable while holding the ultimate reigns of authority in an organization."

Synergy Solutions Group has four associates in addition to Hepting and White and primarily works with clients in Western Canada: Saskatoon, Regina, Calgary and Vancouver. They have more recently been engaged in Toronto as well.

"I have been involved in international corporate development initiatives for a number of years," explains Hepting, "and this Toronto client has a definitive international reach. More importantly, their mission resonates strongly with me. I find myself inspired by their altruistic approach to business."

The duo informed me that a small number of clients just want help setting up a mission, vision, values statement, cultural practice or strategy for them. In most cases they assured me that they could get some great foundational clarity established within a few sessions. Additionally, there are a few clients that go so far as to keep the company on a retainer, with the longest of these being three to five years. However, most clients seem to prefer an ongoing relationship, where the foundations for accountability are established and the company touches base periodically to coach implementation and/or measure their progress.

Hepting pulls off the gloves. "From what I see and read of what is happening to people in senior leadership roles, it seems that many have experienced great personal success, but *feel* failure for various reasons. I feel a calling to walk alongside these people and support them in their darkest days."

"People hire us to build a more engaged team and a healthier culture," interjects White. "Ultimately they want us to help them make more money or to somehow accomplish more through some change initiative. Having said that, at the end of the day it is about people finding ways to productively navigate life together."

"There are many people who are bruised, battered and deeply hurting," agrees Hepting. "It is in this place that we have the opportunity to speak the most into the situation and into them personally and collectively."

White takes a moment to consider what Hepting has spoken and then adds, "I believe that the world is getting more complex each day. Leaders are going to be stretched like never before. They can no longer assume that they have a comprehensive grasp on all aspects of their business. There is just too much demand for resilience – for change and adaptation – on too many fronts. They have to become masters at engaging their team."

"So much of traditional change management comes off as manipulation," continues Hepting, "which of course works completely against team development."

In conclusion, I asked the pair to offer any last thoughts on what they might want leaders to hear from them. Hepting is quick to respond. "I care as much about their success and failure as I do my own. I'd even do the work for free if I could find another way of putting food on my table. I'd want them to know I truly desire to support them in *their* success. It's about trust... What I need to tell you may not be what you want to hear, but it is what you need to hear, and I promise to deliver it as graciously as I can."

"That works for me as well," agrees White. "I'd also add that the single most important issue to incorporate is grace. No one needs to fear 100 per cent accountability if there is a provision for grace attached. You will miss. Period. Every person on this planet will have bad days and miss the mark. You can't fix secrets, and mistakes quickly become secrets if there is no safety. Grace does not provide an excuse for less accountability; it just facilitates the opportunity to reconcile back to accountability without fear."

"True team development takes time," Hepting concludes. "Culture is not formed or transformed overnight. Be patient and stay the course. Hold and support each other courageously in vulnerability and authenticity to accountability with grace, and I can *promise* that you will experience amazing results." ■