

# BUSTED: ACCOUNTABILITY

It's well-sung but poorly understood. **Harry Onsman** looks at what we really mean by accountability

DON WATSON'S two recent books *Death Sentence: The decay of public language* (Random House, 2003) and the follow-up *Dictionary of Weasel Words* (Random House, 2005) demonstrate how we mangle language to appear authoritative at the expense of making sense.

The problem is that the words we use in management are often unclear, undefined and unexplained. A recent inquiry by a client about how to bring to life one key part of her vision statement reminded me that even the most basic building blocks of management communication are fraught with difficulty.

The word in question is "accountability" and the organisation takes great pride in encouraging all its employees to accept accountability for what they do. But what does this mean? If you had to explain it to a new employee, exactly what would you say?

Dictionaries don't help much here. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "responsible" while "responsible" is described in terms of being "accountable", which doesn't help.

Given that it touches on some contemporary management issues, it seems reasonable to expect that researchers and theorists would have some interest in the

meaning of accountability. If we exclude the large quantum of research on corporate accountability (as in Triple Bottom Line stuff) then surprisingly we find, well, to be precise, nothing.

A quick review of the last three years of research failed to identify a single reported investigation into what accountability at work means. This is backed up by a quick look at management textbooks and business books. Again, nothing.

For example, books on performance management liberally throw the word accountability around, but generally don't define the term. We're left with our common sense understandings of the word.

These can range from the scarily simple ("do these things or you will lose your job") to the warmly grandiose ("we expect everyone to contribute their ideas for improving the business").

The paradox that lies at the heart of all this is that accountability is part of the unspoken bargain between the employer and the employed. Many organisations readily expect accountability from their staff without providing the means to achieve an agreed result.

And such one-sided bargains only result in vision statements that run the risk of sounding like weasel words.

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## ON THE WEB

Wiki is Hawaiian for quick, and that's what the wiki sites are all about. **Miriam Hechtman** checked them out

### [www.wikinews.org](http://www.wikinews.org)

It's the news written by the people for the people. Wikinews allows you to write articles, edit other people's stories and update news items with more recent information. Everything is cited and if your journalism skills need a little touching up, guidelines for quality news writing are provided. But if you feel like having a big rant about some injustice, go and blog it somewhere else. Opinions are not part of this news service. The virtual water cooler also welcomes suggestions for improving the technical issues, policies or operations of the site.

### [www.corpknowpedia.org](http://www.corpknowpedia.org)

This site aims to monitor the corporate landscape – exposing "behind the scenes" operations of companies. The goal, the site states, is to provide consumers with the most basic information regarding their purchasing power. So if you want to know who owns who and when they were acquired, this wiki site maps out the corporate family tree, and of course can be edited. Corporate ethics – or lack thereof – are also revealed.

### [www.world66.com](http://www.world66.com)

World66 is an open content travel guide that relies on contributions from travellers globally. A moderator makes sure that contributors stick to some basic rules, such as not diarising your personal life and keeping political comments to yourself. So if you know where to find the best latte in Manhattan or where to find an internet café in Doha, Qatar, visit the site and start editing the more than 90,000 articles on 30,000 destinations. World66 has also teamed up with [booking.org](http://booking.org) so you can book your hotel at the same time.

### [www.wikibooks.org](http://www.wikibooks.org)

Wikibooks is a Wikimedia project and sibling to the now infamous Wikipedia. It's a collaborative project that allows visitors to write open content textbooks and related non-fiction books about different subjects. It's education for the masses at a reduced cost without the heavy hardback. And for those contributing, a tip from Wikibooks: know your topic.

[www.afrboss.com.au](http://www.afrboss.com.au)

ANDREW JOYNER

## YOU'VE GOT VOICE MAIL

CISCO GETS a gold star for a simple but practical idea – voice mail facilities on public phones for people who don't have a phone, or a home for that matter. Community Voice Mail (CVM) has been trialled in the US and will be tried in Melbourne soon under a partnership brokered by corporate social responsibility specialists Positive Outcomes. Street mag *The Big Issue* will be able to use CVM to leave messages for its sales force, comprised of homeless people. The poor and homeless often face a double whammy when they try to get back on their feet or get a job: no fixed phone for communication. Under the CVM system, community groups distribute phone numbers to clients. Their callers can leave a message, which the clients can access, from any public phone.