

## interview

# new man for a new era: all change under Misser

*EP talks to the recently appointed head of AccountAbility about his controversial vision of how the organization should be re-inventing itself and altering its ethos*

They wear sober business suits at AccountAbility these days, and the sartorial change is significant.

Of course smart dress was often on display under the previous leadership of the widely admired CSR guru Simon Zadek. But the universal adoption among senior AccountAbility staff of dark blue and black executive gear is symbolic of a seismic shift in attitude at the 15-year-old think tank, standard purveyor and consultancy.

Zadek, a 'Buddhist economist' with roots in the Body Shop end of corporate responsibility in Britain, left AccountAbility at the end of 2009 after six years as chief executive. He was replaced in the summer by Sunil Misser, a stereotypically hard-nosed New Yorker who learned the sustainability ropes at PricewaterhouseCoopers and is steeped in the world of management consultancy.

The contrast in their outlooks is stark, and Misser's arrival at the helm has created a huge shake-up that has not been appreciated by some of those associated with Zadek's reign.

Whereas the previous incumbent essentially viewed AccountAbility as a body that should be a non-profit agent for change – while also providing some advice to companies on a paid basis – Misser has already put significantly greater emphasis on developing the consultancy business.

Given that Misser was previously AccountAbility's head of advisory services, it's perhaps unsurprising that he sees promise in moving along a more commercial channel. But it's also evident that the change in direction has its roots in a desire to make the organization more 'professional' and practical.

He talks candidly about his view of the old AccountAbility as something akin to an academic institution, a state-of-being that had validity when the main focus was on research and standards development, but was less appropriate when it came to helping companies advance sustainability in a practical way. From now on, he says, 'you're going to find Wall Street uniforms here – blue suits, white shirts and ties. A very professional approach to business.'

While he has admiration for Zadek, it's clear that Misser feels the organization relied too much on the previous chief executive's skills and was therefore not able to deliver consistently high quality advice across the board.

'One of the biggest differences between the past and the present is the way we have professionally organized ourselves to meet the needs of our clients,' he says. 'We've built a lot of institutional competencies, so that when clients come in they are not just looking for me and my team, they will be looking for the AccountAbility way.'

'That's a big breach from the past. It means it's not just about one man, but the institutional competency of the organization. In the past, a client may have had a great session with an individual but then three sessions with other people that were patchy. We want to give the same high calibre of professional service across the board.'

He also argues that AccountAbility under his leadership is determined to steer clear of the 'intellectual arrogance' that can afflict such organizations. 'Those days are over; it's about having a certain flexibility to understand that clients change and the universe

changes', he says. 'We have to be flexible enough to understand our clients' situations and to give them what they want. In the past we would design the best vacuum cleaner in the world and convince our clients that's what they needed, when actually they might have required a dishwasher. That's another big, big change.'

While Misser is keen to point out that he will not neglect AccountAbility's research and standards roles – in fact hopes to build them in tandem with the growth in advisory services – he wants the organization to re-invent itself as the pre-eminent global CSR professional services firm. Key to this is his view that current offerings in the sector are generally either too small and folksy or too big and impersonal.

'There are people in this field who are happiest when they are looking at what the future is going to look like, but ask them to run a business and they get bored,' he says. 'Then on the other extreme you have the likes of the big four, which have a thousand people who will do anything you want and will package it as one big solution. Then there is the empty middle with four of five firms such as BSR, which has 86 people, AccountAbility, with 40, SustainAbility, and Corporate Citizenship. So we have no single 150/200 person firm that devotes its entire life to CSR. I hope we can become that firm.'

What this signals, in the words of a seasoned AccountAbility watcher, 'is not so much a change in leadership as a new organization emerging, under the same name and brand, with a changed ethos and purpose'. Not everyone will like it, but Misser is determined to see through the transformation.