

atmosphere of mistrust led to public showdown

EP looks at how the collapse of the body that oversees the AA1000 standards is rooted in a wider conflict – and at what might happen now it has disappeared

The dramatic collective resignation of the board overseeing the AA1000 standards (see page one) has its origins in an increasingly fractious struggle for the soul of AccountAbility, the 16-year-old organization that last year underwent significant management change.

That cultural upheaval saw the replacement of a regime centred around the rather quirky, iconoclastic leadership of Simon Zadek with the more traditional, business-friendly outlook of Sunil Misser. It has led to sometimes bitter recriminations, of which the fallout over the standards is the most visible aspect.

Both factions recognize that the three AA1000 standards, which were created by AccountAbility well before the Misser era, are valuable and respected offerings that have been of benefit to many organizations around the world.

But the standards are especially beloved of those who cling to the Zadek times, as they symbolize what they see as the public-spirited, change-making ethos of AccountAbility under his watch – as opposed to the consultancy-focussed, earnings-led body they believe it will become under Misser. The AccountAbility of 2011, they argue, would not have created such standards for free use by the business world, and they are worried that the standards are therefore no longer safe in AccountAbility's hands.

For their part, the new raft of managers feel the supporters of the 'old ways' – of which they perceive many on the standards board – are creating unnecessary alarm and uncertainty over the standards as a convenient way of making a wider point about the dramatic changes that have taken place within Zadek's old stomping ground.

Misser and his allies argue they are as committed as anyone to upholding and improving the standards, which means keeping them under AccountAbility's watchful eye but not exploiting them for commercial gain.

As evidence, they point to the fact that they have reinstated the full-time position of global director of standards (Kurt Ramin), which had disappeared under Zadek, that they are developing a 'specific strategy and business plan' for the standards, and that they have just released the final exposure draft of a new, improved version of the AA1000 stakeholder engagement standard.

That appears to be of little comfort, however, to those who are uneasy about the future of the standards. 'AccountAbility isn't the organization it used to be, and the fear is that in the transition to becoming a mid-size consultancy there will be collateral damage to the standards,' one former AccountAbility ally told EP.

'Many civil society organizations have put in a lot of effort to develop these standards for the wider benefit of stakeholders, and the concern is that something that's been developed through this approach might then be used for commercial advantage. We'd prefer to see the standards run by a

completely independent body – somewhere totally different from AccountAbility – so that they are protected.’

AccountAbility, which is still a non-profit body, maintains it does not want to tie the standards into any of its commercial offerings, and that AA1000 will be in a safer position in the future because the organization will be earning more money to invest in improving the standards. It therefore has no plans to float the standards away.

There have been several adjustments in recent times to the architecture surrounding AA1000, and the independent standards board was only convened by AccountAbility last summer.

It was essentially created to provide guidance on the standards, but had ultimate authority for decision-making in relation to the standards, including responsibility for developing strategy and work plans and approving final standards. But in the wake of the resignations, AccountAbility will not be moving to re-stock it with members – the board is now dead.

Instead, the new management will accelerate plans to create a ‘new, beefed-up advisory board’ that will oversee the entire AccountAbility organization, not just standards. It hopes to have something to announce on that ‘in the near future’.

Whatever AccountAbility decides to do from now on, the difficulty for its management is that they have yet to prove themselves, and therefore many in the CSR world, whether they like Zadek or not, may be inclined to give the old guard the benefit of the doubt.

‘The challenge for the management is that many of the names lining up to criticize recent changes are well-known and respected, having been active in the field for many years,’ says CSR commentator Mallen Baker. ‘AccountAbility has so far failed to attract the vocal support of counter-balancing authoritative voices.’