



WHAT IS YOUR ACCOUNTABILITY CULTURE?

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If newspaper headlines are any indication, accountability is prominent in the minds of many people today. In an era of shrinking state and local budgets and burgeoning federal deficits, many are pressing for greater accountability from elected officials. The Enron debacle and other corporate scandals have cast an embarrassing light into the dark recesses of deceit in high places and produced similar cries for accountability. And the highly publicized misdeeds of sports figures, movie stars and other icons of popular culture—along with the resulting court battles—have generated a comparable clamor.

All of which has very little to do with you—directly, at least. As important as those topics may be, the real accountability issue for you is probably more along the lines of, “When an assignment is given in my organization, what can I do to be sure that it gets done, properly and on time? And what can I do to build a culture that supports and expects a high degree of accountability from every employee, top to bottom?”

Those are some of the questions this article will address. But before we talk about what you can do to create and maintain accountability, let’s discuss what accountability is and then look at how you can determine if poor accountability is a problem in your organization.

ACCOUNTABILITY

There are, of course, many definitions for accountability. We have found the following to be particularly useful:

Accountability is the personal commitment to account for responsibilities conferred, and the willingness to accept responsibility for actions and consequences. It is more than just doing what you agree to do; it’s the willingness to do it to the best of your ability and within the agreed-upon time frame. It assumes that you will give your best in the three things you can truly control: effort, attitude and desire.

“Responsibility is the thing people dread most of all. Yet it is the one thing in the world that develops us, gives our manhood or womanhood fibre.”

Frank H. Crane

SYMPTOMS OF POOR ACCOUNTABILITY

We have learned that organizations with poor accountability exhibit certain common symptoms. As you review this list, ask yourself if these symptoms are present in your organization.

- ✓ Spending most of the time in goal setting meetings discussing which goals to set rather than how to accomplish goals.
- ✓ Moving forward on new endeavors with little thought given to changing behavior that will make a difference in whether the new endeavor succeeds.
- ✓ Employees frequently accept assignments without being prepared to be held accountable for progress.
- ✓ Assignments are completed only because of aggressive follow-up by leaders.
- ✓ Meetings are frequently held with little reference to existing, uncompleted assignments from previous meetings.
- ✓ No process in place for reporting progress toward achieving goals.
- ✓ Assignments not completed in a timely manner and accompanied by excuses.

- ✓ Focus constantly shifts to the next new issue/idea, while existing endeavors languish for lack of attention.
- ✓ Never-ending discussions of problems and challenges, but no solutions implemented.
- ✓ Employees seldom held responsible for accomplishing their personal goals.
- ✓ Mentoring activities and performance reviews not connected to the organization's vision, goals, mission, core values and performance standards.

KEY ACCOUNTABILITY PRINCIPLES

Firms with a culture of high accountability have successfully woven the following principles into everything they do:

Commitment vs. Support – One of the least understood principles of effective leadership is the difference between support and commitment. As leaders, we frequently ask for and receive support, when it is really commitment that we need. In our interactions with other employees, support usually means little more than agreement: “Yes, I support you. Whatever *you* want to do about that is fine with me.” Commitment is an entirely different matter. It means that everyone feels a deep sense of personal responsibility, is committed to doing his or her part, and is ready to be held accountable.

“Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility.”

Elizabeth C. Stanton

Return and report – Return and report takes accountability to the highest level: self-accountability. It means that employees feel responsible for doing what they have committed to do and for doing it within the assigned time frame. But return and report means more than that; it means completing the task without a reminder, and properly reporting when the job is done.

Effective management of performance issues – For most of us, any time but now is usually a more convenient time to deal with a difficult performance problem. And are performance issues ever anything other than “difficult?” Performance issues need to be dealt with promptly and effectively, and in ways that build rather than tear down.

“Leave nothing to chance” vs. “Chance for success” – Organizations that lack a system of accountability and a clear understanding of key principles have, by default, adopted a “chance for success” approach to accomplishing important tasks and achieving their goals. By contrast, a “leave nothing to chance” approach incorporates careful planning, clear delineation of responsibilities, powerful reporting mechanisms, and a culture that places a high value on self-accountability.

A LOOK AT HOW ACCOUNTABILITY DOES OR DOES NOT WORK

The teaching power of a good story has been recognized from the dawn of civilization down to the present day. Our story seeks to tap into that power by presenting scenarios that depict good organizations first as they currently are, and then as they could become. As you read the “before” scenario, you will likely see situations, personalities, or events similar to what you’ve observed in your own organization. When you read the “after” scenario, we believe you’ll see the dramatic impact excellent processes can have on good organizations. The story takes place in a professional services firm but the scenes are played out similarly in hundreds of organizations across our country every day.

Before: As It Is

The vote had been unanimous, Richard remembered. 5 to 0. Certainly not a rarity among the partners, but significant for what it said about their support for the idea of offering insurance products and annuities to the firm’s clients. A week ago, Richard had announced to the managers the partners’ decision to move ahead

with this new service, and their support had been similarly unanimous. Most had been involved in discussions of this possible new service during the past year, and were enthusiastic about its prospects for success.

Now, in the final hours of the firm's annual retreat, the partners and key managers were completing plans to move forward with this new specialty service. Randy Peters, the local insurance agent who would be partnering with them in this venture, had been invited to this portion of the retreat, and it was obvious that Randy was impressed with the way the afternoon had unfolded.

"So folks, it's time to start putting names next to assignments," Richard, the managing partner, said. "First, we need someone to go get their insurance license so the firm can split commissions with Randy. As a Tax partner, Alice, that sounds like a natural for you. What do you think?" he asked.

"No problem," she responded cheerfully. "We better make sure those commissions get divided up—we don't want Randy to buy that new motor home just yet, do we?" Randy's exaggerated mock horror at her comment brought laughter from all.

"Doug, as our other Tax partner," Richard continued, "you would seem to be the one to get a Series 7 license so we can be involved in the sale of annuities. How about it?"

"Consider it done," Doug said. He had been one of the strongest proponents of the firm offering insurance and annuity products, and was more than ready to jump in.

"Great!" said Richard. "Now for some general assignments—oh, and by the way, Alice and Doug, we need you two to get working on those licenses right away, OK? Now, for the general assignments. On Monday, each of you will receive the latest copy of your client list. We need you to identify the top 10-15 candidates for insurance and annuity products. In addition, since everyone needs to get up to speed on just what these products are, Randy has agreed to do several half-day training sessions over the course of the next two weeks. We need to get everybody signed up for one of those sessions. Does anyone see a problem doing that?" With only silence and shaking heads greeting his question, he continued, tying down the last few details necessary to successfully launch this new service.

"Now, just a few concluding comments. I've thought a lot about what needs to happen if we're going to make this venture the great success we all know it can be. I think it comes down to one thing: being proactive. Randy will be here twice a week to meet with our clients and the appropriate partner or manager. We need to be absolutely sure he has a full slate of appointments each time he's here. The way we'll do that is by each of us being proactive in setting up those appointments. Identifying our top 10-15 candidates is a great start. Does anyone have any questions?"

"Our responsibility is not discharged by the announcement of virtuous ends."

John F. Kennedy

There were none, and fifteen minutes later the retreat ended in a mood of great optimism.

As promised, client lists were in every mailbox the following Monday. By day's end, three had been returned to him with top candidates identified, and another was waiting for him when he arrived at work on Tuesday morning. When Wednesday passed and the count remained at four, Richard sent out a gentle email reminder and four more lists quickly appeared in his box. Another (less gentle) reminder at week's end brought in two more lists, with four left to go. Personal reminders (also known as "hounding," he thought to himself), finally produced the last of the lists the following Thursday.

The next day, a planner note reminded him that two weeks had now elapsed since the retreat and that he needed to check in with Randy Peters and see how the half-day training sessions on insurance and annuity products were progressing.

“I’m glad you called,” Randy said when Richard reached him later that day. “We’re actually doing pretty well on getting people through the training sessions. With the exception of two of the managers, everyone’s been through the product training. Those managers have both been scheduled twice but have had to cancel so I’m not sure when I’m going to see them.”

“Well, let me see what I can do there,” Richard said, as he made a note to visit with the two managers and encourage them to meet with Randy as soon as possible.

Nearly five weeks had now passed since the retreat and the partners and managers were working their way through the agenda of their bi-monthly meeting. The next agenda item was labeled, “Progress Report: Insurance and Annuity Services Initiative.”

“If my notes are correct,” Richard began, “everybody’s turned in their marked-up client lists and Randy has met with everyone to discuss the products we’ll be offering. Am I right on both counts?” Heads nodded in assent, so he continued.

“So how are we coming on the licensing issues? Doug, how about Series 7?”

“Doing fine,” Doug responded. “Another week and I should be ready to go.”

“Wonderful!” Richard said. “Same for you Alice, on the insurance license?”

“Coming along,” Alice responded.

“Great—another couple of weeks and it sounds like we’ll be ready to start scheduling appointments with clients. Thanks, everybody, for jumping on this one. It feels to me like we’re making good progress.”

Later that day, Richard stopped by Alice’s office to review some budget issues. As he got up to leave, he asked, “So, Alice, you think another week or two and you’ll have the insurance license nailed?”

There was a long silence. “Actually, Richard, I’m not sure when that will happen,” she said quietly.

“Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.”

Johann von Goethe

Another long silence. “I’m not sure I understand, Alice,” Richard responded. “At the retreat, I thought we agreed that you and Doug would get working on those licenses right away.”

“That’s right,” she said, “and I *have* begun the process. But Richard, you know what’s been going on in Tax. It wasn’t a good season for us. Our billable hours are way down from last year, and our revenue figures—well, let’s not talk about that—you’ve seen the numbers. I want this new insurance venture to succeed just as much as the other partners, but I’m facing some pretty hard realities right now.”

Richard did indeed understand the “hard realities” Alice referred to. They talked for a while and agreed to a lengthened time-table for Alice receiving the license that would enable her to join Randy in the client appointments.

Four months had passed now since the retreat. The discussion of progress on the insurance and annuities initiative had come at the end of the most recent partners and managers meeting, and with the press of other agenda items there had been time to do little more than confirm that the licensing requirements had finally been met. Richard decided it was time for lunch with Randy to see how the client meetings were going.

“Richard, I wish I could tell you that we’re setting the world on fire,” Randy said. “But the truth is, we’re not. I’m coming in two afternoons a week, and I have yet to have a full afternoon. Some of the folks seem to be making a pretty good effort to schedule appointments, but others...well, they just don’t seem to have warmed up to the idea yet. To be honest, Richard, I’m pretty worried, and I’m not quite sure what to do.”

Unfortunately, Randy was only confirming what Richard had already begun to sense. Although enthusiasm had been high and support for the new venture had been universal amongst partners, managers, and staff at the outset, the fire seemed to have cooled considerably with the passage of time. There had even been a brief discussion at yesterday’s partners meeting of trying another new venture later this year.

Richard was frustrated, and more than a little discouraged. He knew that this new service could be successful, that they had made good decisions on how to launch it, and that a number of people had put forth a solid effort to make it succeed. What had gone wrong?

After: As it could be

The vote to proceed was unanimous:
5 to 0.

“I know that each one of us understands the difference between support and commitment,” Richard said to the assembled partners. “We just need to be sure that the managers have a similar understanding when we discuss this new service at the retreat next week. Doug, would you please be prepared to address that?” Doug nodded his assent, they reviewed the retreat schedule and arrangements one last time, and the partners meeting adjourned.

“We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.”
Bertha Calloway

Now a day and a half into their two-day retreat, there was a general sense that this retreat would be remembered as one of the most successful in the firm’s thirty-two year history. With lunch over, the partners and key managers were ready to tackle the final topic of the retreat: launching the new insurance and annuity service. Randy Peters, the local insurance agent who would be partnering with them in this venture, had joined them for lunch and would be there for the remainder of the day.

“As you all know from the letter that went out last week,” Richard began, “the partners have voted unanimously to begin offering insurance and annuity services to our clients as of July 1. While we sense that we have everyone’s full support for that decision, that’s not really what we want. Doug, before everyone starts wondering if there was something strange in my dessert, would you like to explain what I just said?”

“It’s quite simple,” Doug said. “Support is easy to give. Support means, ‘I’m behind you all the way.’ All too often that means *way behind you*, saying ‘Whatever *you* want to do, I’ll be supportive.’ If this new venture is going to succeed - and it will succeed - what we need is not your support, but your commitment. Commitment means that everyone feels personally responsible for our collective success. It means that each of us is absolutely committed to doing his or her part and is ready to be accountable for whatever assignments we might receive.”

“Thanks, Doug,” said Richard. “So that we’re all very clear on what we’re committing to do,” he continued, “the document now being distributed lists the eight things each of us will personally need to do to insure the success of this new service. Would you please take a few minutes and very carefully review that list?”

Richard paused, giving everyone a chance to read the document and consider what would be expected of them. “So,” he went on, “the question is, do we have everyone’s commitment?” A person-by-person poll confirmed that the necessary commitment was in place. “Then let’s get to it,” he said.

“As most of you will recall,” Richard continued, “about a year ago we adopted a new system for setting and accomplishing goals. For the benefit of those who are new, let me quickly list the beginning steps of that process. First, we’ll spend a few minutes really clarifying what our goal is. Next, we’ll identify how the firm will benefit from accomplishing that goal, and then we’ll list the factors that are absolutely critical to success in achieving our goal. Let’s take about forty-five minutes and see if we can do those three things.”

With enthusiasm in high gear, the group quickly accomplished its first task. The goal was clearly stated in effort-centered terms, a lengthy list of both the obvious and less-obvious goal benefits was created, and critical success factors were identified. All of the information was entered into the goal-setting tool on Brian’s laptop. (See the final paragraph for more about the “tool”)

“Focus on and measure the effort, not the result. We can all control our effort. We cannot control the result.”

Sam Allred

“Now we come to the most challenging part,” Richard continued, “but it’s also probably the most important thing we’ll do this afternoon because it embodies our ‘leave nothing to chance’ approach to accomplishing our goal. We need to very carefully identify the major tasks and sub-tasks that need to be accomplished if we’re going to achieve our goal. Then we need to assign responsibility for accomplishing each of those tasks, along with completion due dates. In large measure, what we will be doing is laying out our campaign and timetable for launching this new niche service. Brian, if you’re ready to start entering the tasks and sub-tasks into the tool, I’ll lead us through this process.” Brian flashed a thumbs-up and the discussion proceeded.

A little over two hours later, the group reviewed the goal details report provided by Brian and pronounced this phase of the process finished.

“I think we’ve done an excellent job of identifying what’s going to be needed to achieve our goal,” Richard said. “Now, I’d like to talk about a principle and a process. First, the principle.”

“You’ll recall,” he began, “that at the beginning of our discussion this afternoon we talked about commitment and accountability. Those two things are bound up in what I call the ‘return and report’ principle, which means this: we are each responsible for doing what we have committed to do, and for doing it within the assigned time frame. But ‘return and report’ means more than just getting the job done in a timely manner. It means being accountable, doing our job without the necessity of a reminder or someone checking up on us. And it means properly reporting when we’ve completed our assigned task. ‘Return and report’ takes accountability to the highest level—self-accountability—and it’s where we all need to be.”

“Now for the process,” Richard continued. “If we’re going to not only achieve our goal, but also be able to measure the progress we’re making, we need a reporting process. Reporting will occur as follows. Each Friday, every one of us will report to Brian any tasks or sub-tasks that have been completed that week. On the following Monday, Brian will distribute to each of us a report showing where we are on accomplishing every task and sub-task we’ve identified. Each of our partners and managers meetings will begin with an in-

depth review of the latest edition of that report. Finally, I'll summarize our progress each month in the column I write for the office newsletter. Are there any questions on the reporting process?"

Several good questions were raised, giving Richard an opportunity to clarify both the "return and report" principle and the reporting process.

"We're going to turn the time over to Randy Peters now," Richard announced, "to discuss what we'll be offering to our clients come July 1. Randy will describe the range of products and solutions that will be available to our clients, along with the specific benefits they can expect to receive. He'll talk about costs, and distribute an FAQ list based on questions the executive committee submitted to him. In addition, Randy will distribute samples of letters we can send to clients to gauge their interest in what we'll be offering."

"Anticipating that going through client lists and identifying likely prospects was going to be one of the first things that needed to be done," Richard continued, "we went ahead and printed out the latest edition of each person's client list. At the conclusion of Randy's presentation, we'll each take a few minutes to review those lists and identify the 10-15 clients we each think would be most likely to have an interest in what we're going to be offering. Randy, the floor is yours."

Following Randy's presentation, the marking up of client lists, and Richard's closing comments, the retreat was over. Each person left feeling confident that a system was in place that would all but guarantee the success of this new venture.

Five weeks passed, and the partners and managers were convened in their first regular meeting since the retreat. The meeting began with a careful review of the latest goal details report. "This is really encouraging," Doug noted. "It looks to me like almost everyone has taken hold of their assignments and made measurable progress. Look at how many things have been checked off as 'completed!'"

"The aspects of a thing that are most important to us are hidden to us because of their simplicity and familiarity."
Ludwig Wittgenstein

"I agree," said Richard. "This gives us a really accurate picture of where we are right now. I am, however, a little concerned about Neal. Brian informs me that he's missed reporting in on two of the four Fridays. Doug, he works in your area - what do you think?"

"Well, I believe he understands 'return and report,'" Doug said, "because when Alice and I met with the staff in Tax right after the retreat, we spent a lot of time explaining what was expected. I'm confident he's completed some of the sub-task assignments he received, but I sure can't explain why he hasn't reported in."

"I'll visit with him," Richard said, "and see what I can do to get things back on track."

Immediately after the meeting, Richard asked Neal to come to his office. "Come in," Richard said, "and close the door." Neal noticed that Richard remained standing.

"Neal, I understand that on two of the last four Fridays you haven't reported your progress to Brian on the assignments you have for the new insurance and annuity service we're starting up on July 1. Is that correct?" Richard asked.

"Yes it is," Neal responded, "but there's a good reason for that. My billable hours have been off for several months, but in the last few weeks I've brought the numbers back up to where I'm nearly on target once again."

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Richard. “Neal, I know you’re relatively new here - what is it now, about six months? - and you’re still learning how we operate. If I could, I’d like to help you understand a couple of really important things.”

“I understand full well how important billable hours are,” Richard continued. “You’ve probably heard us refer to David Maister - I’d like to share with you something he said about billable and non-billable hours. Maister said, ‘What you do with your billable time determines your current income, but what you do with your nonbillable time determines your future.’ He also said, ‘To neglect nonbillable time is to neglect tomorrow.’ We really subscribe to that philosophy here, Neal. Does that help put the hours issue in a little different perspective?”

“It certainly does,” Neal responded.

“Good,” said Richard. “Then let’s talk about accountability for a moment. From comments you’ve made, I know that our vision statement is important to you and that you’re committed to giving your best effort. Accountability is an important part of the effort each one of us gives.”

“Self-accountability,” Richard continued, “is a core value of our firm. It means we all complete our assignments, and we meet deadlines. But it also means we follow established reporting procedures - we call that ‘return and report’ - so that we can track progress and know we’re going to reach our goals. We really need you to report your progress on this and on future assignments you’ll undoubtedly receive. Can I count on you to do that?” Richard asked.

“Richard, I’m sorry,” Neal said. “This is all a little new to me - but yes, you can count on me.”

“Terrific,” Richard said. “By the way, Doug tells me you’re doing great things in Tax. Keep it up!”

That done, Richard turned to a little more challenging and delicate problem. At the retreat, Doug had committed to getting his Series 7 license to sell annuities alongside Randy Peters, and Alice had similarly agreed to obtain a license to sell insurance. Doug was on track to get his license, but Alice’s progress reports were sounding a little vague and Richard felt a growing concern that all was not well there. As a fellow partner, he was especially concerned about the message it could send to others if Alice didn’t follow through on her commitment. “No time like the present to deal with this,” he thought as he made his way to her office.

“The price of greatness is responsibility.”
Sir Winston Churchill

“Alice, do you have a minute?” he asked as he stood in her doorway. He noticed she looked harried.

“Sure, Richard,” she said. “Please come in.”

“Alice, I get the feeling that things are progressing a little slowly on your insurance license. Am I right?” he asked.

“Boy, you don’t miss much do you?” she responded, sounding a little weary.

“Tell me what’s going on,” he said.

“Richard, you know what’s going on,” she said, feeling a little defensive. “You study the financials more closely than anyone else. This wasn’t a good tax season for us. Our billable hours were down significantly, mostly because we had a vacant position for two months, and our revenues are way off where they should be at this time of year. The simple truth is, I’m buried, trying to make up as much of that difference as I can before June 30.”

Alice was the youngest of the five partners, and had established herself as an incredibly hard worker and tremendous team player. Richard measured his next words carefully.

“Alice, believe me when I say I know the tight spot you’re in. I’ve been there a time or two myself and it’s no place I ever want to be. I should have realized what was going on, but didn’t, and for that I apologize.”

“As you know,” he continued, “offering insurance and annuity products to our clients has the potential to be a very important piece of the firm’s financial future. We really need you to get that license by June 1 so we can stay on track with our timetable, and also so we don’t give any manager or staff person an excuse in the future to not do what they’ve committed to do. Alice, I know how hard it is to be thinking in terms of the future when you’re buried by the present. Why don’t you and I get together later today and look at what kind of resources we might be able to shift around to take some of the heat off of you so you can spend the time needed to get that license?”

His proposal required no persuasive arguments, and a meeting time was quickly set.

As he walked back to his office, Richard pondered the other challenges that would likely arise before this niche was successfully launched. What was the old expression - life is what happens while you’re doing the planning - or something like that? He wasn’t particularly worried, though. He had learned from many years’ experience that with a solid process and people who were committed and ready to be held accountable, there wasn’t much you couldn’t accomplish.

CREATING A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

As we think about this story, certain key points are clear. Organizations that have successfully developed a strong culture of accountability exhibit a number of important characteristics and attributes. The following are examples of what you can expect to see in such organizations.

- ✓ A vision that helps all employees want to give their very best effort.
- ✓ A system for setting and accomplishing goals.
- ✓ A “leave nothing to chance approach” to achieving goals, launching new endeavors, and completing projects.
- ✓ A clear understanding of what commitment means. Organizations with high accountability cultures know that one of the keys to getting greater commitment is open and clear communication. They take the time to identify and write down what commitment looks like. This helps everyone have a better understanding of the required effort and attitude.
- ✓ A system to keep track of individual and team assignments.
- ✓ A return and report system. Once a goal or project and its related tasks have been identified, organizations with a strong culture of accountability determine the return and report process that will be used and the schedule for reporting. This ensures that everyone knows when to proactively report progress and who is to receive the report.
- ✓ New meetings begin with a review of progress made on assignments from the previous meeting.

“It is what we think we know already that often prevents us from learning.”
Claude Bernard

- ✓ Performance issues are effectively managed. Organizations with high accountability cultures take the initiative to solve performance problems sooner rather than later. They focus on the specific issue or problem behavior (instead of the individual) and go the extra mile to build relationships and maintain the self esteem of others.

IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

There are some simple steps you can take to begin improving accountability in your organization.

1. IDENTIFY WHERE TO BEGIN

The first step is determining what level of accountability currently exists in your organization. Assess who and what are the biggest obstacles to improving accountability and where each obstacle is concentrated. Identify where there is already strong support for accountability. Look at the big picture and decide where improvement needs to start.

“If you don’t invest very much, then defeat doesn’t hurt very much and winning is not very exciting.”

Dick Vermeil

2. FORMULATE A PLAN

Assemble a team to write a plan for improving accountability and creating a culture of high accountability in your organization. The plan should allow the organization to experience and then build on early success, and should have provisions to hold team members accountable for progress. It needs to identify how the system of accountability will expand throughout the organization, and it should detail how all employees will eventually be involved in improving accountability. Make sure your plan includes training for all employees.

3. TIE EVERYTHING POSSIBLE INTO THE SYSTEM

Your system of accountability needs to reach into every area of activity in your organization—communication, leadership, performance reviews, goal setting, financial management, etc.

David Maister once said, *“If people are not prepared to be held accountable for what they do, it is unlikely they will achieve much. To choose a goal without being prepared to be accountable for progress towards it is to choose nothing.”* As every person in your organization comes to understand and live this principle, you will begin to develop a high accountability culture.

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