



## The Accountable Executive

Two of our LeadershipOne business writers, Hal Johnson and Ed Street, expect to have their new book, *The Accountable Executive*, released in the Spring of 2009. After last month's introduction, this is the first in a series of five articles - *The Five Accountability Functions* - based on material from their book. They have observed this is a meaningful area of struggle in many mid-market companies and they address what they observe are major contributors to low accountability cultures - and the antidote.

### ***Being Accountable for Effective Direction – Function #1***

#### ***Establishing the vision and aligning activities***

The first installment in this series is about accountability and effective corporate direction. When we think of effective direction in a business setting, our thoughts tend to run to strategic planning. That makes sense, since one of the most fundamental responsibilities of an accountable executive is to assure the enterprise has good direction and related activities are in alignment with that direction. The well established processes found in the strategic planning cycle are sound – when fully embraced. Following the sequence of ***vision → goals → strategies → projects → implementation*** is a proven formula for creating effective direction. However, according to research at the Harvard Business School, only about 10% of companies do well with the ***implementation*** part. And, mostly, this is attributable to lack of accountability.

Building an organization committed to the highest performance standards demands more than just good intentions: it also requires fostering practices that create an environment of clarity, commitment, and accountability. Without healthy accountability, an enterprise loses one of the key elements of management – predictability.

#### ***What is accountability?***

We are glad you asked, because there seems to be a lack of uniform clarity.

1. It's a commitment – a statement of personal promise, both to yourself and the people around you, to deliver specific defined results. It reflects a winning attitude of “you can count on me.”
2. Producing results - results are important so mere activity is not enough.
3. It is meaningless without consequences. Both positive and negative. Not responding to unaccountable behavior is the first step in a downhill slide of performance.
4. At the top level, it assumes a proactive and conscious commitment to the purpose of the organization, manifested by clarity, transparency and participation, which enable contribution.

#### ***Where are you in embracing accountability?***

Creating an accountable organization is an ongoing process. Members of the leadership team should review practices regularly to assure that effective behaviors are sustaining accountability. In working with client companies where accountability is low, we have studied the various contributing causes. Based on our findings, the following indicators have emerged, pointing to opportunities to ratchet up performance through enhanced accountability. Take a look and see if you can spot a similar “opportunity.”

- Unclear purpose and priorities
- Lack of timely decisions
- Duplication of work
- Ineffective meetings
- Long and excessive work hours
- Managers working in their subordinates' responsibility space
- Slow and inefficient decision making process
- Unclear promotional criteria and evaluations
- Loss of good people
- Thinking there is a capability problem



***Accountability shapes what the company is to become***

Unlike many change efforts that have come and gone, accountability is neither a fad nor a change that can be ignored. We have clients who have experienced major improvements in performance using accountability building initiatives. Most of these organizations had experienced a time of "let-down" and the quality of their performance diminished. It was also found that accountability had diminished. And, they had stopped looking for bad habits. They stopped checking their measurable variances in performance. They stopped addressing their unresolved conflicts and they stopped dealing with non-performers. As a result, their performance plummeted and they had to reestablish their accountability processes and commitments to get back on track.

The good news was that when they returned to their accountability practices they quickly became more successful. This time, they had to increase their level of accountability, because the old level was no longer enough to sustain results. When accountability is an on-going process, excellence in performance naturally increases. It definitely shapes what the company is to become.

***The ultimate leadership responsibility***

Executives are constantly being bombarded by demands that impact their ability to sustain focus on the key contributors of success. Ultimately, this seems to be one of the major differentiators for long term success – sustaining accountability. Life is much easier when, as a business leader, you are surrounded by colleagues you can count on to do the right things. Building that culture goes a long way toward sustaining predictably good business results. And, right now, we need all of that we can get.

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