



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. This is the second in a series of five articles, each addressing a key accountability function, based on material from their book. They have observed that accountability 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 an Effective Leadership Team – Function #2

Our last article, which you can get from our web site, addressed being accountable for effective direction. In this material we will address the importance of a leadership team being in place to execute on the direction that has been determined would be best for the business.

The complexities of business are leading to a greater acceptance and use of empowered leadership teams to run the business. CEO's are becoming the "captains" of powerful, knowledge-driven leadership teams. Numerous books and articles have been written on this topic, so we are not going to try to convince our readers this is the smart course to follow. We believe most execs understand that. The difficulty seems to stem from not knowing exactly how to go about it. And that is understandable. There are definite steps involved in getting a group of executive managers to function as a team for the good of the business.

So how do you go about turning your management group into a high performance team? First, you, as the executive leader of your company, have to not only understand the difference, but be convinced to take action to make the change process happen. The latter is usually the bigger hurdle. Like many successful management practices, effective teamwork is knowledge-based. In fact, we think teamwork is one of

the most misunderstood concepts in business. In most mid-market companies, all that is required to be considered a team is to have a seat at the table. Big mistake. Being an effective team is a lot of work, just like a sports team. You need to know the plays (teamwork principles), and the rules of the game, then they can concentrate on working together effectively to put them in play. It sounds easy, but in reality it isn't.

We can recommend a great book on the topic (Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of the Team*). However, reading the book does not convert your group to a team. There is a definitive process, and it takes time – and leadership. But the rewards are significant and make the process worth the effort. The point here is it takes a leader who understands that this is the direction to go and then is accountable to his constituency to see that it happens. Part of that process on the part of the leader is to come to an understanding that (1) there is a difference between a group and a team, and (2) an effective management team will position the enterprise to be even a more effective producer. To buttress this perspective we refer you to a particularly compelling HBR article – *The Discipline of Teams* by Katzenbach and Smith, July-August, 2005. Here are eight important steps they suggest to build an effective team:

1. Establish urgency, demanding performance standards.
2. Select members for skill and skill potential; performance not personality.
3. Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions. Initial impressions always mean a great deal.
4. Set some clear rules of behavior.
5. Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.
6. Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.
7. Spend lots of time together.
8. Exploit the power of positive feed-back, recognition, and reward.



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Business literature, as well as loads of experience, tells us the business environment is becoming more daunting and complex; more moving parts, more competition, more everything. A well disciplined team is much better prepared to respond to that kind of market force than the single manager-leader. The problem is many manager-leaders, not knowing what a real leadership team looks like, think they are there. Another big mistake. Check your criteria. A great check-list is found in the HBR article cited above (Teams & Groups: How to tell the difference). You will see accountability looms large in the process. In fact accountability is one of the key drivers to get to the point of deciding to pursue a better understanding of what REAL teamwork is and how it can add to your performance capability. Even if you believe you have a

strong performance-oriented team, a “check-up from the neck-up” every so often is a good accountability move. In that vein, score your team on a 1-5 scale (i.e. Likert) on the above eight items. Then, think about steps to refresh your team. That is a good accountability move.

Hal Johnson and Ed Street have been senior level as well as chief executives of several companies. They sit on boards, teach, coach and consult regarding best practices, including accountability concepts, to executive management.

They may be reached at (916) 391-3042 or at info@leadershipone.net.