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# How to Create and Maintain a Culture of Accountability

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## The 5 C's of Accountability

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Organisations who enjoy high levels of accountability record higher levels of business success. Accountability is not complex, it is basic business discipline. Why then is it so difficult for organisations to introduce and maintain a culture of accountability?

### SUMMARY

**Accountability is about giving people freedom to act and responsibility for their actions within the boundaries of a clearly defined culture, ensuring every individual understands their part in, and contributes fully, to the success of their team and the wider organisation.**

### Why is Accountability so Elusive?

Although it is well established that it is essential for business success, accountability continues to elude the majority, quite simply because leaders and organisations fail to understand fully and follow through on the required steps. We call these steps 'The 5 C's of Accountability'.

### Understanding Accountability

One of the biggest misconceptions surrounding accountability lies in the belief that it requires a micromanagement style of leadership, with an emphasis on discipline for under performance. This style of leadership in fact has the opposite effect. Removing any sense of personal responsibility disempowers people and heightens disengagement. An individual *cannot* be held accountable for the outcomes of a decision that has essentially been

made for them. Clearly though, individuals need some direction and guidance from their leader. Ambiguity is the enemy of accountability and surrounded by noise and unclear on priorities, people *will* fail. So it's about striking the right balance, and once *you* are clear on how this looks, you can put processes in place to ensure your team are clear as well.

### Step 1 - Clarity

Creating a culture of accountability then, requires the leader to give individuals the freedom and responsibility to act as they see fit, *but* within a clearly-defined fixed structure. In defining that structure the leader must be crystal clear, firstly on what is expected of *every* member of the team, including (fundamentally) what they expect of themselves. This requires clear definition of rules, codes of conduct

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and on what happens when people fail/succeed. That is, you need to make it clear from the start that people will be held to account for their actions.

Once you have clearly defined the boundaries in which your team will operate, you must focus on gaining clarity over the team's direction. Show them what success looks like and how they will get there. Clearly define goals—individual, team *and* organisational -and strategy. A culture in which everybody knows where they stand and what they are working towards is a culture in which individuals and teams can be held to account.

### Step 2 - Commitment

The commitment to engage and be held to account is affected by many factors and some of those factors you can have some influence over. For example, engaging individuals in the goal setting process and emphasising the importance of their role in the success of their team and the wider organisation are essential. Equally, a fear of being disciplined may well be enough to *force* commitment. But the personal *desire* to commit, that is critical to an enhancement in team performance, *must* come from more than just a fear of being disciplined. Individuals must *want* to be part of a winning team; because however much you try and influence it, ultimately it is

their choice whether they commit or not.

An example I find useful here is the ‘Snooze Button Analogy’. So when I set my alarm for one hour earlier than usual so I can get up and go for a run, what do I do at the moment of choice when the alarm goes off? Do I commit fully, hop out of bed and put on my running gear, or do I hit the snooze button, roll over and go back to sleep? The point is this, it is not *easy* to demonstrate integrity at the moment of choice and neither is holding yourself and others to account easy, but without it, your team will never reach their potential.

### Step 3 - Communication

For your team to fully engage and hold one another to account, you need to communicate to them and the wider organisation just how imperative the goals and actions they have set are. Communicate their importance by making the goals and actions visible to



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#### Clarity

all. It sends out a message about how serious and focussed you are on achieving those goals and because they are constantly visible and accessible, it is more difficult for them to be forgotten.

Ask yourself these questions – How many times have you attended a ‘team day’, where you and your team worked together to define your most important goals? And how many of the goals captured on those days did you ever actually action?

#### Commitment

Making goals visible will heighten levels of accountability, not only because individuals are aware that their successes and failures will be there for all to see, or because it forces them to hold each other to account, but because it greatly increases the sense of personal responsibility individuals feel to their team and the organisation.

Just getting people together and putting the ideas down is not enough, accountability requires the *follow through* on the commitments made in that room, keeping the team focussed on what’s important and maintaining the momentum on longer-term goals. Having communicated the importance of your goals and made them visible to all, if you then fail to monitor them, not only will you and your team fail to deliver these goals, but your team and peers will learn that you are not someone who follows through on commitments.

#### Communication

#### Continuous

#### Measurement

#### Coaching

#### **Step 4 - Continuous Measurement**

Making goals and actions visible has an *immediate* effect on accountability. For it to have a *long-term* effect, it is vital that the outcomes of those goals and actions are continuously monitored and updated. Actions must be clearly defined, be assigned an owner and have a required completion date. Ideally, your measurement tool will clearly display progress against goals and provide an area in which team members can communicate and share relevant information.

#### **Step 5 - Coaching**

Coaching is central to accountability. As the leader, in addition to clearly defining the structure, you need to provide the support, encouragement and drive your team will require. You must be approachable, lead by example and, crucially, show them that *you* hold yourself to account. When there’s a win, celebrate that success, it’s not acceptable to say “it’s their job so they *should* be doing it”. Equally, you need to follow up appropriately if they fail.

Accountability—it starts with you...



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