

A culture of accountability

Five tips for developing accountability so the entire organization works in concert

“It’s not my responsibility.” “I’ve done what is in my job description.” “I’m tired of doing somebody else’s work.” If you hear this in your organization, it’s a sign your culture has an accountability issue.



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In business, being accountable means an individual, a team, a division or an organization accounts for, accepts responsibility for and discloses the results for its activities in a transparent manner.

In leadership, accountability is acknowledging and assuming responsibility for actions, products, decisions and policies including the administration, governance and implementation within the scope of the role. It encompasses the obligation to report, explain and be answerable.

It’s important to get the definition right. I’ve spoken with many business leaders who couldn’t clearly define the term when complaining about their organization’s lack of accountability.

Assessing levels of accountability

It’s also essential to understand the five levels in the accountability continuum. Level one is where people expect everything without giving too much in the first place. Level two has individual accountability where the work is done without paying attention to how it fits in the overall environment.

Work unit or team accountability is level three. It reflects a potential silo organization. Level four is cross-functional accountability where specific teams collaborate and accept the consequences for their outcomes.

Finally, level five is where the entire organization works in concert. This is the end goal — people working together, helping each other and being accountable for each other.

Changing the culture

So, how do you get to level five? Here are five tips for creating organizational accountability:

- **Include accountability in your core competencies.** Start the culture change by tying it to core human competencies. Include accountability in the list of four to six key competencies, and then hire, fire, train, grow and develop your organization based on these to reach long-term goals.
- **Conduct specific training.** There are good books and papers discussing accountability and how to nurture an accountable culture. You can easily prepare a short 45-minute course on what it means and how it applies.
- **Define and track it.** As you introduce accountability in informal communication, assemble a team to define internal key performance indicators to measure accountability over time, such as percentage of team tasks accomplished on time, project management success, etc.
- **Integrate accountability into management systems.** Accountability must be integrated across all processes: goals, performance reviews, feedback process, incentive systems and internal surveys. “Getting things done” and “holding each other accountable” needs to be repeated over and over.
- **Lead by example.** The work starts with the executive suite. If top leaders don’t hold each other accountable, it’s difficult for the organization to embrace it.

Changing a culture takes time. Depending on where you start in the accountability continuum, you can expect a long journey to level five. But slowly and surely, you’ll see how people and teams who collaborate and engage with each other evolve. ●



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