

Building a Culture of Accountability

The key is to find a way to lead people without ruling them!

What is culture?

Culture is embodied in the phrase "this is the way we do things around here". More precisely, "*what people perceive they have to do to fit in, be accepted and rewarded around here*". Culture is the sum of the behavioural norms of the workgroup, team, division or organisation.

It is relatively common to have different cultures between teams or divisions within the one organisation. These are referred to as sub-cultures and they can range from being marginally different from the culture of the overall organisation to being quite radically different. This has implications for not only understanding an organisation's culture but also for managing it effectively.

Why is culture important?

Have you ever tried to stay within the speed limit when everyone around you is driving at speeds well over the speed limit? The behavioural norms of a group can strongly influence the behaviour of the individual.

Culture defines the behavioural norms (accepted behaviour) in a group, team, division or organisation. In turn, behaviour underpins the performance (what gets done, when it gets done and how it gets done) of the organisation and perceptions (reputation) of that organisation.

A Framework for Managing Culture

While managing culture requires a range of approaches and cannot simply be managed by dictating the culture you want, it is essentially about managing messages. The objective is to ensure messages are consistently conveyed through aligned behaviours (especially of key people), systems and symbols.

What is accountability?

The key concept is the notion of having a sense of 'responsibility' and a willingness to be 'answerable' to others and is the difference between a group and a team.

In our experience, the most important factor in developing accountability is the quality of leadership and management (and this is the only aspect leaders or managers are really in 'control' of). Good leaders and managers generate high levels of accountability in their people.

Whilst organisations should plan to recruit the right people in terms of their willingness to be team players and be accountable; recruitment is only the starting point. The real key is what leaders and organisations do from that point onwards. Good recruits can be 'lost' in poorly lead organisations with unsupportive cultures.

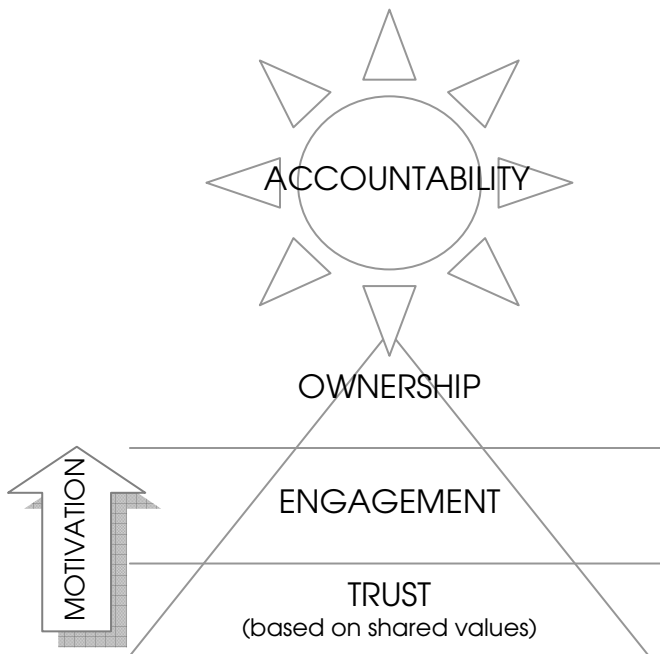
Many managers see accountability as being attributed to an individual's values, therefore they blame the individual and underestimate their own role in creating an accountability culture. In doing this, a great opportunity to build a high performance organisation is missed.

Responsibility is not blame!

It is important not to mistake responsibility for blame as they are diametrically opposed concepts. Where one exists the other will not remain.

Responsibility is the ability to make a response – it is future and action focused. Blame is past focused and is more about the ego – isolating people, teaching them a lesson, point scoring or making them feel guilty/bad – than it is about accountability. Guilt and fear is not a good basis for developing accountability.

A Framework for Building an Accountability Culture



We see the steps in building an accountability culture as being:

1. Building **trust** as the foundation: The four key elements of trust are **Openness/transparency** (giving and accepting feedback, transparency in decision making), **Reliability** (doing what you say you are going to do), **Congruence** (saying what you mean) and **Acceptance** (acceptance of others and acceptance of differences).
2. **Engage** your people: meaningful involvement with alignment. Remember you can't truly and sustainably motivate another person but you can engage them. It is through engagement that motivation will grow.
3. **Ownership**: once the first two elements are in place people start to 'take' ownership – they start to think and act like owners. (As this happens the future possibility for selling down equity, as part of the firm's succession plan, becomes a reality).

The level of accountability is directly related to the level of trust, engagement and ownership that exists within an organisation.

Certainly work at improving all levels simultaneously; however remember higher levels in the pyramid cannot progress any faster than the base they are built on – there are no short cuts.

Without trust and engagement no performance measures and rewards will be particularly effective over the medium to long term – you cannot buy accountability.

The key to building a culture of accountability is to find a way to lead people without ruling them.

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