

ACCOUNTABLE

IT DOES NOT

BY

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In an era where even the most grievous sins barely get noticed, where shareholder trust is so often misplaced, where what once would have been labeled a high crime is so commonplace that no one even blinks — in an era such as this accountability has become a forgotten concept. It often seems that not only do leaders not hold themselves accountable, but neither does anyone else. We have become so accustomed to the unethical and the immoral that both seem to be everyday occurrences. How do we, as leaders, lead the charge to personal and professional accountability? How do we raise the bar? How do we not only create standards but hold ourselves and others to the very highest standards?

This article details the three essential components for creating higher standards. The premise is simply this: accountability is not a forgotten concept. It has simply been blurred and maybe buried by an array of malfeasance. In each of our hearts we know wrong from right; we may just be too weary to establish and maintain highly principled workplaces. The size of the enterprise is irrelevant. Your formal position is equally irrelevant. What is relevant is whether you and I, as individuals, are willing to make tough stands.

Before exploring the components of accountability, I must first say that this article is not a sermon on the evils of greed or the wages of corporate sins. Instead this is an exploration of the practical business strategies that you can use to raise personal and professional accountability. No preaching — just a discussion of business realities and of building integrity. You may think these points only apply to leaders of the largest of the large corporations, but, in fact, they apply to leaders in organizations of any size.

TRUST – THE ROOT

The components for building and maintaining high levels of accountability are clarity of purpose, value/culture alignment, and a service orientation. Each of these standards is rooted in the very simple belief that trust — the trust of our employees, our customers, our industry colleagues — is the foundation



LEADERSHIP

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for accountability. That trust is earned over a period of time, after many repeated positive interactions. That trust is rooted in consistent behavior reflective of core beliefs. When trust is high people expect you to operate with a consistent set of principles reflective of your ideals. The single most basic method for building trust is telling the truth. There is no substitute for honesty.

When that trust is waning or nonexistent, customers and employees have no loyalty. The turnover in both groups is high. Relations with industry colleagues are damaged and reputations, both our individual reputation and that of our enterprise, become questionable. Without trust, strong strategic alliances are almost never built. Knowing these facts, building trust to foster higher levels of accountability is a leadership imperative.

CLARITY OF PURPOSE

We will begin with the first component, clarity of purpose. Why are you in business? If your sole purpose is to make money, be honest about it. We live in a capitalist society. Making money is a noble intention consistent with our economic and social objectives. Be real about why you do what you do. If your dealership is in business because you inherited it from your father and he told you you had better not ever give up his life's work, admit it. There is no shame there. Many enterprises began as mom and pop operations that drafted offspring as cheap labor and easy succession planning. Maybe you are in business because you have a love of the products. Perhaps you have always been curious about the machinery or the mechanics and built the business to scratch that itch.

Having a clear purpose is essential. That purpose drives every business decision that you make. For instance, an enter-

prise that is focused on a love of the products will be more concerned with creative approaches to using the machines or the latest innovations in the industry. That purpose will get translated into action by every employee, in every department and in every interaction. You, as the leader, are responsible for making sure that people both understand the business' purpose, their role in making that purpose real in day-to-day operations and how that role evolves. Equally as important, you must maintain your own focus on that purpose.

If the reason you are in business is to be an innovative mar-

ket maverick, it is up to you to not only be creative, but to inspire creativity in the troops. If you are in business to build wealth and generate record-breaking revenues, it is up to you to sell, promote and market relentlessly. Whatever the purpose, first be clear with yourself and then be clear with everyone who collects a paycheck from your company. A clear purpose holds you and every single employee accountable to the intent of the business. There will be fewer opportunities for misconceptions. This clarity also enables both you, the leader, and the entire company to be honest about who and what you are.

This basic standard eliminates hypocrisy, whether intentional hypocrisy or accidental.

VALUE/CULTURE ALIGNMENT

Value/culture alignment is the intentional congruence between what you espouse and how you operate. Your culture is the beliefs shared throughout the organization. Culture is supported by leadership expectations and accepted behavioral norms. Values are the intangible drivers that the organization holds dear. Drawing from the previous examples of purpose, if your purpose is revenue generation, one of your core values

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will undoubtedly be tenacity, that persistence required to close deals. If your purpose is to foster innovation in the industry, creativity has to be a core value.

Creating culture is neither supernatural nor magical. It simply requires that your clear purpose be reflected in everything you say and do. When purpose is clear, values and culture aligned, leaders have fulfilled one of their primary purposes. That purpose is to consciously direct the enterprise's growth and development. This enables you, the leader, to be aware of how your behaviors support and sustain accountability between people and functions. When you hold honesty as a core value, you will be less inclined to bill the company for lunches with clients who are not really clients. Think about it. That's how big crimes begin, as little crimes. Big fat lies begin as little white lies. Having a sense of who and what the organization is makes everyone more aware of how individual behavior can either support or supplant the company's purpose and core values.

There are many reasons for culture going astray. One is that leaders are

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unclear on the competencies that uphold the enterprise. Think of a business unit that is charged with sales being led by someone who comes from the ranks of the service techs.

In rare instances this person may know how to sell and how to motivate a sales team. In most cases it will be a forced fit. Forced fits are especially dangerous when leaders will not admit their deficiencies. And that is where the cycle begins. When we fail to admit our deficiencies we find ways to cover for them, creating hypocrisy

at the leadership level. So now, here's the leader faking it and expecting everyone else to be competent. Glaring hypocrisy is totally inconsistent with personal accountability.

How can you hold others accountable when you have not managed to hold yourself accountable for competence?

SERVICE ORIENTATION

No matter the business, the size or the industry, a service orientation is a must. Understanding the fact that customers build not just your individual business, but the entire industry, is a key concept. When we place the customers on a pedestal, regarding them with respect and esteem, we are automatically raising accountability.

This is when we recognize that we are not only accountable to our customers, but beholden to them. An emphasis on service can be nothing but beneficial to the organization, to the staff and to the leaders. A sincere interest in customers keeps standards high and accountability at the forefront.

Demonstrate a service focus by making sure that every policy, procedure and practice revolves around the customers' needs, their interests and their expectations. As a leader you are responsible for making sure that policies are implemented so that they have a positive, direct impact on the customer. More important, you have to model the service orientation that you want in your company. You, too, must build bridges with customers. You must be willing to hear from them regularly. You must initiate customer contact. This orientation cannot become pervasive until you consistently model it in every interaction.

A service orientation yields many results. The first is customer loyalty. People do business with people they like.

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They refer colleagues to people they like. Customer relationship management really is not a scientific process. Manage relationships by implementing and evaluating a clear service philosophy. Customer loyalty necessarily breeds revenue growth. People buy more from people they like, often whether they need it or not. The service orientation pays off in dollars and cents. Lastly, a service orientation creates a positive reputation both with customers

and throughout the industry. It is that reputation that keeps you in high standing as an industry leader.

SUMMARY

Accountable leadership is a possibility in companies large and small. Accountability is probable when individuals make a demonstrable commitment to holding themselves and everyone who collects a paycheck from them to high standards. This implies that trust, dedication and honest communication are the underpinnings of every activity in the enterprise.

Trust alone is not sufficient to build accountability. Each leader is also responsible for making the company's purpose, whatever that purpose may be, clear to each and every employee. Staff and managers must understand how their roles support that purpose. That purpose is reflected in and supported by a clear set of standards that govern work and behavior. The right standards eliminate mediocrity. They also provide a framework for every activity. Aligning values and culture connects what you do with how and why you do it. This intentional congruence leaves little room for ambiguity. This congruence also provides you and everyone else with a target. Being able to know what is expected allows you, as a leader, to be the model who also has a high bar for which to strive. Finally, the service orientation keeps everyone focused on the most important link in the chain. Customers are the reason for being. Keeping them a priority is one of the best business decisions any leader can make.

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