Accountability to Inspire Responsibility, Not Blame

Applies to:

SAP Strategy Management

Summary

What is accountability and how can it be applied in a way to motivate staff to take responsibility for their activities? This article describes steps to take to satisfy both the external and internal stakeholders that enforce accountability.

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Introduction

It takes people to fulfill the desired end results organizations wish to achieve. To attain those goals, everyone has to take responsibility to accomplish objectives and be accountable for the results.

What is Accountability?

The simple definition of accountability is to oblige people to answer for one's actions. A broader definition is for an organization to demonstrate that proper, responsible management is taking place. There are both internal and external stakeholders that can enforce accountability.

- o Internal accountability
    - Boards of directors
    - Executives and managers, any superior authority
    - Other team members and co-workers
- o External accountability
    - Wall Street
    - Independent audits
    - Legislatures, governing bodies, and regulatory agencies
    - The Media
    - Customers and the community

Organizations, and the individuals within the organization, have to answer to a variety of stakeholders, who may have different definitions or notions of accountability. An important indicator of an organization's strength and integrity is how accountability is handled and administered.

The word accountability has negative associations, since it is often used in a context of blame or punishment. The idea of holding people accountable is important and should be a motivational aspect, not merely a looming danger. Although there are many different approaches to managing operations, this paper will consider accountability in terms of inspiring or motivating others.

Accountable for Results

Accountability needs to be based on results, what is achieved. A clearly communicated overview of expected results, with responsibilities transparently designated, will help people better understand what they need to do. More than just communicating objectives, the people responsible for following through on that plan need to be empowered.

People need:

- Information
- Authority
- Incentive

Those responsible need to been given the information to understand requirements, the appropriate authority to make decisions regarding how to meet those requirements, as well as having rewards in place to reinforce correct decisions.

Information:

Information needs to be shared. Workers need to understand corporate objectives in a way that directly applies to their everyday work activities. The understanding of these objectives should clearly be linked to the interdependencies within the organization, so that employees and managers meet the needs of both the internal and external customers.

Managers need access to resources in order to meet their objectives. To better anticipate the approval process for the material, time, and human capital necessary to reach their objectives, managers should tie their initiatives to corporate goals. Being able to attach budgeting needs directly to corporate objectives increases the likelihood of project approval. It also allows executives to make better allocation decisions by focusing attention and resources in areas that will make the biggest impact on achieving corporate goals.

Information flowing back from internal or external stakeholders to executives affords insight into what is working and what isn't. Attention can be shifted from reviewing single functions to a whole system's performance. As an example, tracking fill rates on the warehouse floor rather than ensuring a product is on the shelf when the customer wants to buy. The interdependencies between marketing, manufacturing, and distributing means that only through collaboration between these areas can the company expect to get the customer to the product and the product to the customer.

Authority:

It is one thing to hold people accountable for actions. It is another to provide them with the authority that they need to own their job. They need to be able to take some control of the how the job get done, to make on-the-spot decisions quickly to address issues.

Allowing appropriate authority to workers also can eliminate many of the urgent issues that distract a manager during a day. It is not just the inefficiency of time wasted while waiting for someone to make a decision or give approval; it is also ineffective since many people get pulled into the issue before it is resolved. It is far better to empower employees to use their good judgment to make a decision and reward them for making good choices.

Rewards:

The incentives and rewards a company offers will determine the attention and priorities of the staff. Unfortunately, many companies have systems that reward activities that do not forward overarching corporate objectives. The success of an organization is a matter of complex dependencies. It is possible for one department to show success without adequately supporting internal or external customers. Collaboration more readily occurs when incentives are linked to broader institutional goals.

Not tying incentives to organizational goals may accidentally create adversarial relations between people, teams, or entire departments. Having groups or departments working at cross-purposes can only have a negative impact on the organization. These adversarial relations can also be evidence of a culture of blame within a company.

The Blame Game: Why Workers Fear Accountability

In a culture of blame, there is an attempt to localize problems to a particular area or person. This has the effect of neglecting to review the larger processes at work. Taking responsibility for failure is part of the learning process, placing blame is abdicating responsibility. Blaming provides an easy and simplistic solution to an issue that probably has broader implications.

Most employees don't understand the company's strategy or how their activities relate to company goals. Accountability, in their view, often is equated to finding a scapegoat for organizational problems or failures.

The most corrosive aspect of the blame game is that it encourages 'gaming', manipulating numbers and hiding or spinning the truth. Forcing problems underground by having a culture of blame just increases the negative impact when issues come to light. It is much better to learn about bad news or problems early, taking effective, corrective action.

Not every project succeeds. There will be set-backs and failures. Excess punishment puts people in state of fear and paralysis. While the use of punishment may be positive from the perspective of enforcing rules, it is counter-productive to improving performance. A motivated workforce can weather the temporary set-backs and learn from failure. Performance-driven organizations learn and improve from these events.

Can Accountability be good?

There is an important flip-side to accountability, being able to demonstrate your achievements. Keeping the boss in the loop is a very important function, whether that boss is a manager, the board, or Wall Street. The ability to present evidence of outcomes from your efforts, as well as the impact of those results, is the upside of accountability.

Most employees dread writing the self-assessment for their yearly performance review. Employees rarely track their own performance. To give a powerful boost to their self-confidence and motivation, furnish a

worker with the evidence of their contribution toward the strategic goals of the organization. As the staff understands the impact of their work, they can continually modify their activities to focus on results.

What's in a word? Summary

Accountability can be used to motive or punish. Here are four ways to help move staff and the organization toward accepting responsibility.

1. Use accountability to help align people to reach shared goals.

- Motivate by presenting clear understanding of purpose and goals and how those goals directly relate to the mission and values of the organization
- Shared goals diminish creating accidental adversaries

2. Encouraging transparency throughout the organization.

- Communicate broader perspectives: how do daily activities directly impact other aspects of our operations and our customers

3. Be willing to be held accountable

- Even best efforts can have unintended consequences or undesired results. Successful organizations learn and improve with each misstep.

4. Proactively document responsibilities and evidence of success

- Even succeeding in controlling any internal "blame game", an organization will still have to answer to external stakeholders.

Every person, every activity, and every area of the company contributes to building a business around excellence. People need to take responsibility for results, not just their daily output. They need to be empowered with the information and the authority to make decisions aligned with those goals and provided the incentive to make the best decisions. Documenting the goals, initiatives, and measures that display results will supply the needed explanation of decisions and actions when required to provide an account to the boss, the board, or external stakeholders.

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