



SO WHAT DOES ACCOUNTABILITY REALLY MEAN?

By Michael Pilnick, CHRO
Guest Contributor

Why do CEOs and HR Leaders constantly talk about accountability? What does it mean and what do employees really think about it? Does the phrase “**being held accountable**” make you feel like it’s an “**I got you**”? You have been “caught.” It feels as if you’ve been blamed for something gone wrong versus being empowered to achieve great results? The term is so commonly used that many have become numb or cynical and understand the concept in a way that is counterproductive to outcomes that drive revenue and desired outcomes.

Or on the flip side,

As a manager, does your frustration rise when excuses are given for budget variances, missed project deadlines or poor follow through? Does your blood boil when no one seems to be accountable, no one wants to own it and “they” are blamed for whatever goes wrong?

Words are important and it is critical to understand the differences between being “**responsible**” versus being “**accountable**.” Most companies use accountability as a key cultural attribute; however, most employees privately feel uncertain about what that really means. But if communicated and acted on correctly, driving an “accountability culture” can produce far better organizational results and greater employee engagement.

The demise of accountability in many organizations begins with a fuzzy definition that confuses “being responsible” with “being accountable.” The distinction between the two is not a matter of

semantics; it separates two fundamentally different approaches to individual and organizational performance.

Organizations that place high value on “being responsible” create task-oriented cultures. These are cultures where responsible managers delegate tasks, responsible departments interact around tasks and responsible employees perform tasks. The unwritten rule in cultures of responsibility is that individual responsibility ends when the task is completed. These are “inside-out” cultures that do not seek customer success.

Cultures of responsibility desire activity and hard work. They create a hive of activity where a premium is placed on staying busy. Managers become taskmasters urging others to be responsible in fulfilling tasks. The emphasis on “being responsible” fosters an illusion of accomplishment that treats the completion of the task as achievement of the end result. Action feels good but sometimes it is unnecessary or the wrong action – “**Ready, fire, aim!**”

The confusion between task and result breeds a “*pseudo power*” that holds everyone responsible for tasks, but not for the desired end results (being accountable). In a “responsible culture”, performance shortfalls are excused or blamed on others - “*it’s not my job*” or “*I did what they told me to do*.” These phrases should send “chills up your spine” and have “red flags” everywhere if you’re a results-oriented individual.

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“Being accountable” is a far more powerful approach to performance. It is based on the premise that real power is the power to achieve the desired end-result. Accountability does not ignore tasks; it links task efforts directly to the end-result. It applies the logic of cause-and-effect to the relationship between performance and end-results.

In a culture of accountability, employees gain job satisfaction by performing all necessary activities and tasks until the desired end result is achieved. Accountable managers delegate the desire for results’, accountable departments interact around results and accountable employees attach task efforts to the achievement of end-results. It is “outcomes” that count!

A culture of accountability bases performance on a yes or no proposition; either "did" or "did not" achieve the end-result. There are no crutches, no escape hatches and no tolerance for excuses and blame placing.

The contrast between responsibility and accountability permeates every aspect of performance in an organization. For example, Procurement can be responsible for reordering product versus be accountable for lowering costs and protecting quality. A business development professional can be responsible for making 50 calls per week versus be accountable for closing a specified number of deals to produce a stated sales volume.

A culture of responsibility can be transformed into a culture of accountability by consciously switching from focusing on tasks to focusing on results. This switch needs to occur informally in the myriad of interactions that occur on a daily basis. If every interaction is viewed as an opportunity to instill accountability rather than perpetuate responsibility and if leaders skillfully construct interwoven results commitments rather than loosely knitted task lists, accountability will eventually displace responsibility.

A simple conversion formula that can reshape a vague commitment into a hard-hitting accountability asks; “how much of what, by when and of what quality?” For example, instead of saying, “I’ll get back to you” state “I’ll get back to you on Tuesday at 3:00 pm with accurate production numbers and recommendations for performance improvements.” This becomes a very different discussion provided you deliver results.

“A culture of accountability bases performance on a yes or no proposition”

Informal measures for building a culture of accountability must be accompanied by other steps to embed accountability into the formal systems. For example, performance appraisal process must link to end-results, goals and objectives rather than simple listings of duties and tasks. Similarly, compensation and promotions should link to those who achieve end results and demonstrate unflinching accountability.

If your organization chooses accountability as a cultural attribute, they probably did so because it produces superior performance based on non-negotiable end-results. Leverage and embrace accountability - you will find that it will improve your career, the customer’s experience and ultimately your company’s results.

About Michael Pilnick:

Michael Pilnick is the Global Executive Vice President, Human Resources for First Advantage Corporation, the largest global talent, trust, and background-screening provider with 4,100+ employees in 27 offices in 12 countries serving more than 227 countries and territories.



He is commercially focused Global HR Executive with particular expertise in helping organizations achieve the highest return on their investment in human capital. Michael is a strategic thinker with a highly pragmatic, creative, and entrepreneurial approach in transforming an organization and its resources to drive growth. For the past 25 years, he has driven organizational change and has been a trusted advisor and partner to CEO’s and fellow senior leaders in both public and PE owned businesses.