



Leaders Must Accept Their Accountability

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I work with leaders every day and focus on helping them build higher trust in their organizations. One observation I have made over the years is that nearly all leaders are passionate about accountability. They do their best to make sure people in the organization produce the right things in the right ways and hold them accountable for doing so.

Unfortunately, I see very few leaders who are willing to step up to their own accountability. It is just not something that crosses their minds very often. If something is wrong, they will blame the managers, or supervisors, or suppliers, or workers, or the government, or any other person or thing that is handy for the problems that hold the organization back.

The culture of every organization is created at the top and moves through the organization like water flowing down a mountain stream. If there are problems at any level of the organization, the top leader shares culpability because the buck stops at the top, where the source is located.

Let's take a case example and show the stubborn consistency of this theory. Suppose an organization has some delivery problems. They are making large engines to go into military vehicles, and they keep missing the deadlines. The vehicle assembly company is missing their delivery dates because the engines are late. Financial penalties are imposed, and the profitability is impacted to the degree that the CEO is alarmed. He demands to know who is accountable for the delays.

He finds out that some of the suppliers have been sending low quality parts that require a lot of rework. The purchasing manager is called on the carpet for not creating a more specific quality specification. The incoming inspection manager is faulted for not catching the errors at the receiving dock.

The CEO calls in the production manager and demands to know why productivity on the line is down by 18% this year. The manager tells the CEO that people are really upset because of no raises in 3 years.

The CEO wanders out on the production line and sees 9 engines lined up to be reworked. He chews out the quality inspector who tries to explain that the finish on the cylinder bores is too rough. He also notices that there is a lot more clutter than normal on the production floor and asks the supervisor why, only to find out the cleaning crew has staged an informal work slowdown. They take extended breaks and goof off, and their supervisor lets them get away with working only a couple hours a day.

By now the CEO is fuming. It is obvious why things are going wrong in every corner of the building. People at all levels are not doing the right things, and the whole organization is over budget, late, and producing a low quality product.

Now suppose this CEO decided to bring in a consultant to help get things back on track. He tells the consultant that all of the managers and supervisors need some basic training in how to do their jobs better and how to “motivate the troops.” The consultant decides to do some checking before making a recommendation. She spends a few days looking at the data and talking with people all over the operation, then she reports back her assessment.

The CEO meets with the consultant, and is all ears on what needs to be done to bring the operation back into control. The consultant recommends that the CEO push his chair back from his desk, stand up, walk down the hall and go into the men’s room. She suggests he take a good long look in the mirror at the source of his problems and ask himself some tough questions such as the following:

- Morale is terrible in this plant, and as the CEO, how have I been contributing to this problem?
- What is keeping me from fully holding myself accountable for this awful situation?
- In what ways have I been trying to lay the blame on the supervisors, employees, bad economy, suppliers, business downturn, competition, etc., and how can I deal with the current situations and business environment in a more empowering and effective way for all concerned?
- What fundamental changes in the structure, behaviors, values, and vision am I going to make to completely change the environment?
- What behaviors do I need to change at my level, starting right now, to build a culture of higher *trust*?
- In what ways can I change the attitudes of the workers by changing my own attitudes and behaviors?

- Since bonuses, or picnics, or parties, or hat days are not going to have much impact on long term motivation, how can I find out what really will inspire people and then implement the proper changes to the environment?
- How can I be a better mentor for my supervisors as well as train them to be better mentors to their own staff?
- How am I going to find a way to quadruple the time I have available to communicate with people?
- Do I need assistance to solve these issues? If so, what kind of help could I use and where can I find it?
- How can I know if, or when, it is time to pursue other opportunities and let someone with a different skill set handle the turnaround? Maybe someone else should be leading this company, since I have messed it up so badly.

Now the CEO is faced with an awful truth: the root cause of the problem is him. If he heeds the advice of the consultant, it means he needs to start by holding himself accountable, but that hurts too much. It is so much easier to spot the symptoms and hold everyone else accountable. Unfortunately this CEO is not likely to hire that consultant, yet the advice he is hearing is spot on.

If we can get more top leaders to view their responsibility as creating a great culture where things work because everyone in the organization is turned on by the vision and trust in leadership is high, then excellence is possible. It takes a wise and humble leader to view his or her role as creator and maintainer of the culture. Those who can do it will thrive, those who simply blame others will eventually fail.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him** at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

