

Leadership Barometer 157 Leaders Must Accept Accountability

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Few leaders are capable of accepting accountability. I work with leaders every week 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 make sure people in the organization produce the right things in the right ways.

Accountability at the top is rare

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 others for the problems that hold the organization back.

The culture of organizations originates at the top and moves through the layers like a stream of water. If there are problems at any level of the organization, the top leader shares culpability because the buck stops at the top. That is where the source is located.

Case Example

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 deadlines.

The CEO calls in the production manager. He 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.

As the CEO wanders out on the production line, he sees nine engines lined up to be reworked. He chews out the female quality inspector. She tries to explain that the finish on the cylinder bores is too rough.

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. 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. They need more discipline and understanding of 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.

Consultant Advice

The consultant asks the CEO what portion of the problem happened by his decisions and actions in the past. She suggests he take a good long look in the mirror at the source of his problems. 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, and other factors?
- How can I deal with the current situations in a more empowering way?
- What fundamental changes in the structure, behaviors, values, and vision am I going to make?
- What behaviors do I need to change, starting right now, to build a culture of higher *trust*?

Now the CEO is facing an awful truth; the root cause of the problem is him. 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.

We need to get more top leaders to view their responsibility as creating a great culture. Excellence is possible because everyone in the organization is excited by the vision and trust in leadership is high. 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. The ones who simply blame others will struggle and eventually fail.

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