

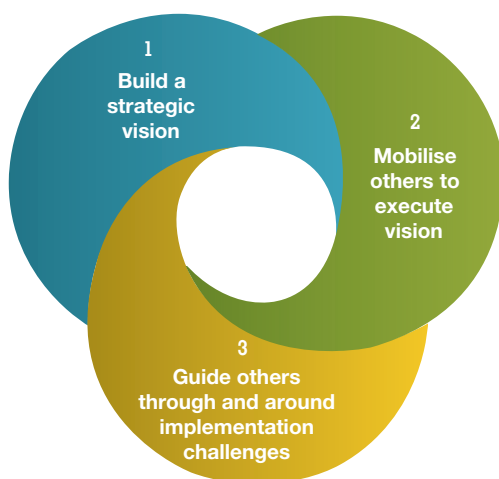
Creating a Culture of Engagement and Accountability

Authoried by
Tom Rose, Ph.D., Executive Consultant, The Forum Corporation

What Great Leaders Do

Executives and their leadership teams do three big things. They build a strategic vision, they mobilise an organisation to execute that vision, and they guide an organisation through and around implementation challenges that occur in making that vision a reality.

Three Priorities of Leadership



In pursuing this threefold agenda, leaders actively cultivate a context that both engages others and promotes their accountability—this includes junior colleagues, peers, and senior colleagues.

Today's Challenge

To address today's pressing challenges most leaders and their executive teams have crafted strategic visions for how to win the hearts and minds of customers and secure profitable growth. While many have confidence in the vision, they have much less in its execution.^{1,2}

Many executives worry that their organisations will not successfully execute the plans needed to make the strategic vision a reality. They foresee implementation challenges.

People will have to do new things or familiar things differently. They will also need to drive results within tight timelines and budgets while negotiating the challenges of working with global and often remote teams.

To succeed, people and teams will have to:

- Exert high levels of discretionary effort to achieve results
- Ensure that commitments are clear so that one has the ability to follow through on them successfully
- Persist in the face of setbacks
- Respond effectively to others who have not honoured a commitment
- Nimbly adjust plans to deal with emerging challenges
- Admit mistakes to keep an initiative on track while preserving credibility
- Advocate for changes in policies or practices that are interfering with an organisational value or goal

Executives worry that these behaviours will not occur and that strategic initiatives are at risk. Many of us recognise that these practices are the behavioural outcomes of an engaged and accountable workforce.

Forum's Definition of Accountability

Leveraging the best of the existing definitions of accountability in the marketplace and Forum's own insight, we define accountability as honouring the commitments we make to others.

Forum's definition is ... honouring the commitments we make to others.

A number of definitions of accountability exist in the marketplace.

Lerner and Tetlock³ emphasize the importance of being called upon to justify one's beliefs, feelings and actions to others. Hickman, Smith, and Connors⁴ highlight the obligation to report and explain one's actions to coworkers. Samuel⁵ and McKinsey & Company⁶ emphasise trusting in and counting on others to do what they are supposed to do, and, as McKinsey researchers add, doing so in a fair manner. Klatt, Murphy, and Irvine⁷ explain that accountability includes commitments that are made to oneself as well as to others.

Accountable behaviour is important on a daily basis, in big moments, on small projects, as well as large initiatives. Accountability is most significant when expressed as timely follow through on commitments despite shifting priorities, conflicting goals, and role ambiguity. Highly accountable people overcome personal discomforts (e.g., being assertive, resolving team conflicts, etc.) to fulfil commitments they make to others.

This formulation elevates the concept beyond being a reliable partner to being someone who can be counted on to do the right thing in difficult situations.

Defining what the lack of accountability looks like sharpens our definition because accountability is often best recognised when it is absent. Gibson⁸ describes the lack of accountability as ...

- Giving Excuses
- Blaming Others
- Putting Off Important Things
- Doing the Minimum
- Acting Confused
- Playing Helpless

Leaders are naturally focused on getting employees to be accountable when they are not. The response to a lack of accountability includes assertive communication about expectations, providing consequences for the lack of accountable behaviour, and negotiating how an unmet commitment will be addressed. Interestingly, addressing such issues with direct reports is a persistent developmental challenge of leaders regardless of level.⁹

Effective leaders focus on accountable behaviour on a broader basis—on the teams, divisions, and business units they lead.

Insights from Pulse Survey

In this section, we outline the results from our August 2014 pulse survey, which was conducted to create initial insights into a new possibility for how we best serve today's global leaders. This survey extends our previous point of view on employee engagement published earlier this year.

New Insights

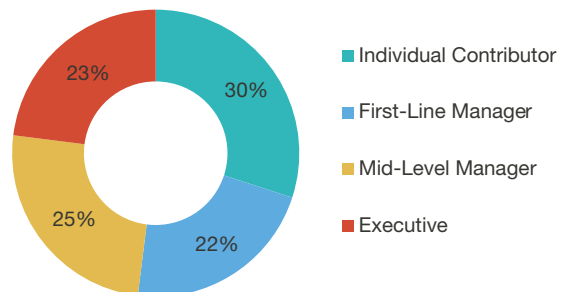
Our August pulse survey asked about engagement and accountability, and we looked at these concepts from an individual, leadership, and organisational perspective. From this work we draw the following conclusions.

- Leaders have not yet harnessed the untapped potential for accountability that resides in their organisations.
- Engagement and accountability are linked. Motivation for discretionary effort (engagement) is linked to fulfilling commitments to others and doing the right thing in challenging circumstances (accountability).
- There are common organisational accountability gaps that leaders can close.
- The most immediate tools for promoting accountability, performance management, and coaching, are under leveraged and can be used to better effect.
- There are common skill gaps that limit accountable engagement but can be addressed with the right development.

Survey Sample

Our sample represents a balanced cross section of individual contributors, first-line leaders, middle-level leaders, and executives.¹⁰

The first question we answered is “How much untapped potential for engaged and accountable behaviour exists today?”



Forum's formulation of engagement emphasises the motivation to give discretionary effort. We found that 22.3 percent of people reported themselves to be highly engaged. We also asked about accountability. We found that a small group reported the highest levels of accountability.

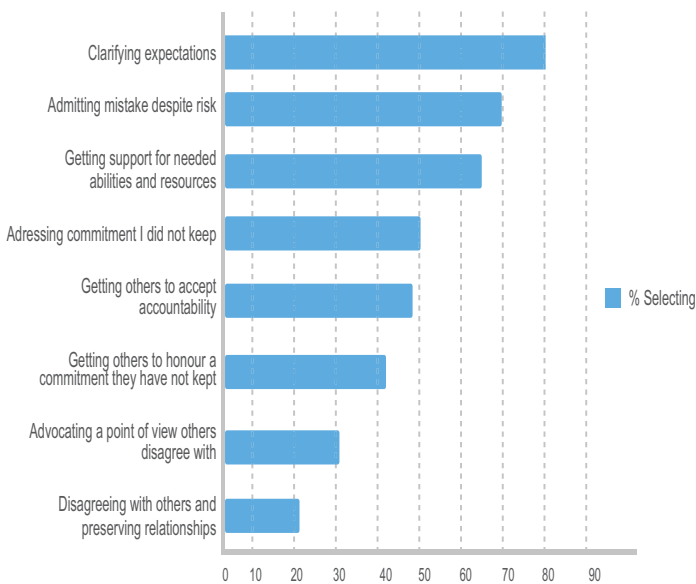
18%
of people reported the highest levels of accountability in their organisations

Linkage Between Accountability and Performance

For accountability to be an important leadership concept, it must be linked to both individual and organisational performance.

Individual Performance

There are several aspects of accountability that our respondents indicated are related to personal performance. Two thirds of our survey respondents reported that setting clear expectations with others, getting alignment on goals, and admitting mistakes were most related to personal performance.



Organisational Performance

We consulted the work of colleagues to document the connection between accountability and organisational performance. In a recent survey concerning the execution of strategic initiatives, McKinsey & Company identified two key success factors.¹¹

- Continuous Improvement During Implementation Phase
- Achieving and Maintaining Clarity

During the implementation phase of strategic initiatives, people discover that estimates for time and effort needed to accomplish tasks were not adequate, that unanticipated events have disrupted the ability to fulfil project tasks, and that competing priorities are shifting access to needed resources. These discoveries threaten mission-critical results.

While effective organisations do their utmost to ensure that implementation plans are well developed, they also recognise that agility is critical to keeping strategic initiatives on track.¹² They need accountable action from their teams.

Accountability begins with getting answers to questions like these:

- What are the new commitments that will support achievement of project outcomes?
- How do these translate to teams and individuals?

Clarity is important because its absence gives rise to negative organisational politics, politics that suppress accountable behaviour. In highly political environments, employees strive to minimally meet the needs of the multiple stakeholders to whom they are accountable, but in doing so, do not perform to their full potential.¹³

Leadership Behaviours that Impact Accountability

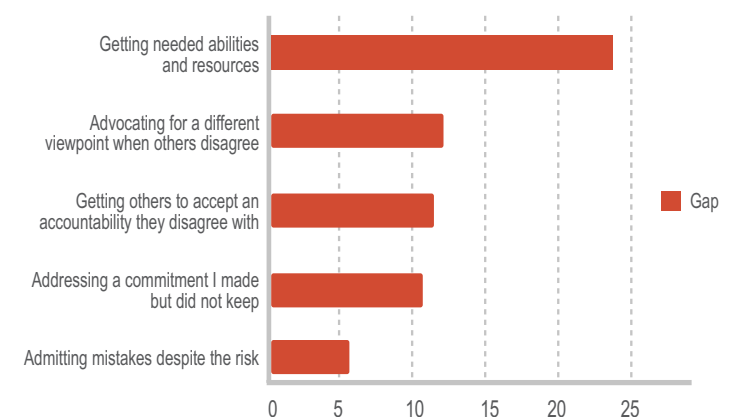
Several leadership practices influenced accountable behaviour in our survey. Leaders ...

- Keep Their Promises
- Model Accountability
- Ensure Clear Goals
- Ensure Needed Resources and Abilities

From the work of others like those at Harvard Business School,¹⁴ we find support for the observation that these leadership behaviours are not occurring frequently. Less than half of leaders are seen as behaving in a way that promotes accountable behaviour in their people.

Skill Gaps Associated with Low Accountability

In our survey, we asked about the skills associated with accountability. We found that people who reported lower levels of accountability possess the following skill gaps.

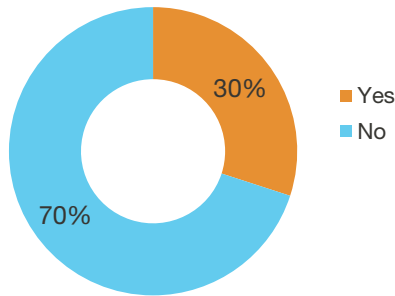


How Organisations Close Accountability Gaps

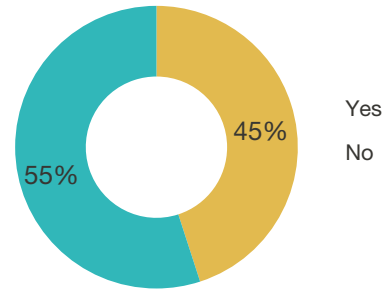
Performance management and coaching are two common practices through which engagement and accountability gaps can be closed. In our sample, a minority of participants indicated that their organisations effectively used both to close key gaps.

There is a need to better support people with effective performance management and coaching.

Use Coaching to Support Accountability



Use Performance Management to Support Accountability



Does Engagement and Accountability Lead to Performance that Matters?

We observed that engagement and accountability are related and are influenced by common drivers (r=.56 to .64, p=.01), including, leaders keeping their promises and ensuring the needed ability and resources. The fact that both concepts share common drivers build confidence in our belief that engagement and accountability should be integrated into a new formulation. We capture this formulation with the equation:

$$\text{Engagement} + \text{Accountability} = \text{Performance that Matters}$$

Helping Today's Leaders

How do we help leaders ensure that people are behaving accountably? How do we optimise the success of the mission-critical priorities that must be accomplished through others? Forum's answer is that we can help leaders with the insights, tools, and skills needed to promote key strategy execution behaviours. We can support leaders by emphasising the linkages we depict below.



Leadership priorities and skills lead to leadership behaviours (1). Employee priorities and skills also lead to employee behaviours (2). Company culture and climate strengthens or weakens the linkages between priorities/skills and behaviour for both leaders and employees (3). Research on the interplay between personal characteristics and organisational culture on such topics as innovation, quality, and service, reinforces our perspective.¹⁵ The bottom line is that organisational context has a significant impact on the linkages that lead to accountable behaviour (4).

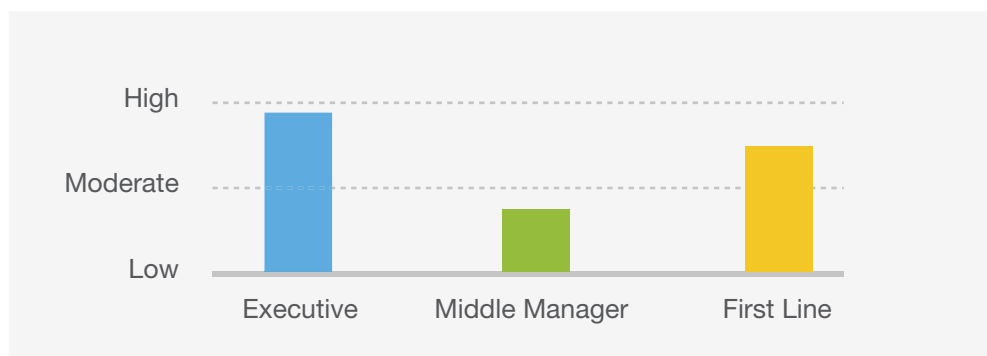
We outline the performance that matters behaviours in the following figure. When people in organisations adopt these behaviours, we contend that organisations will achieve results that matter.



An Intriguing Finding

In our research, the strength of this association between accountability and engagement varied by management levels as depicted below. The relationship between engagement and accountability was much lower for middle managers than for executives and first-line leaders.

Strength of Relationship



($r=.34$ and $.29$ for executives and first-line leaders respectively and $r=.16$ for mid-level leaders, $p=.01$).

We wonder if this relationship is explained by the tension between two key components of what mid-level leaders do. Middle managers are caught between the need to translate broad goals and means into action and the shifts in priorities and resources that occur once plans are in motion. Is it this “rock and a hard place” predicament that suppresses the relationship between accountability and engagement? We are planning further research to test our understanding of this dynamic. Testing this hypothesis is so important as middle-level leaders are the mechanism through which strategic vision becomes reality.

Beyond Hoping for Heroism

Leaders who do not adopt these performance that matters behaviours must count on heroism from a few special employees to execute strategic initiatives successfully. Surveys of executive confidence in the successful implementation of strategic initiatives suggest that most recognise that this hope is not good enough to make their vision for business success a reality. By creating the proper work environment, leaders help increase the odds that the 60 percent of solid performers in their organisations will behave like the top 20 percent of high performers. One of the effective strategies for promoting organisational success is to help the middle tier perform like the top tier.



Organisations that implement development programmes focused on goal alignment, assertiveness, contracting, conflict management, and coaching build the necessary skills for engaged and accountable behaviour.

How We Close the Gap: Forum's 6 for 60

Forum believes we can help leaders close their accountability gaps and create a culture of engagement and accountability. We have extracted a set of prescriptions from our research, which we refer to as 6 for 60. These include the following:

- Setting clear goals
- Building alignment on how goals will be achieved
- Advocating for the resources and abilities needed for success
- Admitting mistakes to advance problem solving while preserving credibility
- Resolving dilemmas
- Coaching accountable action

Through these practices people in organisations establish contracts, ensure the condition that are needed to fulfil them are present, as well as give and receive feedback that keeps commitments on track.

Leaders that follow these prescriptions will be able to count on a greater proportion of their teams acting in a highly engaged and accountable fashion than the approximately 20 percent of respondents in our survey that are highly engaged and accountable.

Enhancing a Culture of Engagement and Accountability in the Workplace

An important additional support is to provide leaders an index or measure that can guide their efforts to build and maintain a work environment that achieves "performance that matters." Employee surveys help pinpoint the strengths and weakness of a given work environment. We propose a revised survey approach that integrates accountability and engagement into a new index of leadership impact. This index can be used to evaluate and document the impact of leadership within an organisation.

Summary

The Forum Corporation has opened the door to a refreshed concept for enhancing leadership: performance that matters. This concept incorporates elements of accountability and engagement. The leadership behaviours associated with this concept are most important. When leaders model and drive clarity, alignment, candour, integrity, trust, and even courage, they foster performance that matters.

Executive teams that promote performance that matters as described in this point of view have the best chance of overcoming their concerns that the strategic initiatives to which they have committed will not succeed.

Endnotes

1. "Senior executives express deep concerns about their companies' strategies and their ability to execute them," <http://www.strategyand.pwc.com>
2. R. Lepsinger, (2010) *Closing the Execution Gap*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
3. J. S. Lerner & P. E. Tetlock, (1999) "Accounting for the effects of accountability," *Psychology Bulletin*, 125, pp. 255-275.
4. C. Hickman, T. Smith & R. Connors, (1998) *The Oz principle: Getting results through individual and organization accountability*, New York: Penguin.
5. M. Samuel, (2001) *The Accountability Revolution: Achieve Breakthrough Results in Half the Time*, Facts on Demand Press.
6. A. D. Smet, B. Schaninger & M. Smith, (2014) "The hidden value of organizational performance and how to capture it," *McKinsey Quarterly*, April.
7. B. Klatt, S. Murphy & D. Irvine, (1998) *Accountability: Getting a Grip on Results*, Alberta, Canada: RedStone Publishing.
8. K. Gibson, (2000) Excuses, excuses, excuses: Moral slippage in the work place," *Business Horizons*, pp. 43, 6, 65-72.
9. D. Guangrong, K. Yang & K. De Meuse, (2011) "Leadership competencies across organizational levels: a test of the pipeline model", *Journal of Management Development*, 30, pp. 366-380
10. Our sample included 600 respondents, and our analysis was based on the 404 complete responses we received.
11. Excerpt from "Implementing Change with Impact," 2014 McKinsey report.
12. J. Davis, H. Frechette & E. Boswell, (2010) *Strategic Speed: Mobilise People, Accelerate Execution*, Harvard Business School.
13. H. Simon, (1945) *Administrative Behavior*, New York and Tempe, Arizona: Free Press.
14. D. Overfield & R. Kaiser, (2012) "One of Every Two Managers Is Terrible at Accountability," HBS Blogs, November.
15. E. Myron, M. Erez & E. Naveh, (2004) "Do personal characteristics and cultural values that promote innovation, quality and efficiency compete or compliment each other?" *The Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, pp. 175-199.

Forum is a recognised global leader in linking learning to strategic business objectives. Our tailored learning solutions help organisations effectively execute business strategies by focusing on their most important asset: people. We provide clients with practical and research-based sales and leadership development training programmes that mobilise employees, accelerate business-initiative implementation, and improve agility.

For more information, visit www.forum.com.

© 2014 The Forum Corporation.