

Create a Culture of Accountability

By Roger Connors and Tom Smith

While the idea of accountability often has a negative connotation, this article provides a fresh and positive perspective on the concept of holding employees accountable for achieving desired results.

How do you feel when someone holds you accountable? Chances are you feel like you're in trouble, like you let your team down or missed an important item on the balance sheet. Unfortunately, most people view accountability as something that belittles them or happens when performance wanes, problems develop, or results fail to materialize. In fact, many think accountability only crops up when something goes wrong or when someone else wants to pinpoint the cause of the problem, all for the sake of pinning blame and pointing the finger. When things are sailing along smoothly and failure has not yet sunk the ship, people rarely ask, "Who is accountable for this success?" Only when the hull springs a leak does anyone start looking around for the responsible party.

Not surprisingly, most dictionaries present a definition of accountability that promotes this somewhat negative view. Consider Webster's definition: "subject to having to report, explain, or justify; being answerable, responsible." Notice how the definition begins with the words "subject to," implying little choice in the matter. This confession-oriented and powerless definition suggests what we all have observed — accountability is viewed

as a consequence for poor performance; it's a principle you should fear because it can only end up hurting you. Since most people experience accountability this way, it's no wonder they spend so much time shunning it and explaining and justifying poor results. A more positive and powerful definition of accountability can do more to achieve outstanding results than all the finger pointing and blaming in the world.

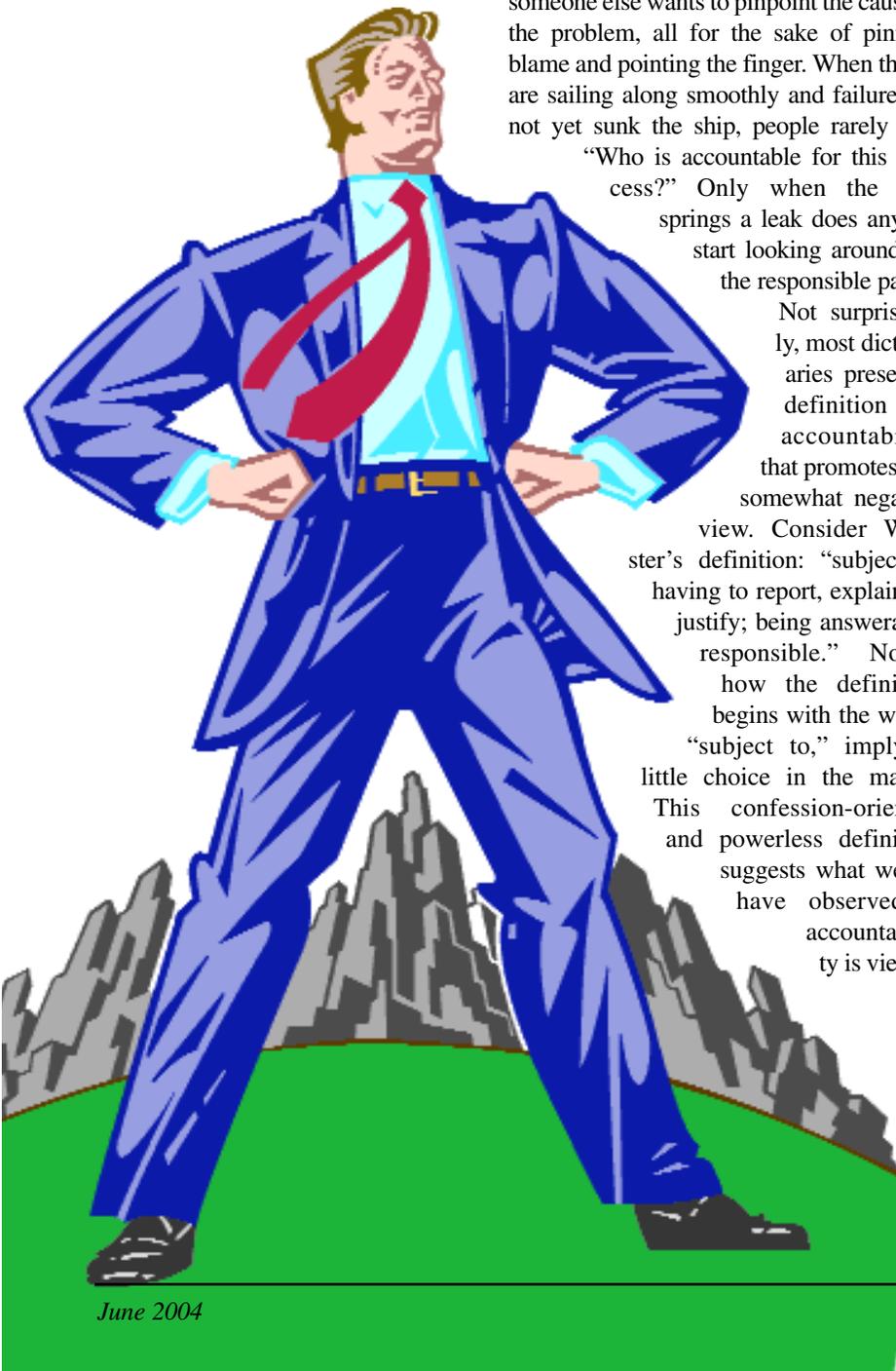
Consider the following new definition of accountability: "A personal choice to rise above one's circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for achieving desired results — to *See It, Own It, Solve It, and Do It.*"[®] This definition includes a mindset or attitude of continually asking, "What else can I do to rise above my circumstances and achieve the results I desire?" It involves a process of seeing it, owning it, solving it, and doing it, and requires a level of ownership that includes making, keeping, and answering for personal commitments. Such a perspective embraces both current and future efforts rather than reactive and historical explanations. Armed with this new definition of accountability, you can help yourself and others do everything possible to both overcome difficult circumstances and achieve desired results.

Accountability in Action: The ALARIS Story

As hard as he tried, Dave Schlotterbeck, CEO of ALARIS Medical Systems, just could not get the organization to perform. ALARIS Medical Systems, a company with \$500 million in revenues and 2,900 employees worldwide, had resulted from the merger of two medical device companies. While this combination should have produced strength and great potential, a huge debt load and under-performance stalled all efforts at realizing that potential.

Overall, the company had missed both top and bottom line performance numbers for three years running. Nothing Schlotterbeck did made any difference. He described his frustration by saying, "These

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were problems that I was personally giving a lot of attention to, in fact higher levels of attention than I had given to anything in the company, but regardless of the approach I took personally, I really saw no improvement.”

The breakthrough at ALARIS was the result of focused effort at every level of the organization. Through a series of cross-functional feedback sessions held between operations, sales, customer care, quality and service, individuals confronted the group with hard facts that many did not want to hear. These sessions helped everyone to “*See It*” and build greater cooperation. People recognized the problem and how they could personally change it. Employees overcame the natural barriers of functional expertise and preferences and aligned themselves for the common good. Powerful forces went to work – forces that improved performance in dramatic ways. The common goal of getting *Above The Line*® to capture these advantages preoccupied every leader and team.

With the organization hitting and, in many cases, exceeding their quarterly numbers for the first time since the merger, Wall Street rewarded this impressive turnaround with an equally impressive increase in stock price – a whopping 900 percent. Capturing this success, in May 2003, *Money Magazine* listed ALARIS as the top performing stock for the last 12 months on all three major stock exchanges. The company had finally attained a culture of accountability in which everyone *wanted* to do and achieve more.

Set Clearly Defined Results

The first step towards *Creating A Culture Of Accountability*® is to define clear results within your organization. Whether you have a goal number to meet in sales, a specified delivery period for your product, or a minimum return on investment to achieve, make sure you know what result you need to reach. Once you’ve decided on a company-wide goal, make it clear to all your man-

agers and employees from the bottom to the top ranks. Everyone must know what they’re working for and how their job pushes the company forward.

Next, management must generate joint accountability for results. Joint accountability occurs when everyone in the company assumes accountability for the result. In an environment of joint accountability, it is impossible for anyone even to think, let alone say, that he has done his job if the team has not achieved its targeted result. It is also impossible for anyone to think or say that she has achieved her individual result if the company has not achieved its result. Leaders can create joint accountability by targeting a clear result, driving the result through the company, and holding everyone accountable for achieving the result and not just doing his or her job. Joint accountability demands that everyone become accountable for producing the results the company must achieve.

Achieve Results, Rather Than Do the Job

How many times have you heard a leader in real-life or fiction demand: “I don’t care how you do it. Just get it done!” Many times, organization charts and job descriptions push people into boxes. They give people the idea that they are getting paid and using their skills to perform a defined function or set of tasks. The task-oriented mindset leads people to believe that if they perform their functions they’ve done what they’re supposed to do, whether or not the result was achieved.

On the other hand, effective leaders operate on the premise that their people must focus on achieving the result. They lead people beyond the boundaries of their jobs and inspire them to relentlessly pursue results by creating an environment that motivates them to ask, “What else can I do?” over and over until the results are achieved. Rather than treating the circles as mutually exclusive, they manage their people so that their “job” is

to achieve the results. The daily activities that comprise people’s jobs must then be consistently in alignment with the targeted results. This mindset can become part of the culture only if people understand the results they are supposed to achieve in the job they are to perform.

Accountable for the Future

Remember, only when you assume full accountability for your thoughts, feelings, actions, and results can you direct your own destiny; otherwise, someone or something else will. It should come as no surprise that the real value and benefit of accountability stems from a person’s or an organization’s ability to influence events and outcomes before they happen. The customary view of accountability fails to recognize that people can gain more from a proactive posture than from a reactive one.

This new view of accountability can help revitalize businesses, strengthen competitiveness of corporations, heighten innovation, improve the quality of products and services produced by companies, and increase the responsiveness of organizations to the needs and wants of customers and constituents. When you use these methods for *Creating A Culture Of Accountability* in your organization, you will achieve the results you want and everyone in your organization will be there to help you along the way. ■

Roger Connors and Tom Smith are the principals of Partners In Leadership, LLC, an international management consulting and training company. They are the authors of two books, including the best-seller, *The OZ Principle: Getting Results Through Individual and Organizational Accountability*. For more information on their Accountability Training workshops, keynotes, and management conferences, contact them at www.ozprinciple.com or (800) 504-6070.