Accountability
GETTING A GRIP ON RESULTS
“Everyone on a team knows who is and who is not performing, and they are looking to you as the leader to see what you are going to do about it.”

Colin Powell, former US Secretary of State
Successful people are oriented toward results. They understand that while “working hard” may be a necessary component to success, it’s simply not good enough. They want to do more than merely “do a good job.” Successful people have a bone-deep commitment to actually bringing value to their relationships. They don’t just get there on time. They finish well. They are self-motivated. They go beyond getting the job done. Successful people understand that if it’s their area, function, or project, they are accountable. They know that the organization is depending on results and they have made a personal promise to deliver. Everyone in an organization, from the Chief Executive Officer to the janitor, has some piece of the business and a corresponding set of results that are theirs to achieve. Busy-ness is not enough. Accountability for results is more than simply completing a list of activities. It’s about taking ownership for your contribution to the organization and achieving results that drive the business forward. Ultimately, successful people know that when it comes to success, results are the name of the game. And while successful people achieve results, successful leaders achieve results through others.
Accountability: Getting A Grip On Results, the last of our Four Pillars of Accountability™, gets to the core of what leadership is ultimately about: achieving results through others. In previous e-books we have discussed your first three accountabilities as a leader: Building Trust, Gaining Clarity, and Engaging Employees. But if you can’t get results, you won’t be a successful leader. Based on more than thirty years of our work with organizations, this e-book offers a practical, useable process for getting a grip on results.
Before reading further, stop and reflect upon the process your organization currently uses to manage expectations and achieve results. Ask yourself how it’s working, with the following questions as a guide:

- Does it inspire people?
- Does it increase trust?
- Does it build alignment on your team?
- Does it improve communication?
- Does it give people clarity about their role and about expectations and promises to each other?
- Does it energize people?
- Does it get a grip on results?
- Does it provide autonomy?
If you aren’t answering “yes” to these questions, we suggest your current performance management system might be in some need of improvement. The process we outline below has been used in many organizations to replace performance reviews and job descriptions and has become their fundamental performance management system. You can replace your current system with these elements or use them to assess and strengthen your system for managing expectations.
Why is it so difficult to get people to be accountable?

We have found six reasons why people aren’t accountable, and why leaders have a tough time holding people accountable. You have to get over these stumbling blocks to start getting the results you need. Our strategy and process, found in the second half of this e-book and in our online program, will help you to rise above each of these barriers. But it’s important that we start by briefly examining them.
1 Too many activities; not enough results

Accountability starts by clarifying the results that are required. Most organizations are so consumed with activities of “fire-fighting” that accountability has become both nonexistent and exasperating. Inasmuch as you will find that accountability averts organizational “fire-fighting,” real firefighters provide a great example. Think about activities versus results for firefighters. If your house is on fire, you need results. Put out the fire and protect the people, fast! Imagine your reaction if the firefighter were to complete the prescribed list of activities—blast the siren, drive fast, hook up the water, run up the ladder, guide the hose—and then drive away, fire blazing. Of course, that’s not what happens. The firefighter doesn’t just perform a list of activities. The firefighter does whatever is necessary to achieve results. There’s no leaving until everyone is safe and the fire is permanently out. That’s accountability.
2 Too much ambiguity; not enough clarity

We learned in the first obstacle that until you have clarity, you won’t have accountability. Clarifying results starts with distinguishing results from activities. Differentiating results from activities, built on awareness of why we do what we do is a challenging shift in thinking for most organizations. Traditional job descriptions are worded in terms of activities. Rarely do they mention results. For example, an accountant’s job description includes activities such as “conducting efficient audits” or “preparing bank reconciliations.” An accountant’s Accountability Agreement on the other hand, speaks about a broader, more powerful result such as “the financial integrity of the organization.”
Not only must you be clear about the operational results you expect from yourself and your employees, you have to take the time to be clear about the kind of behaviours you expect from people. How will people know if they are living the values that your organization espouses? Results aren’t just about a person’s job. Results are also about the way they do their job.

When people are not clear about their expected results, it can often lead to managers being ambiguous about how to hold people accountable. Even when the importance of achieving results is understood, many managers don’t understand the process for getting there. They assign tasks without a firm plan in mind and hope that the employee will “figure it out” and accomplish what is expected of them. As John Spence, author of *Awesomely Simple: Essential Business Strategies For Turning Ideas Into Action*, so eloquently puts it, “hope is not a strategy.”
3 Too much politeness; not enough honesty

Most people find it easier to be polite than to be honest. To hold people accountable, you have to be willing to be honest and respectful. Having the difficult conversations is a skill that is underdeveloped for most managers. It’s frankly not enjoyable, and it’s not easy to tell someone they’re not doing a good job and they are not meeting the organization’s expectations. In our accountability process we’ll show you how to make this easier.

Another aspect of the difficulty in being honest is that managers simply don’t want to be the fall guy. Many managers are reluctant to hold their people accountable, not because they don’t think it’s a good idea, they simply don’t want to be seen as an unkind boss. A recent Harvard study showed that many managers who are hoping to get promoted refrain from holding their people accountable because they want to get good performance feedback and stay in line for promotion rather than risk getting negative reviews from their direct reports which may impede their climbing the organizational ladder.
4 Too many excuses; not enough ownership

Just as it’s easy to come up with excuses for not being accountable, it’s easy to come up with excuses for not holding people accountable. Here are a few we have heard over the years:

- “We work in a bureaucracy with rules and policies that don’t give us any leverage to hold people accountable.”
- “We could never fire someone around here.”
- “I don’t have the support from my boss.”
- “While we understand that consequences are required for accountability, we work in a unionized environment that wouldn’t allow us to exercise consequences.”
- “We are under budget with restraints that prohibit us from rewarding people who are accountable.”

The list goes on and on. But, while accountable people may have reasons, they don’t have excuses. They take ownership to learn to hold people accountable in spite of the challenges and potential barriers.
5 Too much resignation; not enough passion

If a clear, explicit process for accountability doesn’t make people accountable, then passion gives you a reason to be accountable. Telling people to set goals, measure results, and benchmark progress just for the sake of “being accountable,” will sooner or later result in drudgery. And drudgery won’t sustain accountability. While not every aspect of your job has to be filled with exquisite enjoyment, it is vital to have a conversation about the aspects of your work that excite you. If you can foster some degree of passion or purpose or vision in what you do, so that your work fits into a larger context other than simply producing results, there’s a much higher chance of being accountable. Having a reason to achieve results and be accountable can be inspiring, and when people are inspired they are far more likely to be accountable.
Too much mediocrity, not enough tenacity

Even if you help your employees and your team find enough reasons to be accountable, don’t expect it to be easy. Holding people accountable is hard work. Connecting people to their passion, creating clarity, turning activities into results, and identifying specific measures around your employee’s key goals takes a lot of time and effort. Taking time to stop and mentor a struggling employee is time-consuming and takes real effort. Creating a system to track and post information is challenging. Being honest with people when their performance or attitude is unacceptable is extremely difficult, even for the best managers. While we offer a good online program that makes it much easier to hold people accountable, you still have to be willing to invest the time and the effort.

Unfortunately, rather than expend the time and discomfort to hold people accountable, many managers opt for the easier, softer way of mediocrity. But, like exercise, if you don’t sweat a little now, you’ll be perspiring a whole lot more later when you are dealing with a mediocre culture of employees who have been taught to be unaccountable.
7 A lack of tools to build accountability

People don’t have a simple, practical, useable tool for holding people accountable. Elaborate and complicated performance review processes, when they don’t get shelved, might help to set goals, talk about performance, make people uncomfortable, and usually don’t hold people accountable to actually deliver results.

The consequences of a lack of accountability are easy to spot. Most readers will recognize their own versions of these real life experiences:

- An organization becomes comfortably stuck in a culture of non-performance. It becomes an “open secret” that goal-setting is nothing more than a meaningless paper exercise or game. People learn all the acceptable organizational excuses for explaining why they didn’t achieve their goals. Rationalization and excuses are offered and accepted in lieu of results.

- Mistakes are visibly punished and not soon forgotten. Risk-taking is labelled a kamikaze sport, for fools only. Errors are avoided at all costs or at least covered up quickly. Innovation is absent and little learning takes place. Cautious activity replaces results.

- Motivational rewards for exceptional performance barely exceed rewards for the ordinary. Rewards fail to recognize
results in order to ensure average performers don’t feel short-changed, to save evaluation time, and to keep costs down.

- Despite extensive effort from participants, a joint employee-management task force proposal is shelved without explanation. The rumour-mill is active but senior management remains tight-lipped and uncommunicative. Excessive control buries results.

- Managers stifle what they know to be true in order to live by a culture of excessive politeness. In the interests of a superficial harmony, marginal performance is overlooked and thereby subtly reinforced. Avoiding embarrassment and “getting along” replaces results.

- A senior manager’s abusive or unethical behaviour is covered up by his transfer to another department. Nothing more is said regarding the matter. Employees begin to doubt management’s depth of commitment to respect and fair treatment. Denial undermines results.
Many of us complain about the lack of accountability in organizations, yet few are prepared to pay the price that is required to hold themselves and others accountable. Ideally, accountability starts with the CEO and senior executives and slowly develops from there, gradually building experience, confidence, and success. But you don’t have to wait for your boss. The process can start with you. It can start with anyone who is committed to be more accountable. Are you ready to take the leadership challenge?
The tool we are about to give you is called the *Accountability Agreement™* and offers a practical, hands-on approach to overcome these barriers and get you started to build accountability around you.

Accountability Agreements include five elements. If you would like examples that illustrate the use of this template to build Accountability Agreements in various organizational settings, feel free to write us (david@davidirvine.com) and we'll be glad to send you some complimentary examples that we have helped develop with hundreds of leaders.
Element #1. Contribution Statement

For the past decade, we have become increasingly disappointed with traditional performance programs inside organizations that have been forced upon people in an archaic command-and-control, patriarchal approach to accountability, and where accountability has been diminished to a drive for detail and the measurement of exact results for the purpose of fault-finding. Accountability is a critical component of organizational life, but so is survival. Unleashing the potential of your organization and the people within it is far more important than some bureaucratic emphasis on “keeping people accountable.” When people sign up willingly, accountability is effortless because it comes from commitment, rather than compliance. In fact, people will be the first to hold themselves accountable in a genuinely respectful environment.
Our intent, in this first element of an Accountability Agreement is to re-imagine our working relationships in term of a **covenant** rather than a **contract**, one that is built on meaningful personal internal consideration as well as on dialogue between yourself and those who depend on you. This covenant forms the foundation of a meaningful and shared commitment to a cause beyond self-interest, originating from an ongoing inquiry into your authentic self and the nature of your contribution to the world around you.

We learned years ago from Max Depree, the long-time chairman and CEO of Herman Miller (one of the most innovative and admired companies in America), about the difference between a **strategy** and a **legacy**. Max said, “a strategic plan—understanding the value you provide to customers through your unique strengths—is necessary but not sufficient to the full task of leadership. Leaving a legacy—articulating and bringing to life the kind of organization or community that you want to be a part of, or the kind of life you are committed to living, is very different.”

Regardless of what you call this first element, it is the legacy component of personal and organizational leadership that Max is referring to. What matters is that you use this element to step out of your current role and examine carefully how it fits into the broader context of your life. It is a declaration of your accountability, a covenant to yourself and to those you serve, the legacy that you are committed to leave by the authentic life you are living.
We invite you to consider the following areas under this first element:

- What gives you a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment?
- What brings you passion, energy, and meaning in your current role?
- What kind of a person do you want to be known as—and remembered for?
- What is the legacy you most desire to leave?
- What “business within the business” are you in? What is your contribution, the highest value you bring to this organization/relationship? How does this contribution connect to the organization’s mission and vision? (If you were outsourced in this organization, and hired back as a private contractor, how would you describe the value that you bring?)
- How will you contribute to building a better culture here?
Reflecting on and writing a Contribution Statement is intended to give you a sense of *why* you are doing what you are doing. Thus, it is a potential source of energy. It is the passion missing in many traditional performance management processes. It ensures loyalty and commitment. The statement of contribution makes accountability agreements authentic. It gets to what’s in your heart. We will all leave a legacy. The Contribution Statement answers the question, “What will yours be?”

*Note: Your contribution statement, well thought-out and written, becomes your internal compass that guides your service to yourself and to your organization. Every element outlined below must align with your contribution statement. If it doesn’t, then it is mere busy work.*
Element #2. Accountabilities

Accountabilities are your side of the agreement and are the promises that you make to the people who depend on you. They establish a clear understanding of and commitment to what is expected within a specific role. The purpose of this part of the accountability agreement is to clarify expectations. To do that, negotiate and quantify everything possible. All parties should be direct with their requirements, to ensure that their respective expectations are both realistic and workable for all.

There are two kinds of accountabilities; you may choose to implement either or both in your agreement:

1. **Operational Accountabilities** (the “what” of your agreement) are brief, clear statements of the *results* you are promising to deliver; they describe what gets accomplished.

   - What specific outcomes or results do you promise to deliver?
   - What accountabilities are uniquely your own at your level of the organization?
2 **Leadership Accountabilities** (the behaviours you are going to demonstrate to complete your operational accountabilities; the “how” of your agreement.) Leadership accountabilities are a description, also expressed in outcomes, of the work environment—the culture—that you are accountable to create in order to make exceptional performance and greatness possible.

- For both the operational and leadership accountabilities we suggest assigning a *(realistic)* measurement. *Measurements* are descriptions of how and when you will meaningfully assess, quantify and measure how successful you have been in fulfilling the results you are accountable for. Measurements list the different ways to assess your success, with respect to each of your accountabilities. They are the indicators that you are achieving, or not achieving, your results.

- Within each of these accountabilities are specific, short-term goals (usually sixty to ninety days) that will take you toward the achievement of your accountabilities. Accountabilities set the context for goal setting. Goals are measurable or observable results that you promise to accomplish within a given time period. We recommend that you have at least one short-term goal for every accountability.
Element #3. Support Requirements

Support requirements are the accountabilities you require from others to ensure that you will have the support necessary to fulfill your own accountabilities and goals. Just as accountabilities are listed in results language, so, too, are support requirements. Every support requirement has a name attached to it and a request for a specific accountability. This is what locks people into an accountable relationship. Your requests for support will be on someone’s accountability agreement, just as others’ needs for your support will be on your accountability agreement.
Element #4. Consequences

This section describes the consequences regarding what you would like from your organization in return for delivering on your accountabilities. They are a statement of what is important to you, considering what is fair and reasonable within your current environment. There are few better ways to get to know a person—what motivates them and what matters to them—than discussing and negotiating consequences. Although an accountability agreement is often made more powerful by being made public, consequences are normally kept confidential.

To assess consequences, answer the following questions:

- What are you hoping to gain from fulfilling your part of the agreement?

- What recognition is important to you?

- How do you want to be recognized?

- What is reasonable and respectable?

- What happens if you don’t come through – both to you and to the organization?
It is an incorrect assumption that people will always complete their accountabilities. The truth is that, for a number of reasons, “shift happens.” People don’t always deliver what they say they are going to do. Having an honest, respectful discussion about consequences before you have to enforce them, about what happens if you do and don’t do what you say you are going to be accountable for, ensures that no one is blindsided. The earlier and clearer you talk about consequences, both positive and negative, the better.

**Element #5. Follow up**

Follow up is a statement that indicates how your agreement will be maintained as a meaningful and flexible document over time, a true work in progress. When discussing your accountability agreement with those you are accountable to, it is critical to negotiate how often you will need to review your accountability agreement and with whom. For this element, answer the following questions:

- How will you keep this agreement current and ensure it is a “living” document?
- How will you hold yourself accountable?
- How will others hold you accountable?
- How often will you review it? With whom?
Assessing Readiness

No tool can serve as a substitute for leadership. No tool will make a real difference in organizations, or in the working lives of individuals, where leadership and commitment are lacking. While our goal is to encourage you to use Accountability Agreements, we recognize that some organizations are better suited to working with these ideas than others. Where there’s apathy any tool, Accountability Agreements included, will fall flat. There are no shortcuts to commitment. People need to be informed, involved, allowed to influence, and given the right to choose for themselves.

Leadership arises in many places within an organization. Ultimately, however, Accountability Agreements must be compatible with an organization’s culture and supported by key decision-makers if the potential for results is to be realized.

In our experience, these are the five essential leadership qualities that best support accountability agreements. You can use these qualities to assess the readiness of your culture to engage with Accountability Agreements. More importantly, of course, you can assess your own readiness to take the leadership challenge of being accountable:
Leaders seek commitment, they don’t settle for compliance. Leaders have a “whatever it takes” level of intensity and ownership which is characteristic of commitment.

Leaders focus on results, not activities. Expect resistance to Accountability Agreements in bureaucratic and steeply hierarchical organizations where looking good is as important as results, and where results within one’s area of authority are stressed over the success of the organization as a whole.

Leaders learn, and help others learn, from mistakes. Accountability Agreements work best in organizations that support risk-taking, and encourage learning rather than punishing mistakes.

Leaders encourage and challenge, they don’t over-control. For Accountability Agreements to be of significant value to organizations, employees need to have elbow-room/autonomy for decision-making. This means leaders must have confidence in the capacity of the people they hire.

Leaders reward courage, not caution. If people aren’t allowed room to fail, then neither will they find room to grow. Courage is required to develop and implement Accountability Agreements. Do you have what it takes?
Getting Started: Take The Leadership Challenge

Our approach for getting a grip on results, the final of the *Four Pillars of Accountability™* has been outlined in this e-book. Now there is an opportunity – and challenge – to step into leadership. Because leadership is about presence, not position, you lead by a decision to make a difference. Acting on this material is exercising leadership. That is the challenge. And here are some suggested next steps:

**Assess the Accountability Gaps, both in your organization and in yourself, including:**

- A lack of *focus* (busyness without clearly defined results)
- A lack of *dependability*, ownership and trust
- Excess *dependency* on positional leaders for direction and support
- A lack of *commitment* to keep promises
- A lack of *passion* and energy in people’s work
- A lack of *clarity* of expectations
• A lack of *courage* to have the tough conversations about performance

• A lack of *support* to accompany promises

• A lack of clearly defined *consequences* to accompany Accountability Agreements

• A lack of *follow-through* on the consequences

**Look at your own habits as a leader. Fill any blatant Accountability Gaps you are responsible for personally:**

• Never make a promise you don’t intend to keep. Scrupulously keep the agreements you make.

• Identify accountability blind spots. Ask trusted advisors to help identify instances where others see that your actions don’t match your intentions.

• Start working on your own Accountability Agreement (you don’t need permission to be accountable).

• Get support in writing your Agreement. Share it with your boss, your direct reports, and your colleagues. Elicit feedback to ensure you’re on the right track.
• Challenge your employees, your team, to write their own Accountability Agreement. Offer support and coaching.

• Follow up on commitments; deliver on your agreements.

• Clarify expectations, both of yourself and others.

• Ask for support in meeting these expectations.

• Get your leadership team aligned around these principles and an accompanying process to make the philosophy real.

You can do all of these things on your own. You have the power, and the ability, to build an accountable, authentic company.
We can help you do it faster, and more completely, if you are committed to setting a tone that fosters accountability, authenticity, trust, and better performance throughout your organization. Here’s how we can help:

- Coaching to help assess your own level of authenticity and personal accountability performance.

- Leadership assessment for you and your direct reports to identify gaps in your accountability and authenticity that are reflected in your staff members’ gaps.

- Assistance for you and your direct reports in writing, aligning and communicating your authentic accountability agreements.

- Customized leadership development programs that promise an increase in accountability and authenticity throughout your organization.
If you are prepared to take the leadership challenge and are committed to building great places to work and live independent of your title, we offer e-books on the other three Pillars of Accountability: *Building Trust*, *Gaining Clarity*, and *Engaging Others*. Honouring these *Four Pillars of Accountability™* will make you a great leader in today’s complex, demanding workplace.
If you need any support on the journey, regardless of your title, we’d love to hear from you. Please visit:

davidirvine.com

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