

Jim's Profit Accelerator 13: Secrets of Accountable Organizations

It was dark o'clock on a Friday night when I received a memorable lesson in accountability. I was a broke 19-year-old student, checking out a cute girl on the sidewalk, when I drove my mom's car into a telephone pole. Accountability with my dad was excruciatingly simple: "I'm glad you weren't hurt. You'll pay the deductible." A man of few words. My guilt was my punishment.

Many of us think of accountability as nailing the person at fault, and it can be that, but that won't help your organization grow. The fallout from "nailing" others includes hiding, CYA, broken communication, sliding results, and finger-pointing. Those are certainly not signs of a winning organization!

What Is Accountability?

If accountability isn't about nailing the person responsible for mistakes and screw-ups, then what is it? Hopefully a few myths and truths about accountability will shed light here.

Some myths about accountability:

1. It can be imposed by a leader, like the military.
2. People are either accountable or they're not.
3. Follow-up is the main way to achieve it.
4. It is a value, not a skill.
5. It prevents failure.
6. It makes it easy to see who is to blame.
7. It requires the leader to impose consequences for failure.

Some truths about accountability:

1. Most folks want it.
2. It can be taught.
3. It is about who can get credit for a good outcome.
4. It can flourish regardless of leadership style.
5. It is a mindset.
6. It doesn't find root cause, but it may motivate the search.
7. It enables failing fast, the high-speed path to success.
8. It allows people to do more and feel good about it.
9. It requires skilled delegation.
10. It does require following up, sometimes with consequences.

Accountability and Results

Do you believe the myth that accountability is the foundation of a successful organization? In fact, it's a good start, but it won't change anything by itself.

Accountability isn't enough when:

- It's a way to find someone to blame.
- It's a substitute for finding root cause.
- It's a way to recruit an unwilling leader.
- It's unclear whether a team or a person is accountable.
- It ignores problems that reach across teams or departments.
- It is not tied to some kind of measure and objective.
- There's no feedback following performance, good or bad.

Accountability isn't mostly about consequences, and it should almost make consequences unthinkable. In fact, unless consequences are rare, your organization's accountability culture is woefully slack. What to do instead? Try these shortcuts to accountability.

Fast Track to Accountability

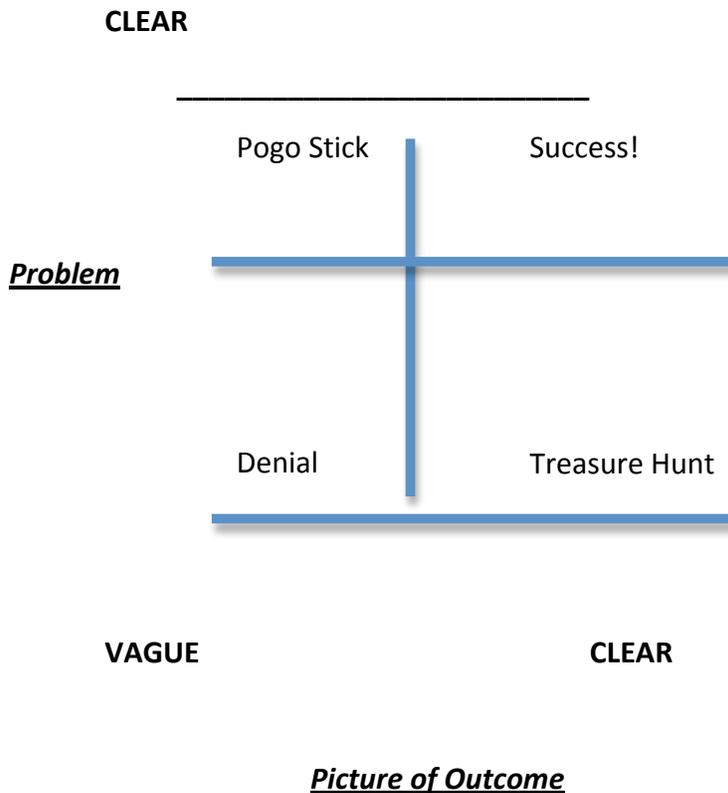
Shortcut 1: Razor-Sharp Delegation

Delegation is like a pass in football or soccer: it doesn't count unless the receiver has possession of the ball and keeps it. That's "ownership," with personal responsibility to do something with it. How do you get "ownership" tied to success?

Success requires both a clear picture of the outcome, and specific problem definition. Here's what it might look like:

- Clear problem but vague outcome: pogo sticking: action going nowhere.
- Vague problem but clear outcome: treasure hunt.
- If both the problem and the outcome vague: denial.
- If the problem and the outcome are clear: success!

Razor-Sharp Delegation



Shortcut 2: Turn on the Light

Overtime in a company was 20 percent too high. Nothing changed it, though many changes were attempted: talking about OT, payroll department listed OT by person, leads were asked to watch at shift-end to get folks to stop work on time, and so forth. Then we turned on the light: We asked for the list of OT by person each day to be *delivered automatically to the computers of every manager who might have a person on that list*. It showed on their screen when they launched their computer, with no extra work. Same data, “magically” appearing. Overtime dropped. Then, managers asked *why* there was OT, which led to efficiency gains!

In your company, what key fact will light up a problem in a score-keeping way?

Shortcut 3: Create Conditions for Success

As a new executive at a large grocery chain, I was invited to help with store design. When I asked why a proposed grocery back room was so small, the answer was, “So they can’t store so much back there!” That trick forced higher turnover and lower inventory in every store, making a huge impact on cash for the company. Here, accountability was induced by creating conditions that ensured accountability —

because it was the easiest action for employees to take. Over-ordering would have multiplied their work dramatically, with no benefit!

Shortcut 4: Clear Up “Why are we doing this?”

Accountability is in each employee’s mind. It may be different from the boss’s mind. Consider this:

- People will do what they think they are **supposed** to do.
- People will do what they think will help achieve **their** purpose.
- People are busy doing **something** much of the work day.
- What people do is driven by what’s in their **heads**.

A company started a cross-functional team to improve production labor efficiency. The basics were good (purpose, focus, commitment), but there was no leadership guidance up front. Their best idea: Ask all employees to vote for the initiative that was most likely to improve production labor efficiency. The result: The team had committed the company to incentives that it couldn’t afford. Ooops! For true accountability, everyone needs to understand the “why.”

Shortcut 5: Set Clear Targets

In one of the companies where I worked, a strong team lead was accountable to start each job on time, based upon its due date. Some jobs were on time, but others were late, incomplete, or even missing! Why? He had conflicting instructions from others, and he was afraid to talk about the conflicts, for fear of getting into trouble. By helping him to come up with a decision rule to choose which job to start next, and by helping him to have the courage to answer the tough questions, work quality and delivery schedule improved.

Shortcut 6: Swap Solving Problems for “Confronting” Problems

The secret to the dreaded “confrontation” is to view it as problem solving. By using clear measures and goals, confronting is reduced to reviewing the facts and helping to make things better. The goal is to be constructive. Here is the easy step by step:

- Get the facts, not opinion
- Note successful activity
- Look forward, not back, to correct the problem:
 - Focus on the facts and activities, not the motive
 - Instead of “Why did you do it?” ask “How did this happen?”
 - Say clearly, “That fell short because...”
 - Ask, “Next time, what will you do?”

Confrontation can either be conflict or it can be a look at the facts. Success depends on clear review of facts, not chasing blame or motivation. Behavior drives success, so look there. Leave motivation (why did you do it?) to therapists. When the goal is to solve problems together, accountability thrives.

Kaiser’s Accountability Home Run

High blood pressure is ubiquitous in the United States (1 in 3 adults) and deadly (348,000 deaths annually) (*CDCP*). A clever Kaiser Permanente program, tested on approximately 300,000 adults, cut

the number with high blood pressure from 56 percent to 20 percent, better than all other U.S. programs (*Oregonian* 8/21/13).

How did they get dramatic accountability from 300,000 people? Their secret outlines a path for any organization:

1. **Define the problem:** Too many adults have high blood pressure.
2. **Delegate clear responsibility for the solution:** This was delegated to a team supporting their 1,800 primary care doctors.
3. **Plan a compelling solution:** Make drugs and checkups cheaper and easier.
4. **Execute powerfully:** A single cheaper drug, along with flexible and free checkups, increased both patient compliance and necessary blood pressure testing.
5. **Check results relentlessly:** Data collection was designed into the program, to track and refine results.
6. **Promptly seek improvement:** When performance slid, the team quickly followed up with doctors to jump-start refinements.

Kaiser borrowed the method used by successful work teams. Adapting systematic delegation for an entire organization offers a powerful path to an accountable culture. What opportunity in your company merits a Kaiser-like accountability focus?

Call me.

For more information, visit www.grewco.com.

Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving businesses provide the foundation for his consulting work as president of the Grew Company. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights on his blog, BizBursts.com: <http://bizbursts.com/>. He holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University.

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