

Accountability drives success

Holding managers accountable for direct reports keeps everyone focused, engaged as they drive towards strategic vision

Accountability is gaining traction. It's a topic frequently in the news and its absence was cited as the source of recent economic woes and popular uprisings.

In an informal survey of about 100 HR directors and managers conducted by Forrest and Company at the 2011 Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA) conference, accountability was tied with coaching as the top HR priority.

It's clear executives in HR and the like are beginning to understand the direct connection between accountability and strategic success.

While this is encouraging, it's also a bit alarming because the buzz may reflect a very limited understanding of what accountability really looks like. Without a complete understanding and, more importantly, a system of accountability, an implementation can forfeit enormous potential.

What is accountability?

In most organizations, accountability looks like this: "You (the employee) have promised to give me (the organization) this unit of work and I give you this much money in exchange for that unit of work." Unfortunately, it is at this point — with accountability defined merely as a hierarchy enforced by contract — most understanding of accountability stops.

There is, however, a more robust application of accountability that energizes organizations as it brings clarity to roles and relationships. This accountability subscribes to the powerful principle all managers are held accountable by their own managers for the output and working behaviour of their direct reports. What is implied is the manager-direct report relationship ensures work gets done and done well.

Additionally, since the manager-direct report relationship is a universal hierarchy, expressly defining the terms of that rela-



GUEST COMMENTARY

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tionship allows clarity to flow through the entire organization, from CEO to the front line.

This becomes a system of accountability where employees at all levels have the clarity they need (and want) to get work done efficiently and effectively.

Accountability versus responsibility

Accountability and responsibility shouldn't be confused. Responsibility is an internal and personal sense of obligation, whereas accountability is external and mutually agreed upon. The relationship between a donor and a beneficiary, for example, is based on responsibility, not accountability.

Organizations without a system of accountability will, by default, turn to a system of responsibility to get work done. This is the state of many, perhaps most, organizations today. In a system of responsibility, the value of work rests with employees — doing what is important to them, not necessarily the organization.

Further, without accountability, employees attempting to secure resources to do their work must appeal to their colleagues' sense of responsibility, through charming, bartering and "bending the knee."

Managerial accountability

Holding managers to account for the output and behaviour of direct reports is both the foundation and the multiplier of a system of accountability. Managerial accountability contains the hard logic that, in order for managers to succeed — including, of course, managers of managers — they must enable direct reports to succeed.

The implication is the role of a manager is to manage. Managing can't be an ill-defined and incidental add-on to a role. Rather, it is the very source of strategic success, worthy of concerted development, detailed mechanics for accountabilities and authorities, best practices and frameworks of expectations.

To fulfill their accountability, managers must also manage well. To do so, managers must step out from behind checklists and processes and use judgment and discretion. Managers are hired to make decisions — even unpopular and often very difficult ones.

Managing means not passing off the tough decisions to HR (even if you're in HR) and, yes, sometimes being the bad guy. And to do that effectively, managers must also be leaders, proactively engaging direct reports, coming to know and understand them as individuals, being open and honest with them and demanding the same in return.

The benefits of accountability for human resources

A system of accountability accelerates the achievement of strategy. There are, however, ancillary benefits for HR that go beyond championing a powerful and effective system of organizational transformation.

In a system of accountability, managing behavioural issues falls squarely on the manager-direct report relationship, freeing HR from trying to resolve situations over which it does not have clear authority nor context.

Further, accountability relieves HR and the organization from “dotted line” cross-functional relationships where a lack of clarity about authorities inevitably produces conflict.

An effective implementation of accountability also results in a dramatic improvement of engagement, productivity and

retention. Once employees clearly know to whom and for what they are accountable, they become aligned, focused and engaged. The result is higher engagement without the need for compensation and benefits as a leverage.

For HR, the biggest challenge is securing buy-in from senior executives. The universality of a system of accountability is such that entire organizations could be involved in an implementation and the authority to do so lies at the top of the house.

HR will also be charged with bringing to the table the means to populate an entire

organization with the clarity and managerial leadership needed for people to be continually aligned, focused and engaged as they accelerate toward the achievement of a strategic vision.

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