

The Roles of Leadership in Accountability: *"It's not you, It's me."*



A field research primer into *The Science of Accountability*[™]

What is the role of leadership in enabling people to be accountable?

Whether it is in the workplace, on the athletic field, or in the social world we all occupy—we generally see two types of people, those that take on whatever comes their way, no questions asked, and move forward with success, and those that look to the heavens and bemoan, “Why me?” or “Why not me?” as they look for excuses and shift blame to others for a lack of achievement.

When we're at work we can see employees, peers and leaders fall into similar camps. Some of us have come to say that they are either “above the line” or “below the line,” when it comes to their personal accountability and responsibility.

Above the Line and Below the Line are the defining ideas developed by Roger Connors, Tom Smith, and Craig Hickman, co-authors of “The Oz Principle: Getting Results Through Individual and Organizational Accountability,” a 1994 leadership book focused on accountability and results. Above and Below the Line gave the business world a vernacular to address accountability in the workplace, and the books also presented a set of tools for managers to implement improvements in their own organizations, The Oz Principle was the first to bring this concept, or at least this perspective on behavior, to the forefront, reprioritizing the way that many in the business world thought about accountability and culture among their employees.

In this vernacular, those that rise “above the line,” who take ownership of their actions and look to continually improve, are likely our high performers and continually deliver quality results. Conversely, those who dodge responsibility in their roles, shift responsibility to others, refuse to be held accountable—those who are “below the line”—may never find true success or fulfillment at work.

The Connors, Smith, and Hickman thesis is very much about self-awareness and the role that accountability plays in success, with a model that divides humanity in half at a line that separates success from failure. Those who are above the line are described as being in the range of “accountability and success” while those who are below the line are defined by “self-victimization and failure.”

Organizations magnify our individual behaviors as culture. Individuals that are “below the line” embody negative tendencies that can poison a company's culture. They're avoidant, they're dependent, they stick to the rules even when the rules may no longer apply, and they tend to keep their head down. They aren't accountable. Those who are above the line are the opposite. They are readily open to change, welcome challenge, and reward collaboration and achievement. These folks tend to contribute to company cultures that support performance and retention.

Going Deeper

The authors did a great job of qualifying the role of accountability in a workplace culture, helping organizations and peers to identify, label and talk about the end result of what happens when people are accountable or not accountable.

“The Oz Principle” defines accountability as “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.”

While useful, we would point out that this definition positions being above the line or below the line as a very personal, individual decision. And it is. There are those in life that, for one reason or the other struggle daily in their personal lives to take action and make progress. In the workplace, however, most employees come to work, at least initially, wanting to contribute, do their best, and actually want to be accountable. So if we see that those around us, specifically our subordinates, are continually under-performing and are “Below the Line” in their ownership of outcomes, as managers and leaders we need to ask ourselves what we might be doing to hinder their progress rather than solely putting it on them.

Over the years, we at Ephektiv have discovered that there are other aspects to accountability than simply an individual’s intent to contribute and deliver. As managers and leaders, we need to ask ourselves to what degree are we managing our team’s culture to support those who want to do their best?

As an employee working for a manager I may want to be “Above the Line.” I may see issues and want to own and fix them. But how hard is it for me to do that in my working environment? If it’s difficult to ask questions of my leadership, get information, and present solutions, my performance and level of engagement will be limited. And if this suppression of my good intent continues, I may just give up and drop below the line, content to defend the status quo.

Ephektiv has studied more than 6,000 people at companies in a wide range of different industries over the years through our Field Research program, a combination of surveys, appreciative inquiry interventions, and ongoing fieldwork observation. Collecting this data about what the environmental conditions are when people are at their best, we’ve been able to bridge the gap from the qualitative to the quantitative when it comes to identifying tangible factors for accountability. And the results have been striking.



**Over 6000
managers researched**

**15 +
years of field
work**

Over and over again, we see the same themes keep coming up in different companies, in different industries and in different job titles and roles. People are at their best when their leadership has cultivated a culture in which they can be accountable and be their best. The barriers to creativity, collaboration, are at a minimum. Ideas are stated and heard, openness to try new things is supported, and everyone feels safe when respectfully challenging ideas for the best solution. This type of setting is the direct result of leadership. We have learned that it is not just about telling people and ourselves to be more accountable, it's the culture in which we work—and this is the job of the managers.

Rather than try to analyze and shift individual styles with regards to accountability, we look to see what supports people to be accountable. So, we have focused our research toward the type of environment that actually cultivates an accountable organization vs. the type of environment that stifles it. We have found that accountability is the outcome of the working and team dynamic set by leaders and managers. We have directly seen that accountability is either maximized or minimized by the environment a leader establishes with their team. Leaders with aggressive behaviors of power and opposition tend to cause their employees to have passive aggressive behaviors in which they are avoidant and dependent—horrible for innovation and progress. Managers that promote clear goals, learning and coach to improve and grow employees tend to foster teams that value these same traits—great for navigating change, creativity, and engagement.

Cultivating Accountability

Knowing this, how can an organization cultivate a culture that enables accountability and employee engagement

There's no one answer, but it starts with leaders taking an approach to their work in which they are continually valuing goals, promoting learning, setting clear vision, and really believing in their people. Then they can use that environment to encourage collaboration and autonomy.

We've found that there are five key disciplines that managers should master in order to develop a culture of accountability within their organizations, three of which happen pre-work and two of which happen post-work. If leaders complete the first three steps effectively, their employees will go out and complete their work feeling more engaged, more autonomous and more accountable than they would have been otherwise.



Clear Expectations: Clarity of expectations is perhaps the most basic of employee needs and is vital to performance. It starts with formally assigning work completely and with authority. It is important to clarify the expected standards to be upheld in the execution of work and the final product. Lastly, effective leaders work to co-create a picture of success with the employee to maximize understanding and alignment, while opening the door to employee input.

Commitment & Engagement: The second step in delegation involves establishing a two-way dialogue that drives engagement. The manager needs to create an atmosphere where this two-way communication is open and comfortable and then leverage that engagement to confirm a common understanding of the work involved, a clear picture of success, and then integrate that understanding with the task, standards and behaviors of the specific project. The manager also explains the “why” behind the work in order to help ensure that the task is meaningful and challenging for the employee and that the impact of quality execution drive intrinsic motivation.

Shared Support: No project is a one-way street. Managers need to provide adequate resources, knowledge and authority to their employees to do the job, as well as engage stakeholders, plan ahead and deliver on their own commitments. It’s on the manager to stay engaged and monitor the work that’s being done in order to facilitate growth and proactively identify potential obstacles, without doing the work themselves.

Monitor, Reinforce, Coach: Moving to the execution phase, once work is underway the focus needs to be on avoiding surprises and helping the employee grow in their work. Provide specifics about what the employee is doing well and what may need to improve, offering positive reinforcing feedback at a 3 to 1 ratio to criticisms. Managers need to be visible and monitor progress, but should also place themselves in the performance equation. How might you be contributing to the employee’s progress or lack thereof? Course correct as needed.

Account for Results: It is the leader’s responsibility to review performance and apply consequences after the work is done. Ask the employee to account for their results and behaviors—based on the expectations that were set at the start of the project—and provide recognition for positive results and behaviors. Ignoring achievement extinguishes positive efforts.

While prescriptive in nature, and structured in approach, these steps are not about micromanagement. They are about the co-creation of, and alignment to, clear goals and expectations, agreeing to the necessary support, and staying involved and available throughout the process so that we can course-correct along the way. The idea being that, by following the five steps above, when the employee gets to the end of their work cycle and they nail it, they get praise and recognition from their leaders. They’ve given input, co-created the vision for success, and owned the work cycle and its results.

If they don’t hit the mark, it’s fair to ask: “Did you meet the expectation that we set when we started this project?” And if not, that opens up the door to feedback and coaching to help close that gap.

Coaching to Success

Increasing accountability isn't a directive given to employees to simply "rise above the line." As we discussed, most of us already want to be above the line.

Maximizing accountability comes from leaders managing a working environment where people can be their best. It's not an overnight change; it's a continuous improvement model that takes time, dedication and buy-in from all levels of the organization.

But when leaders succeed, we've seen entire teams of long-term employees seemingly transformed to high functioning, innovative and engaged employees bringing their best each day. Fortunately, it's something that Ephektiv has proven effective in the field time and again after working with thousands of different organizations over the years.

Our firm has deconstructed the core tenants of the types of working environments that enable self accountability, intrinsic motivation, and the compulsion to innovate and collaborate, distilling our experience into two products: a self-directed coaching app as well as a full, on-site accountability lab program that builds skills in the five key factors presented above. With this research-based approach to identify a repeatable, scalable, and flexible model for accountability, we are hoping to support leaders everywhere in increasing their employees' inherent engagement and desire to account for their results.

We call this "The Science of Accountability." This is the methodology we share in our A2E Labs – Accelerated Accountability and Engagement.

Also part of the A2E methodology, and critical for growth, is a model for coaching employees for growth and continuous improvement.

[Click here to learn more about our 5-step coaching model that supports accountability and engagement and to try our free coaching app.](#)

Hold Them Accountable or Have Them Account?

The Spectrum of Accountability

In many organizations, accountability is looked at solely as a punitive interaction, the type of conversation that comes with swift punishment and deep consequences. In the field focus groups we have held, "being held accountable" was a very bad thing. It even sounds a little scary. However, with some more inquiry into accountability, and how it could operate, we were surprised. Teams shared that when given a task, that they expect and want to "account for their results" but that includes a job well done as well. When Accountability is managed accordingly, employees expect the outcomes, welcome coaching and learning, and more often look to continually improve.

In our experience, accountability operates best as a spectrum of feedback and performance review that includes rewards and praise, as well as metered discipline as warranted.

Consider a bank account that rewards you as a customer for maintaining a minimum balance and building surplus funds. With a balanced budget, things are great. And with interest and longevity, you get better interest rates, or maybe even a toaster. If you're deficient on a check, you don't get thrown out of the bank permanently for a first offense, but might lose some of your perks. If you go too far into the red the bank might then take further disciplinary action—issuing a fine, for example—but even then, you can usually change your behavior and get back in the black.

In this way, the bank is looking at your account and holding you accountable across a spectrum that includes positive feedback and incremental discipline when needed. It wants you to remain current on your accounts, so rather than rely solely on extreme punishments for vague rules, it first looks to cultivate "good" behavior with incentives, clear parameters of operation, and continuous communications and access to performance data.

When a customer falls short the bank has incremental discipline it can leverage, but total termination is not the first and only line of action. The expectations are there, and feedback about performance is fair and just.

Case Study

Client:

Major Northeastern Utility

Subject:

Senior Lineman, a Foreman for a Team of Bucket Truck Workers

Utility line work is dangerous and often happens after dark and in severe weather. There is always a lot to do, and a lot that needs to be done safely.

With that in mind, traditionally the workflow has been for each foreman to take job orders from the Utility's engineering department, plan out the work based on their specs, and then farm out the work to their team. Every week the foreman would hand out packets of information containing the jobs for the week, and their linemen would go out and complete the tasks as planned. That way, everyone up and down the chain in the organization would know that the work is being done safely, on time, and to spec.

This led to a culture that didn't welcome or accept hearing about improvements or changes from frontline workers. It was very one-way, authoritarian, and focused simply on execution over optimization. It also forced the foreman to spend every weekend working, preparing all of the jobs for his team to do in the next week.

Results

After going through Ephektiv's accountability lab, the foreman in this case was inspired to test out our delegation process on his work crews. So, rather than planning out all the jobs for them one week, he instead gave them a document straight from engineering and asked them to instead plan out how they want to run the project. The crew went out, planned the project, executed the project, and came back to the foreman asking for more.

Not only was the work done to spec, it was completed safely, within compliance and faster than before. So he extended the test, allowing the team to plan and manage all of their projects going forward. Now the team is more collaborative, more innovative, and more accountable for and engaged in their work.

The foreman made a choice to change the working environment of the team by changing his own behavior and ways of working to change the way the work was being handled. By doing so, he was able to "turn on" his team, giving them the type of environment they needed to be accountable and do their best work.

And the foreman doesn't have to plan work for the team anymore on the weekends. He plays golf instead.

We
believe
there's
a better
way.

At Ephektiv, we believe there is a better way for people to work together, achieve more, and be fulfilled in what they do each day.

Our mission in pursuing this belief is to help leaders and organizations to develop, execute, measure, and achieve their visions of success—for themselves, and their organizations.

We do this by facilitating sound strategies, developing strong leadership and communications skills, and helping cultivate agile and performance-driven work cultures—all resulting in highly engaged employees doing their best, and engaged and loyal customers.

Ephektiv is redefining how a business services firm helps clients to succeed.

**If it sounds new,
it's because it is.**

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