

Creating a Culture of Engagement and Accountability

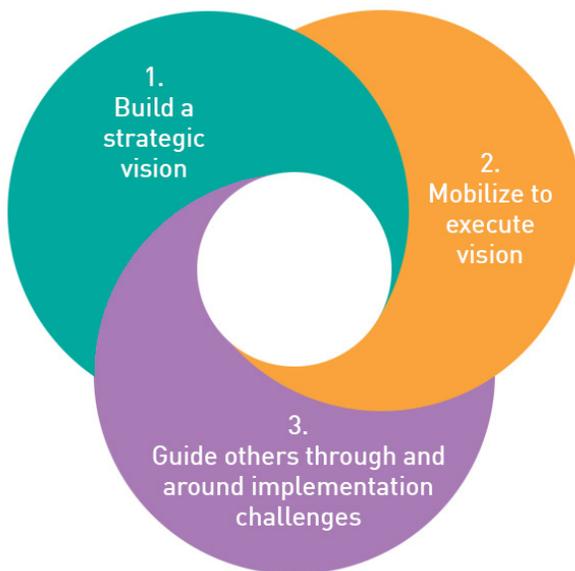


Leadership Development by Design

Point of View

What Great Leaders Do

Executives and their leadership teams do three big things. They build a strategic vision, they mobilize an organization to execute that vision, and they guide an organization through and around implementation challenges that occur in making that vision a reality.



In pursuing this threefold agenda, leaders actively cultivate a context that both engages others and promotes their accountability—this includes junior colleagues, peers, and senior colleagues.

Today's Challenge

To address today's pressing challenges most leaders and their executive teams have crafted strategic visions for how to win the hearts and minds of

customers and secure profitable growth. While many have confidence in the vision, they have much less in its execution.^{1,2}

Many executives worry that their organizations will not successfully execute the plans needed to make the strategic vision a reality. They foresee implementation challenges.

People will have to do new things or familiar things differently. They will also need to drive results within tight timelines and budgets while negotiating the challenges of working with global and often remote teams.

To succeed, people and teams will have to:

- Exert high levels of discretionary effort to achieve results
- Ensure that commitments are clear so that one has the ability to follow through on them successfully
- Persist in the face of setbacks
- Respond effectively to others who have not honored a commitment
- Nimble adjust plans to deal with emerging challenges
- Admit mistakes to keep an initiative on track while preserving credibility
- Advocate for changes in policies or practices that are interfering with an organizational value or goal

Executives worry that these behaviors will not occur and that strategic initiatives are at risk. Many of us recognize that these practices are the behavioral outcomes of an engaged and accountable workforce.

AchieveForum's Definition of Accountability

Leveraging the best of the existing definitions of accountability in the marketplace and AchieveForum's own insight, we define accountability as honoring the commitments we make to others.

AchieveForum's definition is ... honoring the commitments we make to others.

A number of definitions of accountability exist in the marketplace.

Lerner and Tetlock³ emphasize the importance of being called upon to justify one's beliefs, feelings and actions to others. Hickman, Smith, and Connors⁴ highlight the obligation to report and explain one's actions to coworkers. Samuel⁵ and McKinsey & Company⁶ emphasize trusting in and counting on others to do what they are supposed to do, and, as McKinsey researchers add, doing so in a fair manner. Klatt, Murphy, and Irvine⁷ explain that accountability includes commitments that are made to oneself as well as to others.

Accountable behavior is important on a daily basis, in big moments, on small projects, as well as large initiatives. Accountability is most significant when expressed as timely follow through on commitments despite shifting priorities, conflicting goals, and role ambiguity. Highly accountable people overcome personal discomforts (e.g., being assertive, resolving team conflicts, etc.) to fulfill commitments they make to others.

This formulation elevates the concept beyond being a reliable partner to being someone who can be counted on to do the right thing in difficult situations. Defining what the lack of accountability looks like sharpens our definition because accountability is

often best recognized when it is absent. Gibson⁸ describes the lack of accountability as ...

- Giving Excuses
- Blaming Others
- Putting Off Important Things
- Doing the Minimum
- Acting Confused
- Playing Helpless

Leaders are naturally focused on getting employees to be accountable when they are not. The response to a lack of accountability includes assertive communication about expectations, providing consequences for the lack of accountable behavior, and negotiating how an unmet commitment will be addressed. Interestingly, addressing such issues with direct reports is a persistent developmental challenge of leaders regardless of level.⁹

Effective leaders focus on accountable behavior on a broader basis—on the teams, divisions, and business units they lead.

Insights from Pulse Survey

In this section, we outline the results from our August 2014 pulse survey, which was conducted to create initial insights into a new possibility for how we best serve today's global leaders. This survey extends our previous point of view on employee engagement published earlier this year.

New Insights

Our August pulse survey asked about engagement and accountability, and we looked at these concepts from an individual, leadership, and organizational perspective. From this work we draw the following conclusions.

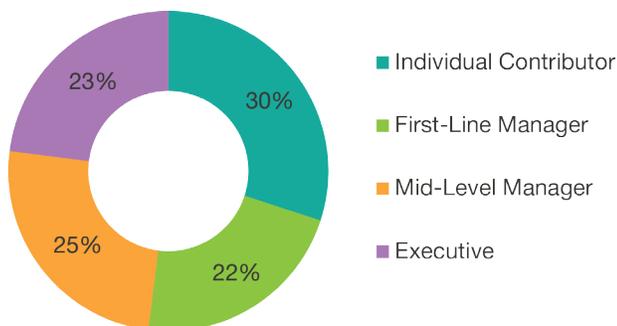


- Leaders have not yet harnessed the untapped potential for accountability that resides in their organizations.
- Engagement and accountability are linked. Motivation for discretionary effort (engagement) is linked to fulfilling commitments to others and doing the right thing in challenging circumstances (accountability).
- There are common organizational accountability gaps that leaders can close.
- The most immediate tools for promoting accountability, performance management, and coaching, are under leveraged and can be used to better effect.
- There are common skill gaps that limit accountable engagement but can be addressed with the right development.

Survey Sample

Our sample represents a balanced cross section of individual contributors, first-line leaders, middle-level leaders, and executives.¹⁰

The first question we answered is “How much untapped potential for engaged and accountable behavior exists today?”



AchieveForum’s formulation of engagement emphasizes the motivation to give discretionary effort. We found that 22.3 percent of people reported themselves to be highly engaged. We also asked about accountability. We found that a small group reported the highest levels of accountability.



18%

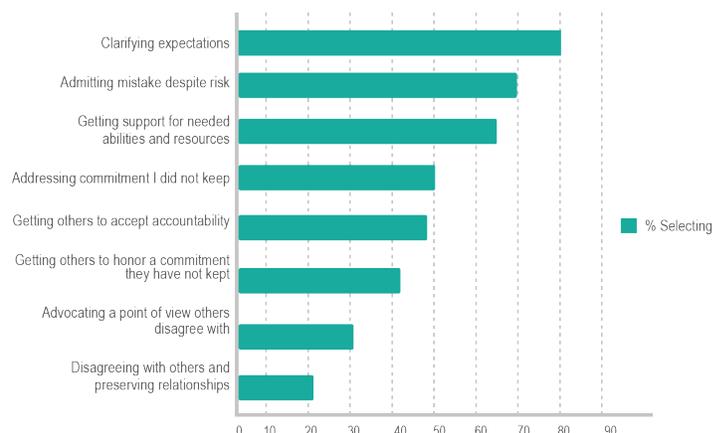
of people reported the highest levels of accountability in their organizations

Linkage Between Accountability and Performance

For accountability to be an important leadership concept, it must be linked to both individual and organizational performance.

Individual Performance

There are several aspects of accountability that our respondents indicated are related to personal performance. Two thirds of our survey respondents reported that setting clear expectations with others, getting alignment on goals, and admitting mistakes were most related to personal performance.



Organizational Performance

We consulted the work of colleagues to document the connection between accountability and organizational performance. In a recent survey concerning the execution of strategic initiatives, McKinsey & Company identified two key success factors.¹¹

- Continuous Improvement During Implementation Phase
- Achieving and Maintaining Clarity

During the implementation phase of strategic initiatives, people discover that estimates for time and effort needed to accomplish tasks were not adequate, that unanticipated events have disrupted the ability to fulfill project tasks, and that competing priorities are shifting access to needed resources. These discoveries threaten mission-critical results.

While effective organizations do their utmost to ensure that implementation plans are well developed, they also recognize that agility is critical to keeping strategic initiatives on track.¹² They need accountable action from their teams.

Accountability begins with getting answers to questions like these:

- What are the new commitments that will support achievement of project outcomes?
- How do these translate to teams and individuals?

Clarity is important because its absence gives rise to negative organizational politics, politics that suppress accountable behavior. In highly political environments, employees strive to minimally meet the needs of the multiple stakeholders to whom they are accountable, but in doing so, do not perform to their full potential.¹³

Leadership Behaviors that Impact Accountability

Several leadership practices influenced accountable behavior in our survey. Leaders ...

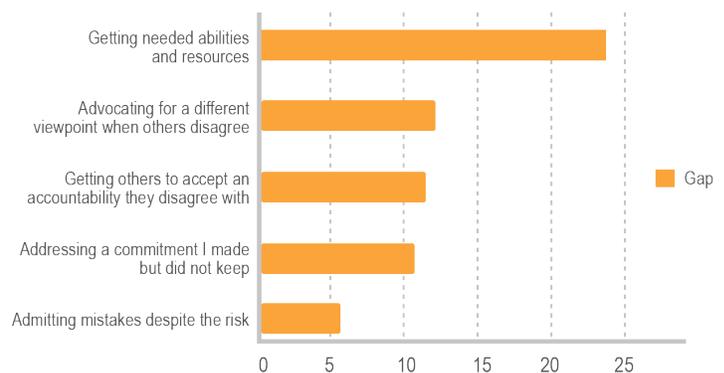
- Keep Their Promises
- Model Accountability
- Ensure Clear Goals
- Ensure Needed Resources and Abilities



From the work of others like those at Harvard Business School,¹⁴ we find support for the observation that these leadership behaviors are not occurring frequently. Less than half of leaders are seen as behaving in a way that promotes accountable behavior in their people.

Skill Gaps Associated with Low Accountability

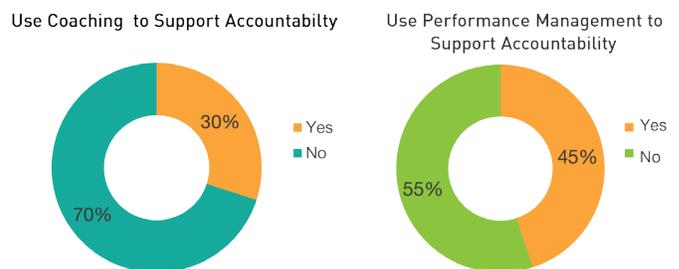
In our survey, we asked about the skills associated with accountability. We found that people who reported lower levels of accountability possess the following skill gaps.



How Organizations Close Accountability Gaps

Performance management and coaching are two common practices through which engagement and accountability gaps can be closed. In our sample, a minority of participants indicated that their organizations effectively used both to close key gaps.

There is a need to better support people with effective performance management and coaching.



Does Engagement and Accountability Lead to Performance that Matters?

We observed that engagement and accountability are related and are influenced by common drivers ($r=.56$ to $.64$, $p=.01$), including, leaders keeping their promises and ensuring the needed ability and resources. The fact that both concepts share common drivers build confidence in our belief that engagement and accountability should be integrated into a new formulation. We capture this formulation with the equation:

$$\text{Engagement} + \text{Accountability} = \text{Performance that Matters}$$

Helping Today's Leaders

How do we help leaders ensure that people are behaving accountably? How do we optimize the success of the mission- critical priorities that must be accomplished through others? AchieveForum's answer is that we can help leaders with the insights, tools, and skills needed to promote key strategy execution behaviors. We can support leaders by emphasizing the linkages we depict below.



Leadership priorities and skills lead to leadership behaviors (1). Employee priorities and skills also lead to employee behaviors (2). Company culture and climate strengthens or weakens the linkages between priorities/skills and behavior for both leaders and employees (3). Research on the interplay between personal characteristics and organizational culture on such topics as innovation, quality, and service, reinforces our perspective.¹⁵ The bottom line is that organizational context has a significant impact on the linkages that lead to accountable behavior (4).

We outline the performance that matters behaviors in the following



figure. When people in organizations adopt these behaviors, we contend that organizations will achieve results that matter.



Performance that Matters Behaviors

- Exerting a high level of effort to achieve a result
- Persisting in the face of personal and organizational difficulties
- Ensuring that one is set up for success with clear commitments and the ability to follow through on them
- Working with others to establish clear commitments of their support of you
- Responding effectively to others who have not honored a commitment
- Admitting mistakes to keep an initiative on track
- Working with others to address a commitment that one cannot fulfill
- Advocating for changes in policies or practices that interfere with an organizational value/goal

An Intriguing Finding

In our research, the strength of this association between accountability and engagement varied by management levels as depicted below. The relationship between engagement and accountability was much lower for middle managers than for executives and first-line leaders.

Strength of Relationship



($r=.34$ and $.29$ for executives and first-line leaders respectively and $r=.16$ for mid-level leaders, $p=.01$).

We wonder if this relationship is explained by the tension between two key components of what mid-level leaders do. Middle managers are caught between the need to translate broad goals and means into action and the shifts in priorities and resources that occur once plans are in motion. Is it this “rock and a hard place” predicament that suppresses the relationship between accountability and engagement? We are planning further research to test our understanding of this dynamic. Testing this hypothesis is so important as middle-level leaders are the mechanism through which strategic vision becomes reality.

Beyond Hoping for Heroism

Leaders who do not adopt these performance behaviors must count on heroism from a few special employees to execute strategic initiatives successfully. Surveys of executive confidence in the successful implementation of strategic initiatives suggest that most recognize that this hope is not good enough to make their vision for business success a reality. By creating the proper work environment, leaders help increase the odds that the 60 percent of solid performers in their organizations will behave like the top 20 percent of high performers. One of the effective strategies for promoting organizational success is to help the middle tier perform like the top tier.



Organizations that implement development programs focused on goal alignment, assertiveness, contracting, conflict management, and coaching build the necessary skills for engaged and accountable behavior.



How We Close the Gap: AchieveForum's 6 for 60

AchieveForum believes we can help leaders close their accountability gaps and create a culture of engagement and accountability. We have extracted a set of prescriptions from our research, which we refer to as 6 for 60. These include the following:

- Setting clear goals
- Building alignment on how goals will be achieved
- Advocating for the resources and abilities needed for success
- Admitting mistakes to advance problem solving while preserving credibility
- Resolving dilemmas
- Coaching accountable action

Through these practices people in organizations establish contracts, ensure the condition that are needed to fulfill them are present, as well as give and receive feedback that keeps commitments on track.

Leaders that follow these prescriptions will be able to count on a greater proportion of their teams acting in a highly engaged and accountable fashion than the approximately 20 percent of respondents in our survey that are highly engaged and accountable.

Enhancing a Culture of Engagement and Accountability in the Workplace

An important additional support is to provide leaders an index or measure that can guide their efforts to build and maintain a work environment that achieves “performance that matters.” Employee surveys help pinpoint the strengths and weakness of a given work environment. We propose a revised survey approach that integrates accountability and engagement into a new index of leadership impact. This index can be used to evaluate and document the impact of leadership within an organization.

Summary

The AchieveForum Corporation has opened the door to a refreshed concept for enhancing leadership: performance that matters. This concept incorporates elements of accountability and engagement. The leadership behaviors associated with this concept are most important. When leaders model and drive clarity, alignment, candor, integrity, trust, and even courage, they foster performance that matters.

Executive teams that promote performance that matters as described in this point of view have the best chance of overcoming their concerns that the strategic initiatives to which they have committed will not succeed.

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About AchieveForum:

AchieveForum delivers leadership solutions that are designed for the customer and are built on more than 85 years of global experience. Our tailored learning solutions are created with purpose and driven by innovation to help organizations effectively execute their business strategies. We provide clients with practical and research-based products and programs that mobilize employees, accelerate business initiative implementation, and improve agility.

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