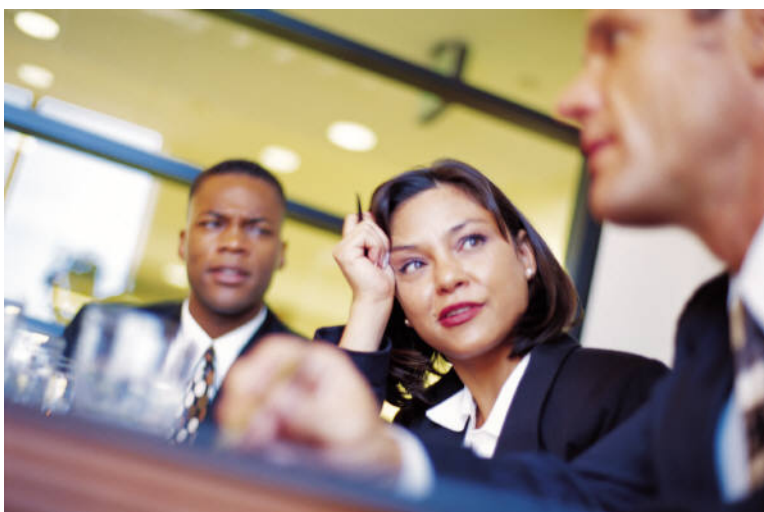

TEN STEPS TO CONVINCING YOUR TEAM THAT
ACCOUNTABILITY ISN'T A BAD WORD



**"THE MORE YOU ARE WILLING TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR
ACTIONS, THE MORE CREDIBILITY YOU WILL HAVE."
BRIAN KOSLOW**

Ten Steps to Convincing Your Team That Accountability Isn't a Bad Word

SELLING YOUR TEAM ON ACCOUNTABILITY



Accountability has become a catchphrase in our society. It takes center stage in congressional meetings, senate committees, boardrooms, courtrooms, therapy sessions and talk shows. Yet the word is most often hurled like a missile across a crowded room, designed to take out its recipient in one fell swoop. Is it any wonder that many people regard accountability as a negative word – something they want to stay as far away from as possible?

Webster's II New College Dictionary renders the word accountable as "Required to render account." The vision that most people derive from this definition is that of someone being called in to answer for their errors. Such a negative view of accountability blinds people to its transformative power and excelling value.

True accountability means far more than being called to answer for mistakes. Authors of *The Oz Principle*, Roger Connors, Tom Smith and Craig Hickman, define accountability as "A personal choice to rise above one's own circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for achieving desired results..." When viewed in this light it is easy to understand how accountability can be a powerful force within an organization, and in the lives of its individual employees.

Accountability can spark proactive thinking and innovation. It creates an environment which enables organizations to triumph over stagnation and complacency to achieve their desired results. Would your organization benefit from fresh ideas and a proactive approach to your current business dilemmas? How would this type of impetus impact your ability to compete in the marketplace?

Most management teams recognize the transforming power of accountability. Yet, they often find it difficult to convince their team members to adopt an attitude of accountability. Is a lack of accountability causing dissensions in your organization and derailing your success? Can your company help its individual team members to become more accountable?

A SNAPSHOT IN AVOIDANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

How important is it to your organization that your team members take ownership? Have you ever considered the financial impact or their failure to do so? Consider the example of a fictional character that mirrors typical team members who fail to take ownership.



Maria Welland is an extremely bright, highly talented architect with the Uptown Architectural Firm in Anytown, USA. Maria, a good employee, has had many opportunities to become great; yet, she has never taken advantage of them. If Maria is an asset to the company, why should she change? Let's examine:

- Why this typical employee is not reaching her potential.
- How her lack of accountability is affecting her team.
- The impact her lack of accountability has upon the company's bottom line.

At 8:30 AM Maria receives an agenda for a meeting to discuss Uptown's planned proposal to a coveted potential client. As Maria reviews the agenda she realizes that important information, upon which the final figures are based, is inaccurate. The final figures are too low. She briefly considers mentioning this to one of the firm's partners, Joe Bishop, when she suddenly realizes that *he* developed the proposal.

At 10:30 AM she runs into Joe in the break room. They exchange niceties and Joe discusses the prospect of snagging the new client, excitedly. Maria nods and agrees that it would be very exciting to take on this new project. Silently she considers that the misleadingly low proposal has a better chance of being accepted; yet, cost overruns will be inevitable and this will not make the new client happy. This presents a serious problem since most of their business is based on referrals. After a few minutes of small talk she returns to her office.

During the 2:00 PM meeting Maria sits at the conference table and listens to Joe's presentation. She wants to be a partner one day and feels that she can hardly afford to rock the boat. Everyone, including Maria, accepts the decision to go with the proposal.

The client accepts the proposal and Joe puts Maria in charge of much of the project. She is dismayed because she knows that there will be cost overruns, for which she will be blamed. Maria holds on to the original proposal. She has highlighted the mistakes to point out to the partners when they question her role in the project's budget.

French actor and playwright, Molière, admonished, “It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable.” While Maria is knowledgeable and competent, her abilities did not benefit Uptown Architectural Firm when they were needed most. She was observant enough to notice the errors. However, her fear of going against an authority figure in the organization, or possibly hampering her career, outweighed her obvious responsibility to her team. By *not* taking action, Maria put herself – her comfort, her career – over the interests of her team.

Does your organization have talented, well-meaning people like Maria? Do these people sound familiar?

- The employee who sees safety dangers in the plant, but just shakes his head and says, “Someone ought to do something about that.”
- The executive who says, “I knew that wouldn’t work,” after the fact; yet never spoke up when you discussed the project.



- The manager, who realizes that an employee is having a serious problem, yet doesn’t say anything until after the employee has a serious accident on the job.

We can easily see the negative impact each employee’s lack of accountability has upon:

- The company’s bottom line
- Their team, or organization as a whole
- Their value to the organization

How much is a lack of accountability costing your company? Is it possible to instill a sense of accountability in your team members when societal accountability is at an all-time low? How can you prevent situations like the one experienced at Uptown from happening in your organization?

The above quote reflects the attitude of many in our society. They are all for accountability – as long as it is someone else who assumes it. How has this impacted our society as a whole? In the words of Josiah Charles Stamp, “It is easy to dodge our responsibilities, but we cannot dodge the consequences of dodging our responsibilities.”



The truth of this simple statement plays out over and over again, across the globe. Global warming happens as the result of man-made pollution. Preventable health problems like heart disease and diabetes often result from a history of poor diet and exercise. A manufacturer is fined millions of dollars because it continued to manufacture products that its management knew weren't safe.

Many progressive organizations have successfully created an organizational culture of accountability, despite the attitude of society, in general. Your organization can take ten simple, but effective steps that will demonstrate the benefits of accountability to your workforce.

- 1. Establish a culture of accountability that begins with the top.**
- 2. Establish clear company goals and standards.**
- 3. Communicate company goals and standards regularly.**
- 4. Encourage innovative, progressive thinking.**
- 5. Teach your team to accomplish, not complain.**
- 6. Empower your team to hold itself, and its members accountable.**
- 7. Replace finger-pointing with unselfish collaboration.**
- 8. Give regular feedback and performance reviews.**
- 9. Reward employees that take a proactive approach to problems.**
- 10. Reward teams that work together to achieve their goals.**

While team members may not be completely happy with the status quo – it is comfortable. Therefore, organizational change is often met with opposition. How can you implement the steps above and get buy-in for your new company culture and plan of action?

TAKE TEN STEPS TOWARD TEAM ACCOUNTABILITY

Step one: Establish a culture of accountability that begins with the top. Company leadership must set the standard with regards to accountability. Communicate with your team openly and honestly. Sharing your honest perspective of the company's current fiscal standing; its plans for the future; or its responsibility for errors will earn your team's trust and respect for company leadership. Such an approach also engenders employee loyalty. Remember, if company leadership tends to pass the buck, you can be sure that your management team and workforce will, too.

Step two: Establish clear company goals and standards. What is your company's mission? Could your management team and workforce recite it readily? A company without a clear mission or goals is like a ship blowing in the wind. It lacks direction. Does your company have a galvanizing mission and attainable goals? If your executives are the only ones privy to this information, it will not have a true impact upon your organization.

Step three: Communicate company goals and standards regularly. Make sure that every team member, from your mail room to your board room is well-acquainted with your mission and goals, whether they are new hires, or 20-year veterans. This should be done regularly through company meetings, team meetings, and regular corporate communications like memos, reminder emails and company newsletters. Each member should demonstrate a complete understanding of how their particular role figures in the attainment of company goals.

Step four: Encourage innovative, progressive thinking. Your employees must feel empowered to take ownership of current or potential problems. Use suggestion programs and other methods to encourage new solutions to old problems. Companies that do not tap into their most valuable resource – their employees – miss out on unique opportunities for growth and innovation. Empower your team members to take ownership of any potential problem – even if it falls outside of their usual responsibilities. The team member may not have the ability, or authority, to correct the problem themselves; but, they can alert the proper team member. An accountable team member will recognize their duty to do so.

Step five: Teach your team to accomplish, not complain. “I couldn't run my report because Alice didn't update her numbers.” “Our department isn't responsible for that.” “I can't believe no-one has done anything about this, yet.” Help your team to reject the blame-shifting philosophy, so common in our society. It is divisive and counterproductive. We are essentially doing *nothing*; while we wait for someone else to do *something*. How can you remedy this situation? Your company's leadership should demonstrate a “can-do” spirit by giving your team practical assistance and direction when warranted. Who would you respect and want to emulate – someone who keeps barking orders at you, or someone who asks what they can do to help, and then *does it*?

Step six: Empower your team to hold itself, and its members accountable. Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, defines team accountability as “...the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team.” He observes that “Members of great teams improve their relationships by holding one another accountable, thus demonstrating that they respect each other and have high expectations for one another’s performance.”

Step seven: Replace finger-pointing with unselfish collaboration. Encourage your team to engage in meaningful, open dialogue to address both successes and failures. Rather than pointing fingers, each team member should commit to finding solutions for the success of the overall team. Company leadership should exemplify this type of ongoing collaborative effort.

Step eight: Give regular feedback and performance reviews. This is an essential part of the operations of any healthy organization. By taking the earlier steps of making your entire workforce aware of the company mission and standards you will set the bar for each team member. This enables each team member to achieve more within your organization. Giving your team members regular feedback and performance reviews, based on these standards, keeps them alert to how they measure up to your standards. Members who are not reaching their goals should be given practical direction and written feedback, outlining the steps needed to achieve their goals. This makes each team member accountable for their own advancement in your organization.

Step nine: Reward employees that take a proactive approach to problems. John proposed using another courier, instead of the one you’ve used for the past ten years. Monica talked to her personal mobile phone carrier and finagled a much better plan for your organization. Carl discovered a less-expensive way to package your product. Implementing these changes will save your organization thousands of dollars each year. Forward-thinking employees deserve recognition and a reward that demonstrates your true appreciation for their efforts. This encourages your team members to look for other innovative solutions. It also contributes to employee retention, reducing costly turnover.

Step ten: Reward teams that work together to achieve their goals. Many organizations award yearly bonuses based on team performance *only*, instead of individual performance. This encourages teams to work together to achieve a mutual goal; since each member has a financial stake in the other members’ success. Other organizations blend the concept of individual and team bonuses by creating a variety of factors which determine each team member’s bonus. For instance, your reward determination system may measure how well each employee meets company standards, individual performance and team achievement. The total would determine the bonus.



Remember Maria Welland from earlier in this report? How would Maria’s team have fared had she acted differently? Let’s rewind the situation. Uptown Architectural Firm has been working with an organizational development firm that specializes in helping companies develop a culture of accountability. Maria and her team members have been learning to strengthen their skills in accountability, communication and team work. Maria, one of the more timid members of the group, has even received some additional coaching. Is it worth the investment?

At 8:30 AM Maria receives an agenda for a meeting to discuss Uptown’s planned proposal to a coveted potential client. As Maria reviews the agenda she realizes that important information, upon which the final figures are based, is inaccurate. The final figures are therefore too low. She decides to mention this to one of the firm’s partners, Joe Bishop, when she suddenly realizes that *he* developed the proposal.

At 9:15 AM Maria takes a deep breath, picks up the phone and calls Joe Bishop. She asks if they can discuss a very important matter over a cup of coffee in his office.

At 9:45 AM Maria sits down with Joe and another teammate. She explains the discrepancy that she discovered in his base information. Joe is disappointed in his error, but is appreciative that Maria came forward with her findings. They rework the numbers together and get everyone copies of the new agenda, in time for the afternoon meeting.

At the 2:00 PM meeting Maria sits at the conference table and listens to Joe’s presentation. While the figure isn’t as low as it was before, it is a fair price with lots to offer the potential client. The team unanimously accepts the proposal.

Later, when the client accepts the proposal, Joe puts Maria in charge of most of the project. The client is happy. The firm is happy. By taking ownership of the situation Maria benefited her team, her company, and the client. Her record of accountability makes company leadership take notice of her, leading to her promotion. She makes partner in the firm, well ahead of her target date.

Would you like to see similar results from your team members? Begin implementing the then steps to team accountability *today*. Do you need help putting a dynamic program in place that will help catapult your team’s success? Invest in the services of an organizational development firm that specializes in helping companies to develop a culture of accountability. Can your firm afford not to?

About the Author



Tim Wilson

About Tim Wilson

With more than 20 years of experience in senior-level positions, and as a business management and organizational development consultant, Tim Wilson has extensive first-hand knowledge of the issues that often hamper otherwise healthy organizations. His proven ability to facilitate team building, training and change management in developing organizations is complemented by his realization that what is truly important to each organization is its bottom line.

Tim's ability to affect change in an organization - within the scope of its financial and organizational goals for the present and with a view to its ability to be competitive in the future – have elevated his firm, **T.A. Wilson & Associates**, launched in 1999, to preferred status among the New England corporate community. He is particularly noted for his expertise in the areas of accountability, effective team communication, diversity management and enhanced employee performance.

Professional Development and Education

Tim holds a Master of Science degree in applied management from Lesley College in Cambridge; a Master of Arts and a Bachelor of Science in business administration and information systems from Clark University in Worcester, MA, and an Associates degree in business management from Fisher College in Boston. His diverse industry background includes experience in the fields of retail, information technology, insurance and financial services. His experiences during his tenure in high-level positions in these industries, coupled with his extensive role in human resources, gives him the added insight and perceptivity to resolve system and people issues that cripple promising organizations.

Conference Papers and Articles

Tim has spoken at numerous conferences and published a variety of articles and white papers on attracting and retaining high-quality talent, maximizing the success of minorities in the workplace, and preparing the current and future workforce to remain competitive in light of changes on the horizon.

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