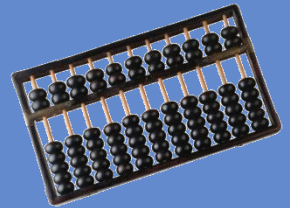



# Accounting for Accountability

## Inspiring Others to Accept Responsibility Through Leadership



Whitepaper  
By: Eileen Dowse Ph.D.

**Accountability is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility and the consequences of behavior.  
It is being answerable for your actions.**

The Situation	The Analysis	The Solution
<p>The term accountability has become a catch-all term referring to everything from cost control to professional ethics. Although accountability is a desire, it is often not the reality.</p> <p>Accountability lies at the center of three important components for leading human capital within organizations.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>The establishment of responsibilities, roles and expectations.</i> Accountability requires that particular outcomes be communicated clearly.</li> <li>2. <i>The comprehension of employee performance.</i> Accountability requires a mutual exchange of expectations and outcomes.</li> <li>3. <i>The quality output of leadership and employee management.</i> Without accountability the quality of outcomes can be unsound and uncertain.</li> </ol>	<p>When leadership and business systems advise or demand organizations to be accountable, they may fail if they do not first recognize that the fundamental component for achieving accountable behavior, rests on the individual.</p> <p>There is little or no material provided to leaders to help them bring the concepts of accountability into the workplace. Therefore we must develop a greater understanding of accountability if we are to ever hope to achieve maximum results and help people become accountable for their actions.</p> <div style="background-color: #4a7ebb; color: white; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <b>The fundamental component for achieving accountable behavior rests on the individual.</b> </div>	<p>Addressing the issue of accountable behavior within organizations means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clearly stating what is expected of people</li> <li>• putting measurable accountability tools into place</li> </ul> <p>By providing guidelines on processes, customs, policies and laws, people can do what is right for the organization and deliver results with integrity.</p> <p>This paper offers you a more in-depth understanding of accountability. It presents you, as a leader, with a formula to incorporate when working with employees and group members.</p> <div style="text-align: right;">  </div>

## The Reality Is Not a Pretty Picture.

The lack of accountability shown today in the working world is working against the best interest of not only business and economic growth, but society as a whole.

Although not a new concept, the need for making accountability become an issue of employee performance, is one where leaders and theorists have become to refer to as an important attribute and competency required for business and personal success.

In response to the cry for accountability, organizations are creating ways to measure performance and report results while lumping the results into some type accountability criteria.

At this point it might be valuable to remember, holding people accountable is designed not solely to catch, reverse and punish wrongdoing, holding people accountable is also designed to deter wrongdoing.

Leaders within organizations are requesting and requiring people to be accountable yet the majority of these leaders know little about the components that might impact and create successful accountability results. In other words, we know we want people to be accountable, we just don't know how to make them accountable.

Little research and clarity exists on understanding what individual traits will result in accountable behavior and achieve the outcome employers hope for.

# What Is This Thing Called Accountability and How Is It Different From Responsibility?

Accountability is about answering for one's actions, more specially in regards to imposed laws or regulations placed on a person. To be clear, accountability is different from responsibility.

**Responsibility is about** taking the necessary action for carrying out an assigned task, while at the same time being independent.

Responsibility is about an obligation regarding a code of conduct, a statement of ethics, and standards for proper behavior. You can think of responsibility as being something internal.

## Responsibility is about human choice

Direct choice- *"Will do it?"*

Group Membership- *"Will I join?"*

Role Acceptance- *"Do I accept responsibility for this task?"*

**Accountability is about** responding to an imposed law. It requires an inner commitment to moral restraints and aspirations. You can think of accountability as being something external since it relates to a person answering to others for one's actions and behaviors. An accountable person is held responsible and judged by external standards. It is like this, you can be responsible for job X, but you are accountable for your responsibilities to person Y.

Accountability, is about someone treating an individual responsible for a task and calling them to give answers and reasons for their behaviors and their results.

Accountability is about methods for holding others responsible and abiding by certain laws, rules and regulations.

*"Have we created the right mechanisms for contributing to self-regulation?"*

There are some conditions that affect the success of accountability.

1. **The amount of people involved in being accountable.** A large amount of people involved with accounting for an action can cause people to place less effort in decision making and developing ownership towards the end result. A large amount of people can cause 'social loafing' or the feeling of 'I will just fly under the radar and let others do it'.
2. **Forcing a person to comply with the results for accountability.** Demanding what a person should feel accountable for, only creates a change in immediate attitude. If, you want to change long term behaviour, the person must feel accountable for the situation and the conditions involved.

You must develop ways for the person to feel responsible for events and requirements.



## Why Isn't Our Accountability System Working?



Many studies have shown that organizations with high quality governance structures outperformed those with weaker ones.

Accountability, is about someone treating an individual as responsible and calling them to give answers and reasons for their behaviors and their results.

The place that accountability breaks down is when people do not understand who should answer to whom, for what and

what rules should be used to produce a response.

Accountability gets even messier since laws cannot create accountability. Laws can only create mechanisms and procedures that will permit accountability to be translated into action.

If accountability systems and structures only focus on the desired organizational competencies, real solutions for operational effectiveness will be limited because you are forgetting who you want to be accountable and for what.

## Still Confused About the Concept of Accountability?

If you are still confused about what the concept of accountability, it could be for good reason. Current research has found twenty-four different definitions and types of accountability as show in Figure 1. What does this mean for someone wanting to get people to be accountable for their actions? It means you must communicate your understanding and expectations very clearly.

**Figure 1** A Smorgasbord of Definitions for Accountability

**Bureaucratic accountability-** imposed formally through the hierarchy within organizations often in particular bureaucratic organizations. (Romzek and Dubnick, 1994).

**Corporate accountability-** imposed by executives and is concerned for checks, balances and oversights and organizational oversight of the exercise of power. The central concern is the “extent to which individual managers, auditors, employees and shareholders can be held to account for the decisions, failures and misdeeds of the corporate entity” (Allen, 2003).

**Criminal accountability-** imposed by the justice department and local prosecutors and addresses the issue of what way a person should be held legally responsible for conduct. It also addresses the type of human rights violation which has occurred (Ratner and Abrams, 2001).

**Cross-Functional Accountability-** imposed by an organization. Here the business outcomes drive the makeup of the team to get the job done regardless of the function. Decisions are made to include as many functions or departments as needed for the success of any team or individual (Samuel, 2001).

**Democratic accountability-** imposed by people and laws. It is believed that when people seek to hold someone accountable, they are usually planning some kind of punishment (Behn, 2001).

**Electoral accountability-** imposed by multiple principals (voters however, also courts and other elected officials in some cases) rather than a single principal or a collective body that can act as a single principal (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999).

**Government accountability-** imposed by the government through attitudes, decisions, policies and practices. It is concerned with what structures, institutions and practices can make officials and employees answerable to citizen constituencies (Allen, 2003).

**Hierarchical Accountability-** imposed by an authority and is designed to ensure accountability for managerial actions rather than to promote control over employees. Its primary concern is to implement the law (Behn, 2001).

**Individual Accountability-** imposed by the employee who takes responsibility for completing their individual assignments based on their own job descriptions, without concern for the impact they may have on others (Samuel, 2001).

**Intragroup accountability-** imposed by two parties from different ethnic groups. This form of accountability requires obligations to communicate and empathy for the other group’s genetic or cultural identity (Allen, 2003).

**Legal accountability-** imposed formally by laws or rules created by the legislature, the judiciary, or a regulatory agency such as a procurement office or civil service commission. (Romzek and Dubnick, 1994).

**Mitigating Accountability-** imposed by anyone requiring validation for an action. “Account giving is designed to recast the derogatory significance of responsibility and transform any negative evaluations” (Scott and Lyman 1968).

**Mutual accountability-** imposed by the group and by the employee. It involves sincere and mutual promises with no coercion. It does however require cooperation. (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993).

**Organizational Accountability-** imposed by leadership. Achieving the business outcomes drives the makeup of the team to get the job done regardless of function or level within the organization. Any person can be held accountable (Samuel, 2001).

**Outcome Accountability-** formed from decisions rather than processes (Simonson and Staw, 1992).

**Personal accountability-** imposed by oneself. This includes self-judgment to a personal set of standards (Allen, 2003).

**Political accountability-** imposed by the president or another political leader over the heads of the departments and agencies and from them to their subordinates. The concern is to implementation policies and laws (Behn, 2001).

**Process accountability-** imposed by the type of process used and is thought to engage people to make decisions in a more evenhanded evaluation of alternatives (Simonson and Staw, 1992).

**Professional accountability-** imposed informally by the members of the organization itself, through their expertise and standards (which may be established by professional organizations or education and training) (Romzek and Dubnick, 1994).

**Public accountability-** imposed by ‘the people’ often through the press or public investigations or by the legal or judicial branch and “requires that inherently governmental functions and tasks be performed by officers of the United States and their government-employed subordinates” (Behn, 2001).

**Relational accountability-** imposed by a more familial person such as a spouse, parent, dependent child, or sibling. These relationships are capable of self-definition and redefinition and therefore have promise, reliance, and dependency at their root (Allen, 2003).

**Retrospective accountability-** imposed by citizens who judge politician’s records retrospectively at election time and then punish or reward them accordingly (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999).

**Work Unit Accountability-** imposed by the team. The success of the team is more important than any particular individual’s success and the group is accountable for each other being successful (Samuel, 2001).

*“The path of least resistance is what makes rivers and humans crooked” Henry David Thoreau*

## Accountability and Answerability Are Synonymous.

To simplify the concept of accountability, consider the word 'accountability' to be synonymous with the word 'answerability', since when someone is accountable, they must answer to a higher authority for their actions, either legal or organizational.

A person is accountable when they have made an obligation or have willingly accepted responsibility and the consequences for his or her behavior.



## Achieving Accountability as an Outcome or Goal.

Organizations require accountability. Without accountability as a distinct binding quality, leaders will find their organizations to become unstable and tenuous, because of the absence of obligations, and commitment.

To achieve accountability, the process requires the realization that a person's character and conduct has an enormous impact

on the results.

**Solution:** The complexities and dynamics of promoting accountability requires leaders to build relationships and provide those being called to account with opportunities to demonstrate their accomplishments.



## Who Can Be Held Accountable For What?

According to authors Cummings and Aaron in their report on the "*Appreciative Dimensions of Accountability*", there are three fundamental criteria that must exist for a person to be held accountable.

To be held accountable, a person must have the capacity for:

- ✓ **Rational behavior:** The mental or psychological state of the person must be that of a 'normally functioning adult'. You do have to account for your behavior if you are not capable or able to do so.
- ✓ **Ability to foresee events:** Results that any reasonable person could have anticipated in light of the information he or she was given will require you to be held to account. You do not have to account for results if you could not have foreseen a tornado approaching.
- ✓ **Divergence:** Deviating from expectations due to departure in requirements. You do have to account for results if the target continually changes and you have not been notified.

### What can you be held accountable for?

Robert Behn with Brookings Institution Press, believes you can hold someone accountable in one of three areas:

- 1. Accountability for Finances-** relates to individual or departmental responsibility, to perform a certain function. In this case, accountability may be dictated or implied by law, regulation or agreement.
- 2. Accountability for Fairness-** deals with deciding what values should be upheld and what rules, procedures and standards should be established. This refers to what the organization should and should not do in regards to record keeping, or for the purpose of conducting of audits. It relates to if people do not do what they were required to do, they will be punished.
- 3. Accountability for Performance-** relates to purpose and providing appropriate and required services to customers. This applies to consequences and achieving performance standards along with satisfying performance expectations.

## Your Employee Did What?

Here is a story of one leader, Martin (he has asked that his company not be named) who acquired many challenging staff and accountability issues when he began his new role as an executive within the company.

Some of his staff constantly tried to push the limits on following company rules and guidelines. One day, one of Martin's employees, Dan, submitted an expense claim after a business trip. The claim included the usually hotel and meal expenses and in this particular claim, an added fee for a night with a prostitute.



When Martin confronted the employee about the 'unusual' business expense, the employee argued saying he felt the claim was valid since he had a doctor's note saying that he had a prostate problem and needed to regularly release fluids from his prostate. Because he was on a business trip the employee felt that a prostitute was the best way to address his 'medical need'.

Martin refused the business request. He then made every attempt to educate his employees on what expenses were justified and how everyone's actions impacted the overall success of the company. He also spoke to all the staff about being answerable for your actions while employed with the company.

Underlying beliefs and assumptions about what is right and wrong and what behaviors are acceptable, can often be traced back to those of the original founders and subsequent leaders of an organization. In many cases, accountability systems are shaped by experiences, successes and failures. They form; what is perceived as acceptable behaviors, policies and practices within organization and how stakeholders are treated. Accountability is not just about behaving in an ethical way, it is also about setting standards for reporting unethical behavior.

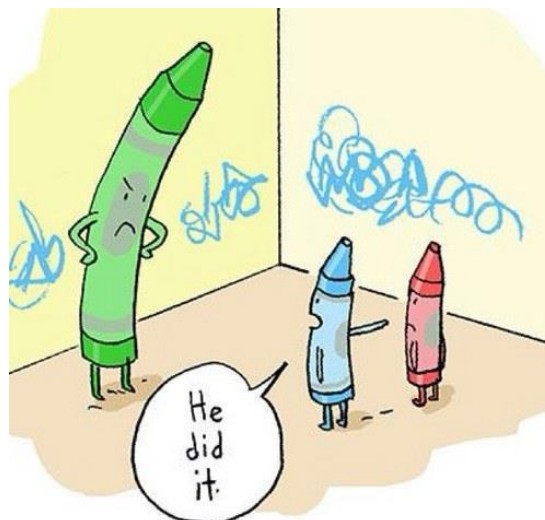
As mentioned before, Martin acquired many challenging staff and accountability issues when he began his new role.

Another one of his employees, this person named Frank, also presented Martin with an accountability challenge to test the organization's accountability system.

During a business trip, Frank and his colleagues went for dinner at a recommended restaurant. Much alcohol was consumed during the meal. After Frank left the restaurant, he found his car had been towed from the place he had parked it. Frustrated, Frank ended up having a fight with a police officer who was at the scene while the tow truck drove away with Frank's car. The confrontation with the police officer, landed Frank in jail for the night with a drunk and disorderly charge.

When the team returned back to the office, a fellow coworker noticed that the Frank had charged for overtime compensation for the evening he was in jail, because 'he spent extra work time on his business trip'.

Again Martin confronted the employee and began to make culture wide, accountability changes to the organization's mindset.





## Creating Accountability Systems.

Accountability is not just about obeying laws, regulations, procedures, or appropriately reporting in hierarchical relationships. Accountability is also about potentiality and whether or not a person can give account ...account-ability. To be accountable means you are required to answer for your actions. It also means organizations must clearly state what is expected of its staff and put measurable accountability tools into place.

Sometimes this means using customer surveys or focus groups to determine if customers feel the accountability system is working as it was intended. Establishing processes and creating understanding around what is necessary for a person to be held to account, should include the



following actions:

- Setting and demanding high levels of expectations for behavior and performance.
- Including clear communications on how the business within the organization is to be conducted, along with listing duties and responsibilities for the position or task.
- Establishing approaches that raise levels of commitment and mutual trust amongst employees.
- Confronting poor performance in a timely manner.
- Making the expectations for accountability public- this approach has been found to increase accountability success.
- Modelling the types of desired accountable behavior you want shown within the organization.

## Increasing Accountability Success Levels- It's All About Choice.



Accountability cannot be imposed or demanded; it occurs as an inevitable outgrowth of the freedom we choose to account and for what we choose and the decision we claim as our own.

There is hard research that supports that fact that any effort made by leaders to evoke more accountability, tends to reinforce a lack of responsibility. Since accountability is a personal promise and something we will answer for, leaders would be wise to remember, accountability requires room for personal judgment and the choice for decision-making. Therefore, if you want accountability levels to increase within

your organization, consider these 6 questions and keys success factors when designing accountability systems.

1. Does the person have clarity of expectations?
2. Does the person respect and honor the person you are accountable to?
3. Does the person believe they will be held accountable?
4. Will the circumstances of the accountability be private or public? Public accountability is much more effective than private accountability.
5. What is closely in time is the person called to account, in relation to the task? Closer timings increases accountability levels.
6. Is there an expectancy that the desired behavior will result in a reward or punishment if the job is done well or not? The magnitude of punishment or reward impacts accountability.

### Figure 2 5 Components for Successful Accountability Systems

Effective accountability systems involve five components:

1. *Business focus*: the right people are making the decisions.
2. *Transparency*: there is open communication and sharing of information throughout all levels of the organization.
3. *Efficiency*: actions leverage best practices to maximize best outcomes.
4. *Flexibility*: all staff have the ability to rapidly respond and change priorities as necessary, because decisions are grounded on shared values and firm ethical standards.
5. *Collaboration*: operations are designed to fairly, respectfully and equitably, support all stakeholders.

## What Makes a Person Accountable?

To achieve accountability as an outcome, the process requires the realization that a person's character and conduct plays an enormous impact on results. This begs the question, what makes an accountable person? While researching accountability, I conducted interviews with 15 individuals, including a: three star general, chief financial officer, lawyer, three time incarcerated drug addict, superintendent of schools, boy scout, president of the Canadian Indian Accountability Coalition, pedophile profiler, artist, US State Auditor General, disabled person, international sales and marketing executive and a county Sheriff. I also surveyed 337 people from around the world and conducted an extensive literature review to investigate what personality traits contribute to accountable behavior.

I wanted to find out what made people accountable, since there seems to be a constant demand for accountability within organizations. I assumed that if leaders were in search of accountable organizations, why not hire accountable people.

My research helped discover a list of 14 predominant personality traits that contribute to accountable behavior and ultimately have had a positive impact on increasing levels

of accountability within organizations.

The list of traits describing an accountable person fall into two categories;

### i) Self-Management

Taking responsibility and action for personal performance; the person is reliable, can adjust to changing situations and functions using a high standard of excellence.

### ii) Commitment

Making the obligation or pledge to carry out some action to support some policy or person; the person has the inner strength to pursue the objective or task and remains focused to work hard without giving up on consistency or attention to quality work.

These two main traits allows an accountable person to have self-management skills to be called to account and has the commitment to the cause and to the person they are reporting to.

My research supports the thinking that personality traits influence accountable behavior. It also impacts the understanding about what traits accountable leaders and employees must bring to the organization to support governance.

## Still Confused About The Concept Of Accountability?

Figure 3 shows how the different levels of 'self-management' and 'commitment' can break down into different interpersonal dynamics and areas of focus. A leader can aim towards placing a 'Trustee' in the position to help with accountability levels.

**Figure 3** 5 Components for Successful Accountability Systems

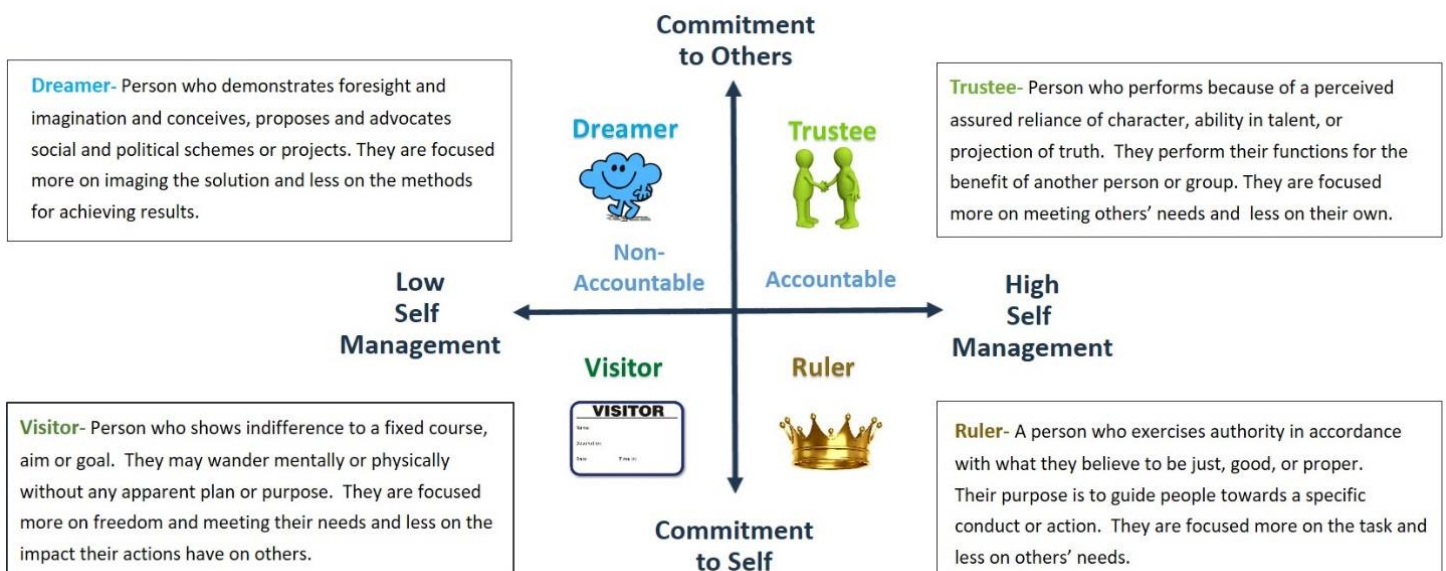


Figure 4 lists predominate personality traits found to contribute to accountable behavior. Organizations can incorporate these traits as part of the list of competencies they desire their employees to possess.

#### **Figure 4**      **14 predominant personality traits that contribute to accountable behavior**

**1. Being exact and correct (Self-Management)**

Alert to any failure in performance, procedures, change and risks. They are interested in being competent at tasks and protecting against errors.

**2. Crisp and clear thinking (Self-Management)**

Is concerned that ideas be correct and clearly thought out.

**3. Elitism or firm identity (Self-Management)**

Has a clear sense of role and identity. Is comfortable with their self-image and shows congruence in their behaviors.

**4. Firm about Standards (Self-Management)**

Has an interest in evaluating a problem from the point of view of strongly held values and a sense of the limits in acceptable behavior. They have the ability to set limits and say NO to people and situations.

**5. Interest in being strict (Self-Management)**

Has a willingness to hold to standards in the face of opposition.

**6. Value-based (Self-Management)**

Will attempt to view a problem objectively and develop solutions that are logical and rigorous.

**7. Caring and investing (Commitment)**

Has a strong sense of the past and has a focus is on the long-term perspective. They know what has been done and how it has been done.

**8. Adapts to other's demands (Commitment)**

Concerned with "being good". It indicates interest in being responsible and productive.

**9. Collaboration (Commitment)**

Focused on mutual and reciprocal commitment to goals and objectives. They value teamwork, consensus, inclusiveness, and invested in others.

**10. Agreeableness (Commitment)**

Tends to be soft-hearted, good natured, trusting, helpful, forgiving, and altruistic. Eager to help others, they tend to be responsive and empathic.

**11. Awareness of expectations by others (Commitment)**

Has an attention to meeting the exact expectations or requirements of others.

**12. Having a sense of community (Commitment)**

Concerned and aware of how others would like things done. They attend to group values and expectations.

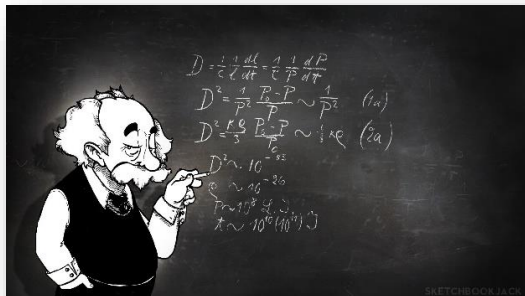
**13. Respectful response (Commitment)**

Is responsible and wants to satisfy obligations.

**14. Service and Support (Commitment)**

Has the desire to interact with customers and others to provide support. They enjoy helping others meet their particular needs.





## The Accountability Formula

Several people have asked me for a formula to determine if they could consider an employee to be accountable. When I explain there are three factors- desire, discipline and dialogue involved in such a formula they gain a better understanding for determining if a person can be answerable for their actions.

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\text{Desire} + \text{Discipline} + \text{Dialogue} = \\
 &\text{Accountability} \\
 &(\text{Drive} \times \text{Commitment}) + (\text{Implementation} \times \text{Acquirement}) + (\text{Contracting} \times \text{Relating}) = \text{Accountability} \\
 &(\text{DxC}) + (\text{IxA}) + (\text{CxR}) = \text{Accountability}
 \end{aligned}$$

**Note: If zero is part of any of these formulas, the accountability total will be negatively impacted.**

<b>DESIRE (Drive x Commitment) (DxC)</b>	
<b>Drive:</b> Directing motions using a force towards an activity, direction or course of action.	<b>Commitment:</b> Making a pledge, being obligated or emotionally impelled.
<b>Drive includes the following skills and mindset:</b>	<b>Commitment includes the following skills and mindset:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Healthy level of fear</li> <li>• Courage</li> <li>• Diligence</li> <li>• Self-confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilience</li> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Intentionality</li> <li>• Sense of duty</li> <li>• Responsiveness</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obligation</li> <li>• Understanding of values</li> <li>• Response to authority</li> <li>• Understanding of required laws and regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guiding principles</li> <li>• Sense of ownership</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Follow-through</li> <li>• Integrity</li> </ul>
<b>DISCIPLINE (Implementation x Acquirement) (IxA)</b>	
<b>Implementation:</b> Ensuring fulfillment of a task through concrete measures.	<b>Acquirement:</b> Having a power or skill resulting from persistent endeavors.
<b>Implementation includes the following skills and mindset:</b>	<b>Acquirement includes the following skills and mindset:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project management</li> <li>• Outcome generation</li> <li>• Critical thinking</li> <li>• Providing structure</li> <li>• Strategizing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being productive</li> <li>• Decision-making</li> <li>• Prioritizing</li> <li>• Anticipates obstacles</li> <li>• Setting measurable goals</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Setting personal objectives</li> <li>• Perseverance</li> <li>• Achieving results</li> <li>• Resolved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reliability</li> <li>• Credibility</li> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Willingness to act</li> <li>• Determination</li> </ul>
<b>DIALOGUE (Contracting x Relating) (CxR)</b>	
<b>Contracting:</b> Formulating binding agreements, establishing a mutual course of action.	<b>Relating:</b> Connecting and or being in rapport with another person, affinity.
<b>Contracting includes the following skills and mindset:</b>	<b>Relating includes the following skills and mindset:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging issues</li> <li>• Identifying assumptions</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Negotiating skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing credibility</li> <li>• Joint decision-making</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> <li>• Giving and receiving feedback</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Compassion</li> <li>• Warm-heartedness</li> <li>• Clarifying roles and expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing credibility</li> <li>• Joint decision-making</li> <li>• Conveying authenticity</li> <li>• Giving and receiving feedback</li> </ul>

Accountability is the product of an organization's and person's values and beliefs. It is a measure of what is important, how business should be conducted and how relationships should be maintained. Unless you have an understanding of the type of person you are working with and have put into place relevant systems and procedures, calling people to account can be frustrating and in many cases futile.

The goal of building accountability within an organization involves affirming and reconstructing the legitimacy of policies and practices.

Accountability is significantly influenced by:

- what others expect
- how individuals gather information in regards to fulfilling those expectations and
- how individuals perceive they will be treated if they deviate from those expectations

Accountability requires a balance between commitment, self-management, loyalty, and participation between all parties involved.

As a final note, remember and you create accountability systems within your organization, accountability is meaningless without consequences.



Eileen Dowse Ph.D. is an Organizational Psychologist whose work focuses on Executive Coaching, Leadership Development and Facilitation. Her dissertation is entitled *"What Personality Traits Contribute to Accountable Behavior."*

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