

Accountability for Results: A CEO's Ultimate Challenge

By Tom Northup, January, 2006

Have you participated in a business initiative that your company never completed? Did you watch key business goals suffer as teams missed deadline after deadline?

Often such problems arise because neither the employees nor the management team hold themselves truly accountable. When teams don't execute effectively because of lack of accountability, the company fails to generate results.

Accountability for results is the crucial step in producing outstanding performance. Many CEOs have trouble providing this accountability.

Establishing Accountability

The CEO is responsible for creating accountability in his organization.

First, the CEO and his management team must develop and commit to a clear vision and translate that vision into a coordinated strategic plan. Without this foundation everyday pressures will overwhelm the process, producing an ever-changing environment that causes indecision and delays.

Second, the management team must make certain that everyone within the company knows that it is committed to the initiative. When teams work under public scrutiny, they develop a strong desire to succeed and to share the achievement. Teams that only commit to doing well are subtly preparing for eventual failure.

Third, the team must place the organization over individual interests. When individuals channel their efforts into making the team work better, positive results occur. Conversely, when individuals protect their turf and work at cross purposes, they doom the initiative.

Fourth, team members must coordinate their high payoff activities so that they work with the same result in mind. The team must focus both individually and collectively on objectives and outcomes to generate positive performance.

Using Accountability to Generate Results

It is not enough to establish accountability in a company. To create results, management must create sound tactics to measure performance. Revenue and profit goals are important but beyond that management must clearly identify relevant metrics, ensure that those metrics are realistic, and specify expected completion dates.

Effective CEOs understand that projects never go as intended. Therefore they hold regular progress review meetings to build accountability into their management routine. These reviews develop focus within the teams and keep the pressures of everyday work life from causing slippage.

These focused review meetings take place outside of regular staff meetings. Their frequency depends on the complexity of the initiative and its progress. With regular reviews, management can make simple corrections while maintaining the original schedule.

Regular review meetings allow management to keep teams accountable and to measure progress towards the desired results.

Accountability and the Leader

A CEO who exhibits strong leadership is best positioned to create accountability for results and outstanding performance. A CEO plays four key leadership roles:

1. Building a culture that values company objectives above individual ambition in which everyone works toward the same objective.
2. Building a culture of trust. In this environment, team members understand they can be vulnerable with each other without fear of personal attack and political retribution. They solve problems more quickly because they make decisions based on objective input from the outset. Management teams with a high degree of trust are cohesive and function at a high level.
3. Avoiding personally becoming the task master of accountability. Effective CEOs trust the team to do the work and hold each other accountable. Without trust team members will hesitate to accept this role.
4. Personally setting the tone for absolute focus on results. When team members sense that the CEO lacks focus, they too will lack focus.

Summary

The success with which management holds itself and its teams accountable is the key to a company's future. Lack of accountability produces extreme frustration when it leads to lack of desired results.

Effective accountability is simple in concept but difficult to practice in that it requires good execution. Accountability is best accomplished when we:

1. Have a solid foundation and work to a clear strategic plan.
2. Have identified specific metrics.
3. Hold regular progress reviews.

The role of the leader is extremely important.

The effective CEO builds a culture of trust within the management team and a culture of valuing the organization over the individual.

He builds a team that works openly without personal and political agendas.

Most importantly, the CEO acts as the organization's role model for effective accountability. He sets the standard for creating results by demonstrating an unwavering resolve to achieve initiatives. He follows the maxim "inspect what you expect" by reviewing progress and insisting that deadlines be met. He creates results by keeping himself accountable even as he provides accountability for his management and working teams.