



Accountability

The Key to Driving a High-Performance Culture

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Accountability is one of the biggest challenges business leaders face, but it can also be one of the most important factors leading to success. Top business consultant and speaker Greg Bustin has dedicated a career to working with CEOs and the leadership teams of companies on this crucial topic. From his experience, Bustin has developed a set of leadership tools that will increase accountability and drive success for any type of organization.

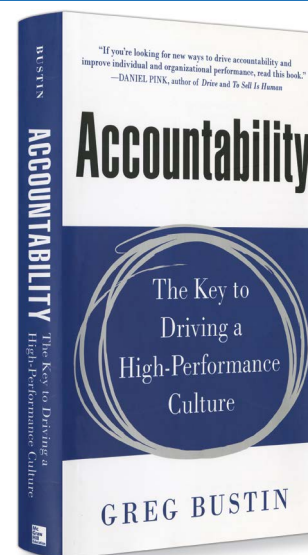
Accountability will transform the way you manage, maintain and motivate yourself, your team and ultimately your workforce. As a business leader's guide to the best practices to turn long-term vision into reality, it introduces the Seven Pillars of Accountability: character, unity, learning, tracking, urgency, reputation and evolution, and shows how each pillar is a crucial part of effective leadership.

Lack of accountability is the single greatest obstacle facing even the most experienced leaders. Bustin shares what he has learned the hard way: if you are not clear about everything — vision, values, objectives, strategy, rewards and penalties — the likelihood of achieving your goals is slim.

Accountability is a must-read for anyone who wants practical, actionable steps to build and grow a thriving business.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why accountability starts with purpose.
- How to get from Point A to Point B with everyone on board.
- How to use the Seven Pillars of Accountability to create your bridge to the future.
- How to sustain a high-performance culture based on purpose, trust and accountability.



by Greg Bustin

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: ACCOUNTABILITY

by Greg Bustin

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Introduction

As leaders, we get the behavior we tolerate. When it comes to holding people accountable, we are often our own worst enemy. We accept excuses that sound logical even when we know better. We allow emotions to cloud our decision making. We delay having a conversation with an underperformer because it's easier to avoid a difficult conversation than have one. Instead of practicing accountability, we practice avoidance.

Three valuable lessons about accountability are,

- 1. Clear expectations must be established.** When your purpose, expectations and rewards are crystal clear, your employees will embrace accountability as a way to become even more successful.
- 2. Bad news does not improve with age.** As soon as you see a problem, it's best to address it immediately. Failure to speak frankly with the person about his or her performance means nothing will change.
- 3. It's not personal.** Leave emotions and opinions behind. Stick to the facts, set a plan to get performance back on track, and communicate specific consequences for underperformance.

In organizations like The Container Store, Ernst & Young, Herman Miller, Marriott, Nucor, Sony and Southwest Airlines, accountability is more than a conversation. It's an attitude and a set of expectations that show up in every aspect of their firms' operations: how they hire, communicate, develop people and make decisions.

Organizations wrestle with accountability in similar ways, and exceptional organizations succeed by following principles and practices that are similar regardless of age of the organization, geography, industry or size. ●

Accountability Starts with Purpose

Before you can hold others accountable, you must first hold yourself accountable. And you first must know what matters most to you. Two of the hardest questions any of us will ever answer are, "Who am I?" and "What do I want?"

It is pretty easy for most of us to describe to others *what* we do. This is the *doing* part of our life. What about the *being* part? Who do you want to *be* that causes you to do what you *do*? Do you do what you do only for the money or for something else? What drives you? What fulfills you? What causes you to make the sacrifices you make?

Human Beings, Not Human Doings

Most business leaders aspire to their positions because they are skilled and hard-working, and they envision a better life for themselves. More of the good life. As their responsibility grows, some leaders gradually discover they are working harder than ever. They have changed from human beings into human doings.

Does this description resonate with you? If so, try answering these two fundamental questions: "What do I want out of life? Is my business helping me get it or keeping me from it?" These two simple but powerful questions help leaders discover what really matters. Along the way, some leaders realize they are so busy doing what they are doing that they might be enjoying less of who they are being.

Figuring out who you are is the natural first step in the accountability process. You must know who you are, what you want and what you don't want before you and your organization can codify and live out the core values you will use as guidelines for holding everyone in your enterprise accountable.



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What Do You Want?

Executives say that thinking through what is significant in their lives, articulating those thoughts as a set of measurable goals, and then writing them down is a powerful process that drives personal accountability. Compare your personal goals with the goals you've established for your career. How do these two sets of goals complement each other? Where are they out of alignment?

Your sweet spot is where your personal core values (what you're *willing* to do) intersect with your experience (what you *can* do) and your interests (what you *want* to do). Finding your sweet spot is one of the most gratifying accomplishments you can experience. It's also a key to driving accountability. ●

Learning from Winners

Every leader is tasked with getting from Point A to Point B. It's often their most significant objective and the hardest to achieve, and accountability is the single greatest threat to reaching Point B.

Accountability's Chokepoint

Every organization deploys three fundamental resources: time, people and money. Think of your organization as a funnel into which time, talent and treasure are poured. Emerging from the funnel's spout is the result of your investment in those three commodities. As time, talent and treasure move through your funnel toward a result, their original state is altered as they come into contact with one another. This contact is shaped by two key contributing factors: the processes inside your organization and the behavior of people. The sum of this behavior is your organization's culture.

For many leaders and their organizations, the narrowest point of the funnel is a chokepoint because it's a place where emotions can enter into decision making and influence the results. Emotions can prevent successful leaders from holding themselves, their peers and those who report to them accountable.

Part of what makes accountability difficult is that when you are working with smart people and things don't get done well or on time, you are often handed excuses. It is a vicious circle, and the excuses are infinite. Talk is cheap, so we often buy it. When we do, accountability suffers. And even though accountability is a significant component of any leader's success, it is not even your biggest problem. Your biggest problem is reaching Point B.

Crossing the Abyss

To cross the abyss to reach Point B, your first challenge is to help those on your team see that it is both necessary and possible to get to the other side. They not only need to share your vision, they need to *believe* it. Unfortunately, those who share your enthusiasm are usually outnumbered by those who do not.

You will need everyone's help achieving the organization's vision, not just a select few. So, your second job as the leader is to bring everyone along so that they, too, believe in the vision and commit to achieving it.

People are more likely to support a plan they helped develop, so guide your team through the development of a plan that shows how you will cross the abyss and get from Point A to Point B. Your plan should include objectives, strategies, budgets, responsibilities and schedules. Your plan is your road map. It's also your contract with each other. Without a plan, expectations are not clear. And without clear expectations, accountability is not possible.

Getting Comfortable with Change

If you don't plan to change, don't bother to plan. Planning, by definition, means doing more of what's working and less of what isn't. So the planning process should be expected to identify people, processes and programs that are delivering high levels of performance as well as those that no longer serve the enterprise or are inefficient.

Tackle change head-on, and expose difficult issues that must be addressed if the company expects to improve its financial and operational performance. Leaders in these sessions talk openly, perhaps hesitantly at first but then more confidently as the session continues, about fixing problems, replicating successes and carving up sacred cows.

At the conclusion of these debates, a choice must be made. Those who agree with the decision are prepared to be held accountable by colleagues and likewise are prepared to hold colleagues accountable for implementing the plan. ●

The Seven Pillars of Accountability

High-performing organizations share seven distinct characteristics called the Seven Pillars of Accountability:

Character: An organization's character is shaped by its values, and these values are clearly defined and communicated. The organization does what is right for its customers, employees, suppliers and investors, even when it's difficult to do so.

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Unity: Every employee understands and supports the organization's mission, vision, values and strategy and knows his or her role in helping to achieve them.

Learning: The organization is committed to continuous learning and invests in ongoing training and development.

Tracking: The organization has reliable, established systems to measure the things that are most important.

Urgency: The organization makes decisions and acts on them with a sense of purpose, commitment and immediacy.

Reputation: The organization rewards achievement and addresses underperformance, earning the organization and its leaders a reputation both internally and externally as a place where behavior matches values.

Evolving: The organization continuously adapts and changes the organization's practices to grow its market-place leadership position.

The acronym: C.U.L.T.U.R.E. will help you remember the seven pillars and that your culture is a significant predictor of your future performance.

Imagine a bridge spanning an abyss supported by seven pillars, each representing one of the seven characteristics that are essential in high-performing cultures. Crossing the abyss — moving your organization from Point A to Point B — requires the commitment of you and your team. ●

Character Counts

Most mission statements are a dime a dozen. We've all seen these impressive declarations that sound good but that are rarely lived out in the behavior of the people in the organization. It's one thing to say you are committed to a particular belief or behavior; it's another thing to believe it and live it.

The paradox of saying one thing and doing another is prevalent in most organizations: the things we *say* we value — treating others how we want to be treated, quality, innovation and even accountability — we don't *treat* as valuable. Our actions are the outward expression of our character.

Your culture mirrors your character. Leaders who commit "little murders," such as starting a meeting late, are contributing to a culture that eventually makes accountability all but impossible. Sooner or later, encouraging certain behavior or ignoring other behavior will result in that behavior becoming your organization's default culture.

Hire People Who Share Your Values

Leaders at exceptional companies like Southwest Airlines hire people who share their values. "At Southwest we firmly believe in the importance of hiring the right

person," says Elizabeth Bryant. "You cannot train somebody to care about other people or to smile when they see a customer. That's something you either have or you don't have. So we first find the people who embody the values that we have at Southwest Airlines. From there, we can cultivate them and grow them and train them in the technical skills."

To codify your character, the strategy is simple but powerful: hire the best candidates who align with your values and then pay them accordingly. Whether you call them values, beliefs or principles, you can use them every day as a filter for making decisions, including who you hire.

When you hire for character as much as skill, you improve accountability because you are in alignment on big things like mission, vision and values. Your debates and decision making will be centered on practices, not principles. And you'll be rewarded with less turnover, lower recruiting costs and a higher-than-industry-average productivity rate.

The Schizophrenic Organization

When leaders are asked, "To whom does your organization make promises?" they generally respond with "customers." There's often a "whatever it takes" mindset that comes into play to make sure you're keeping customers happy. It's a big part of who you are — your character — to deliver on those promises. These promises are important, but they are promises made *outside* the organization. What about promises being made *inside* your organization?

Why do we treat customers one way and colleagues another? That behavior makes for a schizophrenic organization. The promises being made inside the organization, such as deadlines, commitments and agreements made to one another, are broken every day. Broken promises reveal a character flaw.

When a promise to a customer has been broken or is about to be broken, it's often because someone broke a promise to a colleague. When these types of events occur inside your organization, they signal an accountability problem. Such problems make it hard to scale your operation because you're managing by exception.

As you calculate the cost of one of these events, bear in mind that more than money is at stake. Your reputation with your customer has been tarnished. Your reputation with your colleagues hangs in the balance as employees wonder why these problems are allowed to continue and why the people who are part of the problem are still on the team.

Up to this point, we have examined the idea of character as it relates to the qualities and traits of people. Character can also refer to the qualities and traits of things.

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So before rushing off to blame a person, reexamine your processes. Consider the character of three processes:

Workflow: What systems are in place to replicate success? Do those systems reflect the way work really gets done? What steps can be added, deleted or modified to improve efficiency?

Tools, training and development: Do people have the tools they need to be effective? Has the organization provided training and development to help people do their jobs to the best of their abilities? How do we develop soft skills, such as leadership, judgment and problem solving?

Communications: Were the expectations of the job clear? Were the expectations related to individual performance clear? Were the direction and feedback provided consistent?

The words you choose to describe your values are important. You have chosen these words to describe your organization's character. Your promises are the actions that speak louder than your words.

In high-performing organizations, accountability is a side-to-side process. But accountability starts at the top and is shaped by the character of an organization's leaders.

Galvanizing Your Team: Unity

Your organization's mission (its purpose beyond making money) and vision (where you're going) are especially important. They must translate beyond the financial performance of the organization. They must matter to everyone on your team and inspire people to show up every day and give their best to achieve a goal that is bigger than any individual. It is how great organizations drive accountability.

People want to win. Winning requires unity, commitment and accountability. Leaders unify their colleagues and put them in a position to win.

Unity does not mean absence of conflict. A certain amount of tension is inevitable because conflict is the price of individuality. The key to unity is being able to answer "Yes!" to the question, "Are we in agreement on the big issues?"

High-performing teams achieve unity by talking through concerns, questions and doubts, and committing to the strategy, the action and allocation of resources required to achieve the vision. And then they hold one another accountable to their shared commitment.

A blueprint for any executive seeking to unify a group of people in order to accomplish a difficult task is,

- Seize attention.
- Describe the situation and the motivation for action.

- Appeal to shared values.
- Acknowledge difficulties and provide context.
- Paint the vision, show commitment, mix with humor.
- Be specific.
- Leave them inspired.

Clarity Creates Confidence

To bring out the best from the people on your team, you must tell them what to expect. Setting clear expectations at every level in the organization is one of the simplest and most effective steps leaders can and should take to drive performance.

Your operating (or strategic) plan should ensure that everyone is clear about

- Where we are (Point A).
- Where we're going (Point B).
- How we'll get there.
- Who's responsible and will be held accountable for specific tasks.
- Deadlines for commitments.
- Rewards and penalties related to performance.

When your plan includes the above-mentioned components, it becomes your contract at the leadership level. And the basis of your accountability model.

At the individual level, expectations should be established as an up-front contract with an if/then component. The power of the if/then component is its simplicity, its clarity, and the fact that it is discussed and agreed to — as the name of the contract says — up front. "If you do this, then you will get this. If you do not do this, then this is what will happen." Clear expectations and clear consequences for both sets of behavior are indicated.

Accountability breaks down and emotions swirl when clear expectations are not established up front.

To galvanize unity and drive high performance, people need to know what you want them to do and what's in it for them when they do it.

To accomplish great things, the employees of an organization must be unified around a common goal, and each person in the organization must believe that what they do will affect whether that goal is reached. ●

Green and Growing: Learning

Learning continues to be exceedingly important because the pace of change has never been faster; and it will never again be as slow as it is today. How can you and your team keep up with learning all that you need to know? How

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do you know what you need to learn to do the job you're supposed to do?

You are wise to look beyond your four walls to learn from changes occurring in the competitive, political, regulatory, cultural, technological and financial arenas that will make an impact on your business.

But before you look outside your organization, first look inside. Learning doesn't just come from the top. Nor does it come only from experts conveying information and training to your employees. Learning can and should be bottom to top and side to side, just like accountability in high-performing organizations.

Successful companies understand they can learn from their employees, so they survey their workforce to learn how employees feel about the company, to measure employee engagement and to assess whether the company's training, development and communication initiatives are working.

More than anything, learning is an attitude, and it's a way of thwarting complacency, attacking problems and spurring intellectual, skill-based and, ultimately, financial growth.

Leaders of high-performing companies share an expectation that the company will do its part to provide training, tools and development opportunities, and the employees will do their part. Like everything else in the accountability equation, the responsibility for learning is shared equally.

Even when you hire great people with values that match your own and who share your enthusiasm for the work, you still need to invest time, money and patience to help them reach their full potential in your organization. Hire for values. Develop skills.

If you want to grow your business, you must grow your people. ●

What Your Employees Want: Tracking

If you believe — and just as important, your employees believe — tracking helps people make better decisions, improve performance and celebrate milestones, then tracking will be an essential component in your quest to drive accountability at every level of your organization.

Tracking performance and making this information visible throughout the organization are crucial for driv-

ing high performance because they provide the feedback mechanism that enables leaders to remove much of the subjectivity, emotion and excuses associated with underperformance. Tracking performance allows the facts to speak for themselves and do the heavy lifting of holding people accountable.

The key components of the Tracking Pillar are deciding what performance indicators to track and what increments to use; ensuring that what's being tracked is shared widely and connects with your employees intellectually, operationally, emotionally and financially; and making the tracking timely, accurate, consistent and visible.

Tracking sales or profit indicators alone won't tell you the entire story. Running a business without tracking nonfinancial indicators, without gathering data directly from your customers, or without providing performance feedback with your employees is like piloting an airplane from the aft galley without any gauges to help you. You're flying blind.

Not Everything Can Be Counted

Your first decision about tracking performance is determining what to track. Leaders frequently get carried away tracking activities that are meaningless to most employees. And sometimes what is being tracked is meaningless to the company's performance.

Of all the things you track, which two or three indicators should be emphasized repeatedly, communicated continuously and then celebrated when significant milestones are reached? If you have the right employees, they will tell you what information they need to be effective and to feel like the work they're doing is meaningful.

Although it's true that what gets measured is what gets done, it's also true that your accountability and performance will improve when what you measure connects to the work you're asking your people to do. Making the connection between the person, their performance and the organization's purpose is essential.

Tracking is your mechanism for communicating clearly and unambiguously the performance that is occurring at the enterprise, business unit, departmental and individual levels. It's what your best employees want. They want to know how they are doing against their individual objectives, and they want to know how their performance is helping the organization achieve its larger objectives. If you have the right people on your team, peer pressure is a powerful accountability force. ●

Instilling a Sense of Urgency

By whatever name you choose to call it — persistence or passion, stubbornness or stamina, drive or determination — all great leaders demonstrate an urgent will to win.

As the leader, you don't have to be the one solving the problems, but you must identify them and then act on them. Balancing reflection with action is one of the hallmarks of a great leader. Thinking things through can make your company great.

Just as the Unity Pillar and Tracking Pillar are linked by virtue of what each communicates about expectations and progress against those expectations, the Learning Pillar, Urgency Pillar and Evolving Pillar are linked because the characteristics shared by these three pillars embody the approach exceptional companies take to harness, apply and benefit from knowledge.

The Urgency Pillar converts learning into high-performance by sustaining a laser-like focus on improving processes to drive productivity, minimizing red tape to create a sense of urgency and a bias for action, and recognizing mistakes and moving quickly to address problems.

Don't confuse urgency with lots of change. People can handle only so much change because it's stressful. And don't equate urgency with rash, hasty decision making and execution. Urgency for high-performing companies is the disciplined focus on a handful of compelling priorities that are executed with purpose, commitment and immediacy.

Communicating Urgency

Founded in 1974, Clark Builders had grown to \$473 million by 2008 and gained a reputation for delivering great results in cold-climate construction. Brian Lacey joined the company in 1990, and today he's one of Clark's eight partners. He said, "What I've found is that people tend to want to do well, and I've learned that communication is key to helping them succeed. Like any process, communication can have a weak link, and when that weak link breaks the chain in your critical path, you can find yourself in trouble."

Lacey identifies his top performers to handle the critical items on a project. He creates a sense of urgency, charges them with the responsibility for the outcome, and sets the up-front contract so expectations for accountability are clear. "When you provide good people enough information to operate well, they're going to strive to meet or exceed your requirements," Lacey says. ●

Walking the Talk: Reputation

Warren Buffett once said, "We can afford to lose money — even a lot of money. We cannot afford to lose reputation — even a shred of reputation." Reputation, the sixth pillar, is at risk as your colleagues watch to see how you handle adversity, conflict and character flaws. The Character Pillar and Reputation Pillar are linked. Character is who you are. Reputation is how others see your character being lived out.

Most leaders' first thought when asked about "reputation" is to consider it as something that occurs outside the organization. Although technically true, this assessment is only half the equation. Your reputation as a leader is also being formed by your ability or inability to live up to your promises inside your organization. Are you living your values? Are you walking your talk?

Holding people accountable is difficult. A delay in addressing underperformance signals to your employees that you are either oblivious to the problem or afraid to confront the issue. Neither choice inspires confidence, and such behavior diminishes your credibility.

Confronting Underperformance

Successful companies are better than most at identifying underperformers, balancing "humanity and performance" as they coach these underperformers, and then moving them out if the employee can't or won't improve.

As you "search for the guilty," you must decide what role you played in the event. Is the process broken? Were you unclear in setting expectations? Did you make it difficult for someone to come forward and warn you of the impending disaster? If the problem lies with the individual, you must decide how you will address that person's performance.

To address underperformance, you must figure out what's happening below the surface, the part you may not be able to see. What is the underperformer thinking? Feeling? Has that person's beliefs changed? How aware is the person that his or her performance has gone south? Questions are less likely to put the person on defensive, and questions help you avoid making incorrect assumptions about a person and a particular behavior.

Listen patiently without thinking about what you will say next. Listen for what's not said. Watch body language. Assess the gap between their reality and yours. Determine whether they are able and willing to improve. You cannot want success for them more than they want it for themselves. Your assessment will help you answer the hardest

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question of all: how much more time will you invest in them to get their performance back on track?

The company Herman Miller provides the tools and coaching employees need to be successful. “If they can’t improve their performance, if moving them to a position that better suits their capabilities is not feasible ... or if they choose for some reason not to address their performance, then we look at exiting them from the organization,” says Tony Cortese. “When that is the decision, we make every attempt to do that with dignity and respect.”

If you can’t change the people, change the people. ●

Change Practices, Not Principles: Evolving

A leader must accept that customers’ needs are always changing, and so the company you are leading must be ever evolving. Therefore, two of the most important questions a leader must ask and answer, says author Peter Drucker, are, “Who is our customer?” and “What does the customer value?” An organization’s top leader is responsible for getting answers to these questions and accountable for executing the changes that will enable the company to provide the products and services customers want.

Changing a business model takes smarts and guts. Transforming people is even harder and takes leadership. The steps of a change management program, says Sony’s Steve Dalton, are “not rocket science: casting a vision for the future, getting change agents on your side, getting some quick wins, communicating your vision without exception to everyone, achieving buy-in, and figuring out how to reward people. Yes,” he says, “many people know those steps. The issue for me was this: You have got to believe in it yourself if you’re the leader. And how you implement and execute your plan is the key.”

Making yourself visible to your employees and showing them that you care are smart steps for a leader to take under the best of times, and they are essential when the uncertainty of change causes anxiety among the workforce.

Seven Words You Can’t Say

Comedian George Carlin was known for mixing observational humor with larger, social commentary. His groundbreaking 1972 album *Class Clown* featured his most famous monologue, “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.”

George Carlin had his seven words, and here are seven you shouldn’t say: “We have always done it this way.” If you are serious about getting better, you must be fully committed to considering new ways of running your business. Do not change your principles. You must, however, be willing to look critically at changing your practices — your business proposition, your programs, your processes, your people — to evolve and propel your organization to the next level of success.

The flip side of “always” is “never.” Here are five other words that will kill your efforts to evolve, improve and achieve your organization’s performance potential: “We’ve never done that before.”

Tastes change. Habits evolve. New expectations develop. Smart leaders make big, smart bets and are held accountable for the results those bets produce. Big deals. Small improvements. Calculated risks. Follow-through. Your ability to leverage change, your willingness to evolve, and your conviction to execute your plans will drive your future performance.

All organizations wrestle with accountability in much the same way. Although the scope and complexity may differ from organization to organization, the problems leaders encounter on their journey from Point A to Point B are the same.

High-performing organizations create and sustain a culture of purpose, accountability and fulfillment that is guided by a set of principles and practices that are simple to say and hard to do.

The key to accountability is bringing together these principles and then acting on them with consistency to sustain a high-performance culture.

You now have a bridge, supported by the Seven Pillars of Accountability, to help you reach Point B. Where will your bridge take you? ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Accountability*, you’ll also like:

1. ***The Accountable Leader* by Brian Dive.** Centered around three themes — leadership, accountability and organizational structure — this book explores what it means for managers to be held accountable at every level.
2. ***How Did That Happen?* by Roger Connors, Tom Smith.** Gain an unbeatable competitive edge and enhance performance by holding others accountable in a positive, principled way.
3. ***Change the Culture, Change the Game* by Roger Connors, Tom Smith.** Learn how to build a culture of accountability in your organization.