

Want Results? Fix Accountability

BY ROGER CONNORS AND TOM SMITH

If employees don't know what results the company needs to achieve, they won't invest the energy needed to attack obstacles, solve problems and create solutions.

Would it surprise you to learn that 9 out of 10 management teams cannot describe, with complete alignment, the most important results their organizations need to achieve? Their responses vary not only around which results are most important, but also the description itself.

The fallout from this confusion is that more than 3 out of 4 people struggle to understand exactly what their organization is trying to achieve.

The lack of clearly defined key results is one of the major themes from Partners In Leadership's 2014 Workplace Accountability Study (Editor's note: The authors co-founded Partners In Leadership). The study findings reveal a basic assumption — that "result expectations are clear to the organization" — is a flawed assumption at best.

Further, many leaders are unaware their teams or organizations don't clearly understand their targeted results. This explains missed execution because of confused priorities and diluted focus, a lack of personal ownership and accountability for strategic organiza-

tional imperatives and a lack of traction to accelerate progress on enterprisewide initiatives (Figure 1).

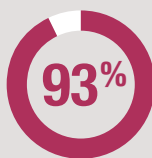
Consider the situation at Brinker International Inc., known best for Chili's Restaurants. When the Brinker team met in early 2009, the company faced massive business challenges thanks to the collapsing economy. The 35-year-old company culture had been hijacked by "the blame game"; no one would take responsibility for anything that was going wrong, and finger-pointing, confusion, cover-your-tail and other denial behaviors abounded.

"At the time, Brinker had no fewer than 40 key performance indicators [KPIs] across the organization that were inadvertently used as key results," said Tony Bridwell, chief people officer at Brinker. "It's easier for company execs to admit now than it was then, but we knew they were experiencing a high degree of confusion around what to measure and really no way to remember easily at the team level just what we were accountable to produce."

FIGURE 1: LACKING ACCOUNTABILITY

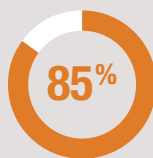
The 2014 Workplace Accountability Study reveals a widespread accountability void that has negative but reversible consequences.

ABYSMAL ALIGNMENT



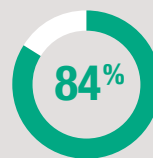
of employees **don't really understand what their organization is trying to accomplish** in order to align with their own work.

LEADERSHIP, NOT LEADING



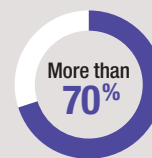
of leaders **aren't defining what their people should be working on** — and an equal number of employees crave clarity.

NO KNOW HOW



of the workforce **describes itself as "trying but failing" or "avoiding" accountability**, even when employees know what to fix.

"WE'RE DOOMED!"



of those surveyed were **extremely pessimistic about the viability of their organization's key measures**.

Source: Partners In Leadership, 2014

Reversing a Bad Trend

The multiyear “Workplace Accountability Study” assessed more than 40,000 people in thousands of organizations. Here are three findings learning leaders should consider for their organizations:

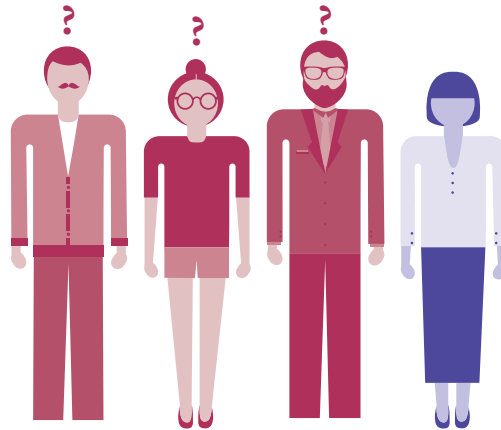
1. Acknowledge reality. While most management teams define and communicate annual measures, the quantity is often overwhelming. Without clarity, confusion can lead to poor execution and counterproductive behaviors. It licenses people to maintain the status quo and dismiss their accountability for results. It also kills momentum because no one is confident about which direction to move.

A clear focus on three to five well-articulated, memorable, measurable key results enables everyone in the organization to take accountability for how they contribute to key results, to explore what else they can do to improve company performance and to work toward needed results. These results should be communicated and discussed at every level of the organization, including the front line.

“While at first we were chided for an oversimplistic version of our key results [reduced from 40 to four], this approach has rocked our world,” Brinker’s Bridwell said. “Since beginning this exercise, we have returned almost 20 percent to our shareholders. Our current low levels of turnover is industry leading. Our engagement scores and team member participation also leads the industry.” That’s not to mention a 52-week high for Brinker shares of \$59 per share in December 2014 — an improvement of more than 10 times.

2. Redefine accountability for results. Eighty percent of people see accountability as punishing or something that happens when things go wrong. This punitive view establishes a pattern of behavior that hampers employees’ ability to execute directives, deploy change and improvement initiatives, and deliver on daily expected job outcomes.

“We recently held an ominous early-morning meeting in the plant warehouse,” said Tim Peoples, plant director for Ocean Spray’s Kenosha, Wisconsin, plant. “The employees felt for certain we were going to announce closing the place; that’s how bad things had become. My boss, the VP of operations, went into a severe scolding, called them out on being the highest cost producers, having the worst safety results, worst material loss results, poorest employee morale and engagement and more.



3 out of 4 people
struggle to understand
exactly what their organization
is trying to achieve.

Then he introduced me. ‘Here’s your new plant manager.’ That’s no way to start a new job.”

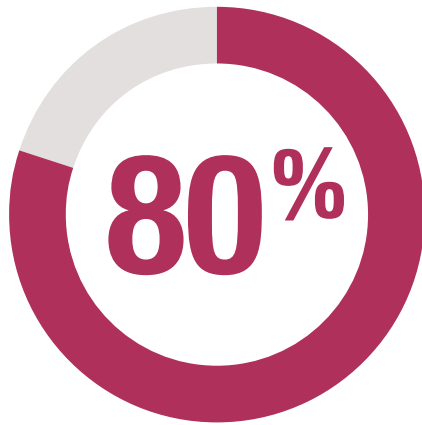
To hammer the point home, Peoples’ boss showed his discouraged audience a picture of how the plant was viewed by Ocean Spray’s senior leadership: a broken-down, rusted-out Volkswagen Beetle. “You’re broken, Kenosha,” were his parting words.

According to the study, 4 out of 5 people see accountability no differently. But there is a more positive and enabling side, the “before it’s too late” rather than the “after the fact, you’re in trouble” side. Reframe accountability as something employees can choose to ensure results are achieved. When people take accountability for results, they:

- Do not blame others when things go wrong.
- Are personally invested in achieving an outcome.
- Take ownership and ask, “What else can I do?”
- Follow up and get things done.
- Creatively deal with obstacles.

With this new view of accountability as an enabler rather than a hammer to beat people up with, Peoples took his Ocean Spray plant to new heights. “We had to move from an ‘us vs. them’ to a ‘working together’ mentality. We could no longer be stuck in our individual silos. We had to be willing to reach across functional boundaries. We had to develop a mindset of being fiscally responsible. Lastly, we had to shift our focus from ourselves to those around us. We had to deliver impeccable customer service to our fellow coworkers.”

After that fateful Ocean Spray meeting, Peoples asked his boss for the picture of the Volkswagen. He had the picture blown up to 4 feet by 5 feet and hung in the employee cafeteria, titling it “Broken Down Kenosha.” He also blew up a picture of a swanky Porsche convertible and cut it into puzzle pieces reflecting key initiatives behind a new set of key measures. Each piece would be earned to cover up the broken-down VW. This was a daily, visual reminder to all employees about the progress needed to turn the plant around.



80% of people see accountability as punishing.

This punitive view hampers employees' ability to execute directives, deploy change and successfully deliver on expected outcomes.

3. Train accountability. Don't assume supervisors and senior leaders know how to hold others accountable. Some 82 percent of survey participants indicated they either try but fail or altogether avoid holding others accountable. Further, nearly 9 out of 10 people said improving their ability here ranked among their top three professional development needs.

Start with the organizational leaders. Study participants were asked, “What is the single most important factor in influencing others on the team to use the principles and practices introduced in the training?” Seven percent said “incentive rewards” and 9 percent said “consequences for noncompliance” but 84 percent said “example of the leader using the training.”

The better the approach to implementing accountability, the better the ability to nail key performance indicators and achieve desired key results. To practice and instill accountability:

- Adopt a model of positive, empowering accountability that can be trained, coached and hired against.

- Ensure leaders model positive accountability in all their interactions.
- Clearly define results for everyone, at every level of the organization.
- Tie engagement efforts to accountability initiatives.

Accountability Produces Results

At Ocean Spray, training efforts began but did not stop with plant leadership. Management presented plant workers with new key measures and a fresh approach to accountability. Everyone in the plant was trained. To reinforce the sense of joint accountability around key results, the leadership team spent time on the shop floor to nurture a new culture of collaboration and a team mindset. At first, this shocked plant employees and made them anxious, but they came to expect management to be there, engaging them in conversation, addressing obstacles, helping them solve problems and being supportive. Managers also began to set aside time to engage in candid and honest two-way dialogue. Peoples said this “was very powerful and helped the management team grow and elevate.”

The picture of the VW is now nearly covered by one of the Porsche. Peoples said his plant:

- Delivered, relative to costs, the lowest costs in the plant's 45-year history.
- Drove millions of dollars in expenses out of its operating budget.
- Amassed more than 600,000 hours (450 days) without a lost-time injury.
- Saw employee engagement jump 7 percentage points above the prior survey.

Further, hourly employees nominated the plant through the local chamber of commerce as the best place to work in their area.

This situation is not an anomaly. As employees and their organizations move toward a proper understanding and implementation of the enabling side of accountability, they will attack obstacles, solve problems and act on those solutions, making this kind of story achievable.

Accountability is the low-hanging fruit to optimize performance and accelerate change efforts in today's organizations; and, it should be on every learning leader's radar. When an organization gets accountability wrong, leaders pay the price in their ability to execute critical plans and initiatives. Get accountability right and watch people become highly engaged and take accountability for ensuring results are achieved. **CLIO**

Roger Connors and Tom Smith are co-founders of Partners In Leadership, a training and consulting firm. Their latest book is "The Wisdom of Oz: Using Personal Accountability to Succeed in Everything You Do." To comment, email editor@CLOMedia.com.