

ACCOUNTABILITY

The difference that makes a difference

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the organisation consultancy

It's time to step forward and be effective using your accountability

The word 'Accountability' may fill you with dread and foreboding as you think about the crushing pressure of performance management, or it may bring you to life as you consider the opportunities your position and accountabilities afford you.

Either way this short e-book is for you.

The purpose is quite simply to help you (challenge or convict even) to help yourself, your team, organisation, or system to make a difference for the people you ultimately serve. For some that may be customers, for others it's clients or patients, but for all it's the people for whom you seek to deliver value from your service.

I was prompted to write this because of what I have been seeing in our consultancy work within Tricordant – opportunities for individuals to positively use their accountability to drive change and improvement, but opportunities not taken for a variety of reasons.

I am not blaming or bashing the people, it just led me to be more curious about why this is and start to talk with others and think more about it. This short e-book is some of my thoughts, which I trust will be enough to inspire you to think and act more for yourself.

Showing up and setting out to accomplish the things you said you would do. Taking personal responsibility



What accountability is and isn't

Accountability is a slippery word that is used a lot, often incorrectly or inappropriately. This can result in building a fear of accountability rather than seeing it as an opportunity.

Let's start first with the isn't. First and foremost, it is absolutely not about control or using authority in a harsh way to bash others into doing what you want or through imposing unrealistic or harsh performance management regimes. The use of the word accountability can just be a proxy for control and used by those who only have this blunt weapon in their leadership armoury.

Of course, it's fair and right that people in positions of authority who have accountabilities should be held to account for their actions and decisions. However, if individuals are truly accepted and operate within their realms of accountability with a singular focus on making a difference, then the 'threat' of performance management may actually become the ideal opportunity to demonstrate success, rather than something to be feared.

In complex adaptive organisational systems where most of us are, control doesn't work. There are high levels of unpredictability primarily because there are high numbers of people involved, and it is genuinely not possible to control the outcomes. Other mechanisms are needed to lead and manage such systems to deliver value and success. However, this should not be used as an excuse to not deliver or screen out the requirements of a job role and the relevant accountabilities.

***Accountability
is absolutely not
about control***



Accountability can operationalise 'mattering'. Doing what matters and seeing success can make us feel valued in our job role, we can make others feel valued for their contribution and we can make the ultimate recipient of the service know that they really matter to us and are valued by us.

I enjoy reading (or at least skimming) a daily blog from NHS Managers written by Roy Lilley. I like his very practical stance which resonates with mine, although I don't always agree with everything he says. Recently he wrote about the error made by so many when they talk about priorities in the plural. He says this comes from the David Brent school of management since priority should only ever be singular. I sympathise with his stance.

Genuine accountability will focus on being valued, delivering value, and meaning in the areas that matter

Accountability is a mindset issue and some of us need a mindset transplant

The challenge is that we can get caught up in semantics around words. Equally, we could talk about the interchangeability (or not) of accountability and responsibility. Purists (and I have a tendency toward that) can say they are different (which they are), but quite frankly so long as someone is picking up the reigns and doing something about an issue that matters, I truly do not care whether they are accountable or responsible. They are making a difference to what matters which is what really counts.

Of course, there are raging operational pressures, performance management pressures and many more other daily pressures. It is so easy to look from outside and not 'understand what its really like here'. I get that although I have been the other side of the desk as well and for a lot more years than I have been a consultant. We can all get caught up in the multiplicity of things to do, the challenges of the urgent and the important, the demands of bosses to change our plans and schedules. However, the professional use of accountability can overcome so much of this.

Exercising accountability means bringing with you all those around you, creating what can be called a web of accountability; several people or teams who all know their part, individual accountabilities, and responsibilities for action. It is the role of the most senior person to develop the web and work with each person within their sphere of influence. The SRO or Senior Responsible Officer is more than just the chair of a programme board!

A really great SRO doesn't need a title, just the authority and influence to create a web with others who also have a 'felt accountability' to want to make a difference. Their role then is the continual encouragement and development of the people within their web to help them succeed.

Making a difference to what matters is what really counts

Being accountable means encouraging, developing, and supporting others to achieve the desired outcomes

What about organisational culture

If only every organisation or system valued staff input, feedback and nurtured genuine accountability, then so many workplaces would be different places to work, they would be healthy, energetic, and confident places that deliver great value and outcomes for those they serve. Unfortunately, that is seldom the case.

Accountability is a team sport, it is relational, it is people working together, resolving differences of view together and achieving results.

Patrick Lencioni in his book 'The Five Dysfunctions of Team' states that the avoidance of accountability is the fourth of the five dysfunctions. This is illustrated by the diagram below.

The point made here is that the absence of trust can lead to the fear of conflict and the lack of commitment to one another and therefore the avoidance of accountability, which ultimately means the inattention to results.

***Where there is
trust in a team
there is more
likely to be a
culture of positive
accountability
and therefore
successful results
and outcomes***

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team



Tricordant has done much work over the years on culture improvement within organisations and system collaborations, and included within that has been a focus on behaviours. As part of this we use a profiling tool called PRISM, which is very insightful on the behaviours of an individual and then the team. It is from the results of this work across many organisations that I say accountability is a team sport. Real success will only be delivered when the team (the web of accountability) work together with a determination and focus on achieving a positive outcome.

Accountability awareness can be a key to leading organisations out of stuckness

One of the great organisational challenges of our time is 'stuckness'. People, teams, and organisations just get stuck and are not going anywhere. A great maxim that I firmly believe is that if a business isn't growing (or going forward) then its already in decline. So why do businesses and organisation get stuck. There are many and varied reasons, but included within these has to be the challenges around accountability, trust and team working. Lencioni's 5 dysfunctions are a good starter, especially if used in reverse as an audit and improvement challenge.

But what about this one? Do you know who in your business is accountable for what, and do they know what they are accountable for? Is it even a conversation you have within your team or in 1:1 meetings? It may surprise you just how tackling this can unlock an understanding of accountability that can move you from stuckness to success.



The Data Challenge

Without the most appropriate information it just is not possible to fully exercise accountability and make the great decisions needed for transformational difference. The information may be qualitative or quantitative and in my experience the latter gets very confused. Over many years, I have been responsible for producing and using detailed data reports and seeking to provide relevant information for myself and others. Sometimes that is really difficult especially if the information systems are largely geared to 'feeding the beast' and providing data for central performance monitoring (control) systems.

A key person or team to include in your web of accountability are the people who can get you not just data, but really good information on the area you want to focus on. Most often the data is in a system somewhere but somebody who understands the vision of the work and has the appropriate skills is needed to get at it and present it in the best possible way.

So often we experience organisations producing large volumes of data, but totally missing key information on the area or areas that need the most focus. Headline numbers are fine, but it is so important to dig into root cause, why is this happening and what is the impact on services and people. Basic improvement skills such as asking the question 'why' 5 times is such a good way to get to the bottom of things and understand what needs to change. So often though the data trail runs cold and that is what needs to be fixed first.

Information is key, but it also has to be the correct information and available over the long term to track progress. Determination to exercise accountability appropriately will find a way to access the right data and information.

The above is a wonderful quote from Jeff Bezos of Amazon which demonstrates that analytics if done right have the potential to overrule politics and bias which so often causes the stuckness and inability to transform.

The great thing about fact-based decisions is that they overrule the hierarchy



Making accountability positive

Recently I had the pleasure of discussing accountability with one of our associate consultants, Dr Amanda Woolley, who apart from having a great operational grasp on accountability, also has a deep academic understanding. You can watch a video recording of this interview [here](#) (but finish reading this first).

In our discussion Amanda talked about 'fundamental attribution error' which quite simply is when you (the other person) do something it's a flaw but when I do it it's a true exception. Amanda's perspective was that just by understanding this and not falling foul of it would make a huge difference in our organisational culture towards making accountability a positive feature.

I know when she said it to me, I immediately resonated with it – what about you?

Amanda went on to talk about a culture of restorative consciousness by which she means moving from a place of control and misuse of power to a place of being relational, seeing each other as having a voice in a collective endeavour and working together to resolve conflicts and focus on what really matters. We often refer to this as co-creation or co-production.

Work together, resolve differences and focus on what really matters
Where you are the senior accountable person, whether the most senior in the organisation or a team leader it is important to create your web of accountability. Bring in the most appropriate people, value them, encourage and challenge them to be the difference that makes a difference. In our co-creation work we also like to include those with different perspectives, even negative views. This diversity of opinion really helps in the final outcome.

Focus on responding to the most important need (ideally one thing at a time). I believe you will be amazed at the difference this will bring to you, your team, and your business.

For a system to thrive, the conductor (and that could be you) needs to navigate the orchestra, ensuring every note aligns. This individual takes charge not just in title but in action, guaranteeing that all parts and levels of the system are synchronised toward a common goal.

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Over to you

There is so much more to accountability, but I have sought to keep this brief and focus on encouraging you to be brave, to step forward, to know that you can make a difference in your organisation and to the people who work with you, and you jointly serve.

What is the one big thing you really need to see change? Use the challenge and inspiration of this e-book to do something about it. Be the leader and bring others into your web of accountability. Share a vision, get the team's input, develop a plan (keep it agile though) and go for it.

In Tricordant we use the OKR methodology, Objectives and Key Results. You can find out more about this in John Doerr's book 'Measure What Matters'. The basic principle is that you decide what the most important work is for the next period of time (3,6,12 months) and then align the organisation (or team) to achieve these by ensuring everyone plays their part. It is a very effective methodology, but the accountable leader has to lead and the team need to be led. OKRs may not be appropriate for you, but the principle of focusing on what matters certainly will be.

***Work together,
resolve
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***The responsibility and challenge to perform
beyond what anyone thought was possible***



In summary

Grasping hold of your accountability is a key to making a transformational difference, start with these steps:

- Decide you are going to grasp hold of your accountability
- Decide what is the number 1 thing you want to see changed
- Bring together and envision your web of accountability
- Get the data you need
- Go for it, and keep going for it
- Celebrate your success

Please let me know your success stories.

If you need more support

It is very possible that you know you need some additional support to bring about the changes you now realise need to happen in your own accountability actions and those of your team or organisation. Tricordant can help you with that with everything from 1:1 coaching, team development and much more.

At Tricordant we can support organisations by collaborating with the existing system, involving individuals at various levels and with diverse responsibilities. By doing so, we aim to refine your working methods, enhancing focus on key deliveries and facilitating the necessary changes. Working together we can foster a more accountable and effective working environment and for you to deliver new and sustainable success. Let me know your success stories

About Tricordant

We are an organisation consultancy working across health and care and the wider public sector as well as with the private and not for profit sectors. Our focus is to support leaders to bring your vision to reality.

Our key services are:

Organisation Development
Organisation Design
Strategy
Systems Working
Leadership Development
Strategic Workforce Planning

We are experts in:

Whole Scale Change
Culture and behaviour change
Operating Models
Lego Serious Play
Partnerships and collaborations
Service re-design and improvement

And we like nothing better than coaching and mentoring individuals and teams to achieve their goals.

So whatever support you may need we can help.

