



Book How Did That Happen?

Holding People Accountable for Results the Positive, Principled Way

Roger Connors and Tom Smith
Portfolio, 2009

Recommendation

When things go wrong at work and you're left asking, "How did that happen?" the reflexive response is to find someone or something to blame. That doesn't solve anything. Nor does it prevent something from falling through the cracks again in the future. Take a proactive, constructive approach by developing a sense of accountability in every person at every level of your organization. Consultants Roger Connors and Tom Smith provide a system – the "Accountability Sequence" – for instilling responsibility in everyone in your company. The authors' insistence – here, as in their previous books – on using their own contrived terminology adds an unnecessary layer of confusion and redundancy to their otherwise solid, straightforward and useful concepts. *BooksInShort* recommends their system for creating an organizationwide sense of accountability, responsibility and participation to managers at any company of any size.

Take-Aways

- The "Accountability Sequence Model" provides a framework for holding people accountable in a way that produces results and positive morale.
- The Accountability Sequence's "Outer Ring" addresses "establishing expectations."
- Its "Inner Ring" uses the "Accountability Conversation" to address why people fail to meet "Key Expectations," which need "commitment, execution and follow-through."
- Those causes are: "poor motivation, inadequate training, too little personal accountability, and an ineffective culture."
- Begin the Accountability Sequence by forming and clarifying your expectations.
- Communicate what you expect in two-way conversation about "Why-What-When."
- Regularly assess employees' progress toward realizing these key expectations through the inspection step so you can spot problems and keep people on track.
- Ensure people's commitment to your mission by capturing their "hearts and minds."
- Select the level of training needed to match the level of the unmet expectations.
- Assess your firm's "accountability "temperature." Work to improve its "Culture of Accountability." If faced with unmet expectations ask, "How did I let that happen?"

Summary

Accountability, Not Blame

The three axioms of the "Accountability Sequence Model" are the foundation of holding people accountable in a "positive, principled way" that makes them feel good and produces results. When things go wrong, people usually have dropped the ball due to a lack of knowledge and experience rather than an unwillingness to fulfill a task. The first axiom, the "Accountability Assumption," acknowledges that most people do all they can to fulfill expectations, yearn to make valuable contributions, and take satisfaction in meeting or surpassing expectations. The second axiom, the "Accountability Fallacy," claims that flawed people fail to deliver on expectations. The third axiom, the "Accountability Truth," says leaders should see themselves as part of the problem in addressing unmet expectations.

"When people do everything in their power to do what they say they will do, the work becomes predictable and commitments become a reality."

The Accountability Sequence has an "Outer Ring" and an "Inner Ring." In the Outer Ring, you "establish...expectations" by the way you "form, communicate, align and

inspect” what you want people up and down your “Expectations Chain” to accomplish. The Inner Ring details the four components of the “Accountability Conversation” you’ll use to help someone deliver unmet expectations. The four leading drivers of unmet expectations include “poor motivation, inadequate training, too little personal accountability and an ineffective culture.”

The Outer Ring

The Accountability Sequence Model takes a positive approach to holding others accountable. It empowers people to deliver on key expectations. Working the Outer Ring is a proactive way to “influence results before things go wrong.” When leaders focus on people’s “failure” and look at punitive measures for dealing with unmet expectations, they sidestep their own responsibility and fail to ask, “How did I let that happen?” This increases a “destructive process” that fails to address the problem. It creates negative “Accountability Connections,” personal connections based on accountability issues with those in their Expectations Chain. The top five reasons people don’t hold their employees accountable include being afraid of offending another person or doing harm to a personal relationship, feeling that they lack time to follow-up, that it won’t make a difference or that they might provoke retaliation.

“True accountability is not about punishment.”

Every employee interaction affects your working relationship. Your “Accountability Style,” how you administer accountability, has a positive or negative impact on your Accountability Connections. Accountability Styles fit two broad categories: “Coerce and Compel” or “Wait and See” Where you fall on that continuum affects your Accountability Connections.

First Step: “FORM Expectations”

The first step in holding others accountable is to define your expectations with the Accountability Sequence Model. Ensure that the people in your Expectations Chain, all those connected to one another in delivering your “Key Expectations,” understand exactly what they need to deliver. A key expectation is one where failure is not an option. Everyone in the Expectations Chain must meet key expectations. For example, the managers at Home Grown Foods were delighted when a training program resulted in a \$5 million sales increase – until they realized only 15% of their front-line personnel implemented what they learned. The managers revised their expectations to 100% implementation plus \$25 million more in sales.

“Your particular style, which reflects your basic personality, greatly influences how you go about holding others accountable.”

Use the FORM Checklist to make sure each expectation is effective:

- **“Framable”** – The expectation aligns with company strategy and vision.
- **“Obtainable”** – The expectation is achievable throughout the Expectations Chain in terms of the company’s current resources and limitations.
- **“Repeatable”** – The Expectations Chain can transfer the expectation easily.
- **“Measurable”** – Managers can track and measure progress toward its fulfillment.

Second Step: “Communicate Expectations with the Why-What-When Approach”

The second step is to communicate your expectations. Some managers rely on a “Command and Control” approach. They tell subordinates what they need when they need it and expect their employees to get it done. Barking orders doesn’t engage people’s “hearts and minds.” To inspire commitment, tell your staff “Why” an expectation matters to the organization and to them personally. Make their work compelling by initiating a two-way, honest conversation that explains the tactical context and importance of each person’s contribution. In communicating the “What,” have three important discussions: clarify the key expectations, initiate a “Boundaries Discussion” to identify real or imagined obstacles that might jeopardize delivery of the key expectations, and have a “Support Discussion” about available resources and backing. Every key expectation needs a “By When” due date and time. This enables people in your Expectations Chain to manage their work so they can meet the deadline.

Third Step: “Align Expectations”

The third step is to align expectations. The highest level of alignment is “Complete Alignment.” All other levels reflect “Complyment,” which occurs when people perform as expected. This often fails to create the necessary level of ownership. Delivering successfully on key expectations requires greater personal “commitment, execution and follow-through.” For example, a hotel employee demonstrated his heart-and-mind commitment to customer satisfaction when he contacted the night manager and asked him to bring in one of his own dinner jackets for a guest who had forgotten his jacket and needed it for an important dinner. Such ownership exerts a positive influence on everyone in the Expectations Chain.

“In the strongest culture, everyone is accountable to everyone, regardless of position or the ability to influence others.”

The three steps of the “Alignment Dialogue” ensure the Complete Alignment of everyone in the Expectations Chain. The first step, “Score It,” reiterates the expectation and asks people if they agree on what it is and the planned course of action by rating their alignment. If they lack Complete Alignment, use the second step, “Evaluate It,” to find what they need to achieve Complete Alignment. Do they feel the expectation is “clear, achievable, needed,” and “linked” to overall strategy? In the third step, “Resolve It,” use “persuasion power” to resolve any concerns. Then either reaffirm the expectation, or revise it with the Why-What-When process. Continue the dialogue by adding “Alignment Meetings” to your regular schedule.

Fourth Step: “Inspect Expectations”

The last step of the Accountability Sequence Model is to inspect expectations. Workday problems and other issues affect people’s ability to fulfill expectations. Check with them often to identify and assess snags before they become roadblocks. This “positive, principled inspection” shows your commitment to joint accountability and your willingness to help. Inspections hold people accountable for what they do right as well as what they do wrong. Be supportive, help find solutions and reinforce

progress. Explain that these assessments are part of the process of enabling them to succeed.

“When you motivate people to do what you want through compulsion and negative consequences, you may gain their compliance but you will never capture their hearts and minds.”

Effective assessments utilize the “LOOK Model”:

- **“Listen”** – Ask questions that tease out issues and ascertain people’s levels of commitment. Listen carefully to the answers.
- **“Observe”** – Don’t manage from behind a desk.
- **“Objectify”** – Establish guidelines for progress and follow up on employee input.
- **“Know”** – Repeat the first three steps to remain on top of the expectation situation.

The Inner Ring

When faced with unmet expectations, Inner Ring strategies enable you to diagnose the problem and find the right solution. The Inner Ring examines four variables that lead to “Four Inner Ring Solutions: Training, Motivation, Accountability, and/or Culture.” Try to boost unwilling employees’ motivation and offer additional training to those who can’t do what you want and need them to do.

“People who invest their hearts and minds go beyond the basic requirements of their jobs and work to make things happen in a way that may even surpass expectations.”

Many managers deal with unmet expectations by lowering the expectation, assigning blame and replacing people, or using the Accountability Conversation. To begin this three-step process, determine if the problem occurred due to poor execution of the “Outer Ring, then selecting an Inner Ring solution, using the Outer Ring ” to implement it.

“Examine Motivation”

“When people lack sufficient motivation” to do the work to meet an expectation, the problem is rarely laziness. Usually they don’t feel compelled to achieve the sought-after results. Their hearts aren’t in it; they need to be engaged in a cause.

“Whenever you begin by assuming the worst in others, you will most likely see their worst behavior (not to mention your own) emerge.”

Liz, an emergency-room manager, experienced this first-hand when – despite her best efforts – her staff repeatedly failed to obtain next-of-kin information when patients checked in. The situation did not improve until Liz told her staff two recent real-life stories about the consequences of this lapse, asking them to imagine how it would feel if the person who had died was their relative. Soon the department reached 92% compliance. You also can inspire people by enlisting them in a cause. Ensure their commitment with this four-step motivational process:

1. **“Define it”** – Create a compelling story that will convey the cause.
2. **“Sell it”** – Give people a reason to believe in your cause by addressing the “Why.”
3. **“Advocate it”** – Continue to retell the story in public; add “supporting evidence.”
4. **“Celebrate it”** – Publicly praise people when they make progress toward the goal.

“Evaluate Training”

When people fail to meet an expectation due to lack of training, provide appropriate instruction. Hasten the training process with the four “training accelerators”: solicit the trainees’ buy-in; align your coaching and instruction with their learning and communication styles; provide feedback and help trainees use it; and model what you want them to learn. Match the amount and depth of training with each person’s skill level. In extreme circumstances when no amount of training helps, you may need to replace the individual.

“Assess Accountability”

An organization’s success depends on the degree of personal accountability its members embrace. The steps for taking accountability are: “See It, Own It, Solve It, Do It.” Impediments to personal accountability include blaming, denial, confusion and ignoring.

“All too often, people only become aware of boundaries after they cross them.”

Manage the directional flow of accountability, the “Accountability Current,” with your organization. Many companies maintain a traditional top-down flow of accountability that places responsibility for “generating accountability” at the top. Instead, in the “bottom-up flow” of accountability, everyone in the Expectations Chain takes personal accountability and holds everyone they depend on – managers, team members, vendors and suppliers – accountable. When everyone in the chain embraces accountability, the organization achieves “360° Accountability.”

“We never form our expectations in a vacuum. Everyone is part of a chain of expectations in the business world.”

People attitudes toward accountability differ and can be context specific: some people consistently refuse to take accountability; some accept it selectively when it works in their favor; and others embrace accountability.

“Consider Culture”

Company culture influences how well people perform and how they understand and practice accountability. In a “Culture of Accountability” they “willingly take personal accountability for their successes and failures,” work to overcome obstacles and always ask, “What else can I do to achieve the results?” Accountable cultures have “integrity.” They “do what they say and say what they do.”

“You cannot effectively hold someone accountable if you have not first formed clear expectations.”

The “Results Pyramid Model,” which works at the individual and organizational levels, shows “how a culture comes about, how it actually develops and what you can do to change it quickly.” The peak of the pyramid is “Results;” under them are “Actions,” the behaviors required to achieve the results. Actions depend on “Beliefs,” the next level down the pyramid. Beliefs drive people’s actions. At the base of the pyramid are “Experiences,” which create people’s beliefs. Changing culture requires understanding how experiences drive beliefs, beliefs determine actions, and actions produce results.

About the Authors

Roger Connors and **Tom Smith** co-founded the Partners in Leadership consultancy and co-wrote *The Principle* and *Journey to the Emerald City*.
