

# Accountability: Take The Leadership Challenge

By David Irvine, Co-Author of the Canadian Best Seller, *Accountability: Getting A Grip On Results*

The concept and experience of accountability needs rejuvenation. We hear that organizations need to be more accountable, young people need to be more accountable, leaders need to be more accountable, and employees need to be more accountable. Yet unless we clarify "accountable to whom," "for what specific results," and "for what matters most," accountability remains illusive rhetoric at best, and a hammer that punishes people at worst. Accountability is ultimately about *trust* and *ownership*. It is a promise and an obligation, both to yourself and to the people around you, to deliver specific, defined results in a way that supports the integrity of the individual. Accountability is about creating an organization where you shift from fear, over-control and dependency to a place of ownership, deep commitment, respect and where you can live your highest aspirations. Accountability is about managing the expectations in relationships, but it is also a philosophy for living.

There are four critical pieces to the Accountability puzzle:

## 1. Maturity

Maturity is a foundational prerequisite for the development of an accountable person. In an old quote book of my mother's, I found this definition of maturity, probably written in my grandparents' generation when accountability was more prevalent:

**Maturity is:**

*The ability to do a job without being supervised,  
To finish a job once it is started,  
To carry money without spending it,  
And to be able to bear an injustice without wanting to get even.*

No leadership philosophy or approach, no matter how superb and eloquent, can compensate for a lack of individual maturity – the accountability of every employee in an organization.

## 2. Personal Integrity

"No one but you cares about the reason you let someone down," my friend Jerry Weinberg says. Personal integrity, another cornerstone of accountability, involves two things. First, you only promise what you intend to deliver, and second, you deliver on your promises. If you make a promise knowing that you lack the resources, capability, and desire to fulfill it, you breach your integrity which in turn, diminishes self-respect and erodes respect and trust in the workplace. Remember, it is better to under promise and over deliver, than to over promise and under deliver.

## 3. Respectful Leadership

Leadership can be summarized in three approaches:

The *Authoritarian Approach* is the Old Deal that says, "If you are loyal, work hard, and do as you are told, we will give you job security and a good pension." The Old Deal birthed unions and job descriptions.

The *Awful Approach*, or Muddled Deal, is common today, and says, "If you do your job plus someone else's, we will provide you with a job, at least for now, rhetoric, and the same pay." This Muddled Deal is creating burnout and depleting employees of the vital life energy that sustains a productive workplace.

The *Accountable Approach*, or New Deal, says, "If you keep learning, create value, and stop expecting your organization to be your parent, we will provide an open, challenging, respectful workplace, an opportunity for meaningful work and recognition, a place where you can live your highest aspirations."

## 4. Clear Agreements

The Accountable Approach – The New Deal – is made real through clear, one to two page agreements containing six key elements:

**Business Focus Statement** – What are your highest aspirations in your work? What are your unique gifts and contribution?

**Accountabilities** – What no-excuse *results* (vs. activities) do you promise to achieve?

**Support Agreements** – What resources, skills, and capabilities do you need to fulfill your accountabilities?

**Goals** – What are your specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-limited objectives?

**Consequences** – What do you want from your organization in return for delivering on your accountabilities? Remember, with no consequences, there can be no accountability.

**Evergreen** – How will this document be kept current and remain useful?

A powerful accountability agreement confronts the struggle between the capacity of the human spirit to live a life of *meaning* and *purpose* and the daily demands of an organization to be *relevant* and *useful*. Accountability agreements can balance both because they are designed to integrate personal purpose with practical value.

Accountable leadership today is about results, but it is also about creating cultures that make work meaningful. It is about engaging people and renewing vitality at work. It is a deep and sustaining way to renew organizations with a promise and a commitment to what matters most, and to bring the most to whatever you do.

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*David Irvine speaks to thousands of people every year, from large corporations to small entrepreneurial ventures, from community associations to government, education, and health care. He focuses on Accountability, Authentic Leadership, and Balanced Living.*

*For information on how David Irvine can bring value to your organization, contact CANSPEAK, 1-800-665-7376.*