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HR and Manager Partnerships: Building Accountability in the Workplace

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Rayna had just received an interesting request. J.B., a recent addition to the front-line management team, had come to her following the division wide quarterly town hall update. The division president, Anne, had given a talk on accountability. She'd been firm in her resolve to increase division wide understanding of what it meant to be accountable at work. J.B. wasn't questioning the directive. He was struggling with the meaning. What did accountability mean for him as a manager?

"Rayna," he said. "In my last job we talked a lot about a culture of responsiveness. We gave a lot of lip service to building good teams, but in the end, it was really all about getting things done – fast. There was a lot of blaming; nobody wanted to be the one to holding the bag. It was about covering your backside – always."

"Ugh," said Rayna. "That must have been tough. We are trying hard to be different here. Anne is all about building a healthy workplace. She wants people to feel good about coming to work."

J.B. replied, "I hear what she's saying. It just doesn't mean anything to me. I'm not sure I've ever thought about accountability at work. I know, it sounds crazy."

"Anne's talk got me thinking," said Rayna. "I've been doing some reading and listening to podcasts on what accountability means. How about we set up some lunch dates to talk about what I'm finding?"

"Perfect!" said J.B. "Thanks, Rayna, I really appreciate you taking this on with me."

Defining Accountability in an Organization – Why Should We Care?

Merriam-Webster ¹ defines accountability as "the quality or state of being accountable; especially, an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions". J.B., the manager in this story, is struggling for a connection. How does taking account for our personal actions come alive in the workplace? Where does accountability link with goal setting and performance? What is a manager's place in building a culture of accountability in the workplace?

Brene Brown, a popular author and TED Talk circuit member these days, places accountability at the core of her model for building trust. She asks two fundamental questions – "Did I hold myself accountable or did I blame others? And did I hold others accountable when I should

¹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved Aug 23, 2019, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accountability>

have?"² Accountability and trust walk hand in hand. That said, it may not always be clear where one's personal definition of accountability meets a professional application of what it means to be accountable in the workplace.

Being held "to account" when things may not always be clear creates confusion and resentment. Elliot Jaques³ proposed, that "we all need to be able to apply our full potential capability to our work in order (sic) fully realize ourselves as individuals...the quality of our interpersonal relationships...is deeply charged emotionally charged – with satisfaction, frustration, opportunity, exasperation,...fairness and dishonest manipulation, and at times even joy or despair". Work is that place where adults generally spend the most time in their waking day. As human beings, if one does not feel safe, valued, trusted and able to find meaning and growth in what we do, it can and will have a deep impact on who we are as humans. As an employee, one may not always express how we feel in Jaques' language, but the tale is told in employee engagement surveys, on Glassdoor,⁴ with grievances filed.

Many organizations cite that "our people are our best resource." As such, humans as resources move the organization forward through the application of their knowledge, experience and judgement. Humans greet the customer, make sure the planes fly, deliver the food to the table, make the special vanilla flavored coffee concoction that comes out the drive-up window on our way to the ball game. Human beings holding themselves accountable for getting something done is how it happens in organizations where purpose, process and goals are held together for producing results.

Human Resources professionals occupy a special place in this grand scheme of getting things done. HR professionals stand in the place where strategic goal setting and individual accountability systems meet. HR systems are linking systems – hiring and selection, talent pool, performance management, compensation and reward systems all hold the keys for building individual and organizational accountability.

"J.B." said Rayna, "I'm having a bit of an 'ah ha' moment here with my studying about accountability. What I am really beginning to truly understand is the importance of what I do as an HR Business Partner in supporting you as a manager. You coming to me after Anne's talk really got me going."

"Ok." said J.B. "Tell me what you're thinking. I'd really like to figure this out."

² Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead: brave work, tough conversations, whole hearts*. Random House: New York.

³ Jaques, E. (2006). *Requisite Organization*. Cason Hall & Co. Baltimore, MD.

⁴ Glassdoor is a website where employees can anonymously submit reviews of companies, as well as search and apply for jobs on its platform.

Rayna continued, "What I am realizing is that all the things we talk about in HR are really ways we build accountability here. Anne is not trying to build a culture of authority and rules. She is leading us to a place where people can come every day and feel like they belong and make a contribution. The things we talk about in HR - helping managers find the right people, write and deliver good appraisals and move talent around the organization, are all ways we assist managers with building a culture of accountability and trust."

"Go on," said J.B. "In my last job, HR was the cop. We never talked about any of what you are describing. HR always showed up when someone was in trouble or a manager needed to get bailed out of a mess. This is all new to me."

"I get it," said Rayna. "You are not the first person who's joined the organization to be surprised with what we are trying to do around here with HR being around long before there's trouble. That's why we keep our offices in the departments. We don't want to be seen as the cops. We want to be partners."

"Ok," said J.B. "Where do we start?"

Linking HR and Business Systems: Building Organizational Accountability

Organizations are created to get something done. When we accept a role with an organization, we agree to show up in some form. That form is coloured by many things – our experiences, our skill set, our traits and temperament and what we value (or don't) about the role we have accepted in the organization. Job descriptions (when written well) describe a way for getting things done. Accepting a role means we agree to "take account" with what is written. We agree to help get something done.

Our individual ability "to account" is built upon our experiences, what we are good at, what we need to understand and know, and what we value. As humans, we yearn for places where these individual ways of being accountable match with what is expected in our workplace. Unless we choose to work independently, we will at some time become part of an organization that has a managerial system. For good or for bad, managerial systems exist. Managers make decisions about how resources are applied; what is to be done to meet goals and satisfy the customer.

As managers make decisions about what they want done, they also make decisions about the time it should take, what kind of quality is required in the approach and who can assist in completing the task. Elliot Jaques, defined this way of thinking with a simple acronym: QQTR

QQTR consists of four key elements to be managed:⁵

Quality: what are the standards for completion?

Quantity: What is the output expected? Is it one, one hundred, one thousand or until it is all complete?

Resources: Who gets it done? Are all those involved managed by the same person or are others not reporting to the same manager involved? (note...this is often the area of greatest challenge in managing with accountability).

Time: When does the task need to be done? Today? This week? This month? This year? Five years from now?

At a foundational level, goal setting is about establishing a “what by when”. Well written goals form the basis for taking “into account” all that needs to be done in the organization. Strategic goals, job descriptions, and performance management systems all link to provide a system for building accountability in the organization.

HR is critical to this system of linking and building both internal and external accountability for all stakeholders. Human Resources at its best hold the framework for working with managers to pull this linked system together and keep it moving forward. Strategic Human Resources planning and managerial support is QQTR linking at its highest level.

Making It Real: Where the HR Business Partner Role meets the Manager Role

Returning to the definition of accountability - to take account for one’s actions – there is a clear, true place where the role of the HR Business Partner meets the Manager Role. As previously mentioned, HR holds the framework for systems of accountability. It is in the education and development of managers that these HR systems come alive. At their heart, HR systems are really managerial systems – no different from marketing, finance and operations. HR systems provide the road map for building accountability (and thereby, trust) in the workplace.

David Ulrich⁶, in *HR From the Outside In*, describes the evolution of HR from holders of data (payroll, benefits, head count) to sitting at the highest level of the organization with strategic planning responsibility. This evolution meant moving from an inward facing way of seeing the organization to an outward facing point of view. HR Business Partners, he describes, are just that – partners in the business. All HR systems and processes are important in partnering with

⁵ Nancy R. Lee. (2017). *Practice of Managerial Leadership: second edition*. Xlibris. Pg. 18-19.

⁶ Ulrich, D., Younger, J., Brockbank, W. & Ulrich, M. (2012) *HR From the Outside In*. New York: McGraw Hill.

managers. Experience working with organizations has taught this author that senior leaders like the Anne of this tale consistently call upon HR to assist them in strategically building using the human resources of the organization in the following key areas:

1. Appropriately defining the right number and the right “type” of people needed for the job.
2. Sourcing those folks – both internally and externally.
3. Maintaining fair and equitable systems for compensation and rewarding employees across the organization.
4. Supporting managers in building a respectful and trust inducing workplace.

Human Resources has called these four approaches by many functional names, but at their essence they are the linkage for managing the strategic business needs and goals of the organization with the management of the human resource requirement for meeting those goals. Doing these four things well is what enables an organization to build trust in an organization. Managers and HR Business Partners, taking account that all of these things done well, together build organization where human beings want to come and do their best.

“J.B.” said Rayna. “I’ve been thinking that I’d like to start with how we partner with managers here in four areas – staffing, hiring, appraisals, and compensation. Sarita, our HR VP, talks all the time about how what we do helps managers be better managers. I want to get better at what I do and you are really helping me, too.”

“I’d like that, too,” said J.B. “Honestly, I’ve never really thought about HR as a partner. I really like the idea that someone is helping me grow as a manager. I want to do the right thing – for everyone on my team, my own manager and the company. I really like it here and want to do my best to learn and grow. Thank you. Let’s get started.”

Building a culture of accountability is not easy. It takes vision, a clear understanding of those systems and processes that support matching an individual’s notion of their own ability to “take account” with the expectations of the organization. And, it takes courage. The courage to practice – even when things get tough (see Brene Brown). Edgar Schein⁷, in his well-seasoned definition of culture, describes what is culture building as an exercise in paying attention and practicing. It is those things that are paid attention to and practiced – for good or for bad – that build a culture.

⁷ Schein, E.H. (2004). *Organizational and Culture Leadership*. 3rd Edition. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco.

About the Author



Sandi Cardillo is president of Conrad Associates based in Fort Collins, Colorado. Sandi consults with both profit and not-for-profit organizations applying accountable management principles in structuring, talent management and improved managerial practices. She has over twenty years of experience in management, human resources, organization development and internal consulting. Sandi brings practical management and human resources experience to her consulting work. She is known for her ability to integrate high-level conceptual frameworks for the executive level, assisting them in breakthrough thinking in the application of accountable management principles. She is well respected for her ability to simplify complex principles and practices for mid-level and front line managers through her teaching and consulting style. She has fifteen plus years of experience teaching these principles and practices to all levels of managers in multiple sectors, including banking and finance, real estate, energy, distribution and not-for-profit.

Sandi has served as a facilitator for Queen's IRC's [Advanced Human Resources](#) and [Building Trust in the Workplace](#) programs.

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