

THE NEW ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PERSONAL PERFORMANCE

by John Kuypers

It is important to understand the structural reasons why personal performance goes off-track and who “should” make things better. There are underlying factors which often explain why someone is stuck or resistant and what you can do as the leader to correct it, given the limits of your role in the organization.

Let's begin with first principles. All work is part of a process. Processes produce the goods and services companies sell to earn revenues. Therefore, a person's performance issue is part of a process that may be characterized as being an inch in size. That inch belongs to a larger process that could be a foot, a yard or a mile in size! An inch might be to execute a simple task like mixing concrete or process an invoice for payment. The steps in this micro-process are linear and sequential. For someone who knows how to do it, the whole step is a mere inch. For someone who doesn't, it may be a foot to them. The process will need to be broken down into *their* idea of an inch – how to open the accounting software, how to find the chart of accounts, how to enter it accurately and link it to the purchase order and so on. As a leader, you need to begin by deciding if you are asking too much or too little for what that person is currently capable of doing.

Getting people to get things done right is a lot easier when they control the entire process. It is not so easy when the process is spread across multiple people. When they need to purchase an item urgently and need approval from finance, their fate is in the hands of others. The others control a step in the process, and the person may or may not meet their deadline. In effect, the person is instinctively motivated to try to control everyone involved in the process. This creates pressure and interpersonal relations are often negatively affected.

Executing processes gets even more difficult when there are multiple layers of people who all have a role. When I was in brand marketing in the consumer products industry, most projects I worked on required multiple signatures in our department, before they could be implemented.

The ultimate complexity comes when a process crosses multiple departments in a larger organization. Departments can operate like silos if they don't communicate with one another. A sales person may wish to secure lines of credit for a new customer quickly, but the credit department may take a week or longer to complete it, and perhaps for good reasons. The result, however, may be a lost sale.

Weak processes are a frequent cause of work going off the rails. The problem shows up in the moment, but its origin started weeks, months and even years ago, when the process became the accepted way of doing things. Sometimes super-human effort is required to compensate for process limitations. The following is an example of individual performance being criticized for what is really a limitation of the process itself.

A food manufacturer produces a sophisticated snack by inserting a flavour treat into the center of the product. It produces millions of snacks per day and 99.7% of them successfully have a treat in the middle. This means 0.3% are missing the treat, or 3,000 per million produced. This still adds up to tens of thousands of defective snacks per day! Correcting these by manually inserting treats is an inch in a process that is a mile in size. However, even with extra staff hired to do this task, the success rate never hits 100%.

When management “visits” the assembly areas, they notice and point out the defects to the production supervisors, questioning the competency of the assembly workers. However, long experience has shown the supervisors that no worker can get the success rate above 99.7%. The result is a high level of frustration by everyone about a daily problem which can only be solved by a long term re-design of how treats get inserted into snacks. Management communicates that they only see the tens of thousands of defects. They don’t recognize or comment on the 99.7% success rate, nor do they track or measure the ability of anyone to achieve higher success rates.

In this example, the inch cannot be corrected by the supervisors or front line workers. The accountability for this belongs to a higher level. It is the role of engineering and plant management to measure and improve the actual process itself. So long as this is the case, the supervisors need to accept that this is not in their control. Their only real choice is to empathize when management complains and carry on as is – a difficult but not impossible choice. All that the managers can really do is shelter their subordinates as best as they can. Initiating a process improvement project at a higher level is the real first inch needed of a mile-long process for finding a long term, permanent solution. The software industry has a fascinating model called The Capability Maturity Model (CMM) that is helpful in this regard. It defines five levels of sophistication for improving core processes that are insightful. These go beyond the scope of this article.

There is a structural leadership solution that needs to be implemented. That solution is to make clear who is accountable for what elements of a process, from design to execution. My long time friend and retail executive Steve Willert uses a simple metaphor from the housing industry to explain the big picture of who is accountable for making things run well in an organization. Steve says, “Work is like a ‘contractor’ model in the housing industry. The trades build the four foot in-store shelf section. The contractor coordinates the trades to build the house (store operations). The developer designs the site infrastructure (store design and support) and the town planner creates the design of the overall community (the business itself).” He then links to the roles and titles in the organization to promote buy-in and acceptance for change and process improvement.

I love Steve’s housing industry metaphor. It makes clear that a leader is responsible for the decisions that belong to their level. Each layer in the housing industry in effect, “reports” to the layer above it. Each is constrained by the layer above it too. This makes sense because that’s how work actually functions. The vision of the town planner constrains the developer who constrains the contractor who constrains the trades. The goal of building a new community comes to life through the subsequent work of each layer below. The result is a community with a strategic vision, not a mish-mash of shacks and mansions.

Distribution of formal authority in the housing industry:



It is vital to understand that this principle is the same for all organizations. Applying it effectively is central to distributing formal power and authority intelligently and thoughtfully. Each level in the housing industry is responsible for a major stage in the *process* of achieving a long term community-building goal. Design the community, develop

the infrastructure, coordinate the resources, and execute the construction. These four words - design, develop, coordinate and execute - drive the process of work in all industries, public and private, government and not-for-profit.

Inside a high-functioning organization, we can say that the 4th Level designs, the 3rd Level develops, the 2nd Level coordinates and the 1st Level executes. Each needs the freedom to do its job to their full potential and each need to be properly constrained by the parameters of the levels above it. In smaller organizations and start-ups, they may only have two actual levels. This means the leader must do the 2nd to 4th Levels. As the organization grows, the workload of each level expands to create distinct roles and ultimately, full-time jobs. The 5th Level through to the 8th Level come into play as the organization becomes multi-divisional and international in scope. However, the first four levels capture the heart of any self-standing business unit. That is the principle. It is a concept adapted from the work of organizational theorist Elliott Jaques, author of *Requisite Organization*.

In my thirty years of experience, most organizations operate using a command and control style of leadership. Leaders want to control key decisions at every level, even if they hate to admit it. The way in which they reinforce their desired decisions is the telltale evidence of what they really want, no matter what words are coming out of their mouth. The senior leader who randomly checks in on lower levels, points out errors and pressures others to conform to their expectations, is communicating loudly and clearly who's in charge of every level's quality of work.

Control is the only way old school leaders can trust that *their* plans will be executed *their* way. This works just fine in a world where employees are fairly compliant and the business itself is stable enough that a handful of leaders can assimilate enough knowledge to approve the decisions that matter. But the forces of change are blowing through the workplace in the form of better information technology, smarter workers and a workforce more willing to change jobs if they are unhappy with their workplace.

For leaders who recognize these changes and want to deepen employee commitment and engagement, the solution is to set better expectations and more clearly defined and delegated accountabilities. I call this *The New Accountability For Personal Performance*.

The new accountability will shift power in a very specific way. It will give each level more power to decide how much authority they want from the level(s) above. It is a turning of the tables, not 180°

but 90°, from top-down to shared. In the old world, the leader decided unilaterally how much control to yield, whether it was a lot or a little. In the new world, the follower and the leader negotiate and mutually agree. Each must then live up to their commitments and be held accountable accordingly. This is the real acid test of personal accountability – the ability to refrain from unilaterally shifting power and control when things get difficult. For the new accountability to take root, it must be supported from the very top. If not, command and control will inevitably re-assert itself. Control is an aphrodisiac leaders don't easily part with.

Two significant changes are thus established. One is that power and authority around key accountabilities are explicitly discussed and decided. The second is that the subordinate has a major voice in that decision. How far each should go, how hands on or hands off a person wants to be managed can be defined by *The 7 Performance Drivers*, a leadership communication tool for agreeing on shared decision-making powers for people who want to work together effectively.

The new accountability will disturb the status quo. Every major leadership model of the last fifty years, from Tannenbaum/Schmidt in the 1950s to Hersey/Blanchard in the early '70s to Elliott Jaques in the '80s has positioned the delegating of power as a one-way decision by the leader. The new accountability is now saying to lower levels, "You decide." This does not necessarily mean the final decisions involved in their work but on their share of decision-making power – their 'right to decide' relative to others. I call this, "The Decision Before the Decision." As a leader, you will be saying upfront, "The onus is on you. How much decision-making power and authority can you handle? What support do you need from me so that you'll be as successful as you can be? Do you also understand and accept the power and authority obligations and limitations of your job level?" This will be a collaborative discussion resulting in firm commitments on both sides.

This approach is guaranteed to get people on the same page – but it is not guaranteed to be the page you had in mind. I have seen clients who, more often than not, have simply agreed to disagree and parted ways. One client had a senior manager who wanted to control what accountabilities she could put on her own plate. Her boss was unwilling to grant her that level of authority. Each stood their ground and severance was the end result. I believe this is a better result than continuing to work unhappily, resenting one's employer and hindering the organization's performance. Like Lee Iacocca said, "Lead, follow or get out of the way!" But let us do it intelligently and rationally, not taking things personally or feeling resentful.

The new accountability is quite simple in the big picture. Each layer knows what it is responsible for personally. Each layer also knows it has a responsibility to help other layers succeed. Furthermore, each person has a common tool and language with which to have frank discussions to change the way power and authority are shared. The result will be a greater authenticity, a reduction in office politics and an increase in commitments to getting things done – on-time, on-spec and on-target. In short, because these commitments are clear and upfront, people will be willing to be held accountable for their role in making decisions and delivering great results.

John Kuypers is a leadership coach and organization performance expert. He is the president of Performance Shift Leadership Tools, a consulting and training firm located in Burlington, Ontario, Canada. John is the developer of the Role Driver roles and responsibilities system, and The 7 Performance Drivers leadership communication tool. He is the author of three books. John can be contacted by email at johnk@performanceshift.com