Accountability and Alignment through Positive Peer Pressure

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As we all begin the new year and roll out goals and objectives, there is a lot of talk about how to create a culture of accountability. This goes beyond the subject of alignment. Leaders can provide clearly established goals to executives, managers and employees, but they also must assure that those objectives are accepted and that employees are accountable.

What we know doesn't work

For years, organizations have been trying to create cultures of accountability through rigid employee performance management systems. There is an interesting debate being waged on whether we should even keep doing performance appraisal because managers and employees claim it's not useful and in fact it may cause more harm than good. On the other end of the spectrum are companies using performance management systems to formally roll out their business goals to everyone in the organization, cascading messages and metrics from the most senior levels of the organization to the entry-level employees.

Much of the research that the energy team has done shows that despite the complex efforts to roll out alignment strategies, employees remain confused about direction and how business strategy affects them. This, in many cases, is because the business environment changes quickly, and as a result, the organization alters activities, disorienting employees. About 70% of the open-ended comments received from clients and in the leadership work focus on direction, with employees and leaders saying that alignment and accountability efforts are not working.

Lessons from marketing and social networking such as Facebook

What does work in terms of accountability is positive peer pressure. If one looks to the world of marketing, advertising campaigns designed to create positive peer pressure to buy gadgets and clothes are quite effective. People are accountable to their peers and will pay money to purchase items to "fit into" peer groups, either at work or at school. Facebook and other social media are other examples of positive peer pressure. Users are very accountable to their "friends" and do what it takes to keep up their profile, add pictures, communication, and be part of the ongoing network.

Being accountable because you WANT to be accountable appears to work well. The challenge then is how to create an environment where employees and managers want to participate in a system that holds them accountable for doing work.

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Learning from the Energy Files

The energy research and client work proves that accountability increases through positive peer pressure, driven through high visibility. Below is a summary of how the process works:

- The core of the energizing process is a pulse dialogue engine that asks employees to provide information on their energy at work and respond to other inquiries about the business. The energy pulsing happens frequently. The Pulse Dialogues (this term is used for the process) match the rhythm of the business. If the organization reviews business data weekly, fortnightly, monthly or quarterly, then the Pulse Dialogues are on the same schedule. Pulse Dialogues are not an event. They are not the annual or every other year survey. Data from pulse dialogues and the associated action-taking process are blended with other business metrics and processes. This puts human and relational capital metrics right into the middle of the business discussions, which means they are taken seriously. Managers are immediately held accountable in the same way they are accountable for other business outcomes (e.g. sales, costs, quality, production goals, etc.).

- The energy metric is coupled with other custom questions that meet the needs of the business on the day the data is being collected. Every organization using the energy system has a unique, customized metrics strategy that can be adjusted on a moment's notice to fit changing business conditions. That means managers are accountable not for something set in stone or a set of questions being used by the competition but for today's issues that are important to the organization. During implementations, managers and sometimes all employees are involved in helping shape question ideas.

- The overall metric strategy is a horizontal (questions spread out over time) versus a vertical process (all questions loaded into a once-a-year big project survey). Pulse dialogues are short and easy to do; trend data are collected. Trust is built over time because employees have experience in submitting data, engaging in dialogues, being part of an action taking process, and learning as recipients of results or news about outcomes.

- Reporting is frequent and provided to everyone. If pulse dialogues are done weekly, then reports are delivered weekly; if they are conducted monthly then reports also are provided monthly. The pulsing process is used with all employees, not a random sample. This is because all employees and all managers receive reports. This is what builds accountability. Random sampling results in the HR department or leadership team "owning" the data because sampling does not provide a sample adequate enough for delivering reports to all managers (not enough people per department for confidential reporting as you drill down into the lower levels of the organization). If a company wants to increase accountability at the line level, then the line needs its own data. Thus, the energy pulsing process keeps the pulse dialogues short, and it provides trend data and regular fast reporting to everyone.

- Everyone translates to mean all employees. At some time in an implementation, when trust is built, all employees get reports. The energy pulsing process is built to give employees personal reports. Every single employee can see his/her own data compared to the trends for the company overall and for other views of the data (e.g. department, location, occupation). This moves accountability from leadership and HR to

the manager and to every single employee. Employees "own" their personal data because ultimately employees are responsible for their work experience. By sharing the data to everyone, visibility to problems and opportunities improves. Transparency increases accountability and alignment.

- All employees use the event log (to track their own experience) and the action-taking module. The words "action taking" are used vs. "action planning" to remove the passive language that is customarily used in employee-driven survey processes. The action-taking module is attached to reports, providing employees with a tool for reviewing actions taken by others and recording their own actions. The system tracks opportunities, actions against opportunities, return on investment (ROI) when an action is closed and/or an ROI story. The stories are powerful, and we find it is the stories that travel from one person to another very quickly. Story telling about successful actions is where the positive peer pressure starts to develop. The ROI stories range from very small actions that may have a $300 benefit to large, organization-wide changes that result in millions of dollars in savings.

- Everyone can nominate actions as best practices. The process builds heroes, and by this competition for doing your best, accountability takes hold in a positive, results-focused way. Accountability for taking action is not the result of threats; it's not the outcome of a new compensation or performance management system. Accountability grows out of active, high-energy participation in a process designed to make the workplace better.

- Accountability and alignment are outcomes of employees networking and taking action to meet business priorities. The organizational objectives are the focus of all this activity because they are at the core of the metric strategy used to power the pulse dialogues, which kick off the interactive dialogue driving action and results.
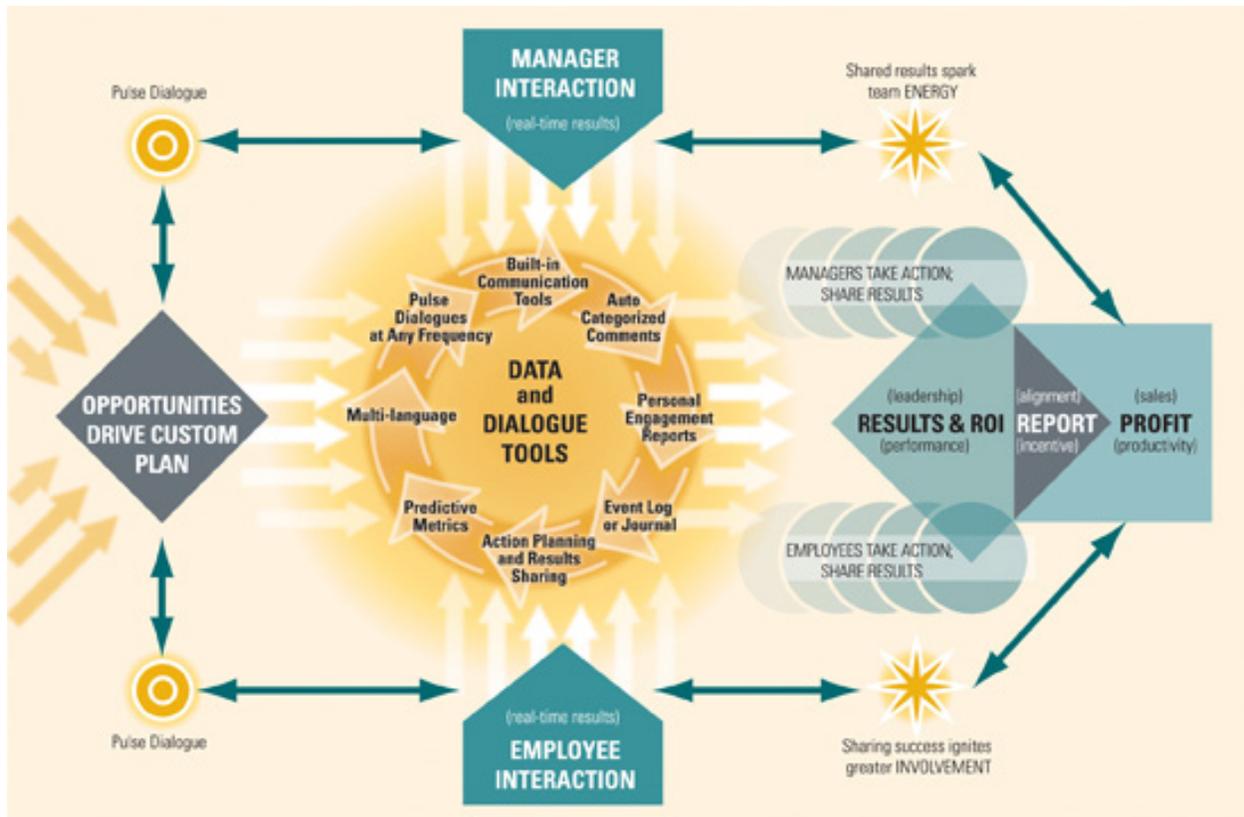
Barriers to success and to creating an accountability culture

The energy work started in 1996, and we have evolved the process since that time. The research team's learning is that the process of ongoing pulse dialogues with accountability, alignment and action can work anywhere. Success has been experienced in large, global firms and in smaller, start-up organizations as well as in manufacturing organizations, unionized firms and in organizations in Brazil, Russia, Japan, Spain, the Czech Republic, and 50 other countries. People around the world, in all jobs want voice; employees want to be challenged; positive energy is a universal construct.

What gets in the way of success is not the culture or the employees. The research shows that the biggest barriers to success often are the company's leadership team and/or the human resource departments. Fear of the unknown and lack of faith in employees from these two groups (one or the other) leads organizations to limit transparency and visibility, and that kills an accountability initiative. Accountability requires employees having a deep understanding of cause and effect, but if an organization is unwilling to share information with employees, then a culture of accountability cannot be built.

Making employees accountable means that first; leaders must be accountable to employees. They must share information, opportunities, and problems and allow everyone to engage in ongoing dialogue about the business and the changing business conditions.