

# TAKE THE HELM

## CREATE AN OWNERSHIP CULTURE—OVERCOME THE *COST OF BLAME*

Today when someone hears the word *accountability* it often is translated into meaning *blame*.

So what is the difference between blame and accountability? What affect does blame have on performance? How do you create a culture of ownership and accountability?

Have you noticed that when “it” hits the fan there is almost an unquenchable thirst to find someone or something to blame.

So what is the definition of accountability? According to our good friend Webster it means—“a willingness to accept responsibility or to account for ones actions.”(1) Notice it did not say “*find fault, place blame and punish*” which is the definition for blame.

Simply put, accountability is taking ownership for yourself and the outcome of your behavior. Blame is looking for a way to a) disown responsibility and b) avoid punishment. A *blame culture* is much like a red ant hill that has been disturbed. Thousands of ants come out of the hole in a panic looking for “*Who done it?*” People in a *blame culture are like the red ants* they don’t stop running around until they have *pronounced blame*.

In an Ownership Culture, people run around asking “*What Can I Do To Help Solve This?*” Accountability deals with two principles a) learning and b) solving the problem.

What affect does blame have on performance?

I was the COO an employee assistance/wellness company and one of my bosses, the Sr. Vice President of the company, was a no-nonsense, take names and kick some serious fanny, kind of guy. I had seen him rip off people’s heads and serve it back to them with a smile on his face. He would say “there may be reasons for failure, but there is never an excuse.”

Being new to the position I made a bad decision that could have cost a lot of money. When the Sr. Vice President asked me what happened I initially wanted to save face and blame it on one of my employees. However, I stopped myself and said “I thought I made a decision that was in the best interest of the company and I was wrong.”

He said, “Well we all make mistakes, let’s make sure we learn from this or

next time I will have to cut you head off...ha ha.” I was shocked by his understanding and willingness to move on. Why? Because I took ownership for my actions and was open to learn how not to let it happen again.

Fear is one of the greatest indicators of blame and so too is trust on of the greatest indicators for accountability

It is difficult to calculate the dramatic impact blame and accountability have on performance, but it is estimated to be in the tens of thousands of dollars. It seems quite clear that where a company focuses, there lies its performance.

Blames Affect On Performance:

- 1) Dodging the Bullet: Time and energy is spent on covering ones own tracks.
- 2) Blame begets Blame: Like wild fire, blame spreads. Customers don't care who's at fault, they just want your service.
- 3) Distrust: Distrust begins to blanket the environment, communication becomes more guarded. Fear becomes the dominate emotion.
- 4) Innovation is stymied: Due to the fact that no one is willing to take a risk because they might fail and get blamed, they cease to think creatively.
- 5) Superficial Communication: This becomes the norm as the real issues are left to fester and grow bigger.
- 6) Teamwork and Problem Solving: These become sluggish at best. It is impossible to solve a problem you refuse to take ownership for.
- 7) Performance: Becomes stymied and forced.

Start today to create a culture of ownership and accountability?

- 1) Be an example of the change you want. Take risks and be accountable for your behavior.
- 2) When mistake happen approach others with empathy, learning to improve.
- 3) Ownership begets Accountability. Take ownership for yourself and watch accountability spread throughout your team. It is absolutely amazing and so refreshing when someone takes accountability.
- 4) Innovate and encourage others to do the same. Create a "safe" atmosphere for the team to share ideas.
- 5) Fail fast: It's OK to fail, just do it fast then learn, improve and move on.
- 6) Allow yourself and others to be human. Be kind and keep things in perspective.
- 7) See blame as neon sign indicating an opportunity to improve performance.

- 8) As a leader, be accountable to your employees first by serving them. Then and only then have you earned the right to hold them accountable.
- 9) Practice making decisions that are in the best interest of the business and you won't stray far from your organizations goals.
- 10) Hold people accountable when they have made a commitment to you.
- 11) Be teachable and let go of your pride.
- 12) Remember that accountability applies for the positive as well. Recognize achievement, good decision making, and hard work.

I have personally witnessed one person be the impetus for a cultural transformation. I challenge you to be the *One Person*. Read this article with your team and discuss how you can increase ownership and accountability within your organization.

(As an aside, the next time you hurt someone's feelings, or are inadvertently thoughtless, try taking immediate ownership for the situation. Often we would rather be *right* then happy and we can always find an excuse or lame reason for why we did what we did. Yes, this takes practice and humility, but you will be amazed at how a disagreement that may have lasted 2 hours is over and done in 2 minutes! Try it.)

#### Notes

1. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accountability>