



The Accountability Ladder

A simple yet powerful tool to drive
insights, awareness and action.



The Accountability Ladder



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We celebrate the progress that companies have made in talent management over the last 15 years. CEOs and Boards now better understand the value of high quality talent. CHROs have built-out talent practices and the talent-building capabilities of their HR team.

Yet despite that progress, even the most progressive organizations aren't seeing the talent management outcomes they originally expected. Some of most basic processes – goal-setting, coaching – aren't being executed with the quality and consistency needed. Talent review and development processes remain slow and ineffective.

Our experience with clients across industries and geographies shows us that the challenge to successfully execute talent management doesn't lie with

process design or training. It exists at a more fundamental level.

While companies have designed simpler processes and engaged their CEO, they've failed to answer a key question for their leaders: Why Should I?

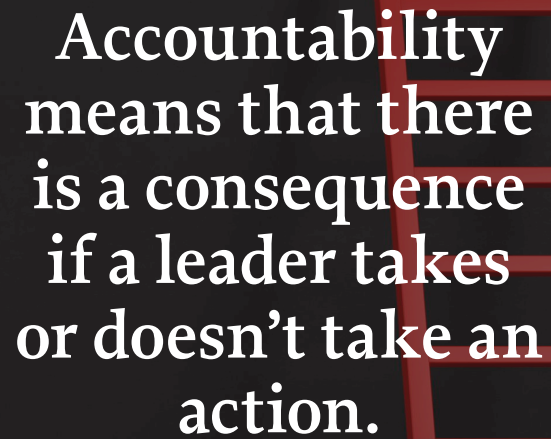
Why Should I?

Your company's leaders have big goals, a full calendar and a rational mind. Most of them understand the value of talent management and genuinely want their team to perform at a high level. The challenge is that few companies hold their leaders consequentially accountable to flawlessly execute the talent management fundamentals that produce that result.

Without that clear accountability, busy leaders either explicitly or sub-consciously ask themselves the rational question, "Why Should I?"

They already have 100 priorities and they're now being asked to add even more. If they hear a compelling answer to the "why should I?" question, they'll move your request higher on their list. Too often they hear nothing, so they quickly learn that there are no consequences if they don't set big goals, transparently coach their direct reports or increase the quality and depth of their team.

If you believe that your leaders are accountable for these outcomes, it may help to clarify our definition of accountability. Accountability means that there is a consequence if a leader takes or doesn't take an action. We call this "consequential accountability" to separate it from the long list of items people claim leaders are accountable to achieve.



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The power of the consequence tells leaders how important it is for them to complete an action. If the only consequence is that the leader will know that they've completed or not completed an action, you have little leverage over their behavior. If the consequence is that they will either be fired or promoted if they complete (or don't complete) an action, you have near-total control over their behavior.

If you believe that your leaders already have accountability with consequence, ask yourself if every leader in your company has ensured that extremely high-quality goals – few, big, challenging – are set for each of their direct reports. If leaders aren't consequentially accountable for fundamental and powerful actions like goal-setting, it's doubtful that they're accountable for more critical actions like accelerating the development of their highest potential talent.

The Path to Consequential Accountability

A company can "push" or "pull" its way to

consequential accountability and we find both actions contribute to effective talent management. “Pull” accountability draws or gently guides people towards a goal.

A company’s [Talent Philosophy](#) creates pull accountability by signaling the company’s preferred way to manage talent. Pull accountability can also be found in a CEO who models the company’s desired behaviors and publicly encourages other leaders to do the same.

“Push” accountability directly tells a leader what they must do to get a positive or avoid a negative consequence. It’s a large stick that should be used cautiously and only when an activity is critical to the success of the business. In theory, push accountability should include both positive and negative consequences, but we typically see companies only use the latter.

The larger an accountability’s consequence, the more it should focus a manager’s attention. This suggests that we should only assign large consequential accountability to the most critical activities. If every accountability has draconian consequences, managers will operate in a highly defensive mode.

We use the Accountability Ladder with our clients to assess if there’s enough accountability to drive leaders to the desired outcome.

The Accountability Ladder

The Accountability Ladder describes the hi-

erarchy of consequences if someone achieves or doesn’t achieve an outcome. It’s intended to be illustrative, not comprehensive, and it provides benchmarks for the impact of different actions.

It’s a quick and easy way to both understand how much accountability your leaders have for an action and to audit whether it’s enough accountability to change their behavior.

The ladder includes different types of consequences – peer pressure, cultural pressure, financial impact, career impact. We recommend that you set consequences at the lowest level required to incent managers to complete the task.

The Accountability Audit

Clients often express frustration that their leaders aren’t executing the talent management activities they’ve been asked to execute. When I ask them to list each activity and assign it an accountability number, it becomes clear how little incentive their leaders have to act.

In very few companies do talent practices rank higher than a 3 on the Accountability Ladder. We believe that a minimum of 6 or 7 is typically required to spur action.

You can use the quick audit below to better understand if your leaders are likely to complete the talent management activities you are requesting:

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ACCOUNTABILITY LADDER



KEY ACCOUNTABILITY

LADDER RATING

Ensure all team members have big, challenging performance goals

Transparently coach direct reports to improve performance

Meaningfully develop high potential direct reports

Seek feedback from others about own performance and/or behaviors

Accurately predict direct reports' potential to advance

Use the results of this assessment to understand where to increase the pressure on leaders to complete talent management activities. Any rating less than a 3 is not likely to convince a leader to act.

Moving Forward

A first step to increase accountability is for your executive team agree on a company Talent Philosophy. A Talent Philosophy is the executive team's view about the best way to manage Talent to achieve the strategy. It sets clear direction for how leaders will manage performance, behaviors, transparency, etc., and includes a specific section on accountability.

The Talent Philosophy will help you to both

define accountability and communicate its importance.

Next, conduct and report the results of your Accountability Audit. Your results should provide compelling direction for where and how to turn up the accountability dial in your organization. Share the results with your line executives, get their insights about how they'd like to enforce accountability and ask which measures they'd support.

Let's take advantage of the momentum in talent management and ensure that companies extract the true power from their process and mindset changes. The Accountability Ladder is a simple but powerful tool you can use to drive insight, awareness and action.

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