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The higher you go on the organisational chart the more responsibility you have and the less accountability you may have. Leadership expert **Henry Evans** suggests some self-generated accountability might be in order

LEADING WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

Henry Evans has been working with C-suite executives and organisations for many years, through his Dallas-based company Dynamic Results, and is author of *Winning with Accountability*, a practical step-by-step guide to help organisations improve performance by creating a strong culture of accountability. The book is required reading in many multinational corporations, and executive MBA courses.

Winning with Accountability forms just a small part of a wider programme he employs when working with CEOs, company presidents and other high-level executives, on introducing the accountability model into their organisations.

Indeed, in the move towards an accountable organisation, Evans emphasises the importance of the change coming from the top down, and has been known to turn away clients who do not understand the importance of this.

“Top executives need to be demonstrating and exhibiting these accountability behaviours themselves, before they request it of anyone else in their organisations,” he says.

The accountability method employed by Evans is, he explains, deceptively straightforward. “It has strong elements of emotional intelligence, but it’s intellectually simple and behaviourally complex.

“When you’re in a leadership role especially at the C-level your people are emulating what you do, so you yourself are affecting the culture of the organisation in every interaction, actively or passively,” he continues.

“Our theory is that, the higher you go on the organisational chart, the more responsibility you have and the

less accountability you may have,” says Evans. “That’s because there are fewer and fewer people who are willing to hold you truly to account. What that means is if you want to be more effective at C-level you have to be more willing to self-generate accountability. And one of the best practices for self-generating accountability at that level is to proactively communicate your commitment to others, in a very unsolicited way.

“In my experience, when I first step in to work with a CEO or the people reporting to them – let’s say the upper two or three tiers on the organisational chart – they have this laundry list of things they should be doing, things that are critical to the company’s success, but that other people in the organisation don’t know about.”

Because these are driven and accomplished people, they have a very high confidence that they will execute around these things, says Evans. “While often they are executing around many of these things, without an exception so far in my career I’ve found them also to be human, and to have things around which they are not.

“So one of the ways I think we’re able to help executives at that level perform at an even higher level is by getting them comfortable with the idea of letting other people know what they’re working on, and encouraging people to follow up with them on those things.”

It is not uncommon in organisations for people to have no idea what their leaders are doing much of the time, says Evans. “That’s a real liability people at the top sometimes have. They have great innovative ideas, they see the path and the journey that will get them to the

execution of these ideas, but they're not always as masterful at communicating those on a timeline, and in a way that brings everyone else along."

A healthy nervousness

In order to get this across to clients, Evans asks them to look back at a time in their career when they were reporting to a difficult manager or a difficult board of directors. "We can all relate to a time earlier in our career when we worked for somebody, and when we were going to go to see that person we felt a little bit nervous in our stomach – a physical sensation that we got when we were going to see that person. Because we knew that they were going to hold us accountable for whatever our responsibilities were.

"As we move up the organisational chart in our careers we experience that feeling less and less, because there aren't as many people who can hold us accountable – or are willing to. What we try to do is to help our clients to self-generate that feeling.

"An action you can take to start doing that is to look through the important things that you're responsible for doing in, say, the next 30–45 days, or perhaps in the next quarter of the company's activity. Then, send out a memo to key stakeholders saying: 'Here's the things that I'm going to be doing'. Use the four pieces of our accountability puzzle (see panel) for each of these commitments.

"So you are saying: 'Here's what I'm going to be doing, here's what it looks like, here's this date in time when it's going to be finished, I'm the owner of the task, or here's who the owner is, and I wanted you guys to know about it'."

According to Evans, this action should generate a healthy nervousness. "And I'm not talking about the kind of nervousness that makes you sick or causes heart disease. I'm not talking about work-related stress here. I'm talking about the healthy kind of nervousness you have before you attempt to something that is truly challenging."

The veil of ambiguity

It is not a method that will appeal to all, recognises Evans, as there are those leaders who rather like the comfort of ambiguity. "Of course, there are people who love to hide behind what we call the 'veil of ambiguity', and some people are successful in doing that. The people we take on as clients are people who don't aspire to be one of those people."

To create a truly accountable organisation, an environment of emotional safety must be created, says Evans, where subordinates feel they are in a position to hold you accountable for your commitments, and are rewarded when they do.

"There's a lot of emotional intelligence woven into our accountability method," says Evans. "One of the things we communicate to clients that we're working with is this: 'Your primary role for the next year is not



'It is quite common for leaders who use their title as the reason people should be performing to be the last to know what's actually happening in their own company'



Henry Evans

to manufacture silicon parts or deliver financial targets or build automobiles, it's to create emotional safety.

“Your focus is going to be on people having a comfortable feeling when they walk into your office to give you bad news, on ensuring they feel safe and encouraged to talk to you about a mistake that they have made – or a mistake that you have made – or something that is wrong in the supply chain, or in the delivery to a customer. This is so that you are not positioned to be the last person to find out’.

“This is really about creating the safety for people to do so. We talk a lot to leaders about how one violation, one slip, can set you back months, even years, of openness. It is quite common for those leaders who use their title as the reason people should be performing to be the last people to know what's actually happening in their own company,” he says.

They also tend to have a higher attrition rate, says Evans. “It is like the old adage, that people don't leave companies, they leave leaders. Now, in the current recession people are likely to hold on to their jobs, but that becomes a problem when there's the inevitable upturn.

“At these times a lot of leaders legitimately and accurately realise that they don't need to change or improve that much. People aren't going anywhere. However, that puts them in a seriously handicapped position once the market starts to upswing, if their competitors have more sophisticated and developed leaders.

The ‘Accountability puzzle’

The ‘Accountability puzzle’ employed by Henry Evans and his team, can be summarised thus:

- **Clear expectations** – every request should include a crystal clear result of your expectation, one that the other party can visualise
- **Specificity** – to avoid miscommunication, include a specific date, time and time zone in your request – the latter because of our more globalised work lives
- **Ownership** – one person must take ownership for the task; while the team may own the overall outcome, the action that gets you to that outcome should have only one person in charge, and there must be clarity as to who that person is
- **Share** – true accountability begins when someone else knows about it, and you must invite and welcome people to hold you accountable, whether you report to them or they report to you.

“So, just as you would refine your processes and your systems during a recession, you should be refining your relationships, you should be refining your abilities and skills around them so that, when the upswing comes, you are better equipped to capitalise on the opportunities.”

Salutary advice for the many leaders with their heads down, busily trying to lead their organisations through the current environment.

Henry Evans is a visiting member of faculty on the UCD Smurfit School High Impact Leadership programme, which takes place in May. For more information see www.smurfitschool.ie/executiveeducation.



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