

The logo for Bartlett Alliance, featuring the word "BARTLETT" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, followed by "ALLIANCE" in a lighter, blue, sans-serif font. The text is partially enclosed by a thin, orange, hand-drawn oval shape.

BARTLETT ALLIANCE

The Accountability Thing

What's so hard about it?

Nancy Powell Bartlett

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A lot, as it turns out. I was recently asked why organizations have difficulty with implementation of new processes, policies and the like. One of the culprits is the lack of specific accountability for getting things done. Many spend a lot of energy developing a strategic plan or project plan with definite intentions of bringing it to life. Many also will tell you that on the way to implementation, the plan gets checked off of the "To Do" list, put on a shelf and never allowed to jump back off ... except for bungee jumping every once in a while to be shown quite proudly ... and then quickly snapped back into the mode of disinterest. If organizations put energy - time, money, resources - into creating a plan, what's so hard about finding the energy to implement it?

It's the Accountability Thing. Accountability from the top down and back up again. Accountability vertically and horizontally. Too many plans have fuzzy strategies. Effectiveness is not clearly defined. Measures, if they exist, are not meaningful. How can employees bring something to life and achieve highly successful results, if they do not clearly understand the expectations and know how to measure their work?

Two-way Street

There are some fundamental factors that get in the way. Accountability is not a one-way street. Accountability takes work on the part of everyone at every level of the organization. Leadership sometimes protests that employees do not accept accountability for their work; that they do not take personal responsibility for getting the job done. I am 100% with the leaders on that concern, *if*: the work has been clearly defined for employees; expectations clearly laid out; specific understandable, meaningful measures put in place; consistent follow-up/feedback on those measures has been provided; and yet, the work STILL is not getting done. That is a clear accountability issue that must be addressed. But all too frequently, one or more of the above factors is missing.

Clarity

More often than one might think, leadership really has not been all that clear. Clarity and expectations have to be unmistakably defined and communicated if people are to be held accountable for results. "Well, come on," leaders might say, "you mean it has to be spelled out?" Yes, in that there has to be a process in place to clearly communicate the plan to and with every level in the workforce. Here is what many of us have seen happen, at least once ... leadership strategizes and creates the plan. They may do this very well, but I can promise you that even at that level, some team members leave that session with different understandings of what they just did, what was decided and how it is to be implemented and measured for success. Everyone has heard of "the meeting after the meeting", where people talk about what "really" took place. Typically, there is not 100% mutual understanding or buy-in. If organizations do not have clarity then and there, how do the plan, the message, the vision get cascaded down into the rest of the organization?

Communication

Next question: among those leaders who do make every effort to clearly communicate the plan/strategies/measures to the next level down, what happens at the level after that, and the next and the next, as the message moves through every organizational level? Remember the childhood game where a message is started by one person and whispered/passed on from one to another? By the time it is received by the last person in line, a very different, and usually very confusing, message results. The easy response to that from leadership is: "Such is the nature of organizations. Communication is hard and will never be perfect. We were clear so they should get it. And, by golly, if they do not follow through and accomplish it, then they will be held accountable!"

Are You Abdicating Accountability?

It is incumbent upon leadership – at every level of the organization – to work very, very hard to ensure that employees have clarity. How is the plan communicated throughout the organization in a meaningful way, rather than the most convenient way? What measures are in place so that there is no doubt among the workforce as to what is expected? If you have clear measures of success, that means someone (the boss) is expecting something specific to happen. S/he is paying attention to that something and will be looking for a result ... an expectation has been created. Most employees understand that and will focus on that upon which the spotlight shines from above. The small percentage at every organizational level who either truly cannot do the work, or who do not want to do the work (resisting change), are roadblocks to the organization's path to success. They must be held accountable. But before zeroing in on those with the least organizational power, take a look at how that plan was cascaded from the top. Ultimately, who is accountable at each step along the way, and is the responsibility landing in the right lap?

Important Questions

Has the work been clearly defined for each employee, expectations clearly laid out, specific understandable and meaningful measures put in place, and has follow-up/feedback on those measures consistently been provided? If even one is fuzzy or missing, your organization cannot achieve its maximum potential. Of course, the next step is to monitor or ensure that performance measures are in place for self-monitoring, but that's a subject for another day. Success requires accountability diligence on *everyone's* part. That's what's hard about it. And it's worth it.