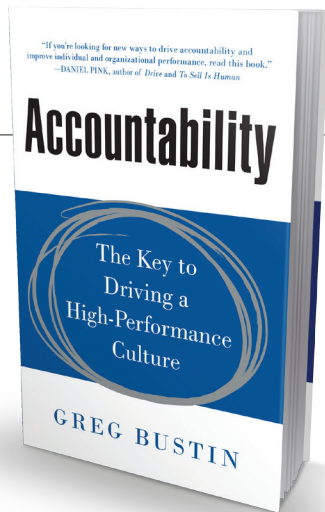


# Accountability

*The Key to Driving a High-Performance Culture*

by Greg Bustin



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## SUCCESS Points

*A few things you'll learn from this book:*

- How your leadership affects your organization
- Why integrity is all or nothing
- Why you must know who you are and what you want
- How to make accountability a support structure rather than a blame structure
- How to increase performance and decrease excuses

## You Can Count on Me

### Why Your Word Matters

#### QUICK OVERVIEW

If you aren't getting the results you want for your business or career, the problem may well be a lack of accountability. In *Accountability*, Greg Bustin explains that this highly desirable but rare trait is often what stands between a leader and his or her vision for success.

Bustin offers an Accountability Assessment to help objectively gauge your organization's commitment to accountability and effectiveness. "Let's face it: You can't improve if you don't know what's working and what's not," Bustin writes. The author then provides insights and instruction on how to create a culture that relies on the seven pillars of accountability: character, unity, learning, tracking, urgency, reputation and evolving.

Drawing on real-life accounts from some of today's best-known businesses, the book makes a convincing case for the need for accountability in today's marketplace

#### APPLY AND ACHIEVE

"If you have accountability in four out of five instances—business units, departments, or employees—you have it in none," writes Greg Bustin in *Accountability*. All or nothing is a pretty high standard to meet, but Bustin makes the point that "wee problems," which can seem inconsequential, can create much bigger issues.

Using the example of starting a meeting 15 minutes late as a breach of integrity, Bustin calls on business leaders to take care of the little things before they turn into major problems. Take a few moments to think about tiny failings that may be creating a culture that lacks character. Missed deadlines, delayed meetings, missing supplies, well-spun stories.... What "wee problems" do you need to address in your organization?

# SUMMARY

## ACCOUNTABILITY

**A**ccountability stems from the Latin *accomptare* (“to account”), a prefixed form of *computare* (“to calculate”), which is derived from *putare* (“to reckon”). Although the word itself does not appear in English until its use in thirteenth-century Norman England, account-giving has roots in record-keeping activities related to governance and moneylending systems first developed in Ancient Israel, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and, later, Rome. In this sense, accountability is concerned with the past—settling up accounts.

For me, accountability has its foundations in the past but the emphasis is on the future: *Doing what you said you would do within the time frame you agreed to do it.*

Accountability is a two-way street. As a leader, you want to know that you can count on people to do what they said they would do. Likewise, your colleagues want to know that they can count on you as the leader to do what you have promised them.

Accountability is a contract, a commitment, a personal promise. And what most people don't appreciate—and I certainly didn't when I was a young manager—is that accountability is less about carrots and sticks and more about relationships forged on purpose and trust.

Practiced effectively, accountability is a way of thinking and acting all the time and ultimately trumps any financial, intellectual, structural, or technological ability. The reason is simple: Accountability is not based on circumstance but rather on an attitude of accomplishing a task or achieving an objective *despite* circumstance.

Accountability is critical to anyone leading a group of people, because, after all, every business is a people business. Accountability is how people get things done—or don't get things done.

### IT ALL STARTS WITH YOU

Before you can hold others accountable, you first must hold yourself accountable. And before you can hold yourself accountable, you first must know what matters most to you.

In my work with leaders, I have found that two of the hardest questions any of us will ever answer are “Who am I?” and “What do I want?”

Most business leaders aspire to their positions because they are skilled and hard-working, and they envision a better life for themselves. More freedom. More personal satisfaction. More of the good life. Their natural abilities and persistence to succeed help make them winners on a certain scale.

As their responsibility grows, some leaders gradually discover they are working harder than ever. They may have some nice grown-up toys and

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are still in charge, but they often find they spend more time away from their personal pursuits of happiness than they would like. Or that the work they are doing is no longer fulfilling. Unexpected personal challenges may surface. Work-life balance is a joke. The idea of a “better life” is an elusive goal. They have changed from *human beings* into *human doings*. Does this description resonate with you? Could it be you in a few more years?

If so, try answering these two fundamental questions:

*What do I want out of life? Is my business helping me get it or keeping me from it?*

These two simple but powerful questions help leaders discover what really matters. Along the way, some leaders realize they are so busy doing what they are doing that they might be enjoying less of who they are being.

### ACCOUNTABILITY'S CHOKEPOINT

All organizations wrestle with accountability in much the same way. Although the scope and complexity may differ from organization to organization, the problems leaders encounter on their journey from Point A to Point B are similar.

Every organization deploys three fundamental resources: time, people, and money. (You may be tempted to include equipment, inventory, or real estate holdings, but these inanimate items are purchased. And while you also may be tempted to argue that people are purchased because you pay them a salary, you don't own them and they are free to leave anytime they wish.)

Think of your organization as a funnel into which time, talent (people), and treasure (money) are poured.

Emerging from the funnel's spout is the result of your investment in those three commodities. The result may be satisfactory or unsatisfactory. As time,

## The Seven Pillars of Accountability

**Character.** An organization's character is shaped by its values, and these values are clearly defined and communicated. The organization does what is right for its customers, employees, suppliers, and investors, even when it's difficult to do so.

**Unity.** Every employee understands and supports the organization's mission, vision, values, and strategy, and knows his or her role in helping to achieve them.

**Learning.** The organization is committed to continuous learning and invests in ongoing training and development.

**Tracking.** The organization has reliable, established systems to measure the things that are most important.

**Urgency.** The organization makes decisions and acts on them with a sense of purpose, commitment, and immediacy.

**Reputation.** The organization rewards achievement and addresses underperformance, earning the organization and its leaders a reputation, both internally and externally, as a place where behavior matches values.

**Evolving.** The organization continuously adapts and changes the organization's practices to grow its marketplace leadership position.

talent, and treasure move through your funnel toward a result, their original state is altered as they come into contact with one another. This contact is shaped by two key contributing factors: the processes inside your organization (your belief systems, policies, operating procedures, and technical support systems that form the infrastructure of your organization), and the behavior of people comprising teams, departments, remote locations, business units, and outside suppliers (it's the rare individual who works in solitary confinement). The sum of this behavior is your organization's culture.

For many leaders and their organizations, the narrowest point of the funnel is a chokepoint because it's a place where emotions can enter into decision making and influence the results. Emotions can prevent successful leaders from holding themselves, their peers, and those who report to them accountable. And when that happens, the results can be less than satisfactory.

Part of what makes accountability difficult is that when you are working with smart people and things don't get done well or on time, you are often handed excuses.

It is a vicious circle, and the excuses are infinite. Talk is cheap so we often buy it.

When we do, accountability suffers.

### Accountability's Other Side

Ron Farmer founded US Signs in 1980 and led his company through nine tough months the company's first year as well as through three recessions before selling his company in 2011 for full value. Growing more than 1,000 percent in the first 5 years landed US Signs on the Inc. 500 list at #196. Farmer started a second company, US LED, in 2001, and he and his team achieved average annual growth rate of 73 percent over the first 10 years. In 2012, he was an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year finalist.

Like many of the leaders I interviewed, Farmer believes accountability has two sides: a positive side and a negative side.

Accountability gets a bad rap. Just saying the word conjures all sorts of negative images: micromanagement; an emotional, mean-spirited conversation; punishment. It can be all of those things, but it doesn't have to be any of them.

"People do their best work," Farmer told me, "when they know they're going to be given credit for their contribution. So there has to be a certain amount of autonomy in people's work so they can contribute without reservation. There's accountability at work in this type of approach, but I view accountability not from the side that says, 'This is what happens if you don't do something,' but rather, 'See what's possible if you do your best.' It's the other side of the same coin."

To Farmer, accountability with autonomy can be exciting to people.

"If people don't have a sense of accountability—to themselves and to each other—they don't warrant having autonomy," he says. "And when creative, self-referenced people do have autonomy, they have the incentive, the energy, and the enthusiasm to do their best. They're proud of their accomplishments and love being given credit for their contributions.

"Teamwork is great," says Farmer, "but even within the team you need to have enough of an understanding of human beings' need for individual contribution and recognition because people—most people, the kind of people we hire—crave challenging work so they can develop a mastery of something

**It is the leader's job to make accountability a support structure, not a blame structure.**

that counts. . . something they can point to with colleagues, spouses, and friends. These people have a sense of ownership, a sense of pride. And so on the one hand, you're holding them accountable; on the other hand, you're rewarding them with the freedom to be their best. So the accountability structure is really a recognition structure. I would rather talk to my employees about a recognition program than about an accountability structure with negative implications."

It is the leader's job to make accountability a support structure, not a blame structure.

## THE GREAT PARADOX

The Dutch theologian and teacher Desiderius Erasmus wrote in the late 1400s that, "We sow our thoughts, and we reap our actions; we sow our actions, and we reap our habits; we sow our habits, and we reap our characters; we sow our characters, and we reap our destiny."

The paradox of saying one thing and doing another are prevalent in most organizations: the things we *say* we value—treating others how we want to be treated, quality, innovation, and even accountability—we don't *treat* as valuable. We say one thing and do another. Our actions are the outward expression of our character.

In a workshop I was conducting for a successful manufacturing company, I began by asking the participants if they could tell me their corporate values. "Yes," they answered enthusiastically, "we recently updated them because people couldn't remember all eight values. We reduced our values to four words so everyone could remember them."

One of the four values was "integrity."

"What time was this meeting supposed to start?" I asked the workshop participants. "Nine o'clock," was the collective response. "What time did we start?" I asked. "Nine fifteen." "How is that acting with integrity?" "It's not," they admitted. So is "integrity" really how things are done at this company, or is it just a word that sounds good?

Starting a meeting late is a small thing, a "wee problem," but small things become big things and big things can turn into big problems.

The behavior you see is the default culture of your organization. Your culture mirrors your character. Leaders who commit what my friend Mardy Grothe calls "little murders," such as starting a meeting late, are contributing to a culture that eventually makes accountability all but impossible. We say one thing and do another, showing our organization's true character is out of

alignment with the words we say matter.

What would an impartial visitor to your organization see, hear, and experience? How would the observed behavior align with the behavior you say you want? Is yours a culture that is created and nurtured intentionally, or is yours a culture that occurs by happenstance? Just as you cultivate a garden, you must cultivate a workplace environment where high performance is the expectation.

## TURNING KNOWLEDGE INTO PERFORMANCE

The ability to pause and reflect on organizational and individual learning is perhaps the single greatest talent of exceptional leaders. As the leader, you don't have to be the one solving the problems, but you must identify them and then act on them.

Balancing reflection with action is one of the hallmarks of a great leader. Thinking things through can make a good plan better. Effective execution of a good plan can make your company great. Retailers remind us that their sale events are "For a limited time only" for a reason: Great opportunities don't last forever.

Urgency converts learning into high performance by:

- Sustaining a laser-like focus on improving processes to drive productivity
- Minimizing red tape to create a sense of urgency and a bias for action
- Recognizing mistakes and moving quickly to address problems

Large companies and small businesses alike recognize the impact produced by a sense of urgency in the workplace.

Among the executives completing my accountability assessment, 76 percent "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that decisions are acted on "in a timely manner," and 79 percent "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that "we recognize our mistakes and move quickly to address problems."

Minimizing red tape was a factor in driving performance among 61 percent of the executives, and making "decisions with less than 100 percent of the data" was "strongly agreed" and "agreed" to by 57 percent of the executives.

# SUMMARY

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Ray Napolitan of Nucor characterizes this type of decision making as a “commonsense approach” to leading people and projects. “We’ll go down a path and we will think through how best to approach a particular problem or opportunity,” he says. “We’ll get 60–70 percent of the analytical part that we’ll mix with a gut feel for whether something will be successful, and then make a decision to implement our decision, understanding that we’re going to make adjustments based on a commonsense approach. So if something doesn’t work, we change it. We’ll move quickly to tweak things. We don’t get caught up in paralysis by analysis.”

### HOW ACCOUNTABILITY AFFECTS YOUR REPUTATION

Why do good projects go bad? Often because of a bad culture.

In toxic cultures, blaming colleagues is more likely to occur than accepting responsibility and supporting one another. The president of a family-owned and -operated business once told me, “We’re a murder mystery waiting for the first act to begin.” You can cut the tension in that office with a knife, and I’m confident the cynic’s six phases of a project are alive and well in that company:

1. Enthusiasm
2. Disillusionment
3. Panic and hysteria
4. Search for the guilty
5. Punishment of the innocent
6. Praise for the nonparticipants

A *Heroic Event* occurs when a promise to a customer has been broken or is about to be broken because one colleague failed to keep his or her commitment to another colleague. Someone—perhaps you—will step in and save the day. As the project is rescued, timing, workflow, and cost issues need to be addressed internally, and your people will wonder how much longer the underperformer will be allowed to get away with this disruptive behavior.

Externally, you have broken your commitment to your customer. Your reputation with your customer is tarnished from missing a deadline or delivering poor service or a shoddy product.

So you get on the phone with your customer and make another promise. *This time we’ll get it right*, you say. Whether you get another chance depends on your reputation with your customer.

What happens next is another reputation-defining moment for you as a leader. As you “search for the guilty,” you must decide what role you played in the event. Is the process broken? Were you unclear in setting expectations? Did you make it difficult for someone to come forward and warn you of the impending disaster?

If the problem lies with the individual, you must decide how you will address that person’s performance.

“The hardest thing about accountability,” says Ernst & Young’s David Alexander, “is consistent performance evaluation. If you are inconsistent with how you’re communicating expectations or you’re inconsistent in evaluating performance, then it will tear down the fabric of your culture.”

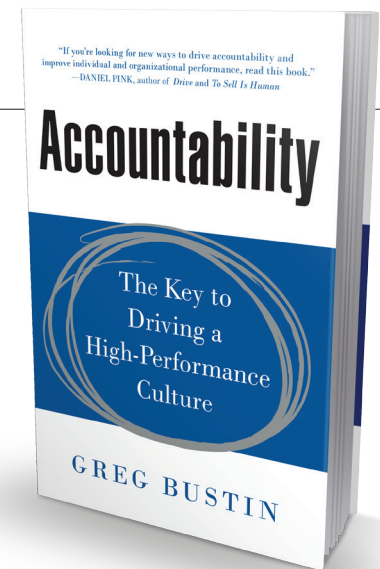
In other words, if you have accountability in four out of five instances—business units, departments, or employees—you have it in none.

### **What Lack of Accountability Sounds Like**

- I rush from one fire to the next, so there’s no time to work on my project.
- Our deadlines are unrealistic.
- I have to spend my time on tactical—not strategic—work.
- We don’t have the right people.
- I didn’t understand the assignment.
- It wasn’t my job.
- We underprice projects (or products) so we can’t staff properly for the work (or products) we have agreed to deliver.
- We can’t agree on priorities so our budgets are spread too thin.
- We are constantly being asked to do more with less, including more work for the same salary.

## About the Author

**Greg Bustin** is a business and leadership consultant, an international speaker, and a Master Chair for Vistage International, the world's largest CEO membership organization. He writes a monthly bulletin sent to more than 5,000 executives globally and regularly speaks at events in the United States, Canada, Australia and the UK. His perspective on leadership has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Barron's*, *The Dallas Morning News* and other major publications.



## Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you've learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. How do you honestly feel about the word *accountability*? Do you appreciate standards or people that hold you accountable, or do you resent them?
2. What do you want out of life?
3. Is your business/career helping you get it or keeping you from it?
4. Review the sidebar titled "What Lack of Accountability Sounds Like." Which of these excuses do you hear in your office—or from yourself?
5. What "wee problems" are taking root and damaging your business's reputation and/or culture?
6. What factors weaken your sense of urgency?
7. Think about a recent problem you've encountered in your business. What role did you play in the event? What can you do to prevent it from happening again?

## Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of **Accountability**, you may also want to check out these titles:

**Execution IS the Strategy** by Laura Stack

**Moments of Impact** by Chris Ertel

**QBQ! The Question Behind the Question** by John G. Miller

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