

leadership instalments

Accountability and the Corporate Body

By Dan Gaynor

FOR ALL THE ATTENTION WE PAY TO ACCOUNTABILITY

I am convinced that it is often misunderstood. Most people tend to see it as an obligation employees have to leaders. I'd like to take a somewhat different look at it. Let's start with the concept of the organization as a corporate body. The word corporate, like so much of our language, has its roots in latin. Oxford defines it as "forming one body of many individuals." This definition places accountability and the leader's responsibility in a somewhat different light.

Organizations are formed of many individuals. While these are individual people they become a singular entity when they come together - a corporate body. Each individual's performance affects the entire body. The body's health and strength depend on the contributions of individual members. This is profound because it means that working on even one person's contribution - correcting a bad habit, teaching a new skill, inspiring someone to reach higher or removing someone who can't or won't contribute - is actually working on the whole team. A change in even one position changes the entire body at least a little and sometimes a lot.

This is where many leaders fail. I believe many don't appreciate the importance of responding to daily performance issues whenever they arise. They overlook too many successes and failures. They come face to face with one of the most important leadership choices - the choice between engaging or avoiding. And it's so very easy to avoid most of these situations. Most of the time no one will know you did, but this is not good leadership. The best leaders engage. They surface and resolve the questions about people - their habits, their skills and their contributions - one situation at a time. These many and often small engagements are at the heart of team building.

Too many leaders think, "What difference will it make anyway?" But remember, even a small change within one member of the body changes the entire body. This is what team building is really like. I doubt anyone would say of the newspapers I led, "That was the day it all changed." There was no single day or event. Some were larger than others but it was a whole series of daily engagements by all the members of those leadership teams over years that gave rise to success.

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Now let's come back to accountability with a new focal point - the corporate body. When someone does not deliver what the team and its mission require they are not hurting the leader so much as every other member of the corporate body. In this light, the leader's role is to protect the body. Why? Because everyone has an interest in its health and performance. So when leaders use their authority to hold people accountable for what they do - praising success and correcting shortfalls - they are serving and protecting the corporate body. This is the correct way to look at leadership and accountability.

The best leaders also appreciate that accountability is also good for individual team members. It's only when we take accountability for what we do that we are really in a position to learn from it. As long as we avoid it with excuses we are in no position to learn. So leaders who hold people accountable are also positioning them to learn and grow. The best way to do this is with a caring and yet firm approach. To avoid performance issues is to become a weak and enabling leader. Put simply, don't let people form habits that are going to cause them and the team problems, even if it means they must lose a job to learn a lesson.

Each time you face the choice to engage or avoid, choose engagement. Build an entire leadership team that skillfully engages and you are well on our way to building a high performance organization.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the corporate body perspective change your view of accountability?
2. What is your tendency in the choice between engagement and avoidance? How about the other members of the leadership team?
3. When was the last time you avoided dealing with a performance issue and regretted it later?

To learn more about accountability or sharpen your team's leadership skills contact us for a half-day workshop or your next leadership retreat.

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