

Chapter 1

What Is Leadership Accountability?

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Think of a time when you and a group of close friends went to a new restaurant for dinner. You had great expectations for your evening because you had heard that the restaurant was terrific.

Unfortunately, your experience was not at all terrific. It was average at best.

At the end of the meal, you and your friends were disappointed. In fact, many felt resentful for spending all that money. Now imagine it's a few days later and you are asked by another friend about your night out. You probably would say that the restaurant was mediocre at best. Not a great endorsement at all.

Webster's Dictionary defines the word “mediocre” as something of low quality, value, ability, or performance. Essentially, it's seen as something that is simply not good. That's exactly what that restaurant was: mediocre.

Most of us can cite other examples in life when we were left disappointed by a mediocre experience—a poor dining experience like I just described, a bad movie, or substandard service while shopping. These experiences leave us frustrated and, at times, even angry.

But you know what? We also have similar experiences in our working lives, especially when we have to work with leaders we describe as being mediocre.

Mediocre Leadership and Its Impact

One of the sad realities I've encountered as I speak with people from different parts of the world is how many of them share stories of working for bad bosses and mediocre leaders. It's astonishing how frequently the topic comes up once people know the kind of work that I do as a leadership adviser. As these people share their stories, they do so with the same emotional reactions: disappointment, disgust, and even outright anger. It's no

wonder so many movies and television shows are based on stories of bad bosses and mediocre managers. Unfortunately, these experiences are far too common for most of us.



Activity 1.1: Mediocre Leaders



5 minutes to complete

Take a moment to think about your own experience with bad bosses or mediocre leaders. In the following space, write down what specifically these individuals did and did not do. Make sure you also capture how they made you feel.

Based on all my conversations, here are the most common themes that emerged from all the stories people shared about their experiences with mediocre leaders and bad bosses:

1. **Inept.** These leaders simply don't have the right instincts for leadership. They make bad (and even stupid) decisions that leave a trail of disaster behind. The worst ones are those who are incompetent but think they are great. No one can understand how these people were ever able to be put into a leadership role in the first place.
2. **Cowards.** They do not have the stomach for leadership. They always take the easy way out. They avoid difficult things. They don't take a stand, and they don't have a backbone.
3. **Lack of initiative.** They don't act. They're lazy and don't work hard. They look for the easy way out of any situation. They deflect responsibility or they always play under the radar, never to be seen or heard.
4. **Immature.** Even though they are adults, they typically act like temperamental toddlers. They have the emotional maturity of a two-year-old: When they don't get their way, they have temper tantrums. They can't handle any feedback; they become defensive and react with drama.
5. **Selfish.** They are only in it for themselves, taking as much as they can along the way. They have a huge sense of entitlement. They don't seem to care about the company they lead, the employees, or the customers. It's always about "ME, ME, ME!"
6. **Blame others.** When things go wrong, the finger always points at someone else. They never personally acknowledge their role or contribution if anything goes wrong.
7. **Highly insecure.** They lack confidence for the job, and this drives everything about who they are and what they do. They don't trust others. They surround themselves with weak or incompetent people. They stir the pot on teams by engaging in gossip. They, in turn, create teams that are insecure.
8. **Uncivil.** They regularly and routinely mistreat, disrespect, and insult others. They frequently "tear a strip off" their direct reports—often in public. They are bullies.
9. **Need to be liked.** They want to be your best friend and confuse the need to be liked with the need to be respected. They agree with everyone and everything. They avoid conflict or any confrontation. They never make an unpopular decision.

10. Make excuses. There is always a reason why something didn't work, and that reason never includes them. They never truly own the outcome of any situation.

Just writing this list makes me sick to my stomach. But that's how mediocre leaders and bad bosses make us feel. They demotivate, demoralize, and deflate your ambitions. They stifle your motivation. They can eliminate any desire to contribute in meaningful ways to your organization. The really bad bosses and truly mediocre ones demonstrate many of the items on this list. That's what makes them so ineffective.

The unfortunate reality for many people is that they can cite more examples of working with these types of leaders rather than examples of working with truly accountable and great leaders. In fact, I was asked by a leading national newspaper to submit an article on mediocre leaders that ran in their business section. The business section editor told me my article was one of the most popular that they had ever published and that it generated extremely high activity on social media. We can all relate to the experience of working with mediocre leaders.

So why did I begin this chapter by focusing on mediocre leaders and bad bosses? Quite simply because we cannot talk about truly accountable leadership without first appreciating what the absolute opposite looks like.

We have to change this reality in our organizations and in ourselves. Why is this so important? Because being a leader today is a very different proposition than it was a generation ago. When I first started my career, the model of leadership was very different. The world was a simpler place. You could have one or two leaders at the top of the hierarchy who knew their industry well and could create the strategy for success. All the remaining managers and leaders needed to simply carry out the orders from above and do their jobs. I worked with and saw many of these mediocre managers. However, it didn't seem to matter because there was leadership strength at the top. This model actually worked for a long time.

Today, we live and work in a very different world—one that is much more complex, uncertain, and ambiguous than perhaps at any time in our history. Many companies find themselves at critical inflection points, unsure of how to remain viable and drive sustainable growth. Yesterday's model of leadership is not effective for today's world.

Strong and accountable leadership is more important now than ever before, and it's required at every level in an organization. When you work with a leader who is truly an accountable leader, your experience is completely different from what we described

previously. When you work with an accountable leader, you give everything you have. You are fully engaged and committed. You want to emulate the leader and do what is necessary to help him or her be successful.

This is why I believe the ideas in *The Leadership Contract* have resonated so well with organizations and their leaders. It's time to stop settling and tolerating mediocrity from our leaders. We need leaders to be truly accountable.

But before we continue, I have one more question for you in this section. I have found that it's easy for people to talk about mediocre leaders and bad bosses when they are referring to others. I find that we are much more uncomfortable looking in the mirror and admitting that, quite possibly, we may be mediocre ourselves. So here's the next question for you.



Activity 1.2: Are You a Mediocre Leader?



5 minutes to complete

How many of the ten characteristics previously listed do you demonstrate (or have demonstrated in the past) in your leadership role? What impact has this had on your capacity to be an accountable leader?



Reflections

It's important for you to be honest with yourself. I suspect that, for many of you, the answer you wrote down wasn't one you are happy with. I was in The Netherlands, in the city of Eindhoven, speaking to a group of senior executives. During a question-and-answer period, a CEO spoke up. He said that as he reflected on the ideas I was sharing, he realized that he had allowed himself to become mediocre. He wasn't even aware of how it happened. He shared that he had begun to settle and accept mediocrity in himself and the leaders in his company. That insight shocked him.

I believe his story is fairly typical. Many mediocre leaders do not start out that way; but once you start settling, even in very small ways, then you find yourself on a slippery slope. Before you know it, you become like this CEO. At least he had the courage to look at himself in the mirror and challenge his own leadership. This field guide will, I hope, help you do the same. If we are to be truly accountable leaders, the first important step is to make sure we don't settle; we don't tolerate mediocrity in ourselves or others. We continually set high standards personally and for our teams.

Now let's shift our focus and explore what real leadership accountability is and what it looks like in action.

Leadership Accountability

Earlier in this field guide, I referenced the global research we conducted on leadership accountability. You can go back to Chapter 3 in *The Leadership Contract* to review the findings. One of the most interesting results that we discovered was the list of five critical behaviors that truly accountable leaders demonstrate every single day. These five behaviors surface whether the company is an industry-leading, high-performing one, or an average or below average performer. These five behaviors were consistently demonstrated across all the companies completing our survey globally. In other words, truly accountable leaders demonstrate very similar behaviors, regardless of the type of company or geography. Here are the five behaviors of truly accountable leaders (see Figure 1.1).

- 1 Holding others accountable for high standards of performance
- 2 Tackling tough issues and making difficult decisions
- 3 Effectively communicating the strategy throughout the organization
- 4 Expressing optimism about the company and its future
- 5 Displaying clarity about external trends in the business environment

Figure 1.1 The Top Five Behaviors of Truly Accountable Leaders



Activity 1.3: Review The Top Five Behaviors of Truly Accountable Leaders



15 minutes to complete

Assess your own leadership against these five behaviors. To what extent do you truly hold others accountable for high standards of performance?

To what extent do you consistently tackle tough issues and make difficult decisions as a leader?

To what extent do you effectively communicate the organization's strategy to your team?

To what extent do you express optimism about the company and its future?

To what extent do you display clarity about external trends in your business environment?

Now let's explore specifically what I mean by "leadership accountability." Based on my research and extensive client work, my definition of leadership accountability has three parts.

First, leadership accountability happens when leaders take complete ownership for their entire role—both the technical and people aspects of the job. Every leader is being asked to drive business results. That's a given. But you are also being asked to develop teams, address poor performers, and create a compelling work environment and culture. When you own your entire leadership role, you embrace all parts of the job. My team and I have learned that many leaders miss this first part of the definition. Those leaders are in a leadership role, but they really only pay attention to the technical or functional parts of their jobs. They either deemphasize or completely ignore the broader leadership expectations of their roles. They are, in many ways, only part-time leaders. In other words, they only pay attention to a small part of their broader role and expectations.



Activity 1.4: Do You Own Your Entire Leadership Role?



15 to 20 minutes to complete all activities in this section

To what extent do you own your entire leadership role? Explain your response.

Second, leadership accountability is demonstrated when a leader acts in a deliberate and decisive manner. You must be clear about your responsibilities and commit to fulfilling them every day. In my experience, few leaders bring a high level of clarity, deliberateness, and decisiveness to their roles. Even fewer leaders can tell you, with any degree of confidence, what guides their leadership, the values that anchor them, or their personal visions for themselves as leaders. Are you one of these leaders?



Activity 1.5: Are You a Deliberate and Decisive Leader?

Would others describe you as being a decisive and deliberate leader? Explain your response.

Finally, leadership accountability is demonstrated when leaders bring a sense of urgency to their entire leadership role; they tackle tough issues when they arise and rarely shy away from a challenge. They are focused on ensuring their organization is always moving forward and growing stronger every day. You must bring a sense of urgency to the important and difficult tasks that you have a tendency to avoid. When you avoid these tasks, you weaken your organization; it stagnates, gets stuck, and doesn't move forward. The key I find is not to bring a sense of frenetic or mindless urgency, but to really be mindful on driving priorities forward. My team and I see too many leaders who are either passively waiting for permission or hoping things will get better. If this is you, then you are not bringing enough urgency to your role as a leader.



Activity 1.6: Do You Bring a Sense of Urgency to Your Entire Leadership Role?

How do you bring a sense of urgency to your entire role as a leader to tackle the tough issues in a way that makes your organization stronger?



Reflections

What did you learn about yourself as you reflected on the three parts of the definition of leadership accountability? Few leaders can say that they can answer each question with complete confidence; we all have personal gaps in demonstrating real leadership accountability.

Let's face it: Many leaders struggle to fulfill the accountabilities of their leadership roles. Some focus more on the technical parts of their roles and make leadership a part-time portion of their jobs.

Most leaders see much more opportunity to lead in a more deliberate and decisive manner. Often, they do not have a clear sense of the kind of leader they need to be, and this limits them. Or they have a tendency to wait for permission—waiting for others to be decisive. Some feel they are not empowered to be decisive, as they do not have real decision-making authority in their companies.

Most leaders conclude that they can, in fact, do a much better job of bringing more urgency to important—but often avoided—tasks in their role. Leaders can often easily identify many areas that they have been avoiding, delaying, or addressing with only partial commitment.

What is also important to understand is that all three parts of this definition must be present for real leadership accountability to exist. For example, if you believe you own your entire role and that you are deliberate and decisive, but you do not bring a sense of urgency to your role, then you aren't a truly accountable leader. All three parts must be present and working together in an integrated way as you lead.

Final Thoughts

This chapter introduced and helped you understand the concept of leadership accountability. In the next chapter, we explore the four terms of the Leadership Contract because they provide the road map to help you become the truly accountable leader your organization needs.

