

## ACCOUNTABILITY

### What is accountability?

**Accountability refers to taking responsible ownership over all attitudes, decisions and actions.**

### Why is it important to be accountable?

Measuring the importance of accountability can be done from at least three different frameworks:

- Personal – Why is it important to me to be accountable?
- Interpersonal – Why is it important to others that I’m accountable?
- Professional – Why is it important to the business environment that I’m accountable?

The personal framework provides each of us with an opportunity to explore if accountability is part of our values system, how it relates to our own set of motivators, and/or how it relates to the satisfaction we personally gain when our reputation is one of accountability.

Many people find that being accountable for their own attitudes, decisions and actions helps them maintain a sense of control, can increase their self-confidence and sense of self-worth, and ultimately helps them recognise their strengths and opportunities for success.

Interpersonally, we can explore the impact our accountability has on others. By having an attitude of accountability, and being accountable for our own behaviours and actions, we model the effectiveness of this way of operating for others. When we do this, not only are we significantly increasing our capacity to meet our own needs, but we are also allowing stakeholders to increase their own level of accountability and thus their own ability to meet their needs.

Our reputation is based on the experiences of other people, so it is a logical conclusion to sincerely explore the needs of others, make commitments that are in line with their objectives as well as our own, and to follow through with the established expectations.

Although it could be argued that the most important person for us to earn and prove our reputation to is ourselves, from a practical perspective we also need to consider that reputation is more often discussed by others. Therefore, we are accountable for the reputation we have earned which has been formed by the experiences of others in response to the attitudes, decisions and performance they have seen us demonstrate.

The professional framework is about exploring the needs of the business or business environment we are operating in. Organisational processes may require group accountability, as well as individual accountability, and only when both of these are achieved will organisational strategic objectives have the potential to become a reality.

Many business situations have a large number of stakeholders who are relying on the performance expectations to be achieved, and when one or more parts of the overall system under-performs, it can have significant ripple consequences to other parts of the system. Therefore there is an increased need for accountability to ensure the sustainability and success of the organisation.

### Why is it so easy to slip up in the area of accountability?

The main obstacle to accountability in nearly all situations can be traced back to not properly setting and managing the expectations – whether they be expectations we place on ourselves or the expectations of others.

When we're not managing expectations well for ourselves, we can take on tasks, projects and metrics that we're not thinking very wisely about in relation to everything else we're expected to do, our schedule, our skills or potentially even our desire to do it.

We can take on too much and not know how to handle it.

This then leads into not managing the expectations of others very well, particularly when we say "yes" to things that would be wiser to say "no" to, and/or offer alternatives in a professional way.

When we say "yes" the other stakeholder now has the expectation we're going to follow through on our commitment, even if we have no idea how we're going to do it, when or even if we have the knowledge and skills to do a quality job.

Even when we do think we're managing tasks and time well enough to accept accountability, other things can come up which might change how and when we're able to honour what we have committed to. Frequently, people don't go back to the stakeholder to negotiate a different expectation. When that doesn't happen, and we then don't deliver to the original expectation, the damage can already be done. It's less effective to apologise after the missed deadline than it is to renegotiate the expectation in the first place.

### Characteristics and/or Behaviours of an accountable person

- They check to ensure they understand the requirements before making a commitment.
- They ensure they have the time, knowledge, skills, resources, etc to meet the commitment before they make it.
- They negotiate the commitment and the expectations, and ensure they have understood the commitment and expectations well.
- They follow through on what they commit to, how and when they say they will do so.
- They renegotiate in advance if anything comes up which might impact the original agreement.

- They take responsibility for their decisions and actions, which may include owning up to not meeting the expectations, and they do not make excuses or blame others for their own actions.
- They engage in the important conversation of how to address the issue when expectations are not met, including attending to the emotional impact and needs of the other stakeholders, if required. Then they follow through on the new commitments!

### Evaluate your own perspective on accountability

- How do you perceive accountability? In order to answer this question take the time to answer the questions listed below.
  - How important do you consider accountability to be in your professional life?
  - How do you demonstrate accountability?
  - What factors influence your decisions before you make a commitment?
  - How do you demonstrate accountability specifically in situation where you have not met the original expectation and/or are aware in advance that you will not meet the expectation?
  - How do you negotiate expectations?
  - In what ways, if any, do you document expectations and commitments?
  - What feedback have you received regarding the quality of your demonstration of accountability?
  - How have you responded to and acted on that feedback?
  - What was the impact of your new behaviours?
  - What lessons have you learned as a result of this?
- Think of someone you know who demonstrates accountability exceptionally well. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 10, what would you be)?
  - What's one thing you could do to improve how you'd rate yourself?
- Think of the least accountable person you have come across. How would you rate yourself in comparison to this person (if they were a 1, what would you be)?
  - What's the lesson you've learned from this comparison that has benefited you in your professional life?
  - How did you ensure you wouldn't be measured the same way as that person?

### Improve your degree of accountability

After you have completed your evaluation, if you have noticed some room for improvement, you might like to try some of the following strategies:

- Seek feedback from your six of your clients/colleagues – your two largest/most important, two medium/moderately important and two lower priority business partners – asking them to compare you with others they work with and tell you honestly how accountable they perceive you to be. Honesty is important, so create a very safe environment to seek this feedback and tell them you welcome constructive comments. Ask yourself:

- Are there some people in business that I am more accountable to than others? If so what is driving this change of behaviour in me?
  - What would be different in terms of my reputation and my clients' satisfaction and other stakeholders' satisfaction when working with me if I upheld one standard for accountability for everyone?
- Develop metrics around accountability, which could include a benchmark turn around time for work, response time on communications, adherence to the dates within a project plan or contract, etc. Negotiate these measurable expectations with the other stakeholders and develop the reporting system so that the performance against the targets can be transparent and easily shared. Be prepared to regularly discuss this facet of your performance with the stakeholders.
  - Consider getting coached or mentored on this area (or any other area you'd like to develop) and work with the coach to determine the actual habits that are effective and those that are negatively impacting your performance to be accountable. This may also give you a chance to explore attitudes, beliefs, values, skills and things like how well you manage your schedule, say "no" and negotiate. If you're not sure where to start to look for a coach or mentor, the High Ideals member directory includes members who offer these services, which may be a good place to begin your search as you'll know that those practitioners have also achieved the High Ideals credentials.

### Further resources

If you would like to develop further in the area of accountability, the following resources may be worth considering.

Please note that High Ideals does not endorse or receive any direct benefit from recommending the following resources, the list is simply a suggestive collection of materials that members of the High Ideals management team have found useful in their own development.

- <http://www.accountability21.net/> is a non-profit organisation that provides frameworks and world-class standards on accountability for any type of business organisation through to governments. There are standards documents which can be purchased which could assist in developing business practices for your business including how you engage with your stakeholders to ensure everyone's needs are met, honoured and fulfilled.
- <http://www.mindtools.com/> is a site High Ideals often refers people to as it is an incredible resource to assist people in developing their own professional skills regardless of whether they run their own business or work for someone else. Consider checking out the resources under the heading of "Time Management" as a useful place to start.
- <http://www.selfgrowth.com/> is a site High Ideals often refers people to as it offers both personal and professional self-development information and resources. You can type in any search word you want, such as "personal accountability" and you'll get a list of articles, blogs, resources and links to other sites which could assist you in your own development.

- <http://www.high-ideals.com> – Check out the Member Directory section for High Ideals members who offer services which could support you, such as coaching, mentoring or consulting on High Ideals criteria/values.

### Author and editor acknowledgement

**High Ideals** would like to acknowledge and thank Noel Posus for his work on this document. Noel Posus is the Director of Training, Research and Development for High Ideals as well as a professional coach, educator and author. To find out more about Noel, please visit his profile on the High Ideals directory by clicking [here](#) and search by name.

This document is part of the **High Ideals** Criteria Information Series, edited by Claire Stretch. For more information on Claire please visit her profile on the High Ideals directory by clicking [here](#) and search by name.

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