Manage your company culture

Accountability can be defined as taking ownership of one's behaviour and the responsibility to perform both individually and in teams, said Helene Vermaak, Director of The Human Edge.

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"It is one of the integral components in developing a high-performance cultural operating system within any organisation. It is when considering the impact of a culture of accountability on organisational performance that we come to realise the critical importance of developing this element."

Vermaak reiterated that a ship is guided by those who steer it, and in business it is the leadership team that not only steers the organisation, but also determines the culture. A culture of accountability in an organisation is developed when leaders are able to influence profound and sustainable positive behavioural change.

"Either you will manage your culture or it will manage you," said Vermaak. "Inevitably, it is the culture of the organisation that will produce the results in the long term and it is the leadership's responsibility to create and foster the desired culture."

Four attributes

To create a culture of accountability, Vermaak referenced four attributes that should be present, as defined by best-selling authors Roger Connors and Tom Smith in their book *Change the Culture, Change the Game*:

- **See it** - Obtain perspectives of others, communicate openly and candidly, ask for and offer feedback, hear the difficult things that allow you to see reality;
- **Own it** - Being personally invested, learning from both success and failures, aligning your work with desired company results, acting on feedback received;
- **Solve it** - Ask: What else can I do? to achieve results, overcome obstacles and make progress. Overcoming cross-functional boundaries, creatively dealing with obstacles and taking necessary steps; and
- **Do it** - Doing what you say you will do, focusing on top priorities - not blaming others and sustaining an environment of trust.

Following research in which 25,000 individuals were interviewed and observed, it was determined that the most successful companies are those in which people speak up openly, honestly and respectfully when a problem arises. "This can only occur if there is a performance management system that enables everyone to hold everyone accountable," said Vermaak.

When creating a culture of accountability Vermaak proposes that the following principles are applied:

- **Make it safe** - Communicate mutual purpose and mutual respect within the first 30 seconds of a conversation. Building trust and minimising fear helps the other person feel safe and, in turn, will aid in them in speaking up and listening to you;
- **Describe the gap and lead with facts** - Lead with facts by describing the gap between expected versus the observed performance or behaviour. When sharing concerns, don't lead with accusations or judgemental language;
- **Invite dialogue** - After sharing your facts encourage the person to share his views. Others will be open to your views if they are convinced you are open to theirs;
- **Acknowledge that most problems aren't limited only to motivation or ability** - Make it easy and motivating for the individual. Social, structural and personal elements all play a role in guiding a person's behaviour and performance; and
- **Move to action** - Make a decision as to Who? will do What? by When? and ensure that you follow up to close the accountability loop.