Picture yourself in a meeting. Suppose there are a dozen people seated around a table and someone says, “I’m going to hold you accountable for what we’ve discussed.” What words or feelings immediately come to mind?

Fear? Threat? You may be thinking, “Uh oh, now there are expectations.” Others around the table may experience pressure or stress. Still others sense the tone of the meeting suddenly has changed – leadership is going to be searching for a “gotcha.”

This type of negative reaction to accountability has been earned. Most of us have experienced the word “accountability” as punitive – a “punishment” for not doing something. It is viewed as punishment because that accountability typically lurks at the back end of the
business process. Accountability shows up when something goes wrong and people start to lay blame. They start pointing fingers.

In reality, winning begins with accountability. You cannot sustain success without accountability. It is an absolute requirement!

The secret that successful organizations have discovered is to install accountability on the front end of interactions … before the outcome is known. Successful organizations front-load accountability into their strategy. When front-loaded, accountability breeds better relationships, eliminates surprises, and vastly improves job satisfaction and performance.

**Defining Accountability**
Accountability should not be defined as a punitive response to something going wrong.

Webster’s Dictionary defines “accountability” as “the quality or state of being accountable; an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility for one’s actions.”

Notice the adjectives describing accountability in the dictionary: quality, obligation, willingness and responsibility. Does that sound like punitive response to something that has gone wrong? Of course not. Accountability means preventing something from going wrong.

So, as a first step on the road to creating an accountability culture, we must redefine and streamline “accountability” to carry a more positive connotation:

Accountability: “Clear commitments that — in the eyes of others — have been kept.”
With this new definition in mind, let’s put it to work by asking you to write down in the space below two commitments that are important to your success. One for business and one for your personal life.

**Business Commitment**  


**Personal Commitment**  


Thank you. We’ll refer to these later in the book.

**People deal with us based on what they think about us, not what we think they should think about us.** So, when we make a commitment, we have to fulfill that commitment in the eyes of others. It is not good enough to fulfill the commitment in our eyes – we have to fulfill the commitment in the eyes of others. That is the tricky part.

When we’re accountable, it is necessary for us to go to our customers, our suppliers, the people we work for – and yes, the people who work with us – and ask them, “How am I doing?” We allow them to hold us accountable – in their eyes – for our commitments.

Growing up in New York City during Mayor Ed Koch’s administration, I remember this: Whenever Koch greeted someone,
he’d say, “Hey, I’m Mayor Ed Koch. How am I doing?” He constantly asked for feedback. He was being accountable in his constituents’ eyes.

Was Ed Koch the best mayor in New York’s history? That depends on whom you talk to, but he continually asked for feedback … and the voters loved it!

Accountability is – first and foremost – about being reliable. To get a good picture of your personal accountability, you may want to periodically ask yourself, “Can people count on me to do what I say I’ll do, as I said I would do it?”

Recently, at a meeting involving the president, chairman of the board and chief operating officer of a large organization, an executive named Cathy promised, “You’ll have the executive summary from this meeting by Friday, December 21, at 5 p.m. CST.”

Two of the officers wrote down this information. The president did not; and when one of his colleagues asked him, “Aren’t you going to hold Cathy accountable?” the president responded, “I’ve worked with Cathy for three years. I know she’s as good as her word.”

It’s at that moment Cathy knew she had consistently acted in an accountable way. It was the president’s perception and feedback that let her know she had modeled accountability.

Creating an accountability culture is to recognize that wherever you are on the organizational chart, you encourage others to hold you accountable.

For instance, let’s say I’m sitting in my office working on a presentation. I asked my assistant to hold all calls and not disturb me while I focus on the presentation for an important meeting.
I hear the mailman leave my mail and, out of the corner of my eye, I see a new issue of a martial arts magazine. I love martial arts so I go over, pick the magazine up and begin leafing through it ... and, as usual, I find an article I’d like to read.

I return to my office and begin reading the article. It’s at this point my assistant steps in and says, “Shouldn’t you be working on the presentation that you asked me to allow you the time to focus on?”

I slowly close the magazine and smile. “Yes, thank you.”

Now, saying “thank you” may not be the first thing that comes to mind at that moment, but my focus is on communicating genuine thanks. She’s holding me accountable to my stated commitments because that’s the deal we have, and I do appreciate her holding me accountable to getting the important things done.

**Accountability is about high performance and not fear or stress.** It’s about being willing to hold yourself to a standard that improves the performance of your organization and also having a willingness to be held accountable by others.

So, it’s okay that a member of your team walks into your office and says, “Hey, you said you’d have that report on competitive products to me by noon today. It’s 1 p.m. When can I expect it?”

In an organization where accountability isn’t important, the manager might say, “Wait a minute. Let’s get this straight. You work for me. I don’t work for you! Now, get out of my office!” But, in a Culture of Accountability, the manager will say, “You know what? I’m sorry I didn’t get that to you on time. Here’s when I’ll have it for you.”
When holding someone else accountable we must recognize and respect the power of intention. If our intention is to put someone down or to make them feel badly about themselves, it will be obvious. If, however, our intention is to help them perform at a higher level and to help them succeed, they will be able to see that, too.

Here’s an example:

While facilitating a meeting with a client, we were reviewing our performance with them and listening to their feedback. At one point during this discussion, I called a 10-minute break. At the moment the break began, one of my team members walked up to me with her back to the clients, a smile on her face, and very direct eye contact. She said, “Henry, you are being defensive and you have 9 minutes to adjust, okay?”

A couple of hours later when the meeting had ended, we asked the president of the company for feedback on the meeting. He said, “You know, Henry, when the meeting started, I felt that you were being a little defensive, but right after I noticed it, it seems to have vanished. The meeting was a huge success.”

I am eternally grateful to my team member for giving me the feedback when she did. I remember trusting her intention in that moment.

“When you’re screwing up and nobody says anything to you anymore, that means they’ve given up on you.”

Randy Pausch, author, The Last Lecture
Remember: *Hypocrisy exists in the space between language and action.*

If you are ever perceived as a hypocrite, it’s because there is a gap between what you said and what you did. Hypocrisy is created in the space between your words and your actions.

This simple example explains the concept well: Erik is a new manager and he’s having a team meeting. Chris has joined the group late because of a long meeting with an important client. He quietly asks the person next to him where they are on the agenda.

Erik’s saying, “Employee morale is really important to me.” Then he sees Chris asking about the agenda and shouts, “Be quiet, Chris!”

In a very short space, a lot of relationship damage has just occurred.

On the other hand, if Erik’s been the team leader for awhile and if he’s told his team, “If you ever interrupt one of my meetings, I’m going to tell you to be quiet” – and then he does exactly that – Erik’s not a hypocrite because he’s set a clear expectation.

**How to Front-load Accountability**

To front-load accountability in your organization, you have to provide the specifics … and that includes clear expectations. If your team can reflect the essence of what you said to them back to you, your expectations have been clearly stated. If their reflection does not mirror what you are trying to accomplish, you need to start again.

For instance, if I wanted Sam to reflect back to me, I wouldn’t ask Sam to repeat what I said because that would be condescending. What I could say is, “Sam, how do you interpret what I just said?”
Another way to invite reflection is by asking someone to paraphrase what they heard you say.

**Front-loading accountability begins with clear expectations from both the sender and the receiver. And, it is both parties’ responsibility.**

For instance, what if your manager told you, “I expect you to do a good job on this proposal.”

You could say, “Okay” and take your best shot at meeting the manager’s expectations. Or, you could say, “Okay, but exactly what does a good job look like?”

The manager may say, “I want our products to be featured up front, which should be followed by features and benefits. Then, in the summary, show how our products resolve the client’s accounting problem.”

In this example, the manager provided the details and how the assignment would be measured. By providing the measurements for the project – at the beginning of the project – the manager has allowed you to succeed in doing a good job.

If you are not provided the specifics of what a good job looks like, you probably won’t succeed, which makes it important to ask the question, “What does a good job look like?” or “What does it mean when you say, ‘Good job’?”

So, what if you make an assignment and you’re not completely clear on what the outcome may be? If that is the case, consider this language:
“I’m not 100 percent sure the decision we’re making is going to be the right one. However, everybody needs to be 100 percent sure this is the decision we’ve made and this is the direction we’re going to take. We may have to adjust later.”

To use this language successfully takes trust. It takes honesty for the leader to say, “I don’t have a crystal ball … and I accept that I may be wrong. But everyone needs to understand that this is our direction and this is how we’re doing it.”

The next step to front-loading accountability is to put into place a high testing standard to measure quality. Just as important, you must be willing to take feedback and make changes that will strengthen your strategy. Part of this feedback will come from team members, and more feedback will come when you ask your customers, “How am I doing?” In doing so, you’re getting feedback from every level throughout the process.

**The Benefits of Front-loading Accountability**

Remember when we asked you to think about how being asked to be accountable made you feel? Quite often people have feelings of stress, fear or being extremely uncomfortable.

The term “accountability” probably deserves these negative connotations when it is used in a punitive way … and in Western cultures, we tend to use accountability to determine whom to punish when something has gone wrong.

These feelings of fear, stress and discomfort when we are asked to be accountable are what we call “relationship breakers.” So, when accountability comes at the backend of the business process, we break that very thing that pulls us through tough times and fuels good times: relationships.
Conversely, when you front-load accountability, relationships will be built, solidified and strengthened.

When you front-load accountability, you include specificity in your commitment. Unlike the manager who asked team members to “do a good job” on the important client proposal, your commitments include specific language – “I want this proposal to outline our products at the beginning, include features and benefits and, in the summary, to show how our products will resolve their current accounting problem. Here is when I need it to be completed.”

Front-loading accountability is also a hiring function. Many winning organizations make accountability a part of their hiring process, specifically addressing personal accountability in interviews. Those organizations make it policy to only recruit and retain employees who embrace accountability as part of their personal values.

In describing accountability to one new employee, the hiring manager said this: “Accountability in our organization means doing what you said you will do, as you said you would do it. That is the minimum acceptable performance level for our team members. It’s the way we are … and it’s a high standard.”

When you front-load accountability:

- Performance increases
- Resources are better allocated – people don’t have to guess
- Job satisfaction is increased
- Relationships are strengthened
- Results improve, ultimately increasing revenues and profitability
Summary:

✦ Accountability is a positive term describing commitments that – in the eyes of others – have been kept.

✦ Accountability is continually asking, “How am I doing?”

✦ To front-load accountability in your organization, you have to provide crystal-clear expectations.

✦ By front-loading accountability, relationships among team members are strengthened because they know they can count on each other. This leads to greater performance, higher quality and better service to your clients.