

# OwnIt!

Honouring and Amplifying  
Accountability

Dr PAIGE WILLIAMS

## There's an epidemic of underperformance plaguing teams and organisations and it's caused by issues with accountability.

Activity but no progress, meetings with no follow-up, confused responsibilities, impossible demands, missed milestones, low morale, poor engagement, talent drain...

From broken promises and unrealistic expectations to finger-pointing and cultures of avoidance and blame, issues with accountability – and the fear that drives them – are rampant across business, government, and NGOs.

### If you have people in your team, you have issues with accountability.



**DR PAIGE WILLIAMS** is an author, researcher and PhD in Organisational Behaviour. A trusted advisor and mentor to senior leaders across business, government, education and beyond, she uses a potent blend of neuroscience, psychology and twenty-plus years of international business leadership experience to help leaders surface uncomfortable truths, see the rules they need to break in order to breakthrough and lead themselves, their teams, and their organisations to thrive.

The results are dramatic and measurable.

**Own It!** is the book for you if...

- ✓ You've been let down by a broken promise or expected to do the impossible at work
- ✓ You're struggling with lack of time, too many commitments and a culture of blame
- ✓ You're tired, frustrated and overwhelmed with what lies ahead and can't see a way forward
- ✓ You're a leader who knows your team could perform better, but aren't sure what to try next
- ✓ You're ready to break the mould, feel energized and engaged with your work, proud of your achievements, and excited about the future

ISBN 978-1-989737-58-3



9 781989 737583



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ESTD 2013 [www.grammarfactory.com](http://www.grammarfactory.com)

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Dr PAIGE WILLIAMS

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Grammar Factory Publishing  
MacMillan Company Limited  
25 Telegram Mews, 39th Floor, Suite 3906  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M5V 3Z1

[www.grammarfactory.com](http://www.grammarfactory.com)

Williams, Dr Paige  
*Own It! Honouring and Amplifying Accountability* / Dr Paige Williams.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-98973-758-3  
Hardcover ISBN 978-1-98973-760-6  
eBook ISBN 978-1-98973-759-0  
Audiobook ISBN 978-1-98973-767-5

1. BUS085000 BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Organizational Behavior. 2. BUS071000 BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Leadership. 3. BUS030000 BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Human Resources & Personnel Management.

#### **Production Credits**

Cover design by Designerbility  
Interior layout design by Dania Zafar  
Book production and editorial services by Grammar Factory Publishing

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## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT OWN IT! ...

In her refreshing new book, *Own It!*, Paige restores integrity and accountability to their proper place at the center of the performance conversation. Through a compelling blend of real-life stories and cutting-edge research, she unlocks the power in the timeless wisdom: say what you'll do and do what you say, and delivers a practical guide for building an accountability culture that enhances individual performance and brings out the best in others.

*Own It!* is an antidote for the helplessness, spin, and frustration holding back far too many organizations, and is a must read for any leader interested in building more authentic, happier lives for both themselves and their teams.

**ANDREW D'ANNA**

*MANAGING DIRECTOR, CHARLES SCHWAB & CO., INC.*

Accountability is a word that is used often, but is often used without understanding exactly what accountability is. In *Own It!*, Dr Paige Williams identifies what it means to be and to call others to account.

There are key challenges in accountability. Paige outlines and explains what these are and suggests the pathway as we journey to greater understanding what accountability is.

Accountability is not easy, in fact it is hard. But without it, and an accountable culture, the chance of sustained success is unlikely. Whether it be from a professional or personal viewpoint, *Own It!* Is a book that will enlighten, inform and lead you to greater accountability.

**STEVE HOCKING**

*CEO GEELONG FOOTBALL CLUB*

Owning it is a way of life and Paige is the living embodiment of this truth. In *Own It!* she invites each of us to take responsibility for who we are and what we do with our time at work, in life and on the planet.

**MATT CHURCH**

*FOUNDER, THOUGHT LEADERS*

In *Own it!*, Paige has delivered an exceptionally practical and insightful book on how to understand, build and maintain accountability for yourself and others in the workplace. An engaging read, that brings Paige's insights developed through her professional experiences working with leaders across many industries to life, in a clear and accessible format that will benefit many people and organisations.

**DREW BESWICK**  
CEO, *POSSABILITY*

This book is like wearing contact lenses for the first time – suddenly seeing so clearly, is a shock. *Own It!* cuts through the baffling confusion and craziness we see all around us – in politics, government, sport, even in our private lives, and argues much of it comes from a lack of accountability: we're in an accountability crisis. People don't do what they say they will (or don't admit what they can't), so we all waste time, waste effort, and get demoralised and tired.

Dr Paige Williams draws the sting of accountability, which sounds demanding – and is – by bringing in research that the key to any effective communication, particularly the most challenging level of holding people to account, is relationship – or, as she puts it, love. For Paige, doing what you say; saying what you can't; and being deeply honest with others – and yourself – is integrity in action. With that completely different perspective, it suddenly becomes much easier, not just to understand a great deal of the incompetence and frustration around us, but to do something about it.

This is a brave book. But these are fragile times, and we need brave books. I have coached and taught leaders from around the world for almost thirty years, and books like this, which open up a whole new territory, with both heavyweight science and beautiful writing, come along very rarely. The message is clear and strong and might not be easy for some to hear – but Paige guides us through. It has made a real difference to me, and I warmly recommend it."

**ANNE SCOLAR, AUTHOR OF *THE FINANCIAL TIMES GUIDE TO BUSINESS COACHING*,  
AND 2020 CO-WINNER OF THE HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW WARREN BENNIS PRIZE.**

Paige has nailed a very important lever not just for performance but for personal success and happiness. Her insights, wisdom and practical perspectives on accountability are backed by significant and cutting-edge research that make perfect sense for individuals and organisations who want to thrive in a new now.”

**GARRY THOMPSON**

*CEO UPLIFTING AUSTRALIA*

I had the pleasure of working with Paige as she delivered a bespoke program based on *Own It!* to reset accountability and reduce waste, create connections and boost progress and performance. Paige’s well researched frameworks and incredibly practical and engaging delivery created immediate insight and impact.

I highly recommend *Own It!* to all in leadership positions. I often find myself channelling Paige by remembering every time I point my figure at someone else there are three of my own fingers pointing back at me...

**MARK VALENA,**

*FORMER CEO GMHBA, NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR*

In *Own It!*, Paige tackles the chunky challenge of accountability and shows ways in which a leader and team can excel in this regard. I have always believed accountability to be an essential element of leadership and this book captures the issue as well as bringing many solutions that any manager/leader can use to enhance their team. I particularly like the concept of creating an accountability system within the team where all can clearly see what they are required to do to ensure the accountability of the team. And of course, the chapter on the *Own It!* mindset brings everything together with frameworks that should be in every leaders kitbag.

**GEOFF STALLEY,**

*CHAIR, UPLIFTING AUSTRALIA*

## CONTENTS

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| Introduction  | 1          |
| <b>PART I: WHY WE SUCK AT ACCOUNTABILITY</b>                  | <b>7</b>   |
| 1. The Other Epidemic   | 11         |
| 2. Wired for Avoidance  | 25         |
| <b>PART II: WHAT WE NEED TO DO TO FIX IT</b>                  | <b>39</b>  |
| 3. From Holding to Calling: Resetting Accountability          | 41         |
| 4. Creating Clarity of Accountability Expectations            | 55         |
| 5. Cultivating Quality of Accountability Relationships        | 77         |
| <b>Part II Wrap-up: The Accountability Reset Matrix</b>       | <b>89</b>  |
| <b>PART III: HOW WE CAN BE BETTER AT IT</b>                   | <b>95</b>  |
| 6. Do You Own It? Developing the Right Mindset                | 99         |
| 7. Can You Coach It? (part 1)                                 | 115        |
| 8. Can You Coach It? (Part 2)                                 | 131        |
| 9. Will You Craft It? Shaping a Culture of Accountability     | 151        |
| <b>Conclusion: Avoiding the 'Dark Side' of Accountability</b> | <b>169</b> |
| <b>Appendix: Case Studies</b>                                 | <b>175</b> |
| <b>Glossary</b>   | <b>187</b> |

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Paige Williams is an organisational psychologist, executive coach, researcher and author. A PhD in Organisational Behaviour, an Honorary Fellow of the Centre for Wellbeing Science and an Associate of Melbourne Business School, Paige is known as a leadership and culture expert. The potent combination of real-life leadership experience and deep academic knowledge fuels Paige's 'superpower' of translating complex ideas and academic research into real, relevant and relatable solutions for the work that leaders do every day.

Drawing from research in wellbeing, neuroscience, leadership and systems, as well as her own twenty-plus years of international business leadership experience, Paige helps successful leaders – from emerging high potentials to established CEOs – lead themselves, their teams and their organisations to thrive in the dynamic, complex and uncertain environments in which they operate. The results are dramatic and measurable.

Paige has worked with thousands of leaders across business, government, NGOs and education, including the Department of Defence, Charles Schwab, Specsavers, Sawary Energy, Swisse, Maroondah City Council, the Magistrates Court of Victoria, the Transport Accident Commission and The University of Melbourne.

Her first book, *Becoming AntiFragile: Learning to Thrive through Disruption, Challenge and Change*, was published in 2020, and her work has been featured in a variety of academic and non-academic journals, including *Psychology Today*, *Smart Company*, *Australian Financial Review*, and *Human Resource Management*. She presents at conferences internationally and has been interviewed for a variety of media, including national television and radio.

## GRATITUDE AND APPRECIATION

My experience of writing this book was like having a second child – you know what’s coming, which makes it both easier and harder. I sweated the small stuff less and trusted the process more, but in the same way that it takes a village to raise a child, it is more than just my effort and energy that have breathed life and form into *Own It!*

Thank you to Kelly Irving, who kept me on track with structure, scope and time, and was both gentle and ferocious in her feedback – the perfect combination for a book coach!

To Scott MacMillan, editors Andrew Tracy and Carolyn Jackson, and the whole team at Grammar Factory, thank you for making the production and publishing of this book such a joyful and easy process.

To Matt Church, Lisa O’Neill and the Thought Leaders Business School tribe – thank you for inspiring, encouraging and holding space as I navigated some tough times during the research and writing of this book. You may not have known it, but you were a lifeline in the dark.

I’ve been blessed to draw on the wisdom and expertise of many wonderful academics and practitioners as I’ve developed and evolved my thinking around honour and accountability. To my fellow Lab Leaders at MMcQ – Dr Michelle McQuaid, Michelle Etheve and Danielle Jacobs – thank you for your friendship, support, and the many thought-provoking discussions we’ve had about accountability. They shaped my earliest thinking, and are very present in the chapters on mindset and coaching.

Thank you to Andrew D’Anna, Kane Leersen, Luke Mathers and Glenn Flood for reading early versions of the chapters and sharing your thoughts. To my wise and clever friend Anne Scoular, thank you for our stimulating conversations that helped me understand that it was honour and integrity that underpinned my passion to reset accountability. And thanks as well to my wonderful mentor Lesley Klue, who has helped me find my truth and speak it clearly into the world; I am so grateful for you.

To my practice team – my business manager Nikita Flood, and Cath O’Connell at Wholehearted Marketing – my gratitude for your patience and good humour as we brought to life the ideas in my head. Appreciate you both.

And finally, to my home team – my mum, Margaret, and ‘The Angels’, my daughters Liv and Pixie. You have had the lived experience of ‘honouring and amplifying accountability’, as I’ve written this book. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleaders and for keeping me grounded with love and laughter throughout this journey. I love you.

# INTRODUCTION

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MAYBE YOU KNOW THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH ACCOUNTABILITY, but you're not confident you know what to do about it.

Maybe you know there's a problem, you know what to do, but you know it won't be easy, so the motivation just isn't there.

Or maybe you know there's a problem, you know what to do *and* feel able to do it, but you're not convinced that you will be supported on the other side.

Accountability affects us all. Whether you're giving or receiving it and whether you need a boost of confidence, motivation or support, I want you to know that *Own It!* will help.

## WHY THIS BOOK, NOW?

The thing with writing a book is that the ideas become deeply embedded in your way of thinking, being and doing. It becomes an inherent part of your world view – at least for a while, until that evolves and develops.

In my first book, *Becoming AntiFragile: Learning to Thrive through Disruption, Challenge and Change*, I wrote about our need to remove what's making and keeping us fragile as one of the first steps to becoming more antifragile. Because without addressing the fragility in the first place, there will always be a ceiling to how antifragile we can become.

As I started to look at my own fragility and that of my family, friends, clients and colleagues, there was a common theme in what was holding us back: issues with accountability. Whether that was personal accountability by acknowledging what's ours to own, collective accountability in calling out unacceptable behaviour or practices, or asking others to step into their accountability, this was the thing that was making and keeping us fragile.

But there are layers to this fragility.

I've seen time and again that we don't really know how to 'do' accountability – either with ourselves, or with others. We all have accountability expectations every day. These expectations are so deeply embedded in our social structures that we barely give them a thought, and maybe that's the issue – we aren't conscious and aware of what's going on with these accountability expectations. As a result, we're also not intentional and focused about how we meet or navigate them, which leads to underperformance in both our professional and our personal lives.

Underperformance is an interesting term, so let's pause for a moment to explore what I mean by it. If performance is about meeting or achieving expectations or requirements, and 'high performance' means that we exceed those expectations or requirements, then 'underperformance' means we don't meet them in some way. We don't meet the KPI, support the culture, create safe and effective relationships, live our lives in a meaningful and fulfilling way. And the thing I've observed and experienced about underperformance that's caused by issues with accountability, is that it is *avoidable*. More often than not, there is capacity, motivation and a desire to do better, but the fog of accountability issues prevents them from shining through.

So what does this look like?

In our work, it looks like waste: wasted time, wasted effort, and wasted energy, which then impacts creativity, connection, innovation, productivity, progress and performance.

In our home life, it looks like drama: we create unnecessary struggles for ourselves, we create conflict that could be avoided, and we create suffering that is preventable.

So at one level, this book matters because I've seen so much evidence of how poor we are at 'doing' accountability and the fragility this creates for us personally and professionally.

But as I immersed myself in the research for this book, and as the ideas became embedded in my ways of thinking, being and doing, I realised there was something deeper that accountability means to me.

And that is *honour*.

Accountability is about personal ownership. Accountability is about integrity in action. Accountability is about doing what you say, saying what you'll do – and, perhaps more importantly, what you *can't*. It's about speaking truth and being deeply honest with yourself and others.

Because this is the challenge that I've seen – maybe you have too. Accountability slips sneakily and creeps stealthily. It doesn't exit stage left with a fanfare, oh no: it catches us when we are tired, busy and distracted; when the follow-up conversation feels too hard and it's easier to give someone the benefit of the doubt, 'just this once'. Rarely do we jump off an accountability cliff: like an eroding rock face, accountability slips over time, as we let expectations of ourselves and others slide. And when it does, other important things slip too – things like encouraging inclusive behaviours, hearing diverse perspectives, calling out toxic culture, and modelling human-centred leadership.

So this book is about more than productivity, and will result in more than accelerating progress and improving performance. It is an invitation to return to integrity and honour – an invitation that requires truth and honesty, vulnerability and strength, love and the courage to commit.

Because, when it's done from that place, accountability is an act of

love. When we call ourselves and others to account from a place of integrity and honour, we are saying, 'I see the greatness in you. You can play a bigger game.'

## **WHAT'S AHEAD...**

In Part I of *Own It!* we explore why accountability is important and why it is an issue. Chapter 1 looks at how accountability is the 'glue in the flat pack' of society; unpacks the three problems that have given accountability such a bad name; and examines how these are fueling an epidemic of underperformance. In Chapter 2 we examine why accountability is so problematic through the lenses of neuroscience and psychology, and discover some useful ways to help us counter our natural response to take the easy way out.

In Part II, we delve into the antidote to our current epidemic of underperformance. Chapter 3 examines how a fundamental reset of accountability is needed, and what that looks like. Chapters 4 and 5 dive deeper into the two factors that my research determined to be critical in putting that reset into action. Part II wraps up with an invitation for you to assess where you're currently at in terms of your accountability relationships.

In Part III, we move into action as we describe what you can do to reset accountability – firstly with yourself through an *Own It!* mindset (Chapter 6), then with other people through setting up accountability for success (Chapter 7) and redirecting it when things go wrong (Chapter 8), and finally by creating an *Own It!* culture within your team or organisation (Chapter 9).

Finally, acknowledging the reality that accountability can be tricky and challenging, we conclude the book by looking at some cautions and caveats, and how best to maintain and sustain this work. The Appendix includes three case studies that explore specific contextual challenges that can tip accountability into the 'dark side'.

## INTRODUCTION

Accountability is a fundamental part of the social contract that we engage with every day as we go about our lives. To reset it requires a term that I don't like to use: a paradigm shift. It will ask you to look at the truth of how you are showing up in your personal accountability, how you are asking others to step into theirs, and how you are creating a context in which accountability can thrive.

It is not easy work.

It is not for everyone.

So, with that said, and from a place of love...

*I see the greatness in you.*

*Are you ready to play a bigger game?*



# PART I

## WHY WE SUCK AT ACCOUNTABILITY

*Southern Italy, August 1996.*

*I'm twenty-five years old and managing a 200-bed hotel on the beautiful Amalfi Coast in Italy for a high-end UK tour operator.*

*We are in the midst of peak season, at full occupancy with busy childcare, water sports and activities programs in full swing. The season is going well but for one thing: we only have 70% of our full allocation of kitchen staff.*

*The head chef – experienced and in his forties – is struggling under the pressure, and his young team are feeling it too. On this particular morning, the restaurant manager asks to see me and tells me that he's pretty sure that one of the sous chefs is taking wine from the restaurant for his personal consumption. After investigating, the evidence is clear – he's definitely stealing.*

*I speak with the head chef, who is reluctant for me to take immediate action. The sous chef is a big personality and popular with the kitchen crew – there's*

*no doubt he's helped keep spirits up as the pressure has increased in the last few weeks. To lose another chef at this time could well tip the kitchen team over the edge and impact the service we can provide to our guests. Maybe, he suggests, I could keep the sous chef for a few weeks while we line up a replacement from the UK, and then dismiss him...?*

*But now that I know about it (and it's likely others do too), how can I **not** do something?*

*Is my responsibility to our guests to deliver a great holiday experience?*

*Is my responsibility to my organisation, as the point person for the company that the sous chef is stealing from?*

*Or is my responsibility to my team, to show them that there are clear boundaries that have been crossed?*

*And what if I sack him and then he fights it – will the company back my decision?*

*Maybe this is just an accepted behaviour that no one talks about?*

AS THE STORY ABOVE MAKES CLEAR, THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT accountability can be a tricky thing.

The implications of calling people to account and letting the consequences of their actions unfold can be significant and wide-reaching. It's understandable that we often choose to turn away from the hard work of it.

The thing is, the implications of turning away are also significant and wide-reaching.

And that's why we need to reset how we think about accountability – to understand and engage with it from a completely different perspective so that it is easier to do with ourselves and with others.

## INTRODUCTION

The next couple of chapters will help you to do just that.

In Chapter 1, we dive deeper into the impact that accountability issues have in organisations, and why resetting accountability is the strategic imperative for us to create the positive, purposeful progress we need to succeed in a COVID-impacted operating environment. We also examine the three problems I see that are fuelling the current situation with accountability, and the shift in perspective we need to make in order to address them.

In Chapter 2, we do some root-cause analysis with our accountability issues by looking at how the way our brains are wired and specific psychological processes and perspectives that influence how we react and respond to accountability situations and scenarios.



# 1.

## THE OTHER EPIDEMIC

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ACTIVITY BUT NO PROGRESS, MEETINGS WITH NO FOLLOW UP, CONFUSED RESPONSIBILITIES, IMPOSSIBLE DEMANDS, MISSED MILESTONES, LOW MORALE, POOR ENGAGEMENT, TALENT DRAIN – THERE'S AN EPIDEMIC OF UNDERPERFORMANCE IN ORGANISATIONS TODAY, AND IT'S BEING DRIVEN BY ISSUES WITH ACCOUNTABILITY.

From broken promises and unrealistic expectations to finger-pointing and cultures of avoidance and blame, accountability issues – and the fear that drives them – are rampant across business, government, NGOs and beyond.

Do any of these sound familiar?

- You're struggling with a lack of time, too many commitments and a culture of blame.
- You're fed up with being the only one who sees things through and takes personal ownership.
- You've been let down by a broken promise or expected to do the impossible at work.
- You're tired, frustrated and overwhelmed with what lies ahead and can't see a way forward.
- You're a leader who knows your team could perform better, but isn't sure what's holding them back.

Simply put, if you have people in your organisation, you have issues with accountability. And that's a problem, because as the challenges and opportunities of the post-COVID landscape continue to unfold, so does the need to perform.

Sustaining engagement and holding on to talent has always been important, but it is emerging as *the* strategic imperative that will provide the progress and high performance needed for organisations to survive and thrive in our new economic context, in which workers are reassessing what 'good work' and a 'good life' look like.

**Let's say that one more time:**

*Accountability is the strategic imperative in the post-COVID economic landscape.*

*Why is this?*

Because without accountability, nothing sticks: not your latest transformational change initiative, not your best talent, nothing.

Without accountability, poor-quality work, decisions and leadership go unchallenged, and 'ethical slip' starts to happen.

Without accountability, leaders, teams and organisations fall behind as the scale of disruption, complexity of change, and pace of technological advancement increase.

Without accountability, we waste time, money and energy in a fog of confusion and dysfunctional, ineffective accountability relationships.

From my twenty-plus years as a senior leader and my work with the CEOs, senior executives and leaders who are my clients, I know that accountability underpins success. And multiple research studies agree.

In fact, research suggests that when organisations get accountability wrong:

- 75% of team members see solving problems as ‘someone else’s job’,
- 65% don’t see due dates as real commitments,
- 80% don’t seek and offer feedback often,
- 82% try but fail to hold others accountable (or avoid it altogether), and
- 85% are unsure what the organisation is trying to achieve.

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*When we get accountability wrong, poor results, failed initiatives, missed targets, low morale and engagement, and an environment with more blame than trust follow.*

Things get worse without anyone knowing why or accepting the accountability to do something about it. The result is pervasive fragility that shows up as anxiety, stress and underperformance in both professional and personal contexts – an epidemic that spreads across all layers and levels of society as we lose touch with honour and integrity, and traditional approaches to leadership fail us.

And if we weren’t good at it before (and let’s face it, most of us weren’t), the added complexity of COVID and its impact on employees, team structures and ways of working have made accountability feel even harder.

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*Accountability issues keep us fragile to disruption and uncertainty.*

## **SO, WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?**

When I talk to leaders around the world, I’m hearing things like:

- ‘It feels harder to lead a hybrid and distributed workforce – it takes more time, effort and energy.’

- 'My people's priorities and expectations of work and life have changed – what was okay before is less okay now.'
- 'Accountability conversations can be tricky at the best of times – they're even harder when they're in a virtual environment.'

Unfortunately, team members are seeing leaders' lack of action on accountability very differently. This is what I'm hearing from the teams I'm working with:

- 'We have this "culture of politeness" where no one talks about the real issues. We all know there are problems, but there seems to be this understanding that no one calls them out. How can I start when no one else is?'
- 'It's so frustrating that 20% of the people do 80% of the work and no one does anything about it. I'm being asked to do more and more, but I see others doing less and less. How can they get away with it? Why isn't management holding them accountable for their responsibilities?'
- 'It's just confusing and demoralising. We spend so much time talking in meetings, but very few action points come out of it and even if they do, no one follows up, so most of them don't get done anyway. I mean really, what's the point?'

Part of the problem is that accountability is so deeply embedded in the way we live, work and play that we don't even see it. This is because accountability is universal: it's the oil in the engine of human interaction. Imagine if you could not rely on *anyone* to do *anything* they said they would or were expected to do – it's not hard to see how quickly chaos follows in that scenario. Without accountability, coordinated activities become difficult at best, and impossible at worst.

Accountability is also a requisite for social order: it is the glue that binds social systems together. Imagine what would happen if we didn't have accountability to shared expectations. Travel timetables become meaningless, stop signs irrelevant... and visiting a doctor? Well, that depends on whether they decide to show up today. Despite the fact it's so deeply

embedded that we don't notice it most of the time, accountability is what enables the systems of our societies and the structures of social order to operate successfully.

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*Accountability is the oil in the wheels, the glue in the social systems, and the angel on the shoulder of each of us. When it's missing, progress slows, instability grows, and bad stuff happens.*

And accountability has a moral imperative too: it is the angel on our shoulder. Imagine if individuals could act without regard to the consequences of their actions. It is comforting to think that people would do the right thing even without consequences, but in reality that isn't the case. As Adam Smith so wisely said in his 1759 book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 'A moral being is an accountable being.'

## THE 3 ISSUES WE NEED TO ADDRESS

There are three critical issues that we need to address to make progress with accountability:

- *Confusion* in understanding,
- *Concern* in application, and
- *Contexts* that undermine.

Let's examine each of these in detail.

### 1. Confusion

Accountability is complex, fuzzy and confusing. One of the biggest challenges is that it means different things to different people – often in the same organisation, and even in the same team. This leads to what has been called 'multiple accountabilities disorder'.

Part of the issue is that there is a popular fallacy in organisations that holding people accountable for their actions is an effective means to

control behavioural outcomes. However, research shows that accountability-inducing practices are not uniformly effective, because the way they are understood and adopted varies by individual. I'm sure we've all experienced scenarios in which team members have been exposed to the same situation, but hold quite different expectations about their accountability within it. This discrepancy exists because individual interpretations of external situations and systems are subjective, and so differ from person to person.

Added to this is a time-related factor. The subjective experience of *being accountable* is different from the subjective *retrospective evaluation of accountability* that takes place after the event in traditional approaches to accountability, such as performance reviews.

And to top it all off, there's a problem with language, as words like 'accountability', 'responsibility' and 'ownership' are so often used interchangeably. Combine this with the wild variances of subjective individual interpretation, and it's not surprising that there's so much confusion about what accountability really means and looks like.

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*How consistent is the understanding of accountability in your organisation or your team?*

## **2. Concern**

Accountability is often only asked for once things have gone wrong – the conversations come too late, people are defensive, and so it can feel hard to do them well.

If I were to invite you to a meeting so that we could have an accountability conversation, my guess is that it wouldn't be top on your list of 'favourite things to do today'. And that's because accountability has had a bad rap; if it were an A-list celebrity, accountability would need to fire its agent!

We use accountability as a stick to 'punish' people when situations have

gone wrong. It's often reactive, and usually comes when the situation is no longer retrievable – the classic move of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. Unfortunately, too often 'holding people to account' is done from a place of wanting to name, shame and apportion blame. Just the language we use tells a lot about the motivation and energy of the action.

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*How confident do you feel having accountability conversations?*

Because of this, accountability conversations feel punitive; it's like we're telling someone off and pointing out what they've not done, where they've not delivered, and, ultimately, how they're not good enough. And usually, this is done at a time when it's too late for them to do anything about it anyway. Is it any wonder these conversations are met with defensiveness, and feel so hard to do?

### **3. Context**

When it comes to accountability, context matters. A variety of 'macro' factors, such as team culture, conflicting pressures, multiple demands, and the specific characteristics of sources of accountability can positively or negatively influence individual accountability.

The problem is that because it feels so uncomfortable, leaders are unsure how to embed accountability into the culture of their teams and the organisation so that it becomes a normal part of how work gets done.

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*Is accountability part of your team culture?*

Added to this, employees often face numerous, conflicting accountability requirements through matrix reporting structures and multiple strategic agendas. Public administration research has found that such conflicts lead to poor decision-making and performance.

These three issues – confusion, concern and context – are why we need to create a new understanding of accountability that moves it from a

means to punish people to a tool that can set us up for success. This reset of accountability requires a shift in mindsets, attitudes and behaviours so that we can confidently role model, coach, and create contexts and cultures that support accountability.

The good news is that resetting accountability doesn't have to be difficult, expensive or time-consuming. Small shifts in mindsets, attitudes, and leader and team practices can have a big impact on accountability, learning, progress and performance.

Here's what we need to do:

1. *We need to let go of the idea that accountability is 'hard', 'tricky', or requires 'courageous' conversations.*

We often hear about the need for 'courageous conversations' in workplaces. Rather than being conversations in which we are vulnerable (the original meaning of the term, as used in Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead*), I find this is often code for accountability conversations. In my experience, when leaders listen to the right voices and coach for accountability, there is a clarity to these discussions that removes the need for them to be 'courageous'.

2. *We need to stop thinking of accountability as a 'nice-to-have' and understand that it is the foundation for higher performance and engagement from both individuals and teams.*

Workplace researcher Cy Wakeman has found that, on average, employees spend two-and-a-half hours each day engaged in workplace drama, of which 23% is due to lack of accountability. Despite many organisations focusing on employee engagement as a key driver for performance, Wakeman's research shows that it is accountability rather than engagement that drives business success (we'll explore this further in Chapter 7).

- 3. We each need to recognise and own our role in the current situation and be prepared to 'show up' differently to move it forward.*

Accountability issues don't happen on their own – they are created by people. Whether you are asking for accountability and not receiving what you believe you need, or being asked for it in a way or at a scale that you feel is not appropriate, the first accountability to step into is your role and responsibility in the current situation. What is yours to own?

## **THE OPPORTUNITY IN RESETTING ACCOUNTABILITY**

By resetting accountability, we reduce stress by wasting less time and energy in drama. We save money by creating more-effective work practices. We support higher performance and better-quality work outcomes by enabling forward learning and growth for ourselves and our people. We become clear on the high talent and potential in our teams, and focus our energy on those staff who are engaged in their work and prepared to be called to account.

By owning what is ours to own, we strengthen connection, encourage development, and support purposeful progress and high performance. We move beyond fear to develop fruitful relationships based in trust and confidence, and we create clear expectations that invite people to be their best as they take meaningful and effective action that will benefit themselves, their team, their workplace, and beyond.

## SUMMARY

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- » *We are in the midst of an accountability crisis, which has produced an epidemic of fragility that is showing up as anxiety, stress and underperformance across all layers and levels of society.*
  
- » *There are three main issues that need to be addressed:*
  - *Confusion in understanding*
  - *Concern in application*
  - *Contexts that undermine*
  
- » *In order to correct these, we need to adjust our thinking so that we understand that:*
  - *Accountability is not 'hard' or 'tricky', and can be accomplished through clarity rather than 'courage'.*
  - *Accountability is not a 'nice-to-have', but rather the foundation for higher performance and engagement from both individuals and teams.*
  - *We must clearly recognise our own role and responsibility in the current situation in order to properly embed accountability in our workplaces.*
  
- » *When we reset accountability in our workplace relationships, we reduce stress, save money, support higher performance and better-quality work, and encourage development, resulting in positive, purposeful progress.*

## *FROM IDEAS TO ACTION*

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- Think about the three accountability issues: *confusion*, *concern* and *context*.
  - » How do each of these play out in your team and/or workplace?
  - » What impact does each of them have on relationships, progress, performance and morale?
  
- If you could wave a magic wand and reset accountability in your team or workplace, what difference would it make?
  - » How different would it feel to be there?
  - » What would be able to be achieved that isn't possible right now?
  - » What are at least three changes that you can predict as a result of resetting accountability?

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