Fear and Loathing in the Accountable Culture

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Abstract

As organizations strive for efficiency and effective execution, an accountable culture has come to the forefront of executive focus. This focus on accountability has ranged from achieving lofty revenue targets to completing daily assignments. The result is a highly effective model for achieving organizational execution, yet when over stressed this has the high potential to drive a culture of fear in employees about their job security introducing a level of management and organizational policy loathing. This paper explores cultures of security and fear, and cultures of high and low accountability attempting to discover if it is possible for a culture of high accountability to also exhibit an environment of high job security.

Keywords: Accountability, Culture, Fear, Security, Accountability Grid

Introduction

Accountability in an organization can be the difference between long-term success and failure (Cornelissen, 2012). On a micro level in day-to-day activities, accountability can be displayed in the form of direct reports completing their roles and responsibilities to a macro level of an individual completing projects and annual goals when they were committed to being delivered.

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Accountability is the bonding tie of worker to manager to executive to shareholder that ensures everyone's vested interest in the organization's mission is adhered to (Robbins & Judge, 2008).

For the framework of this discussion it will benefit to define the four key factors that will be combined and evaluated:

- Culture: The values and behaviors that create an organization's environment
- Accountability: Completing tasks or goals that were committed to in the allotted time for the allotted budget
- Fear: An organizational culture where employees are persistently worried about being fired due to performance
- Security: An organizational culture where employees are typically not worried about losing their job due to performance

Two very common occurrences are organizational cultures that exhibit high levels of accountability and high levels of fear or organizational cultures that exhibit low levels of accountability and high levels of security. This paper will explore if there is a possibility of creating an organizational culture that exudes high accountability and high security.

Cultures of Fear

Organizational cultures of fear consist of numerous attributes of which three main characteristics will be explored. Ambiguous behavior displayed by leadership in the form of secretive decision making, lack of or indirect communication, lack of responsiveness to input or suggestions, inconsistency or mixed messages, uninviting behaviors, and undefined expectations that create the environment where the employee is not confident what the rules are, what is acceptable, or an accurate portrayal of their performance (Ryan & Oestreich, 1998). This level of ambiguity is effectively used as coercive leverage and later to terminate employees for violating unwritten expectations (Edmondson, Thomke, Lee, & Worline, 2004). Abrasive and abusive conduct exhibited by leaders can come in the behavioral form of silence, glaring eye contact, abruptness, ignoring people, insults, blaming, discrediting, controlling, threating job stability, yelling, angry outbursts, and even physical threats. This is used to control and manipulate a workforce into submission out of fear and worry of losing their livelihood. Lastly, cultures of fear create an environment where employees are concerned with the repercussions of speaking up or voicing their opinion. This application of fear can come in the form of loss of credibility or reputation, loss of advancement, change in job role, to loss of employment (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005).

While this culture can lead to short term goal accomplishment through coercive power it also sets in a foundation of long term detrimental impact. Ambiguity can create a dynamic and flexible work construct but it also leads to an increase in the number of instances where work products are continually sent back for rework due to the inability to hit a defined quality standard. This environment also leads to cultures of poor collaboration where employees are solely concerned with looking out for their own long term employment viability where they will hoard what knowledge they do have with the hopes of becoming irreplaceable. In the culture where candid feedback dies in fear that certain statements will result in termination, the effects drive bureaucracy, stagnated thought, and a lack of organizational learning (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005).

This environment leads to a highly detrimental effect on the people that are in the culture. Driving a high degree of mistrust, employees will exhibit high degrees of reservation from sharing information to expressing concerns. The strongest identifier of this culture is the attrition level where employees feeling backed into corner enter a survival mode where their fear based choice is to find employment at a different organization before being terminated.

Cultures of Security

An organizational culture of security can resemble a number of characteristics starting with a casual pace of work flow where speed of decisions and swiftness to action are lacking. Numerous bureaucratic processes and policies devour numerous advancements or change initiatives. The most significant indicator is that due to a low level of consequence, goals are routinely not completed on time, for the agreed upon budget, and in some cases the goals are not completed at all (Harker & Zenios, 1999).

This has a significant effect on the work creating a culture that values candid feedback knowing that there is little fear of retaliation therefore leaving people to speak freely and to voice their concerns or input. This helps drive a higher level of collaboration focusing an emphasis on quality and perfection. This does lead to decisions made via committee, significant delays and a potential to miss market opportunities leaving the long-term viability of the organization in questionable standing.

An organizational culture of security creates numerous benefits to its employee base where there are high levels of trust between the employee and management, and where open communication can be normalized. Employee attrition typically stays low and a family culture is frequently brought up where the organization and employee are subtly responsible for looking out for each other’s best interests. While this can be seen as an enviable position for employees and organizations, it unfortunately can also create an environment that encourages employee lethargy due to a knowledge of insignificant consequences that awaits poor performance.

High Accountability Cultures

High accountability cultures consist of a few key attributes that drive a responsibility model from the executive ranks down to the ground floor of operations. Namely an elevated emphasis is placed on establishing clearly defined goals consisting of specific timelines where there is typically a clear alignment of organizational objectives to individual goals. This further emphasizes a transparent environment where concerns, objectives, and ideas are brought forward as the main concern is each individual achieving their end goal and not letting a lack of communication affect their output. As there are very specific antecedents, there are very clear consequences for goal attainment ranging from discipline for not achieving results to incentives for achieving results.

This creates a fast paced, dynamic environment where needed changes are identified early and changes are implemented quickly due to the fabricated importance of annual reporting and drive for completion by predetermined timeframes (Edmondson, Thomke, Lee, & Worline, 2004). During these changes it is typical to see innovative solutions implemented at a moment's notice to overcome the gap between probable and stretch goals. This also elicits a significant level of clear feedback where there is a low level of ambiguity due to the quantifiable nature of goal attainment.

Accountable cultures create an incubator of an environment of employee involvement due to their level of vested interest in the organizational outcomes. With that vested interest, employees do face a greater potential for burning out after years of having to perform at top levels each day. This does establish high expectations that can lead to the consistent turnover of low performing employees a practice routinely executed by General Electric's annual turnover of the bottom ten percent of their employee pool during the 1990's and 2000's (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005).

Low Accountability Cultures

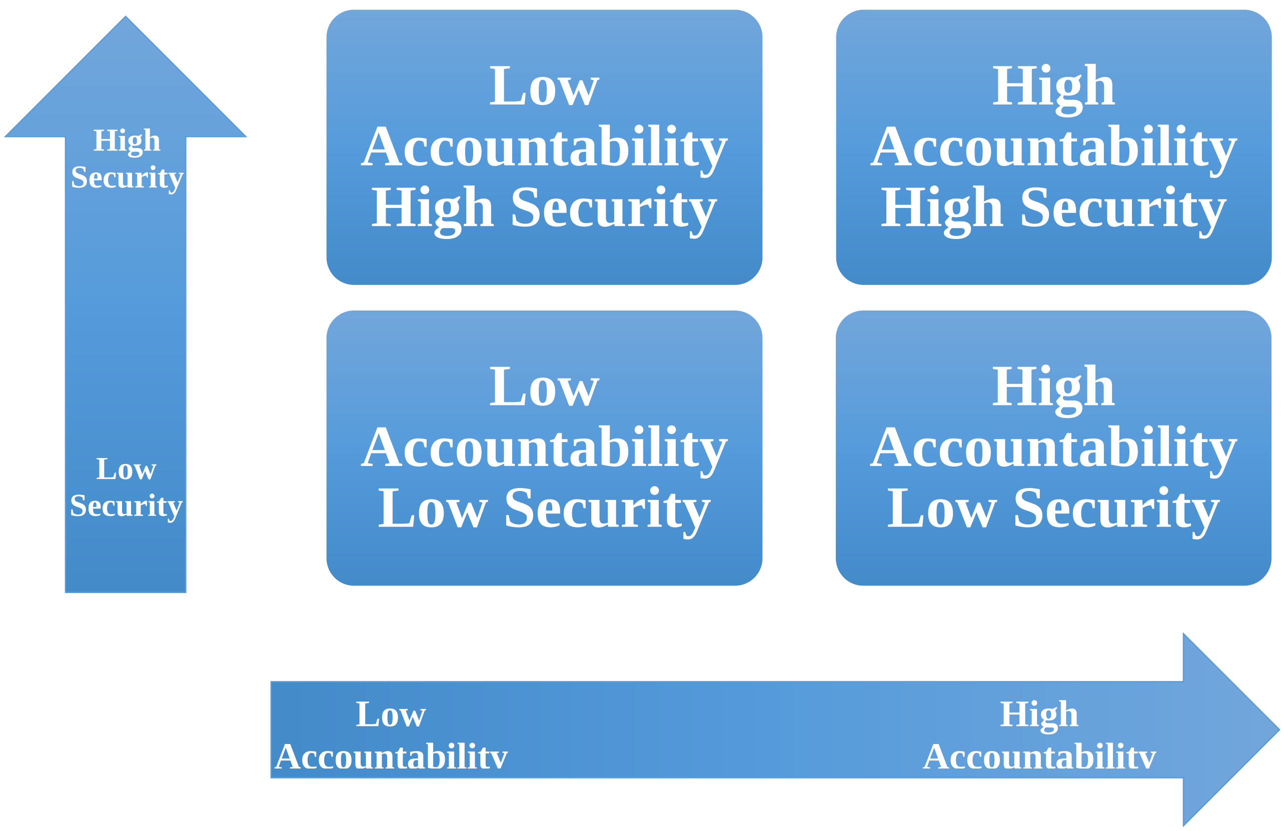
Low accountability cultures can be incorrectly stereotyped into a few industries namely government, education, and research and development organizations, but they in fact cross boundaries from non-profit to for profit organizations. These environments can be defined by lacking a strategic vision, leading to inadequate and misaligned goals, and high levels of ambiguity. Also, visible are elements of laissez faire management practices where as long as status quo is maintained and no issues arise, leadership does not intervene.

Similar to high security cultures, low accountability cultures focus on the process vice the outcomes leading to numerous policies and procedures to control minimal productivity gains. This can lead to numerous side projects to work on goals that are not aligned with the organizational mission. This leads to an inconsistent application of management practices and leadership as employees are governed via policy instead of by end goals (Nickerson & Zenger, 2002).

Low accountability cultures can encourage high security cultures and encourage a sluggish behavior by the workforce. With having a loosely defined strategy and the emphasis placed on the process, annual performance reviews become inconsistent as they are rated on process performance vice end goal accomplishment. This inevitably can lead to excuse creation behaviors, which is followed by disengagement.

Accountability Grid

The Accountability Grid is a simple matrix that tracks which quadrant an organization would fall into following an evaluation of the organizations level of accountability combined with the organizations evaluated level of fear. The evaluation for accountability would be based on the importance placed on goal attainment and security is evaluated by the fear experienced by the employee base. For the matters of this paper the target quadrant would be achieving the upper right consisting of a high accountability and high security organizational culture.



High Accountability & Low Security Cultures

Organizational cultures with high accountability and high fear resemble many current corporate organizations. These organizations are characterized with a heavy emphasis on achieving quarterly revenue targets and the termination of leadership that is unable to attain desired goals. These organizations consist of long working hours and with significant unused vacation time, substantial opportunity for upward mobility, and high employee turnover. Due to fears of failure and being adverse to risk these environments leads to long-term stagnation and an inability to elicit innovation (Edmondson, Thomke, Lee, & Worline, 2004).

Case Study Example: In 2014 "Organization Alpha," a fortune 10 company, overhauled its web page in the hopes that the retro fitting of the web sales page will significantly increase revenue. These projections had been incorporated into its annual and quarterly revenue projections and had established itself as one of the organizations top priorities. Three months into the eight-month project, work had been delayed by three weeks due to an emerging concern with web security on the current web site, this issue inevitability led to pulling resources off of the project to address these concerns. In a rush to make up for the lost three weeks, the project manager hired additional web programmers on a contract basis and instead of providing sufficient onboarding services to the contractors they were assigned to "Organization Alpha's" web developers to help expedite their progress. Unfortunately the contractors' onboarding did not establish a baseline of expected outcomes and after two months during a capabilities review, the web platform was incompatible with the requirements creating significant rework of the coding.

A month later at the quarterly project status review the project manager reported that the project had now gone over budget by $500,000 and was four weeks behind schedule. The project manager who had over twenty years of experience with the company was terminated following *the meeting and was temporarily replaced by the deputy project manager. Since there was not a high level of confidence in the deputy project manager, an external candidate was hired and in place six weeks following the termination of the original project manager. During this interim period the deputy project manager was able to maintain the schedule but with the implementation of the new project manager, progress was halted for two weeks, as plans were rebaselined. With the project now at seven weeks behind schedule and executive pressure pushing to meet revenue expectations, the new project manager was forced to crash resources expending a significant amount of the project budget to incorporate temporary workers to achieve the project timeline. With the expediting of work, quality was cut significantly and the end product was a shadow of its original intent. The inferior product was released to the public with a number of issues and the project team was maintained to respond to errors providing Band-Aid fixes until an acceptable product was finalized eight months after the original release.*

The project team, which had been borrowed internally from the IT Department, had been neglecting their operational role of maintaining the current network infrastructure. With the extension of the project team due to delays, their work had been contracted out to a service provider to maintain their network. Prior to the end of year budget reconciliation the executive staff realized that due to the project costs significantly exceeding budget that the project manager and IT staff would be terminated in a cost cutting move by outsourcing IT to a contracted service permanently.

This case represents a high degree of high accountability of management of end results with little concern given to the process to achieve those results. While both project managers applied by the book project management solutions to schedule delays and cost overruns they were not in a position to effectively save the project due to the original delays that initiated the project. The end result of the termination of services by the I.T. staff being replaced by a vendor service spoke volumes to the organization that participation in organizational projects has a high propensity to be career limiting.

Low Accountability & High Security Cultures

Organizational cultures with low accountability and high security resemble many current government organizations. These organizations are characterized by a heavy emphasis on maintaining the status quo to a provided service or product. These organizations consist of a standard 40-hour workweek with little to no overtime, limited opportunity for upward mobility, and low employee turnover. Due to an adversity to change the status quo and a lack of positive consequence these environments leads to long-term stagnation and an inability to elicit innovation (Chatman & Flynn, 2005).

Case Study Example: In 2012, "Organization Bravo," a state government organization had decided to overhaul its current web site. The web site was built shortly after the Internet came to be online and the current version was not a very practical in application. Due to not having the allocation to hire a project manager, the Department decided to contract a project management team to design, build, and implement the updated web page.

Following the hiring of the project manager, funds were temporarily frozen due to the inability of the state's congress to pass a budgetary continuing resolution. This created a three-month initial delay and 75% of the contractors identified to join the project team were no longer available due to finding new employment during the delay. As the team was hired and the project initiated additional delays occurred due to regulatory reviews and temporary funding freezes based on a mismanaged state budget. Attrition of contractor workers was high because of the *number of work stoppages and an inability to elicit participation from the Department employees in helping with the project.*

After a year of work on the web site, process adherence to project requirements was in full compliance yet the web platform was only 25% complete and had exhausted all of the projects funds. During the review with the Department Administrator and the project manager explained all of the difficulties with getting the project up and running and dealing with all of the issues between the Department's employees and the contractors. The Administrator was sympathetic to the project manager and went to the oversight council asking for additional funding to complete the project over the next year.

This case represents a high degree of management of process management with the inability to achieve an operational outcome. The example cements the point that cultures of low accountability create an environment where failure to achieve expectations becomes the cultural norm. Additionally, in these cultures where low accountability is normalized by management the lack of urgency and concern for achieving expectations are perpetuated throughout the organization.

High Accountability & High Security Cultures

Organizational cultures with high accountability and high security have very few models that they resemble in today's society. These organizations are characterized with a heavy emphasis on long-term growth built on achieving incremental goals that are aligned with the overall strategy. Tending to measure not only goal attainment but process performance as well the extensive metrics are used for organizational learning instead of being used for retrospective punishment. These organizations typically consist of flat organization structures, which do not offer many opportunities for upward mobility but have limited employee turnover due to a high level of team interdependence (Cornelissen, 2012). Behaving as a learning organization new ideas and initiatives are debated openly and vetted thoroughly reducing fears of failure and being adverse to risk as team support is created during the initiation process. These environments lead to continuous improvements, an ability to elicit innovation, and high levels of employee engagement (Edmondson, Thomke, Lee, & Worline, 2004).

Case Study Example: "Organization Charlie" identified in 2013 that they could increase revenue and improve its customer experience by overhauling its current web page. Identifying and tracking customer improvements a tiger team was created to develop a new design based upon customer feedback. Following the design, a contracted team was hired to build the new web platform and began work upon their hire.

Following six months during the project build the tiger team reformed with a select number of customers to view the web's first iteration. During the review a number of improvements were identified which would result in a two month delay to rebuild much of the current work that had already been completed. While this would create an additional cost and time delay, the executive staff approved the change considering that the project's purpose was to improve the customers' web experience and that the long term payoff of implementing a better product would validate the cost and delay.

This case is a high example of leadership through a maintained focus on the overall objective. While the project did run over on time and on budget, it did achieve the end goal of improving customer experience which was the number one priority. This is an example of an executive team that held the Tiger team responsible for an improved product and maintained a culture where employees felt secure enough to go over budget and over time to provide the right result. This displays an example of focusing on the process and on the end product.

Discussion

There is great difficulty as well as great balance in creating a high accountable and high security organizational culture, but the return on investment pays significant soft dividends for years to come (Collins, 1997). In a highly competitive job market to attract the best talent, they will be attracted to work in this environment that elicits loyalty and minimizes the disruptions of turnover. The innovation that is facilitated in this setting brings upon an ability to develop unique products, implement creative solutions, and proactively shift to take advantage of market conditions. Most importantly high accountability and high security is the stage setting of long term stable growth that ensures long term organizational viability and maintains the financial backing of the environment (Harker & Zenios, 1999).

A healthy organizational self-assessment can identify a number of static and reactive metrics to measure an organization's status on the accountability grid. A narrowed look at attrition and terminations gives an accurate portrayal of employee fear and level of organizational commitment. Proactively measuring for a high security environment can be accomplished by performing leadership round tables and focused discussions by an external facilitator that is performing a qualitative analysis of how candid the respondents are. The more candid that the respondents are, the higher the levels of security the organization exude.

During this evaluation process if a lack of accountability or low security are uncovered there are three key strategies to implement to begin to move an organization to the top right of the accountability grid. Starting with establishing a clear vision and goals that are cascaded down to the individual level creating a strong antecedent. Secondly, focus on creating an environment in which individuals can achieve those goals that consists of transparent and candid communications, an environment that encourages innovative risk, and a focus on the outcome and process instead of just one or the other. Lastly, establishing standard positive and negative consequences for outcomes that ensure accountability is rewarded.

Suggestions for Future Research

Research for this article uncovered notions that cultures of high accountability and low security tended to focus specifically on the end product and not on the process to achieve the end goal. Additionally, it was displayed that cultures of low accountability and high security focused specifically on the process to achieve the end product, but were not overly concerned with the actual completion of the end goal. Greater insight would be obtained with future research focusing on high accountable and high security organizations and if their organizational focus were equivalent on the process and the end goal.

Conclusion

The viability of organizations is consistently under attack from competitors creating a market where each organization is striving to establish a competitive advantage. The detriments that low accountability and high fear prove to be organizational cancers that can remain hidden for periods but if left unaddressed will destroy an organization from within. Those organizations that invest in establishing or maintaining a high accountability and high security environment routinely pull ahead in long-term financial growth. Their key to success begins with their vision and cascading of goals, the culture of candid communications, and the healthy execution of consequences.

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