CoopLew

Leading The Next Paradigm for Transformative Diversity Leadership.

Article Title: **Building Accountability Systems: Matters, Metrics and Maturity**

Author: Ken D. Coopwood Sr., PhD

Tags: campus leadership, metric design, achievement, accountability

Read Time: 10 minutes

Building Accountability Systems: Matters, Metrics and Maturity

Ken D. Coopwood Sr., PhD

Accountability, while mentioned in nearly every strategic plan in higher education, is still the loftiest of efforts stated for achievement. intended to invoke transformation. Regardless of what is being planned, the notion that someone can blamed if things go awry is universally strong enough to cause "relative impartiality" in judgement when discerning why plans failed, who was responsible, and who was the accomplice.

When infrastructure and circumstances are misaligned, building accountability systems that ensure adherence to objectives is nearly impossible. It's difficult to make systems "creep-proof", so people don't tip-toe away from expectations of accountability. When accountability systems are not creep-proof, a struggle to learn "What happened?" is at least one consequence. This and other consequences can ultimately cause a barrage of expensive, emotionally devastating, and acrimonious affairs in search of truth, or deflection. Avoiding costly and adverse consequences means that alignment and circumstances must be clear. Research pertaining to accountability makes these universal principals: the cart does not belong in front of the horse; what doesn't get measured can still matter; and the most effective attempts at transformation begin with intentional efforts to examine one's commitment to being held accountable.

Even with research-based, universal principals at our disposal, many approach accountabilities from perspectives of title and territory. It has been expected, for example, that a president be held responsible for actions taken by subordinates several levels below. It has also been expected a mid-level director to provide highest-quality programs with support provided from a dysfunctional, system fundraising office. In these examples, measurable components of accountability such as scope, relationships, and resource-sharing that serve to establish levels of collaboration and interdependency can be bypassed – thereby releasing the subordinates and the fundraising office from direct accountability. Assessment of personal commitment by either party is foregone, which gives ample room for lack luster approaches to work, associated metric achievement and myriads of excuses and deflections when tasks are deemed incomplete.

This article's trilogy for accountability; matters, metrics and maturity, provides inroads to uncommon thought about precepts to achieve success.

First, "matters" of accountability are about the actions expected for which someone will be held accountable. These have historically focused on action-items within plans designed and delegated in advance of review by those who will be doing the work. This is putting the cart before the horse. Instead, thoughts about what will most naturally bring accountability should come first. For example, knowing what business problem is most relevant to the person to be held accountable is strategic.

It informs us what will be the person's prime motivation for success. It gives more credence to accountability than can be derived from, "Do this if you want to keep your job." By not taking on the matter of alignment between person and task first, we miss the boat regarding values such as pleasure in work, kindly attitudes and need for recognition that drive human productivity and thus accountability. Moreover, asking upfront how the plan will make sense to those being held accountable as well as discussing science-based guidelines that ensure effectiveness of the plan, gives the plan stronger hooks for acceptance and a *willingness* to be held accountable. If such matters aren't considered before a plan is drawn, then disconnect between the plan and the person/department to be held accountable is most likely. Matters of personal attachment, visions of acceptance and recognition precede commitment. Without these considerations first, the plan is just words on paper taking the form of something to do for pay.

Next, metrics drive behavior, period. This factor of productivity, drawing from language of Six Sigma, ensures that those being held accountable to do "creep" away from behaviors that determine the degree to which they are seen accountable. Therefore, it is most credible to build accountability systems that serve to intentionally institutionalize one set of behaviors over another. This means that behavioral-based metric must be in place to guide accountability. To wit, many diversity plans fail because of this omission – no formal authority to assess for patterns of behaviors that permeate institutional values and commitments. The result: plans are made with metrics that have little significance to those who will not be held accountable for their attainment. They are thereby afforded the choice to be a silent accomplice for success or failure.

Designing metrics that breed accountability should be paradigm-based as opposed to plan-based. This means that before a plan is made, questions about what paradigm shift (new rules and patterns) is needed should be discussed. During this assessment, it is also vital to identify what strengths and weaknesses behavioral-based metrics will expose about those being held accountable. Asking "Who will benefit when the metrics and paradigm shift are achieved? and, "How will metric achievement make the larger institution a benefactor, i.e. saving money, time or something else of value?" – makes for more effective alignment between infrastructure and circumstances.

Lastly, "maturity" represents both personal and institutional levels of development that dictate the zeal exerted towards accountability. The extent to which a person or institution identifies with the functionality of their roles will likely sway or skew the scope of accountability for which they are willing to be responsible. Deliverables such as "identify diversity behaviors, competencies and their delivery" must be something that the person or institution is ready to research, assess, and implement. The extent to which people are *ready* to be held accountable will ultimately represent whether a plan is strong or weak. If the determination is not made prior to introducing a plan, a high risk exists that the plan will be reduced to a script of valuations used to declare incremental progress by the institution. Moreover,

processes to improve maturity and readiness are left undiscussed and unrecognized, which recycles the same esteem and effort for the next phase of incrementalism called a plan.

In sum, building systems of accountability involve important and credible actions steps *prior* to putting plans in place. A person, department or institution should not simply expect that title or territory make accountability inevitable. People are not wired to be good at things they don't practice. To increase levels of accountability, ask the following questions before deciding where accountability should be vested:

1. What business problem is solved via adherence to new rules and patterns of thinking and behavior?
2. How will behavioral change from a person, group or unit impact the greater institution?
3. What can be done to ensure readiness for new rules, patterns and functionality?
4. What metrics say we are on course and which say we are staying that way?