

One leadership imperative for success in 2024 and beyond

 By [Brian Eagar](#)

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Failure to respectfully hold others to account is still one of the main weaknesses in leadership today. I wrote an article about this topic in 2015 and, sadly, in 2023, nothing has changed. This dysfunction perpetuates the mediocrity and non-performance that is the downfall of so many businesses.



Brian Eagar, founder and group CEO of TowerStone

If there is one message from me for 2024, it is that it is our responsibility as leaders to unearth the potential of those in our charge. Failure to do so not only deprives them of success but also harms organisations at the very core. While everyone fears these conversations more than most things, accountability is the very thing that promotes results, inclusion and belonging.

Changing the mindset

Like a guard rail, accountability is not there to push anyone off the edge, but to bring us back on course. When things go right it is a silent sense of security; when things go wrong it guides us to adjust. When it is seen for what it truly is, holding teams accountable is not something to dread, but to embrace passionately. While positive feedback does give an emotional boost, appropriately saying what needs to be said is the only thing that truly unlocks potential – for both team members and for the business.

In fact, giving constructive feedback in a respectful manner is as important as acknowledging good work. Only focusing on one weakens both because, if the leader doesn't demonstrate honesty and belief in the individual and the team's growth, positive feedback is often seen as mere hot air. Our fear of hurting feelings is hurting people more than we realise.

No-one comes to work to fail, but those who do not receive the necessary guidance from their leaders don't know how to do better. They are lost in the uncertainty. It is truly sad that so many leaders still shy away from holding their team members accountable, refusing to hone this skill. It's not something you do for yourself – those you lead need it desperately, and so does your organisation. Do your team members deserve clarity regarding what they are doing well and where they can do better? Undoubtedly so. We must all get better at this.



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We sometimes fear that giving tough feedback will harm the relationship. But is there an authentic relationship if you are not being honest? We sometimes fear that they will leave. But isn't it worse for them to stay and underperform? It is okay to be uncomfortable. Embrace it. As Carl Jung said: "There is no change from darkness to light or from inertia to movement without emotion." In essence, holding others accountable is the gift of certainty. Something we all yearn for in this volatile world. There is no belonging without knowing where you stand and how you can contribute.

Remember, your best performers are watching you closely. When they see you failing to call out poor performance, it diminishes their efforts. If mediocrity and poor performance is swept under the rug, why should they give their best?

The consequences of avoiding your responsibility as a guardian

You rarely hit the guard rail without incurring a dent or a scrape – feedback is never easy to give or receive – but without it the damage increases exponentially. 2023 alone sprouted many examples of businesses who have seen their success plummet due to a lack of holding people accountable. And even when leaders do step up to the plate, they tend to focus on the hard facts and numbers that are easier to substantiate, rather than the underlying causes rooted in the culture they are creating – either actively or passively.

The consequences are dire. The absence of clear boundaries breeds uncertainty, mediocrity and non-compliance. The only thing worse than not having a code of conduct is having one without honouring it. When the guidelines are perceived as mere suggestions, the uncertainty and mistrust both poison and paralyse the culture. When no-one knows what is really expected of them, nor what they can expect from you or one another, chaos ensues. Some unwritten rules develop spontaneously, like the proverbial small foxes that destroy the vineyard. And many precious productive hours are wasted on team members trying to navigate the uncertain waters, rather than on advancing the business's interests. Fear of stepping over the line actually increases because no-one knows where the line is, or complete apathy develops because there are simply no consequences. Ultimately, psychological safety and belonging are both destroyed.



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When people are clear on what they need to do and how they need to work together to do it, they are engaged, they contribute, they are willing to take risks, work flows and they strive for common outcomes. This cannot happen without leaders intentionally and consistently reinforcing "the way we do things around here".

Setting the guard rails

Fortunately, this downward trend also has an upside that I foresee further developing in 2024. Organisations are increasingly realising the importance of defining what they need their culture to look and feel like, to enable accountability. And not only in the midst of a win or a crisis, but on the average day. I have seen many brilliant and authentically led initiatives that drive engaging, inclusive culture change where leaders and team members hold each other accountable for what they commit to.

HOW we work and WHAT we achieve are one and the same and can never be separated. The "what" represents our business objectives, growth and financial returns, while the "how" is the behaviour we display in pursuit of these objectives (our culture). Work gets done by people, whether it means getting ores out of the ground, manufacturing products, packing shelves, providing customer support, balancing the books, etc. And how people show up and support each other to do their best determines the success of any endeavour. The HOW will have an impact, either left to its own devices or intentionally driven by purposeful leaders.

Leaders are primarily responsible for directing the HOW, so that their teams can achieve the WHAT. All organisations have a strategy to enable leaders to hold their teams to account for the WHAT. What is also desperately needed is a clearly defined, upheld and enforced culture to allow them to hold their teams accountable for the HOW. This removes much of the anxiety and uncertainty around the behaviours that infect our cultures. It's a simple conversation of: Here are the guard rails, here is where you are moving towards the edge, and I can't allow you to derail all of us.

In 2024 and going forward, we must change the way accountability is perceived, and equip ourselves and those we lead with clear guidelines for how to work together. This is about you bravely stepping up to the plate to make sure every team member knows what they need to do to perform at their best. When you do this, you infuse your organisation with certainty, honesty, ownership and courage – and only then can excellence become a shared responsibility.

ABOUT BRIAN EAGAR

Brian Eagar is the founder and group CEO of TowerStone. From being voted as the naughtiest kid most likely to fail at school, Eagar found success in the information and technology sector as a young sales and marketing executive, culminating in an executive sales and strategy role for one of the Siemens businesses based in Germany. On his return to South Africa, his passion to inspire leadership led to the creation of TowerStone Leadership Centre in 2006.

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