HOW TO BUILD AN ACCOUNTABLE TEAM

An ebook by Dr. Vince Molinaro

LEADERSHIP CONTRACT INC.

We need accountable teams **to drive strategy and get important work done. Unfortunately, most teams are falling short.**

THE BIG IDEA

Building a strong and high-performing team can be one of the toughest challenges that leaders face. However when you succeed, there isn't a greater feeling.

Think of the best team experience you have had in your career. Most likely, these teams shared these characteristics:

- Your team was aligned and clear on what needed to get done.

- Everyone pulled their weight and went to great lengths to support each other.

- Team members felt safe and confident to challenge one another.

- The team leveraged the unique capabilities of all members.

- The team balanced working hard with having fun and celebrating success.

- Everyone on the team was accountable to each other.

Who would not want to be on a team like this? However, for many teams, this ideal state is elusive and challenging to attain.

In my book, *Accountable Leaders*, I share my global research showing that organizations rate 80% of their teams as mediocre, 19% as being good and only 1% as being truly accountable.

Given the challenges and pressures that teams face today, these findings are not encouraging. Team leaders must do better, and this is what this eBook is all about.

In the remaining pages, I will present a set of ideas that will enable you to build a great team – a truly accountable team.

I use the term "truly accountable team" deliberately because, based on the work I have done with senior teams worldwide, I have learned that truly great teams share one inherent quality – they are truly accountable.

Accountability is what differentiates great teams and leaders from mediocre ones.

GLOBAL RESEARCH SHOWS:
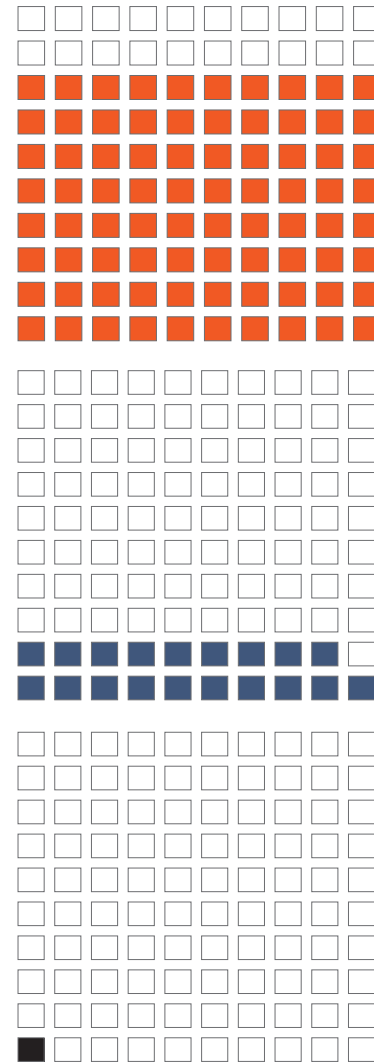
80%

OF TEAMS ARE MEDIOCRE

19%

OF TEAMS ARE GOOD

1%

OF TEAMS ARE TRULY ACCOUNTABLE

Source: Molinaro, V. (2020). Accountable Leaders - Inspire A Culture Where Everyone Steps Up, Takes Ownership, and Delivers Results. (John Wiley & Sons).

Teams are changing.

Organizations expect more of teams today than ever before.

WHY IT MATTERS:

For a long time, most teams had the same basic structure – there was a team leader, and there were team members. They all worked together in the same location where everyone could see each other and frequently meet face-to-face.

However, teams, as we know them, have been transforming considerably. In recent years, many business drivers have been raising the expectations and stakes for teams.

INCREASING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Customers are demanding more value and innovation. As a result, companies need to bring different capabilities and areas of expertise to generate value and exceed customer expectations.

TEAM COLLABORATION

Research suggests that the expectations of team collaboration has increased 50% in the past few years alone. The same research also reveals that many cross-functional teams are dysfunctional and not working well together.

GLOBAL & MATRIXED STRUCTURES

As organizations have become more global and matrixed, so have teams. The way teams work is also much more virtual. Day-to-day interactions with teammates are via technology platforms rather than in-person face-to-face meetings.

REMOTE & HYBRID WORK

When the global pandemic first hit in early 2020, it upended the world. For many teams, remote work became the rule of the day. As companies are planning their re-entry back from the pandemic, there is a sense that hybrid (in-person and remote) work models will become the norm. Virtual teams are here to stay and this will make leading teams more challenging.

We are already seeing signs of this as recent research reveals that CEOs are struggling to drive team cohesion. Hybrid work will be a new reality that leaders must navigate. They will need to elevate their capabilities to build virtual teams.

It is necessary to have a clear understanding of the connection among teams, leadership, and accountability.

A MULTITUDE OF TEAMS

What's also different today is that some of your team members are not even your company's employees. You are working with others who are strategic partners, vendors, suppliers, freelancers, and consultants. As more companies shift to agile methodology, teams today are also more fluid – they form and disband regularly. A recent article by Microsoft on the changing nature of work reported that most employees are on twice as many teams as they were just five years ago!

The bottom line is that teams are no longer what they used to be. All leaders will need to equip themselves with the know-how and capabilities to build strong teams.

Building stronger teams is crucial to achieving your organization's goals.

THE IMPACT:

I have worked with a lot of senior executives to help build strong teams. In each case, it quickly became apparent that accountability was a significant part of their team challenges. But it was also a key part of their solution.

As I looked at the research, I found some interesting connections between teams and accountability.

For example, Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, two pioneers in teams and teamwork, found that we do not understand how accountability plays out in teams. They argued that no group ever becomes a team, until it can hold itself accountable as a team.

In weak teams, the team leader is the source of all accountability.

In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni found that avoiding accountability was a common challenge for many teams.

A recent article by Joseph Grenny in The Harvard Business Review found that the weakest teams demonstrate little to no accountability. In weak teams, the team leader is the source of all accountability.

Team members must learn to hold each other accountable.

In the strongest teams, team members manage most issues and performance problems amongst themselves. This is the tell-tale sign of an accountable team.

Research by Amy C. Edmondson, the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, reveals a [strong connection between accountability and psychological safety.](#)

Based on these insights, it became clear that more work was required to better understand how teams can be more accountable and, therefore, more successful.

The first issue to confront is the old notion that accountability on teams is all about the team leader holding the team accountable. This is undoubtedly part of it, but you know what is even more powerful? When team members hold each other accountable.

I believe this is the ideal end state. You can create a truly accountable team – one where each team member is accountable, not only at an individual level, but also mutually accountable to one another.

So how do you make this happen? Start by understanding the characteristics of truly accountable teams.

Truly accountable teams demonstrate high levels of clarity and commitment.

1

ACCOUNTABLE TEAMS UNDERSTAND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY.

If team members are not accountable at an individual level, then it will require a lot of work, time, and energy to cultivate and sustain it at a team level. I cannot tell you how many times I have worked with a struggling team, only to see that their issues were not in fact team issues. Instead, they were individual leadership accountability issues whereby some of the team members were not being accountable, thereby undermining the team's success. The other team members could not count on them, which became a source of frustration.

2

ACCOUNTABLE TEAMS DEMONSTRATE A HIGH LEVEL OF TEAM CLARITY.

Accountable teams must be clear on the business context in which they operate. They need to understand their organization's strategy and the expectations of stakeholders they work with every day. They need to be clear on the interdependencies with other teams across their organization to execute strategy effectively.

3

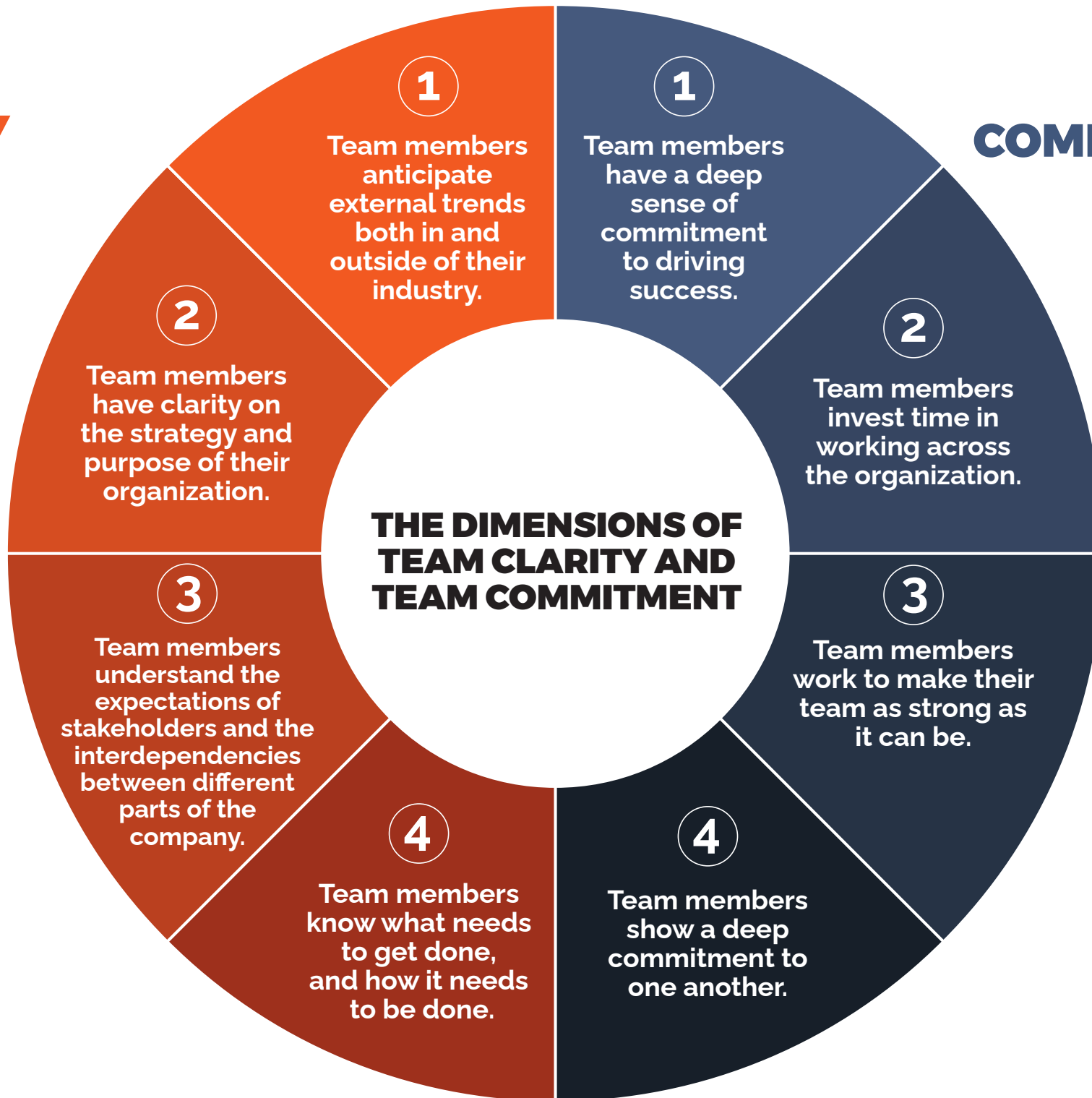**ACCOUNTABLE TEAMS DEMONSTRATE A HIGH LEVEL OF TEAM COMMITMENT.**

Team members need to understand the team's mandate and be deeply committed to driving success. They are committed to working across the organization with key stakeholders to drive positive business outcomes. They are committed to leading the team and investing time to make the team as strong as possible. They are committed to one another; they demonstrate high trust and have each other's backs.

Each of the three elements are interrelated. Teams that demonstrate a high degree of clarity will also show a high degree of commitment.

THE LESSON HERE IS THAT IF YOU CAN FOCUS YOUR ENERGY ON DRIVING HIGHER TEAM CLARITY LEVELS, YOU WILL INVARIABLY GET AN INCREASE IN TEAM COMMITMENT.

TEAM CLARITY

This chart presents the specific dimensions of team clarity and team commitment.

TEAM COMMITMENT

THE DIMENSIONS OF TEAM CLARITY AND TEAM COMMITMENT

1 Team members anticipate external trends both in and outside of their industry.

2 Team members have clarity on the strategy and purpose of their organization.

3 Team members understand the expectations of stakeholders and the interdependencies between different parts of the company.

4 Team members know what needs to get done, and how it needs to be done.

1 Team members have a deep sense of commitment to driving success.

2 Team members invest time in working across the organization.

3 Team members work to make their team as strong as it can be.

4 Team members show a deep commitment to one another.

TEAM CLARITY - A CLOSER LOOK

1
CLARITY ON THE BUSINESS CONTEXT

Team members take accountability for anticipating external trends and understanding their business context. A team is strong in this area when it is clear on:

- The trends and drivers in their external business environment and industry.
- The needs of external customers and consumers.
- The changes and issues impacting their organization.
- The actions they must take to spread clarity on the business context to others on the team.

2
CLARITY ON THE STRATEGY OF THE ORGANIZATION

Team members take accountability for understanding the purpose and strategy of their organization. A team is strong in this area when it understands:

- The links between the strategy and external market trends and customer expectations.
- How the team's mandate aligns to organizational strategic priorities.
- Their primary obligation in driving the success of the organization.
- The need to regularly communicate and cascade the strategy.

3
CLARITY ON STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

Team members take accountability to understand the interdependencies that exist with other parts of the organization. A team is strong in this area when it is clear on:

- What matters to their key stakeholders.
- The stakeholder relationships are needed to drive success at the organizational level.
- How to influence key stakeholders to drive strategic priorities of the organization.
- How to align work across the organization.

4
CLARITY WITHIN THE TEAM

Team members take accountability to understand its priorities and plans, and efforts to ensure the successful attainment of business results. A team is strong in this area when it is clear on:

- Their collective goals and priorities.
- How to execute the team's strategy and priorities.
- Where they stand as a team (current strengths and gap areas).
- The kind of leadership culture the team requires to succeed.

TEAM COMMITMENT - A CLOSER LOOK

1 COMMITMENT TO TEAM'S MANDATE

Team members demonstrate accountability to build a deep sense of commitment to driving its success. A team is strong in this area when it is:

- Passionate about the future of the organization.

- Demonstrating strong accountability for executing the organization's strategic priorities.

- Setting high standards of performance for the team.

- Consistently demonstrating an aligned and united front.

2 COMMITMENT TO WORKING ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

Team members demonstrate the accountability to work with key stakeholders. A team is strong in this area when it:

- Finds ways to break down silos and drive collaboration across the organization.

- Demonstrates the courage to tackle difficult issues with stakeholders.

- Invests time to build productive relationships with key stakeholders.

- Minimizes unhealthy politics and works with stakeholders in the interest of the whole organization.

3 COMMITMENT TO LEADING THE TEAM

Team members demonstrate accountability to work together, and team members are committed to making the team as strong as possible. A team is strong in this area when its members:

- Share high aspirations to be truly accountable leaders.

- Support each other's development as leaders.

- Demonstrate the courage to tackle tough issues and have difficult conversations with each other.

- Demonstrate resilience and resolve in the face of adversity.

4 COMMITMENT TO EACH OTHER

Team members demonstrate a deep commitment to each other. A team is strong in this area when its members:

- Hold each other accountable and call out unproductive leadership behavior.

- Deeply care about each other.

- Demonstrate high trust and have each other's backs.

- Regularly commit to spending time to get to know each other on a personal level.

Is your team truly accountable?

Complete this quick assessment.

TEAM CLARITY

1. Everyone on my team is clear on the business context in which we operate.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

2. Everyone on my team is clear on the strategy of our organization.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

3. Everyone on my team is clear on the expectations of our key stakeholders.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

4. Everyone on my team is clear on our priorities and key deliverables that will drive our success.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

TEAM COMMITMENT

1. Everyone on my team is fully committed to our team's mandate.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

2. Everyone on my team is fully committed to working across the organization with key stakeholders.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

3. Everyone on my team is fully committed to leading our team to be truly accountable.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

4. Everyone on my team is fully committed to one another.

Not at all **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** To a great extent

The four strategies to build a truly accountable team.

PUT THE IDEAS INTO ACTION:

Based on your answer to the quick assessment on the previous page, ask yourself the following questions:

- What insights did you gain about your team's current state of accountability?

- What areas of strength can you make even stronger?

- What gap areas must be addressed as a team?

HERE ARE FOUR STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU STRENGTHEN THE TEAM CLARITY AND TEAM COMMITMENT OF YOUR TEAM.

1) MAKE LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY A PRIORITY IN HOW YOU LEAD YOUR TEAM

Ask your team to complete the assessment above and then hold a meeting to discuss the ratings.

The insights will help you gain a collective understanding of the team's perspectives on its current strengths and pinpoint gaps where the team must be stronger.

2) DEFINE YOUR TEAM'S OBLIGATION

Spend time to work with your team to come up with a clear understanding of its primary obligation. In *Accountable Leaders*, I outline a detailed process.

Here is a summary of the questions for you to consider using with your team.

- What is your vision of the kind of team you want to create?

- What enduring value must your team deliver for your organization?

- How does the team want to be viewed by key stakeholders and senior management?

- What are the behavioral expectations for how the team intends to work together and treat each other?

3) COMMIT TO TACKLING THE HARD WORK OF TEAM LEADERSHIP

Many teams struggle to get better because the team leader and team members avoid tackling tough issues and problems head-on.

When left unaddressed, these issues build and serve to erode credibility and create a wedge in team dynamics.

Begin by identifying what hard work and tough conversations you and your team are avoiding. What is the price you are paying because of this? Regardless of what it may be for your team, commit at each team meeting to surface the issues holding you back, and work through them as a team. If you are successful, you will immediately see your team get to another level of effectiveness.

4) BUILD ONE TEAM WITH A UNITED FRONT

Ensure your team has a high degree of cohesion and robust leadership culture. In the end, this is all about a sense of community. When you achieve it, your team can sustain its momentum and high performance over the long term.

Here are some strategies for building a sense of community and connection on your team:

- Build relationships with other teams across your organization.

- Fix strained or poor relationships within your team and outside your team with other teams, departments, and functions.

- Help the team get to know each other.

- Take time to have fun as a team.

Building a truly accountable team takes hard work. But when you succeed the rewards will be amazing.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Building an accountable team will require a lot of attention and hard work on your part. It will require greater clarity and commitment from your entire team.

A team cannot be truly accountable until every team member understands what they need to contribute individually and what the team needs to contribute collectively.

Every team member must be committed to their responsibilities but also to work together, to have each other's backs, and to have the courage to hold each other accountable.

If you commit to build a truly accountable team, your team's clarity and commitment will begin to ripple outward throughout your organization.

You and your team will set an inspiring example for other teams. You can be the leader that makes it all happen!

ABOUT DR. VINCE MOLINARO

Vince Molinaro, PhD, is a strategic leadership adviser, speaker, and researcher on leadership accountability.

As the founder and CEO of Leadership Contract Inc., Vince travels the world helping organizations build vibrant leadership cultures with truly accountable leaders. He calls out the global leadership crisis and thoughtfully lays out the strategy to address it head-on. His unique combination of provocative storytelling, evidence-based principles and grounded practicality has leaders at all levels stepping up to fulfill their obligations to drive the success of their organizations.

Vince is a New York Times best-selling author and has published several books including *Accountable Leaders* (Wiley, 2020), *The Leadership Contract* (3rd ed., Wiley, 2018) and *The Leadership Contract Field Guide* (Wiley, 2018). He has also co-authored two other books: *Leadership Solutions* (Jossey-Bass, 2007) and *The Leadership Gap* (Wiley, 2005).

His research and writing on leadership accountability are featured in some of the world's leading business publications, and his ideas serve as the foundation of leadership development programs in companies around the world.

Vince's company, Leadership Contract Inc., helps companies at critical inflection points build and scale strong leadership accountability. Through advisory services, development programs, digital solutions and speaking engagements, they accelerate the ability of leaders and teams to demonstrate ownership so they can drive strategy, inspire employees, and navigate change.

People can follow his insights on his Gut Check for Leaders blog, Lead the Future podcast and through the Accountable Leaders App, available from the Apple and Google App Stores.

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