

Creating and Leading Accountable Teams:

A Contrarian Model

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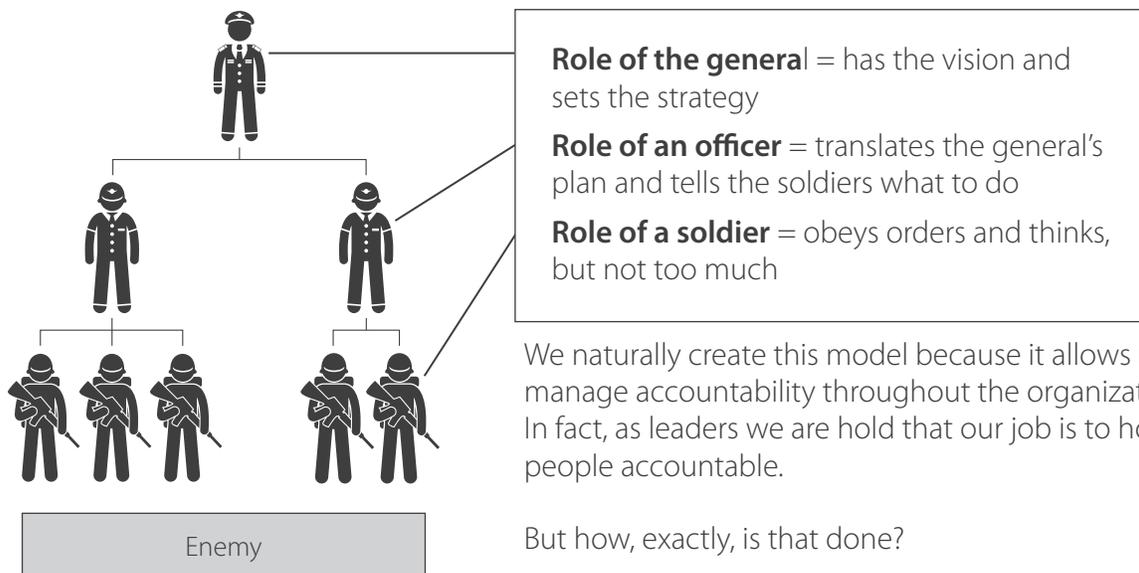


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Please note: This is a non-traditional approach to leading teams. Much of this may be in complete contrast to what you may have learned—so if you find yourself feeling a little bit uncomfortable at some point reading, that is normal. Eric fundamentally shifted his perspective after hearing another Vistage speaker, Pat Murray, talk about teams in a presentation over twenty years ago and has been learning ever since.

Let’s start by talking about teams in the context of organizational structure. As the size of companies increase, we tend to take on an organizational structure that adds layers and creates silos or departments. The question is: where does this come from?

Hold Accountable Model



But how, exactly, is that done?

In order to hold someone accountable you typically start with setting expectations. From there you might put measurements in place, contract with them to make sure they are bought in, coach, train, beg, remove obstacles and a whole host of other strategies to help them get it done. If after all of that you might then turn your attention to setting consequences. And if they still don’t respond, you need to enforce consequences.

But then you start to wonder: who really has the accountability here? As leaders, **we** are setting expectations, **we** coach and cajole, and **we** set consequences until when day you realize that **holding people accountable is a myth**. Whenever I hear someone say, “I am going to hold someone accountable” – what I really hear them saying is, “I’ve got the accountability and I am going to make sure it gets done.”

Why should your team members be accountable when you have all of the accountability?

Case Study: Battle of Normandy

So let's go back to organizational structure and talk about it in terms of accountability. From a military perspective, the model works pretty well, especially if you go back to World War II. Dwight D. Eisenhower brought his brain trust together and said, "Guys, let's take Normandy." They spent six months strategizing it before telling the soldiers, "Hey, take Normandy." Then they waited three months for good weather and went out and took Normandy. That's pretty much how it played out in World War II. Thinking, telling, doing, often inadvertently, over and over.

This example is similar to what often happens in the business world. But in business we have CEOs instead of generals, middle managers instead of officers, and front line employees instead of soldiers. And this leads to much the same process over and over: **thinking, telling, doing.**

And instead of an enemy, in business we have a customer. As a leader of a business you want your front line employees to look toward the customer and do what is right on behalf of them. But most employees aren't looking to the customer. Instead, they are looking to their boss because their boss controls their next raise, and ultimately if they'll have a job at the end of the day. **This upward focus on the boss causes employees to look upward internally as opposed to outwardly looking to the customer.**

Getting Your Team to Manage Accountability

How do you get employees to be less focused on their boss and more focused on the customer? You can accomplish this by moving the accountability management into the team itself.

While having a truly accountable team sounds enticing comes with a consequence... **as a leader you are going to experience the feeling of losing control.** This is a feeling akin to what a parent feels as their children get older and take on more responsibility themselves or a coach will feel during a game. As much as a coach would want to go out there and tell the players what to do or do it themselves they can't.

There is a second consequence: **creating an accountable team requires everyone to be more responsible and accountable which requires a higher level of adulthood in your organization.** Creating an accountable team doesn't follow the traditional leader/employee relationship. It forces the team members to have tough conversations and deal with problems directly.

While there are some functional teams, very rarely are teams truly accountable. Most teams consist of good people with good intent, but under pressure these good people don't function as a team. Functional teams have a clear purpose, metrics to determine success, capable processes, competent people and a shared fate.

Functional Team	Accountable Team
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clear and fully accepted purpose – knowing exactly what needs to be achieved 2. Metrics to determine if the purpose is being achieved – know at all points in time if you're on track or not 3. Capable processes – good communication, defined roles and responsibilities and flexibility from leadership 4. Competent people – different ways of thinking, experience, and capability that collectively work well together 5. Shared fate – what happens to one happens to all <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Commitment</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Deals with real issues as a team <p style="text-align: center;">ULTIMATE OUTCOME</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. There is an individual commitment to each other's success <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Investment (We>I)</i></p>

Case Study: CEO from Minnesota

Eric was first exposed to the thought of shared fate about 10 years ago when he started out on his own. Eric met with a CEO from Minnesota, who had asked him to help his executive team function more like an actual team. Eric realized the CEO’s problem was that he was giving everyone separate siloed responsibilities, instead of creating a team where everyone was working together toward a shared fate. He asked him to imagine the following scenario:

The next time sales are down you bring your team together. You inform them that sales aren’t on target, and collectively they need to figure out how to get back on track, or serious cost reductions will take place, starting with this room. Then you walk out.

When a shared fate is lacking, people point fingers and feel relieved when problems are not their responsibility. At the end of the day, everyone should be equally responsible.

The real shared fate of most teams is surviving the boss. Team members will discuss their experiences with the boss, and while this will create a shared fate amongst the team it is not a very healthy one. Your job as the leader is to constantly dial up the shared fate. You can achieve this through a variety of means including:

- **Compensation**
- **How you treat the team**
- **Make it difficult to get on a team**
- **Take them through a challenge**

If you have all five of the functional team attributes (see previous chart), you’ll have a functional team. However, the accountability can still rest with the leader. If you want the accountability to move into the team, the magic comes with the next step.

All accountable teams deal with their real issues in a group setting. By real issues we mean something that impacts the teams’ ability to be successful. Accountable teams don’t ignore issues, talk behind each other’s back, or go to the leader. Real issues are dealt with one-on-one or the entire group handles it. With this in place you’ll develop an individual committed to each other’s success, where one cares just as much about their teammates’ success as their own. When this occurs, teams achieve extraordinary results.

The Theory of Herd

Wilfred Bion, a pioneer of modern day group dynamic thinking, developed the Theory of Herd. Which had four premises.

1. Human beings are no different than pack animals.
2. Individual action is a myth.
3. We carry our groups with us and they don't even have to be present.
4. A connection to a group is a requirement for human survival.

The point of all this is that our strongest biological need is our need to be connected to other people. Because of this high need to be connected we operate out of fear of separation. Bion locked onto this and realized that this was the key dynamic that existed in highly functional teams. He found teams that functioned at a very high level had very low levels of fear of separation.

How to Produce a High Level Team

Minimizing fear of separation is the key to truly accountable teams, and the only way to accomplish this is to ensure real issues are dealt with in a group setting.

So what are the ways a team can deal with a real issue?

1. **Ignore it, avoid it or do nothing**
2. **Talk behind each others' backs**
3. **Ask someone else to deal with it (usually the leader)**
4. **One-on-one confrontation**
5. **Group confrontation**

The first three items listed above are the most common. Most people tend to spend the majority of their time and energy ignoring real issues, talking around them or asking someone else, like their boss or HR, to handle them. The small percentage of time left is usually left spent on one-on-one confrontation, and typically less than 1 percent is spent on group confrontation.

Let's look specifically at these first three and see what happens to fear separation as we engage in each one.

1. For most of us, **ignoring issues is our way of managing our anxiety**. You avoid confrontation by ignoring the issue, but over time you'll find your fear of separation goes up because you realize you're on a team that doesn't talk about real issues. You may even start to internalize the situation and think you could be the real issue.

2. **You may pair up with someone who sees the world similarly to you.** You both engage in a conversation about someone that is underperforming and share the problems they’re causing. When you leave that conversation your anxiety goes down because you realize someone feels the same way you do, but your fear of separation goes up. This happens because there is a realization that the person you just talked to is a backstabber, and if they disagree with you down the road they are likely to talk about you behind your back.
3. **You talk to your boss about the underperformer** and explain how things are falling through the cracks. Your boss acts on this information and fires the underperformer. Your anxiety with respect to the issue goes down because you don’t have to deal it anymore, but your fear of separation goes up because you start to worry that this could also happen to you.

Roughly 90 to 95 percent of our time is spent minimizing our anxiety. However, the price we pay is that our fear of separation goes up. Fear of separation goes up, the team fractures. This is ultimately why most teams are dysfunctional.

The real problem with these behaviors is that they destroy **trust**. To set up your team to be successful you need to stop these behaviors, starting with behavior number two. **Pairing is the single-most destructive behavior to teams**, and eliminating it within your team begins with you stop doing it yourself. Know that every time you pair, you become untrustworthy. While the other person may agree with you, deep down they’ll never trust you.



When you commit to stop pairing, it results in higher amounts of trust, and you’ll see that snowball through the organization. Next time you’re in a situation where someone wants to talk negatively about someone behind their back, respond with, “I really can’t speak negatively about someone else unless that person is in the room.”

If you move to one-on-one confrontation you’ll find your anxiety goes up because you’re thinking about dealing with real issues one-on-one. The potential confrontation, conflict and emotion that may be involved can cause a lot of anxiety. What happens to anxiety and fear of separation as we engage in each behavior?

The question becomes, “What happens to fear of separation?” It could go up or down, depending upon how the other person reacts. If they handle it poorly and lash out, your fear of separation will go up. If they handle it well and are thankful for the feedback, your fear of separation will go down.

When you bring up a real issue in front of an entire team your anxiety goes up drastically, but fear of separation goes down if there’s a healthy process in place and a high level of trust in the room.

What happens to anxiety and fear of separation as we engage in each behavior?

1. Ignore it / Avoid it / Do nothing
Anxiety: ↑ Fear of separation: ↓
2. Talk behind their back
Anxiety: ↑ Fear of separation: ↓
3. Look to the boss/HR to take care of it:
Anxiety: ↑ Fear of separation: ↓
4. One-on-One confrontation:
Anxiety: ↑ Fear of separation: ↓↑
5. Group confrontation:
Anxiety: ↑ Fear of separation: ↓

There are advantages to both one-on-one confrontation and group confrontation. Some of the most common advantages for group confrontation are:

- **More data can get put on the table**
- **Multiple perspectives and viewpoints**
- **Less hearsay afterwards**
- **Can puncture the denial**
- **More likely to identify the real issue**
- **Can better solve by coming up with more options**
- **Group learning takes place**
- **Mutual accountability**
- **More efficient**
- **Demonstrates the team cares**
- **Trust can go up**
- **Team becomes stronger**

Alternatively, some of the common advantages of one-on-one confrontation are:

- **More comfortable for confronter and confronted**
- **Less anxiety**
- **Creates a one-to-one connection**
- **Confronted may be more likely to speak up**
- **Allows the confronted to work on the issue before being brought to the group**
- **Better for personal or sensitive issues**

The question at this point is which one is more powerful? Which list brings more value to the organization? It's clearly better from a team perspective to deal with real issues in a group. But why, in the face of all these advantages, is it so hard to deal with real issues in a group setting? It's so difficult because on every team there's an unwritten rule. It's a psychological contract that isn't stated, but goes as follows: I won't talk about your performance and you don't talk about mine.

Meetings are often viewed as a waste of time. The concept of a meeting is not the issue however. The actual problem is we choose to avoid, in fact we collude to avoid, talking about the real issues. Those issues are talked about in bars, bathrooms, and hallways and avoided in meetings.

If you truly care more about the other person than yourself you would be open and honest with them. But most people are more worried about themselves than their teammates and choose to say nothing out of self preservation. If you think about it, if you really trusted that your teammates had your best interest at heart receiving feedback wouldn't be such a difficult experience.

In order to get to group confrontation you need to establish trust and stop pairing, but even more important, is enforcing the following rule in all of your meetings: everyone must speak for themselves. This means:

1. You cannot speak on behalf of others or in the third person. You can't bring in data based on what other people say or share the thoughts of others.
2. You are no longer allowed to use pronouns. No "we," no "they," and no "our."
3. No questions that aren't questions. Require all questions to be turned into statements. Don't allow thoughts to be twisted into questions.

The healthiest teams make statements and speak on their own behalf. Because when they do that real data is brought to the table, real issues are addressed, and most importantly, judgment is eliminated. If you take this and apply it for a few weeks you’ll notice a dramatic difference in your teams. You will find that trust starts to build because people will all start speaking for themselves, and you’ll start getting to the real issues. This will give you the runway to start moving toward talking about real issues in a group setting.



Prior to starting up his own firm in 2007, Eric Coryell was hired on as president to accelerate the growth of Diamond Cut, a start-up company in Mequon, Wisconsin. He played various roles in helping HUI transform itself into a highly successful team-based custom metal fabricator, and he was president of EWC, a manufacturer of medical interconnect systems. He now dedicates his time to helping organizations engage their employees through strategic alignment, leadership development and the creation of functional and accountable teams.



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