Organization without Accountability = Sure Failure

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Are these facts consistent?

1 Howard comes to work early every day and stays late.

2 He keeps busy most of the day doing assigned tasks that the organization needs to have done.

3 He does most of those tasks well.

4 When he goes home Howard feels satisfaction in what he has accomplished that day.

5 His boss just rated Howard's performance *poor*!

There are two likely explanations: either

 a) Howard's boss is an idiot, who can't recognize superior performance, or.

 b) Howard has been working very hard on the wrong tasks, ignoring the things his organization most needs.

Let's leave explanation **a** to Dilbert. We'll examine the causes and consequences of **b**. How can one work his tail off, do his work well, and still fail?

Diagnosis

We can conclude that Howard's work queue is overloaded. He is regularly assigned more tasks than he can possibly get done. So, without detailed direction, which of those tasks is Howard most likely to work on and complete today?

- The ones he knows how to do, where all the information he needs is readily available.

- The ones he enjoys doing.

- Extremely short-term problems, where customers, users, or others (the *squeaky wheels*) are pestering him for results.

Since there aren't enough hours to finish everything, he surely won't get to the messiest, most ill-defined, and most unpleasant tasks in his queue, even if some of those tasks are critically important to his employer. But since Howard got a lot done and made some people happy, he'll feel good about today.

Lack of defined accountability

The problem stems from failure to set up and monitor concrete *measures of performance* (*accountability* criteria) for Howard's role. Job descriptions usually focus more on activities than on results. They're full of vague terms like *participates in*, *assists with*, and *contributes to*, that may clarify intent, but contribute nothing to resolving such problems.

This phenomenon is characteristic of behind-the-scenes *staff* roles demanding specialized skills poorly understood by management, roles such as:

- Telecommunications network administrator.

- Methodology consultant.

- Quality-assurance director.

- Data administrator.

Such functions tend to drift without yielding the real benefits that were expected when they were established. A short-sighted organization may overreact by eliminating them altogether in a reorganization.

The rational solution

The way to solve this kind of problem is to establish rigorous accountability for every role. The preamble:

> *The Director of Corporate _____ will be doing his or her job satisfactorily when:*

is followed by a list of measurable and verifiable criteria. Some are also quantifiable, for example:

> *Instances of system unavailability for more than 10 minutes occur no more than twice a year.*

Or

> *99% of E-mail inquiries receive a reply within three hours.*

The full accountability statement then serves as a *contract* between the incumbent and his boss. If we can then measure actual performance, there will be no surprises at performance-review time.

Negotiation

Naturally, a mature professional can't accept just *any* accountability statement drafted by management. To have any chance of success he or she must also be assured of having both (a) enough resources (budget) and (b) direct authority to accomplish the specified results. That assurance requires constructive negotiation between the incumbent and his boss.

Consequences of inaction

Organizations that don't routinely establish rigorous *results-oriented* role definitions for critical staff roles and that don't foster rational negotiation between subordinate and supervisor are almost certain to suffer from chronic failure to reap the hoped-for benefits of those staff roles.

We also see the critical role of *Project Manager* suffering from the same phenomenon in more and more organizations. Organizations that fail to hold their project managers strictly accountable for well-defined results will suffer from very costly chaos.