Accountability Lessons From the Blackhawks

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In January 2016, the National Hockey League's Chicago Blackhawks won a franchise-record 12th consecutive game and in 2015 won their third Stanley Cup in five years. That's a remarkable feat for a team that, in 2007, was ranked 118 of 122 fan-favorite sports franchises in the United States by *ESPN Magazine*. The Blackhawks have built a high-performance, winning culture based upon a foundation of talent management, constancy of purpose, and standards of teamwork and accountability. Patrick Sharp, who has been part of the Blackhawks teams that won the Stanley Cup in 2010 and 2013, has said that accountability played a big part in building the team's culture of performance excellence and consistency in execution. Sharp told ESPN.com in May 2015: "It's being held accountable, whether it's from a coaching staff, whether it's from the president of the team, whether it's from the captain of the team or just another teammate. You want to come to the rink every day not only play your best individually, but you don't want to let your teammates down."

Standards of teamwork and accountability are also elements of a winning culture on the corporate playing field. Talent managers and learning leaders are responsible for translating performance strategies into winning results, yet there is often a yawning gap between strategy and its execution. For instance, executional excellence has been cited by global CEOs as a key challenge facing corporate leaders, heading a list of some 80 issues including innovation and top-line growth. In a 2015 Workplace Accountability Study with 40,000 respondents, 91 percent ranked accountability as one of the top development needs within their organization.

How can leaders help create end-to-end strategy execution and ensure accountability across diverse functions and wide geographic areas? A common approach is to reorganize, hoping that a different structure will produce better outcomes. But if underlying processes and cultural barriers aren't fully addressed, reorganizing can sometimes just trade one set of constraints for another.

Here are some focus areas where talent managers and learning leaders can help direct improvement efforts so that they have the biggest effect.

- **Identify what accountability means.** Describe what accountability means to your team, department, and organization. Let employees know exactly what is expected of them so they are more comfortable taking ownership of behaviors that demonstrate accountability. Provide real images and scenarios of accountability in action as opposed to vague terminology. Visualizing, as well as hearing, what accountability looks like in the day-to-day workplace will boost performance and commitment.

- **Establish a culture of accountability.** Many performance cultures fail to foster the coordination and commitment that is essential to effective execution. Even if execution activities are well coordinated, many managers report that they cannot count on their boss, direct reports, or colleagues to deliver on promises. In a true accountability culture, senior leaders are actively involved as credible role models and advocates of performance expectations focused upon honoring commitments.

- **Remember that accountability includes personal responsibility.** Accountability starts at the top but is driven from the middle. While there are several ways to emphasize the *personal responsibility a*spect of accountability, one of the quickest comes in the form of a simple question that can be asked of individuals at the end of every project meeting: "What are you personally going to achieve and by when?" Studies show that when employees make promises to an entire group of people —including their peers—they are more likely to keep that promise. In addition, sharing specific goals and deadlines in front of a group promotes 100-percent

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transparency. Of course, an organization and its leaders must make sure that people have the tools and resources they need to succeed with their commitments. Accountability is a two-way street.

- **Improve coordination**. One of the biggest problems with effective execution is the failure to coordinate across units. While most organizations have some sort of system for managing coordination across boundaries, most managers say these do not work well. Executives and learning leaders need to aggressively seek to identify and remove processes that prevent individuals from working cooperatively across silos. Disciplined, integrated processes and clearly defined methods for coordinating are needed to deliver consistent outcomes.

- **Know when to walk away.** Many companies invest enormous amounts of time and energy executing strategies on unsuccessful initiatives with a limited upside. Failure to halt execution quickly enough wastes resources that could be redeployed and risks burning out talented managers who are sent in to save projects or plans that should have been shut down much earlier. Prioritizing strategies and resources for execution improves results.

- **Know how to adapt.** If execution strategies don't work or business conditions change, leaders need to adapt and adjust tactics. Yet many managers complain that changes in strategy and direction are typically made with a bias towards quick action at the expense of proper preparation or reflection. Just as managers want more structure in the processes to support coordination, they also want more structure in the processes used to adapt to changing circumstances.

The best talent management or learning strategies are ones that are well aligned with critical business needs, have demonstrated commitment by all stakeholders, and are effectively delivered and executed. Effective execution depends upon coordination and accountability across all organizational levels. By focusing on the areas above, learning leaders can help grow the collaborative, accountability culture needed to increase performance, improve engagement, and foster a championship brand for their organization.

References

"Blackhawks built winning team by changing culture," by Scott Powers. ESPN.com: Cross Checks blog, May 16, 2015.

Workplace Accountability Study retrieved from slideshare.net/MikaNurmesniemi1/workplace-accountability-study.

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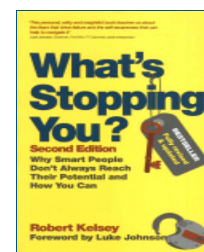**L&D RESOURCES FROM THE ATD ONLINE LIBRARY (MEMBERS ONLY)**

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