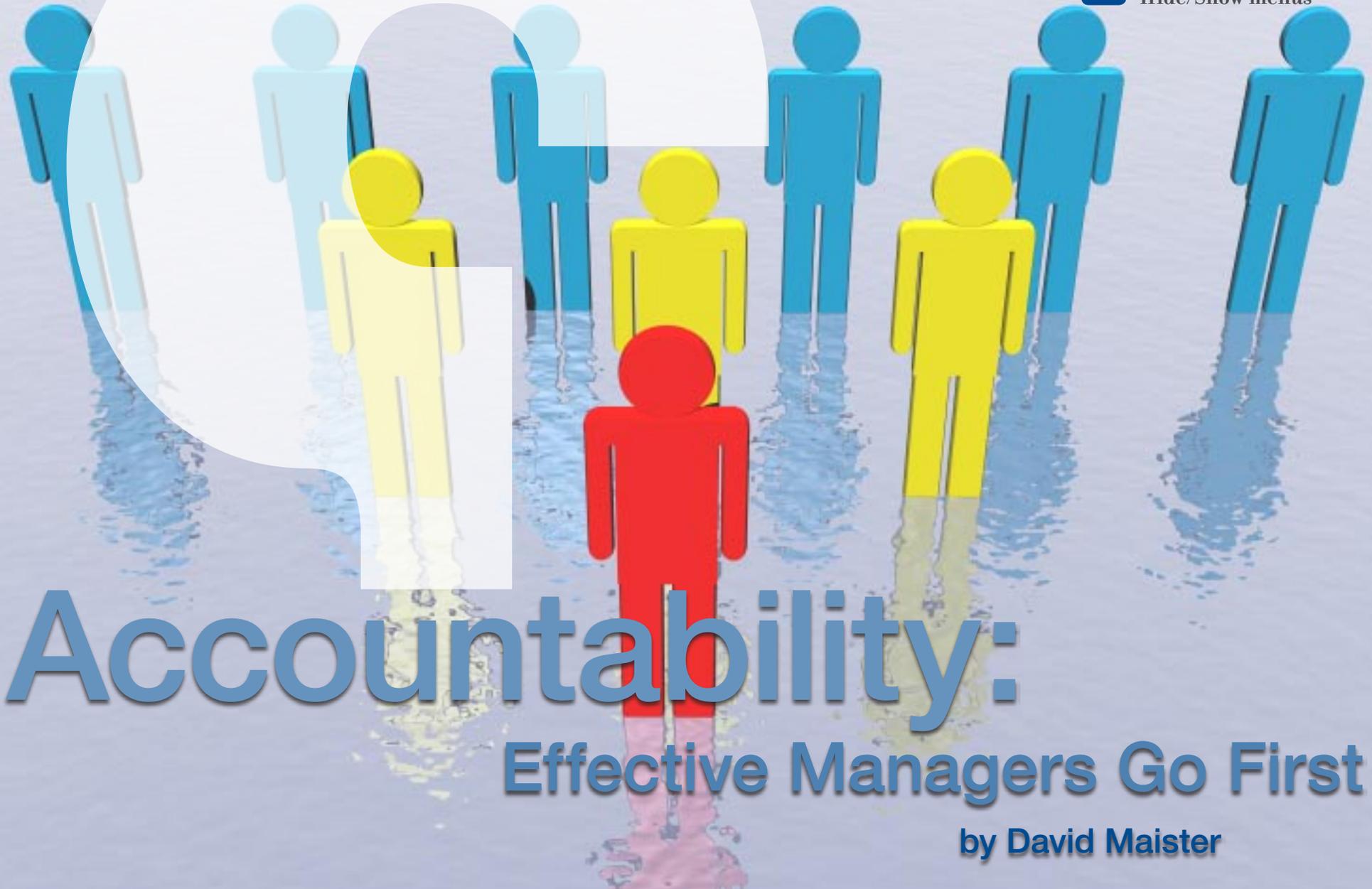




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Accountability:

Effective Managers Go First

by David Maister



After attending one of my seminars, Jay Bertram, president of the Toronto office of TBWA, the global advertising agency, returned to his office and immediately asked all his people to evaluate their overall job satisfaction, their feelings about the office and (most critically) their overall rating of him as a manager.

Then he dropped the biggest bombshell: as I had recommended, he announced to all his staff that if he did not improve in their ratings across all three measures—by 20 percent within one year—he would resign! He later wrote to me:

I was thoroughly moved by your passionate plea for senior management accountability. I want to thank you for encouraging me to be a better manager. It is because of you that I am making a real difference for my employees. I have never been happier and more productive. I have just completed the follow-up survey, and my scores have improved.

The results have been terrific. The office continues to grow rapidly and our employee satisfaction results are all above the corporate averages. We have become a better management team at having direct conversations with our employees, and we face issues rather than avoid them. I believe everyone in the office has become more accountable. They look to what they have done or contributed before complaining about others.

And what had I said that made Jay act on all this? He told me:

You challenged me to be personally accountable for my role as a manager. It struck home when you said that many managers are seen by their people as lying—to others and to themselves—when they publicly proclaim their commitment to standards of excellence or missions for their organization and do not follow through. You gave me the reassurance that living up to my standards, and being prepared to be personally accountable for them, was the right thing to do.

Every manager has room for significant improvement. We must challenge ourselves to stretch past our comfort zone by stating a goal that will generate a real change in our own behavior, for all to see and experience. Managing is truly a race with no finish line. We must keep moving, learning, listening, acting, and growing if we are to fulfill our role.

Jay described my recommendation as “the right thing to do,” and maybe it was, but in my seminar I hadn’t been trying to make a moral point but a practical, pragmatic one. When trying to get an organization to move, there is nothing more powerful than a manager who is prepared to lead—by going first!

We cannot expect an organization to raise its game, change its direction or pursue new ambitious goals and strategies by saying “Charge! I want all of you, the troops, to climb out of your foxholes and go put yourselves in harm’s way.” Realistically, that’s unlikely to work. Instead of saying “Charge!”, we need to say “Follow me,” energizing others through our own behavior.

In any organization, regardless of its purpose, scale or location, there is great power that comes from creating a culture of accountability. When people in an organization can depend upon the fact that everyone else will keep their word and perform the duties and tasks they have accepted, more will get done with less explicit oversight. People will feel a heightened sense of responsibility and will act on it.

And if we want others to perform *their* roles to higher levels, we must ensure that they know and believe that we are truly being held responsible for performing *our* role—the managerial role—effectively.

A Specific Recommendation

There are four steps toward making yourself accountable, and in turn, improving your organization:

Step One: Examine the specific statements below, one by one, while putting yourself in the shoes of your employees. Ask yourself whether or not doing well on each of these is an important part of your role—is it something you are supposed to be good at?

You, My Manager ...

- Act and live by the principles you advocate
- Act as a role model that people want to copy
- Are a person of integrity
- Enforce the company values
- Are “part of the team” as opposed to being the boss, separate and detached.
- Cause me to stretch for performance goals
- Are concerned about long-term issues, not just short-term profits
- Provide constructive feedback that helps me improve my performance
- Are a source of creative ideas about our business
- Help me to grow and develop
- Make me feel that I am a member of a well-functioning team
- Emphasize cooperation as opposed to competitiveness between work groups
- Are prompt in dealing with underperformance and underperformers
- Keep me informed about the things I need to know to perform my role properly
- Encourage me to initiate tasks or projects I think are important
- Are good at keeping down the level of politics and politicking
- Are more often encouraging than critical
- Are fair in dealings with employees
- Are consultative in your decision making
- Act more like a coach than a boss
- Are publicly generous with credit
- Are effective in listening

Eliminate immediately any questions that you think are idealistic, unimportant or not part of your role. Add back in any critical things you think I have missed in order to be good at performing your role.

Take this first step seriously and slowly. The purpose is to think through what you really need to be good at if you are to be an effective manager. You have to ask yourself what your personal performance standards really are.

Notice that we are trying to uncover performance standards for ourselves as managers that will predict the future performance of the organizations for which we are responsible. Most organizations will already have in place metrics that record how well managers are doing as judged by a retrospective look at our group's results in the latest reporting period. Our purpose here is different. We are asking ourselves: "What would I, as a manager, have to do well to cause my group to perform better in the future? What do I have to do well at to *really* make a difference?"

Step Two: Circulate the final questionnaire you develop, asking everyone you deal with in your organization to evaluate you on the specific dimensions you have decided you should be good at. Have the surveys returned to and tabulated by a third party (inside or outside your organization) to give everyone the comfort and confidence that the individual responses will be treated confidentially.

Step Three: PUBLISH the average ratings you receive to *everyone* in your organization. Everyone—administrative staff included!

Step Four: Call a meeting of those you manage and give the following speech:

“Here’s what you think about me. Don’t expect me to be perfect the first time we try this. Perfection is not a standard you can hold me to, and it’s not a standard anyone can hold any one of you to.

“What is more, don’t expect me to be perfect a year from now when we repeat this, just as I will not expect you to be perfect. I don’t think that’s a realistic standard for any of us.

“But here’s my promise to you, right here, right now. If I have not improved in my performance against the agreed-upon standards that are embedded in my role, then I will step down from my role as the manager of the group.

“You do have a right to expect that I will get better at the things that are my responsibility. And that’s exactly what I’m going to ask of you!”

Now THAT’S going first! Can you imagine the impact?

The Benefits of This Approach

Why do I advocate what seems to be such an extreme approach? Let's analyze some of the many things that this process accomplishes:

- It clarifies your role as a manager, in advance, in everyone's eyes.
- It establishes the principles of accountability and continuous improvement.
- It creates a balancing scorecard
- It provides feedback for improvement
- It reduces the emotional distance between manager and organization

CLARIFYING YOUR ROLE AS A MANAGER

I have written extensively about where I think a manager can have the greatest impact (for example, see "How Managers Add Value" in my book *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, Free Press, 1993.) Nevertheless, it may be debated at great length whether the sample questions I gave above are the right ones for you. In fact, depending upon the size and type of organization you are responsible for, I may have missed the mark completely. That doesn't matter too much.

What does matter—in fact, it is crucial to your effectiveness—is that *you* clarify, articulate and agree, both with those above you and those you are supposed to manage, what you are supposed to be good at. There can be a great deal of ambiguity about how you, the manager, are supposed to make a difference. Managers are subjected to a lot of pressure to focus on a wide disparity of things: finance and administration, representing their organization externally, personal production of various kinds, and energizing their group.

If there is no shared understanding of how you, the manager, are supposed to have an impact, how can you be sure that you are thinking about the job in the right way? The very act of clarifying your role and obtaining consensus and buy-in about what you are supposed to be doing, what will actually make a difference, can be a giant first step.

THE PRINCIPLES OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The approach of accountability presented here is not meant to be brutal or threatening. Central to the approach advocated here is the philosophy that accountability means the obligation to improve, not to be perfect.

As I pointed out in my article *Strategy and the Fat Smoker* (<http://www.changethis.com/24.StrategyFatSmoker>), if you tell me my goal must be to lose 50 pounds (or twenty-some kilos) in a year, the prospect will be terrifying and I probably will not move at all. However, if you ask me to focus on losing one pound a week, the likelihood that I will join in and (in 50 weeks) accomplish the goal is infinitely higher.

So it is with organizations of all kinds and sizes. Wonderful things can be accomplished if you convince me (and us) that this is doable. But don't scare us with the immensity of the challenge. Also, don't scare me about how demanding you are as a manager. By showing that you expect improvement but in doable, reasonable amounts, I am much more likely to become an eager participant than if I feel you have impossible standards.

CREATING A BALANCING SCORECARD

One of the most important things the system I describe can accomplish is to establish a counterbalancing scorecard for evaluating your own performance as a manager.

One of the reasons that the managerial role so often goes neglected (and remains misunderstood) is that most organizations already have scorecards, very powerful ones, for the other roles managers are asked to play. Without the “upward evaluation” system I propose, it is therefore normal that you and I will emphasize the other, more visible, scorecards that judge how well we are doing in our other roles: financial measurements, measures of volume such as number of customers or subscribers, user satisfaction scores, and so on.

Some organizations and managers might claim that because they have 360-degree feedback programs, they already have the system I am describing. Many 360-degree programs collect feedback from those being managed and find ways to pass it on to the manager on deep background, without public accountability. But because the 360-degree feedback is never publicly disclosed, it fails to convince those being managed that the information is being acted upon. (Frequently, it is not). That is not the system I am advocating.

The goal of my feedback system is not to measure. The goal is not (just) to obtain feedback. The goal is to create a form of accountability that will both create sufficient pressure to improve and demonstrate our willingness to be personally accountable. The power of what I am advocating is *visibility* and *accountability*.

OBTAINING FEEDBACK ON OUR PERFORMANCE AS MANAGERS

Obviously, a consequence of the system of accountability that I advocate is that we open ourselves up to receive direct feedback on how we are doing as managers, and get the opportunity to consider ways we can improve.

At all levels of our careers, our continued effectiveness and improvement depends not only on what we think of ourselves, but on what other people—those we are trying to influence—actually do think of us.

Unfortunately, people very rarely tell you the truth about yourself, which makes it even more important that you develop ways to get feedback on how you *really* come across to the rest of the world. And the feedback must be timely. We must ask for feedback, and act on it, while there is still the opportunity to change.

When you're the boss, all of this is even more critical. As has commonly been observed, when you become the manager, people stop telling you things—especially about your own performance. If you really want to find out how you are coming across, then you need to find out not what people have to say when they are in a logical, analytical mode, but what they FEEL about you. This is scary stuff, but absolutely essential to know if you are to have an impact!

There are, of course, more ways, in addition to questionnaires and surveys, to divine feedback from your staff. On my blog, Kent Blumberg (www.kentblumberg.com) describes his method:

I hold monthly coaching sessions with my direct reports. About once a quarter, I ask them to give me feedback on my leadership. Usually I ask “What can I do to more effectively support you?” and “If you were me, what would you do differently right now?”

The answers are often hard to hear, but usually just what I need to hear. And I most often act on what I hear (not always—I'm not perfect!). It's not easy to do, but this sort of feedback has been the best development advice I have received. The people I lead are the best judges of my leadership skills—not me, and certainly not my manager.

Also on the blog, Jennifer Davis (www.CreativeOutletLabs.com) said:

I find it is easier to get people to open up with candid feedback if you start by commenting on something you could have done better and then ask them to respond. You come out of a meeting and remark to a trusted colleague, “I think I could have done a better job keeping the group on task today. You seem to do this well. What’s your secret? What am I doing wrong?” This puts people at ease and communicates that you really do want to learn and improve from their advice.

I’d add one more little “trick” that has helped me. If I ask people what *they* think of me, they are usually polite (well, usually.) But if I ask them if they’d be willing to tell me what *other* people say about me, I give them the opportunity to say things without putting them in the awkward position of criticizing me to my face. Quite often, they say “Well, now you’ve asked, David, there are *some* people—not me, of course, David—who think you could improve in these areas.” We can then discuss it without raising the emotional temperature on either side.

The key point to note here is that while these informal, more personal methods of obtaining feedback will usually yield deeper and more thorough insights than the questionnaire we discussed earlier, they represent a *complement*, not a substitute. Occasional in-person conversations may yield better feedback, but they do not represent the visible, powerful, ‘impactful’ system of accountability that we are trying to describe here.

REDUCING THE EMOTIONAL DISTANCE

Perhaps the most powerful benefits of the accountability approach I advocate is that it makes the manager part of the group, subject to the same standards and processes as everyone else.

One of the most effective ways we have to get people to respond to us is to make them believe that we are truly talking about *us*. If we can be convincing to people that we are “all in this together, mutually committed and mutually responsible,” it is much more likely that we will have influence.

However, it is remarkable how rare this feeling is, and how difficult it is to sustain. I have seen even the best managers become increasingly isolated, at least in the eyes of the rest of their organization, as time goes by. Managers become resented by those doing the work, perceived as costly administrative overhead or increasingly remote from where the action is.

It is hard to energize a group of people if they view us, as managers, as “other.” Alas, this can happen all too often. Members of management are seen as “the bosses”, distinct from “we the workforce.” Few of us are likely to be energized by (or can energize) those we see as being on “the other side.”

To overcome this distance and remain part of the group doesn’t mean that, as managers, we must do exactly the same things that we want our people to do.

Of course, some symbolic gestures are powerful, as when the owner of the hotel bends down to pick up a piece of trash on the hotel carpet, thereby illustrating that he owns the problem as much as anyone else, and wants everyone in the organization to own problems rather than delegating or abdicating responsibility for tasks and standards. But while symbolism is powerful, this approach can be, and is, taken too far. A manager can get too involved in the daily activities of the group.

In some professional businesses, for example, group managers often feel that to manage effectively they must do as much or even more of the group's work than anyone else. They try to lead by selling more work personally and serving more clients themselves as individuals. The problem with this approach is that while it can (and often does) inspire others through the force of personal example, it eliminates the time and attention available to ensure that the managerial role is played properly.

It's as if a military leader were trying to win the battle by personally killing more of the enemy in hand-to-hand combat than any other warrior. It's inspiring, it's impressive; it may even be noble. But there's real room for doubt as to whether it's the best way to help the organization win. If you were a soldier, wouldn't you want your general to excel at generalship, and not (just) be the best rifle shot?

To be effective, an approach is needed that simultaneously inspires, creates the sense that the manager is deeply embedded within the group, and allows and encourages the manager to perform the tasks that actually do lead to group success. In each of our organizations, we need to think through more thoroughly exactly how a manager is supposed to add value, and then ensure that the manager fulfills that responsibility. That's the personal accountability system we have been discussing.

The Role of Integrity

I suggested above that, in clarifying your role, you should design your own set of questions, preferably in consultation with those you report to and those you manage.

However, it must be noted that there does exist some research on which managerial behaviors are most likely to lead to future organizational performance. I will not try to summarize all of it here, but it may be helpful to report the findings of my statistical study of 139 businesses (*Practice What You Preach*, Free Press, 2001.)

In that study, I was able to identify the organizations that produced the highest financial performance, and then investigate how the attitudes of people within those offices differed from the other businesses in my database.

Consistently, the difference between the most successful operations and everyone else was attributed (by the people in the organizations) to the qualities of the person managing the office. Such managers, they said, were the type of people who “washed their own cup.” They weren’t separate and distinct from their people. They never became detached, but made their management very *personal*.

The words used by the employees to describe the managers were:

- Honorable
- Genuine
- Noble
- Someone of high integrity
- Sincere
- Articulate about what he or she stands for
- Enthusiastic

The best managers were not *only* these things. These characteristics were necessary but not completely sufficient. Managers of successful businesses were also demanding and set ambitious goals. However, being demanding and setting ambitious goals were quite common characteristics—such behavior was not distinctive among the most successful organizations.

It was honesty and integrity, as judged by the members of the organization, that *did* have predictive value in identifying financially successful organizations. Managers of successful businesses, it turned out, did not necessarily advocate different things than other managers; they just lived what they advocated. They practiced what they preached.

At first, the words honesty and integrity were a surprise to me, not least because they sound so “moralistic.” Why did these qualities lead to the superior financial performance I identified in my study?

What seemed to be happening was this: When the employees saw their manager in these ways, they were more likely to believe and accept the standards and values he or she advocated. The employees would then do one of two things: join in enthusiastically, or leave because they did not want to participate in something that seemed so “inspirational” and “moralistic.”

Those who remained had been self-selected as eager and willing participants in the ideology of the organization, and were more likely to function together as a team to pursue the organization’s objectives.

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner arrive at similar conclusions in their masterwork *The Leadership Challenge*, (3rd edition, Jossey-Bass, 2002). So did Jim Collins in *Good to Great* (Harper Business, 2001).

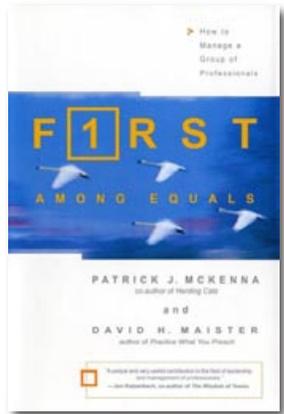
There are many qualities that cause people to follow and participate with enthusiasm, but the honesty and integrity of the manager are clearly the pre-eminent number characteristics. What I am advocating is an accountability system to ensure that you and I do not only assume that we are seen this way, but are actually held to that high standard.

This conclusion leads us to the ultimate paradox in all of this. I have tried here to make the case that the manager acting as the shining role model for accountability is a pragmatic point that leads, with high probability, to superior effort and excellence in others. Such managers can (and do) create superior financial returns—consistently. As such, this finding is practical, not a moral point.

But maybe the real lesson is that, ultimately, it is a moral point. Maybe what ‘accountability’ *really* means is a willingness to be assessed and held to the standards one advocates—a point of principle, not a tactic.

If people believe that the manager is behaving in certain ways *only* as symbolic gestures, then the act will lose its power. It gains in influence to the degree that others believe that the manager believes it. When excellence becomes a moral point, it will tend to be implemented better than when it’s purely a pragmatic one.

In the final analysis, what would energize any organization, of any kind, anywhere, is not the mechanics of any questionnaire, but the sincerity and integrity of the manager. Any manager can say “These are the standards I believe in.” What transforms an organization is when the group also hears the manager say “And I expect to be held accountable to the principles I advocate! Does anyone else want to join me in operating that way?” And they say “Yes, me too! That’s what I want to be part of!”



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Maister is widely acknowledged as one of the world's leading authorities on the management of professional service firms. For two decades he has acted as a consultant to prominent professional firms around the world, on a wide variety of strategic and managerial issues. In 2002, he was named as one of the top 40 business thinkers in the world (Business Minds, by Tom Brown, PrenticeHall/Financial Times.) He is the author of the bestselling books *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002.) These books have been translated into 14 languages. For seven years, he served as a professor on the faculty of the Harvard Business School (1979–85), prior to launching his consulting practice. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts. Visit him at davidmaister.com where you can join the conversation at his [blog](#), listen to his [Business Masterclass](#) podcasts, or sign up to receive his [future articles](#).

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