

The Accountability Framework® System (AFS)

by

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The purpose of this paper is to provide the background and research base for the Accountability Framework® System (AFS).

Research on High Performing Organizations:

High performing organizations share five common attributes:

1. **Vision**-clarity over where the organization is going; what the organization wants to be recognized as in the marketplace¹
2. **Success Factors**-what the organization needs to concentrate on in order to fulfill its mission; these are the major corporate initiatives spanning several years, each with a goal to be attained and a measurement system to track progress²
3. **Accountabilities**-who does what in terms of roles; what is each person's commitment/promise of performance and how does it contribute to overall organizational results.³
4. **Values**-how people are expected to behave towards one another and towards the customer⁴
5. **External focus/internal alignment**-clarity over who the customer is and their needs, alignment of processes/systems, departments/programs to deliver services/products against those needs⁵

Organization leadership needs to address all of these elements of high performance. The challenge is to integrate and align each of these elements into one system so that people in an organization see the big picture as they go about their work.

The Accountability Framework® System (AFS)

The purpose of the AFS is to provide leaders with some tangible constructs to integrate all of the elements of high performance in a comprehensive, yet relatively straightforward management model. AFS provides three sets of constructs, each designed to enhance an organization's capacity in three key areas:

1. Clarify organizational direction
2. Clarify every employee's personal accountability for both results and values
3. Measure performance of both the organization and every employee

The First Construct – The Accountability Framework®

The Accountability Framework® construct assists in clarifying overall direction of the organization. The actual framework consists of a vision statement of what the organization wishes to be recognized as in its business, several Success Factors (or areas of concentration, strategic thrusts/directions) required for the organization to fulfill its vision, and a short list of corporate values expected and required of every employee.

The construct is based on three sequential research efforts. Initially, a similar methodology was developed to illustrate the relationship between values and goals⁶. Later, this same methodology was used to develop a similar construct for illustrating priority of needs⁷. A further research effort built on both previous efforts to identify and measure priorities for determining community-wide needs.⁸ In this latter research, the model was tested formatively in three cities (Ft. Lauderdale, Daytona, and Panama City) in terms of its capability to highlight and prioritize key components in planning and delivering community-wide services. In a final test, results revealed a .80 Spearman rank correlation between two sets of qualitative and quantitative rankings derived through use of the model at a .01 significance level.

Each organization creates its own Accountability Framework®, capturing essential messages to communicate to shareholders, customers, and employees. For many, the process of creating the framework provides an opportunity to capture essential language of the future organization and a chance to discard old, outdated language. The formulation process also provides an opportunity to include all key individuals in the discussion.

Strategic/operational planning builds on the construct by defining strategic goals, results measures, corporate initiatives, and assigned leadership for each Success Factor. The plan becomes the basis to identify, track and adjust all work in the organization over several years of strategic goals, results measures, corporate initiatives, and assigned leadership for each Success Factor.

The Second Construct – The Role Map®

The second construct defines every employee's accountability within each Success Factor. Called a Role Map®, this construct focuses and aligns everyone's energies in areas that are priorities for the organization. Unlike position or job descriptions, Role Maps® bridge the gap between one's functional responsibilities and the key areas of concentration required for the organization to be successful. In this way, everyone is accountable to carry out their work in line with the stated mission and vision. As such, both those leading the organization and those at the front line levels (and often closest to the customer) march to the same set of drums.

The Role Map® development is based partially on the research model developed by Dick and Carey⁹ who used the hierarchical approach to conduct job analysis studies. In their approach, complex jobs are broken down into a sequence of procedural tasks, illustrated in a hierarchical fashion. In the AFS, their approach is simplified further based on research by (Miller¹⁰, 1991) and research by Bloom¹¹ (1956). In the former, short-term memory of any person is limited to less than seven items. Applying this to Role Mapping, the number of accountabilities for any one person is limited to five. Empirically, such simplification creates a similar level of abstraction throughout an organization in the definition and clarification of roles. In essence, everyone's role is stated at the same level of abstraction.

In the latter research in cognitive theory, Bloom divides the psychology of learning into three domains (cognitive, or the world of knowledge; affective, or the world of feeling; conative, or the world of doing). It is the first of these worlds that is most pertinent to the Accountability Framework® System. Bloom further divided the cognitive world into six hierarchical levels, from the most simple to the most complex: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. At a minimum Role Maps® are expressed at the "application" level on the rationale that this is the first observable level of tangible behaviour, hence the easiest to manage, coach, and improve.

In nearly all cases, Role Maps® cut horizontally across an organization in an attempt to bring people together in a team environment. A good example might be Area Managers across the country, each managing one geographic sphere of activities. By creating one Role Map® together, each manager will recognize commonalities of their management roles within each Success Factor – even though they may execute their roles quite differently from one another depending on the peculiarities of their territory, customers, and team members. With homogeneous groups, it is useful to document how the very best performers actually execute their role. This is particularly useful when consistent standard of performance across the organization is essential, enabling the organization to expand their operations without adding another layer of supervision.

The Third Construct – The Performance Grid™

The third construct measures results, both for the organization and for the individual. At the organizational level, progress toward goal attainment for each Success Factor is tracked and measured. This composite index of measures, along with baseline and current status, documents how well the organization is performing in light of where it intends to go, based on priorities and previously defined goals.

At the individual level, employees plan their personal objectives based on organization priorities and their Role Map® accountabilities. Everyone is held accountable for achieving results and demonstrating corporate values captured in a common performance matrix.

The conceptual framework for the four-quadrant integrating matrix was developed as a way to integrate both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the term “importance”.¹² Applied in a performance-reporting context, these dimensions translate into “urgency” and “values” in determination of priority.

The vertical axis represents how well an individual has executed his/her role accountabilities and met stated objectives. The better the performance, the higher one goes on the scale. The horizontal axis represents the values-based behaviours that were graphically depicted on the Accountability Framework. The better an individual demonstrates these values, the farther he goes to the right. Every organization wants all employees to be plotted somewhere in the top right quadrant, where everyone is making a “quality contribution.”

The real cost of quality for an organization is the percentage (and cost) of employees in any of the other three quadrants. The top left quadrant represents those who achieve results but at the cost of organizational values. These individuals destroy any “team” environment that organizational leadership wants to create. The bottom right quadrant represents employees who demonstrate corporate values, but do not achieve results. These individuals keep the organization from progressing.

The most troubling quadrant shown at the bottom left represents those individuals who do not achieve results or demonstrate corporate values. One of the many organizational decisions is how much the organization needs to invest in terms of money, time, and energy to move everyone into the top right quadrant. Much of this depends on an organization’s tolerance for “bottom quadrant thinking” – i.e., how prepared it is not to take action to address inadequate contributions by those located in this quadrant.

Why the system approach to leadership is important

Many of these elements are present in most organizations. What is unique about the AFS is that all of the elements are integrated into the one system, providing one comprehensive model for consistency throughout the organization. This system approach is key to leading all employees toward achievement of corporate vision.

Most organizations are affected by the sub-optimization phenomenon: in order to do the work needed, the work is divided into smaller pieces and done by individuals concentrating only on each piece. This is much like pyramid building thousands of years ago where the acquisition and transportation of thousands

of rocks was given to one group, stacking them into the pyramid was the responsibility of others, acquiring and managing the slaves was given to another, and so forth. Today, we have departments and programs that focus on smaller pieces of the whole: customer relations, product development, human resources, finance, operations, etc. The aim of this functional specialization is to allow similar work activities to be accomplished by those with similar competencies. The concept, in its purest sense, is that if all the smaller pieces are their best, then the whole must be the best.

However, sub-optimization may lead to chimneys or silos in an organization, where each department focuses principally on its own part of the work, rather than looking out for the needs of the larger organization. Leaders have tried to break down the silos in many ways. Matrix management is one way to deal with this. Assignment of cross-functional groups to address quality issues is another mechanism to deal with the larger organization, particularly processes that affect several departments in the natural flow of work.

The AFS counters the negative consequences of sub-optimization in five important ways.

- First, the AFS holds everyone accountable for key corporate priorities through the building of the Accountability Framework itself, and associated goal-setting, planning.
- Second, progress is tracked and results identified by Success Factor rather than by corporate initiative, making the essential organizing construct for all work the key priorities of the organization.
- Third, budgets are prepared and tracked by Success Factor, again directing everyone's attention on key organizational priorities.
- Forth, the AFS becomes the corporate agenda for progress and quality meetings and discussions around strategic goal achievement.
- Finally, through the role mapping and performance management process, everyone at all levels in the organization identifies how they will contribute and be accountable to helping the organization fulfill its vision. Essentially, the AFS helps organizational leaders and staff to maintain a focus on the big picture.¹³

Research on high performing organizations provides the base of important elements needed to be in place for organizations to excel. Linking organizational direction with measurement with goal attainment is a major challenge today. The AFS creates a mechanism to make all of these elements part of the way of doing business. It is often used as a screen to decide what not to do either corporately or individually.

Three Other Approaches:

Three prevalent models that incorporate elements of high performing organizations are:

1. Peter Drucker's Management by Objectives (MBO),
2. Robert Kaplan and David Norton's Balanced Scorecard (BSC),
3. Elliott Jacques' The Requisite Organization (TRO).

Primary Differences:

The primary difference between these models and the AFS is that the AFS is a more inclusive model, incorporating all key alignment/accountability elements into the one system from broad directional efforts to performance management.

- MBO focuses on identifying and linking objectives as a method of attaining goal congruence throughout an organization, measuring/rewarding personal performance.¹⁴
- BSC focuses on four perspectives (financial, customer, internal business, and innovation/learning) for which organizations should develop goals and critical factor measures to assess whether performance is in line with strategy.¹⁵

- TRO focuses on management structure and role definition as a means to enable an organization to thrive.¹⁶

Strengths of each Model:

Each model has its strengths. MBO was the initial application of goal theory, linking goal attainment with corporate and personal rewards.¹⁷ BSC attempts to overcome a singular focus on financial numbers by highlighting non-financial aspects: customer satisfaction, internal processes, and learning/motivation.¹⁸ TRO recognizes the importance of hierarchical management structure and roles linked to complexity of work for managers and their subordinates.¹⁹

AFS in Comparison

With the AFS, all elements are incorporated into the one system: objective setting for corporation/team/individual, measurement of goal attainment, structural definition and alignment of individual roles, personal accountability, and rewards. AFS also highlights corporate vision as the driving force behind all of these elements. In this way, the total organization is focused on the future of what it wants to become, not the past of what it has been.

AFS Incorporates Cognitive Psychology and Information Theory in its “Look and Feel”

The AFS incorporates research from cognitive psychology/information theory. In addition to the Miller and Bloom research, the AFS emphasizes:

1. The importance of values in shaping organizational strategy (they play a pivotal role in motivation and cultural change),²⁰
2. The application of brand and design principles into communications (how to shift attitudes and give stakeholders/employees a sense of belonging to something unique),²¹
3. The importance of visuals (constructs clarify and present complex information in easy-to-remember formats),²²

The Process followed to build AFS within an organization is also Research-Based

The AFS approach incorporates many proven findings from adult learning theory, social and individual psychology:

1. Key aspects of adult learners: the role of experience, readiness to learn, problem solving and immediate application.²³
2. Group dynamics, consensus building, affinity diagramming.²⁴
3. Locus of control, advance organizer concept of preparing individuals to understand and process new information.²⁵

Summary

Leaders are facing immense challenges today. In order to stay focused on key elements of high performance, they require an integrated mechanism to plan, execute and track major initiatives. The AFS has a proven record in both public and private sector organizations when there is a sense of urgency to change from the status quo. Its value is in its ability to visibly align several key elements – vision, success factors, accountabilities, values and an external focus – the very elements that high performing organizations have in common. The model is also flexible enough to use up and down the organizational hierarchy and horizontally. It is flexible enough to adapt to hard goals and measures, both in the long and short term, yet promote culture development.

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