



LEADERSHIP WITHOUT EXCUSES

**HOW TO CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY
AND HIGH PERFORMANCE**

(INSTEAD OF JUST TALKING ABOUT IT)

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There are three kinds of people. What sets them apart is how much they're going to help you, their leader, deliver the business results on which you've staked your reputation.

Saints are *always* accountable. You can consistently rely on them to do the right things. To make smart choices. To follow through on commitments. To operate in compliance. And to do other things that are important to your organization's performance and survival. Maybe the saints do these things because they are fundamentally great people. Or maybe they're just the perfect fit—for the job, your team, and the organization. Regardless, saints make you look good as a leader (whether you deserve it or not). Unfortunately, saints comprise only a fraction of most organizations.

What do you do with saints? You don't want to lose them, so you reward and protect them. Vigilantly. What you can't do is give them more work to do to compensate for your failure to hold poor performers accountable. We'll say more





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about this in the coming pages. But we're not focused primarily on the topic of leading saints. (After all, if you were fortunate enough to have an all-saints workforce, it'd be unlikely you'd have felt motivated to open this book.)

Sinners are the opposite of saints. You can't count on them to do anything consistently except make excuses why they aren't delivering the performance and results you need. Maybe they're fundamentally bad people. Or just fundamentally bad hires. Either way, sinners reflect negatively on you as a leader (whether you deserve it or not). Fortunately, in most organizations, they too are usually small in number.

What do you do with sinners? Ideally, you don't hire them. This is why we're fans of rigorous hiring processes and probationary periods for new recruits to validate fit. Even then, you're still likely to end up with some sinners. So you have to get rid of them. Again, we'll say a bit more about this later on. But this book is not really focused on sinners either.

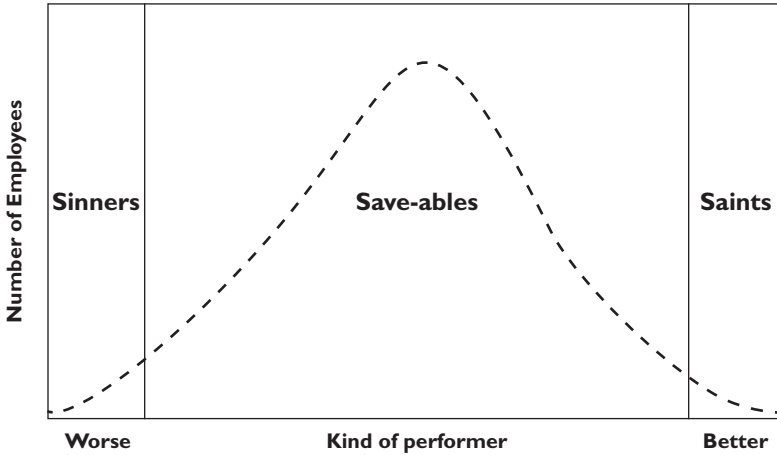
Instead, this book is focused primarily on leading the third kind of people: *save-ables*. Most people are save-ables. Sometimes they make good choices; sometimes they don't. They'll consistently do the right things, demonstrate accountability, deliver high performance, and give you what you need only under certain conditions. To create these conditions, you've got to understand and address their hardwired human frailties. There are three in particular you need to worry about. Specifically, the very predictable problems with the all-too-human save-ables are that (1) they can't read your mind, (2) they're





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Figure I-1 Three Kinds of People and Their Typical Distribution.



Kind of people	Accountable?	To create accountability
Saints	Yes	Protect them
Sinners	No	Take them out of the system
Save-ables	Depends	Take excuses out of the system

selfish, and (3) they're frequently delusional. Let's look briefly at each of these human frailty factors and how to address them (Figure I-1).

They Can't Read Minds

Your save-ables can't read your mind. So if you've not communicated *clear and credible expectations* for performance, you've effectively (albeit unintentionally) equipped them with an excuse for not doing what's needed.





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The big insight here is that communicating clear and credible expectations is much harder than it sounds. It's not just something leaders should get around to after they've done their real work. "It *is* the work," says Len Schlesinger, president of Babson College and former chief operations officer (COO) of Limited Brands. "There's nothing particularly special about communicating expectations . . . other than all the things that tend to go wrong when people are 'too busy' to attend to it." For examples, check out "The Save-ables' Excuses" sidebar.

They're Selfish

When we say that save-ables are selfish, it doesn't mean that they're bad people. As the father of capitalism, Adam Smith, wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest." The same principle applies to your save-ables: They won't do the right things because they're benevolent, but rather "in regard to their own self-interest."

This is why it's so important to create *compelling consequences*—aligned with the performance and behavior you need. If you are, as management professor Steve Kerr famously put it, "rewarding A while hoping for B," you've equipped your save-ables with a good excuse not to do what's needed. Because whatever you're rewarding and tolerating (intentionally or not), the save-ables are going to give you





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more of it. A big insight here—one that we'll elaborate on in the coming pages—is that you have a lot more power than you probably realize to create compelling consequences—both positive and negative—in order to motivate your save-ables to do the right things.

They're Frequently Delusional

Save-ables are prone to self-deception. But it's not their fault. Really. In *Welcome to Your Brain*,¹ neuroscientists Sandra Aamodt and Sam Wang explain that

Your brain lies to you a lot. . . . For the most part, it's doing a great job, working hard to help you survive and accomplish your goals. . . . Because you often have to react quickly to emergencies and opportunities alike, your brain usually aims to get a [half-baked] answer in a hurry rather than a perfect answer that takes awhile to figure out. . . . [T]his means that your brain has to take shortcuts . . . [which] lead to predictable mistakes.

In other words, humans simply are not hardwired for honest self-assessment because it was not an evolutionary tool helpful for our survival as a species. The quick-triggered decision making and defensiveness that enabled our distant ancestors to fend off saber tooth tigers predisposes us to narcissistic self-deceptions and excuse making.

For example, a little self-deception can go a long way toward helping save-ables rationalize why they deserve





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credit for successes—or merely for good intentions—whereas mistakes and failures are not their fault. A dose of delusion also comes in handy when the goal is to produce an alibi (“Don’t look at me. I didn’t know anything about it.”), justify a misstep (“I had no choice.”), or minimize a broken commitment (“It’s only two days late.”) or its outcome (“They were a pain-in-the-butt client anyway. Good riddance to them.”).²

To take away those excuses, and others like them, it’s essential to lead *conversations grounded in empirical reality*. Empirical reality is the reality we verify with our senses. It refers to the way things really are, as opposed to the way we’d like them to be. If you are, as the philosopher William James put it, a “lover of facts,” you’re more likely to enjoy a comfortable working relationship with empirical reality (though more claim this affinity than practice it).

The big (if obvious) insight here is that when your people see you indulging in magical thinking, it licenses them to do the same. Accordingly, if you want your save-ables to get real, you’ve got to lead by example.

The Save-ables’ Excuses

Typical comments we’ve heard when conducting Conditions of Accountability Assessments:





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Failures to Communicate Clear and Credible Expectations

- They want us to get excited and engaged around our new “strategic direction.” But it’s just one of eight things in the past year they’ve asked us to get excited and engaged about.
- They always say “do the right thing,” and we all believe in it. Then we hit a situation where we need an expensive replacement for a customer, but I need three layers of approval, one of whom is out for two weeks. The field is yelling at me: “We’re gonna lose this client!” Telling me to “just do the right thing” doesn’t provide a solution.
- We do a lot of “rock hunting.” My boss sends me to look for a rock. When I come back, he says, “No, that’s not the rock I was looking for.” So I go looking for another rock, hoping I get luckier next time.
- We don’t get anything done because no one can make a decision, but anyone can veto it.

Failures to Create Compelling Consequences (That Are Aligned with Desired Performance)

- They seem to have no idea what really motivates us. They never ask.
- They reward and recognize average performers the same way they reward high performers. So what’s the





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point of killing myself and taking time away from my family in order to be a high performer?

- The people who create the most drama get the most attention. So now I know what to do if I want my boss to focus on me.
- We say we care about customer service, but all they measure and pay us for is productivity. So the people who are actually dumb enough to really care about the customers are penalized for it.
- The “reward” for high performers is getting more work to do, while the poor performers stand off to the side.
- They say they’re going to get serious about holding people accountable, but they never do. They usually just promote or transfer poor performers to make them someone else’s problem.

Failures to Lead Conversations Grounded in Empirical Reality

- We say we want openness and honesty. But that’s just one of the lies we tell ourselves. I’ve seen them shoot too many messengers of bad news to believe it.
- Apparently, there was a problem with my performance, but I was the last one in the department to learn about it. No one gave me the feedback until my year-end review.





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- They say they want more innovation. But if I come up with a smarter way of doing things, I'll need to get seven people to approve it first. I don't have that much energy.
- Everyone secretly knows this initiative is going to fail. But no one is willing to say it out loud.
- As a group, we claim credit for our successes but blame our failures on external factors.
- We never learn from our mistakes because that would require us to acknowledge them. So we just keep repeating them.

The Three Conditions of Accountability

Our research and experience tell us that if you consistently and effectively create the three *conditions of accountability* by

- Communicating clear and credible expectations
- Creating compelling consequences
- Leading conversations grounded in empirical reality

then your save-ables will consistently give you what you need. In fact, they will become nearly indistinguishable from your saints. And this makes the sinners very conspicuous and therefore easy to spot and cast from your midst (before they lead any save-ables in the wrong direction).





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When you fail to create the conditions of accountability, though, you unintentionally equip your save-ables with excuses—sometimes very good ones—for not doing what you need them to do. Which makes sense. If your people don't know what to do, don't feel motivated to do it, and aren't having real conversations about it, no one should be surprised when they make bad choices and let you down.

And when this happens, you've put your own goals, reputation, and survival in jeopardy. On top of that, you've created a situation in which it's pretty difficult to distinguish between your save-ables and your sinners—in which case, you won't know who to fire.

Temptations

As we said earlier, most people are save-ables. Whether they are accountable has less to do with their inherent nature and more to do with the situational contexts in which they find themselves and, to be more precise, whether the three conditions of accountability are in place. But leaders face a powerful temptation to sort people who are really save-ables into one of the other two categories.

Giving Halos to People Who Don't Deserve Them

Sometimes leaders confer sainthood not on the basis of consistent performance but rather to individuals they like or to whom they otherwise feel emotionally connected. And then





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when these “saints” misbehave or fail to do the right things, the leader rationalizes the bad behavior or downplays its significance. The problem is the double standard. Having two standards of accountability—one for cronies and another for everyone else—jeopardizes leadership credibility, creates resentment, and undermines the effectiveness of all other efforts to take excuses out of the system.

Sodom and Gomorrah Fallacy

An even bigger problem is leaders lumping their save-ables in with their sinners without proper due diligence. We understand the temptation. Because taking excuses out of the system is so challenging, lots of leaders make excuses as to why it isn’t worth the effort. “I don’t want to put any effort into creating the conditions of accountability,” they say, “because it won’t do any good. I’m stuck with a bunch of sinners.”

You might be thinking the same thing. And though it’s possible that you’re right, we think it’s highly unlikely that your workforce, like the Old Testament’s twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, consists almost entirely of fundamentally bad people. If this is really true, your human resources (HR) department (or whoever recruited them) should be destroyed, which is what God did to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah when Abraham couldn’t find anyone righteous there. While HR is always an easy target of wrath, it’s more likely that you as the leader are





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part of the problem! Sinners are the people who aren't doing what's needed *after* you've done your best to create the conditions of accountability. Until you do that, it's irresponsible to claim that you can distinguish them from your save-ables.

Leadership without Excuses

Again, we understand why its tempting to lump your save-ables in with sinners instead of trying harder to “save” them by more aggressively creating the conditions of accountability. As we've acknowledged, it's very hard work. This important responsibility is—or ought to be—why you take home the big bucks (and are worth every penny). And this is why we wrote this book: To make the task a little easier by equipping you with a few new practical insights that you can put to use immediately.

In the first section of the book we'll focus on powerful, proven leadership strategies for *communicating clear and credible expectations*. We hope the second section of this book will change the way you feel about *creating compelling consequences*. And the third section describes approaches to *leading conversations grounded in empirical reality*.

