Accountability-Based Management™ (ABM) Principles and Process

COREinternational's approach, which has been employed with hundreds of client organizations for over 20 years, is based on a management model constructed by Dr. Elliot Jaques, a Canadian-born educator, author, social scientist and management consultant.

On top of the solid foundation of Dr. Jaques' work (often referred to as Stratified Systems Theory, or Requisite Organization) COREinternational has developed a proprietary methodology for Organizational Assessment, Design and Implementation - including a robust set of management tools and instructional aids designed to transfer knowledge to our client organizations – that have come to be known as Accountability - based Management, or ABM.

At the heart of ABM are a number of key principles, namely:

- Organizations are systems comprising structure and processes. Good organization design must take a holistic view of the organization as a system.

- Work in organizations which are properly structured accountability hierarchies has a natural "stratification", differentiated by discrete changes in complexity. We refer to these as levels of work. Ideally, there should be one layer of management per level of work.

- "Form follows function," or "structure supports strategy." In other words, an organization's strategy or mandate determines the work activities that need to take place and the complexity of work required.

- An organization structure is the framework within which management has chosen to distribute accountability and authority down through an organization in vertical reporting layers, and across in groups.

- The right layering & grouping supports effective teamwork within and across boundaries. In addition, accountability is connected to trust: by granting accountability and authority to role holders, management entrusts them to make decisions and create outputs commensurate with that accountability and authority.

- An ABM-based organization design, once implemented, is best supported by the practice of a set of managerial leadership principles which include management tools and techniques to ensure the clear assignment or work, and authorities to ensure decisions and follow-up are taking place at the right level.

Organizations that apply this set of principles to organizational assessment, design and implementation reduce or eliminate the risks associated with designing for specific people or role holders. Instead, the approach allows the organization to focus on the distribution of work within the system, and to make logical, fact-based decisions based on pre-established criteria.

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Accountability Based Companies by Design®

City of Hamilton Public Works

In addition, these organizations can focus on aligning structure with strategy, to ensure that the work being done in the system is designed to deliver outputs that support the organization's strategy.

Approach to the Public Works Project

Between October and December of 2015, COREinternational undertook a rapid assessment, using our Agile Alignment approach, of two branches of the Department of Public Works at the City of Hamilton.

Following the initial review, a decision was made by management to more clearly understand the efficacy of the entire Public Works organization, which required additional data to be collected and analyzed leading to a recommendation regarding redesign of the Department.

The work was done using COREinternational's Design methodology, which entailed:

Step 1: Project communication

- Developing communication messages for the PW organization and other key stakeholders so everyone was clear about the review's nature, timelines, and expected outcomes.

- Meeting with the PW leadership team to build an understanding of the review's objectives and outcomes.

- Developing messaging to be used throughout the remainder of PW, and working with the appropriate stakeholders to prepare a communication plan.

Step 2: Data collection and evaluation

- Gathering data from approximately 60 Public Works employees in the top 3-4 layers of management through individual interviews and reviewing relevant documentation such as strategic plans, previous initiatives, process maps, role descriptions, and other documentation deemed relevant.

- Working directly with the City Manager and the GM of Public Works to articulate a set of design criteria for the future state of the Public Works organization that will be used as part of our collective assessment of design propositions.

Step 3: Analysis

- Analyzing the data collected in the interviews and elsewhere to clearly understand and articulate:

    - The nature of executive and management work—actual and required—for the organization.

    - The impact of the current layering and grouping of work on business outcomes and overall organization effectiveness.

    - The degree of clarity of accountability and decision-making authority.

    - Areas of current and potential cross-functional friction within PW.

- General issues and opportunities for the organization based on what staff felt was working well, what was not working so well, and the concerns and hopes staff share during the interviews.

- At the conclusion of analysis, developing design propositions to:

  - Build a more connected organization (with fewer silos) to better support the redesign of the GM role and other supporting roles, and improve the flow of work within PW.

  - Improve internal and cross-functional linkages.

  - Create a shared, compelling view of how a revised structure will enable PW to operate more efficiently and effectively within the context of the overall direction for the evolution of City services.

Step 4: Feedback and Proposition Development

- Met with the City Manager, the GM of Public Works and the Executive Director, HR & Organizational Development to review our findings and recommendations.

- Created and reviewed a comprehensive depth chart of the entire PW organization to show how the work is actually being done—at what levels and in which groupings—highlighting areas that are working well and areas that are under-performing.

- Presented options for organizing for optimal performance, and discussed the relative merits of the propositions being discussed.

- Employed the feedback and decisions made as a starting point to ensure top - level roles were structured and clarified to support execution of the strategy.

Next Steps

Once the new structure has been approved, clarifying roles and accountabilities throughout PW through a cascading process that proceeds from the top down through the organization.

The cascade process ensures every role holder is clear on the accountabilities of their role, and establishes the basis for effective cross-boundary team work.