



## AIA Best Practices: Accountability builds leadership credibility

---

Contributed by Robert Gaarder, PhD

### Summary

If you want to be an effective leader, here's a good place to start: Create a culture of accountability in your organization. This may require both gaining new skills and real behavioral change.

### Creating a culture of accountability

"Anyone who accepts mediocrity—in school, on the job, in life—is a person who compromises, and when the leader compromises, the whole organization compromises."—Charles Knight

All of us are guilty of reacting without thinking when we're in leadership situations. For architects, the task of leadership is doubly difficult given both the type of people who are drawn to the profession and the limited exposure to management that their technical education and background afford them.

To be a successful leader requires:

- a frank and accurate assessment of how you react in leadership situations that call for accountability
- becoming more knowledgeable about what it takes to achieve leadership accountability—how to set expectations, delegate appropriately and manage conflict. It also means being willing to conduct tough, difficult discussions
- the ability to change one's reactionary behavior by drawing on the leadership skills needed for a particular situation

Nobody said it was going to be easy. Yet focusing on accountability will bring significant rewards: credible leadership, improved morale, and a more productive organization.

### What are the attributes and skills of leadership?

Leadership is a combination of personal attributes and interpersonal skills. For the past decade, I have worked as a leadership consultant for scores of architecture companies. In the course of my work, I normally administer a "360" instrument developed specifically for such firms. This instrument rates one's leadership attributes and skills (see Chart 1), as seen through the eyes of those who work with that person.

With more than 500 people responding, here's what I found: As a group, leaders of architecture firms tend not to be very good at holding others accountable. Most of these leaders are consistently rated low in accountability, as well as in the related skills of communicating expectations, delegating appropriately, and conflict management.

Personal qualities	Interpersonal skills
Integrity	Accountability
Visionary thinking	Communicating expectations/delegating appropriately
Strategic thinking	Conflict management
Managing complexity	Collaboration
Emotional self-awareness	Inspiration
Self-awareness of abilities	Empathy
Self-confidence	Managing organization politics
Initiative	External image
Optimism	Developing others
Being a change catalyst	Management of crises

## CHART 1

### The consequences of a lack of accountability

You are not doing any favors to the person you're not holding accountable or to the company. And everyone knows it.

- **Missed opportunities for professional development.** If an employee does a mediocre job or exhibits behavior that affects his or her ability to work with others, that may lead to the development of habits detrimental to one's career.
- **Low organization morale.** If an employee is not being held accountable for his or her performance or bad behavior, this may engender negative emotion—resentment, cynicism, and irreverence—among those around them. That, in turn, will result in low workplace morale.
- **Mediocre results.** If an employee does not feel that he or she is going to be held accountable, what is the incentive to keep a project on time and on budget? The result is mediocre projects, services, and firm profits.
- **Erosion of a leader's credibility.** Leaders are held accountable for both their own actions and those of their subordinates. If the leader does not hold people accountable, he or she will lose the respect and loyalty of those whom they are leading.

## How to be more effective in holding others accountable

The low ratings that architectural leaders tend to receive in the areas of communicating expectations/delegating appropriately and conflict management are symptomatic of the problem. To address the accountability issues, a leader might do the following:

- **Define clear expectations.** In order to hold someone accountable, it is important for both the leader and the 'led' to agree on a clear definition of expectations, including specific quantitative and qualitative performance objectives.
- **Identify rewards and consequences.** It also means a frank discussion of rewards for exceeding performance objectives and consequences for not meeting them. Even if clear performance objectives are laid out, this discussion is almost always overlooked.
- **Do not avoid difficult discussions.** There is inherent conflict in holding someone with poor performance or bad behavior accountable. For most leaders, this not fun. So let us just postpone that discussion...or even better, ignore it altogether, right? Wrong! However, postponing or ignoring is the default behavior for too many leaders. A leader has to be tough-minded and proactive.
- **Hold those at the top accountable as well.** Holding one's peers or fellow partners accountable is the most difficult part. There are a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is the dynamic of power that leaders are reluctant to exercise on perceived peers. However, the consequences of not holding those at the top accountable are just as damaging to one's leadership credibility, if not more so.

## About the contributor

Dr. Robert Gaarder is a Leadership Coach and Organization Consultant to leaders. Working out of Falls Church, Virginia, Dr. Gaarder specializes in working with professional service firms in the fields of architecture, engineering, and IT.

*The AIA collects and disseminates Best Practices as a service to AIA members without endorsement or recommendation. Appropriate use of the information provided is the responsibility of the reader.*

## About AIA Best Practices

AIA Best Practices is a collection of relevant, experience-based knowledge and expert advice on firm management, project delivery, contracts and more, aligned with the *Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition*. See the full AIA Best Practices collection at [aia.org/aia-best-practices](http://aia.org/aia-best-practices).

This article corresponds to:

*Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition* Unit 1 - The Profession

Chapter 05 – Organizational Development

Section 05 – Leader Effectiveness