

Taking Responsibility in a New Leadership Role

Taking Control of Your Accountabilities

Sarah has just been appointed CEO of her organization, and she's feeling excited but anxious.

The realities of her new job have hit home. She is no longer simply in charge of meeting plans and targets. She is now responsible for ensuring that her organization is doing what it's meant to do, and that the people within it are doing the right things, in the right way.

That's a lot to be accountable for. So, how can she make sure that everything is OK?

In this article, we'll look how you can be truly responsible for your organization's work, right from the start.

Note:

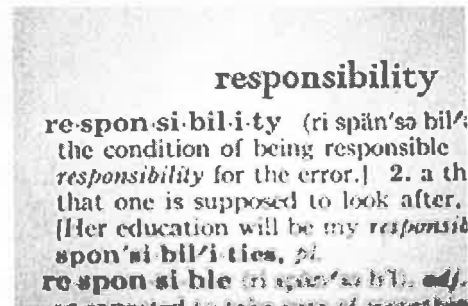
We focus on new organizational leaders in this article. However, you can also follow some of these steps if you're new to a departmental or team leadership role.

What is Responsibility?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines being responsible as being "liable to be called to account."

As a leader, you're responsible for everything that happens in your organization, and you'll quite rightly be held accountable for everything that happens, good or bad.

You need to question the decisions and processes that hold your organization together, and the consequences of not doing this can be severe. It's no excuse to say that you didn't know what was going on, or that you weren't personally involved - the buck stops with you.



As a leader, you're responsible for ensuring that your organization does the right things.
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New leaders are especially vulnerable to being caught out by difficult situations. They may inherit dysfunctional structures and procedures, or simply be too overwhelmed by the pressures of a new role to know what to question. This is particularly true of new leaders who are promoted from within: they may make assumptions about their organization based on their previous roles, they may feel loyal to previous leaders' decisions, and they may fail to see the "bigger picture" that a leader needs.

Full responsibility is an enormous challenge to take on, and it can feel overwhelming. However, leaders who plan for this responsibility right from the start (that is, when they accept the job) have a far greater chance of success than those who take a more "laissez-faire" approach.

Note 1:

Within this article, we'll focus on moving into a new role. However, taking responsibility is an ongoing process, and you should think about these steps as often as you feel necessary.

Note 2:

The steps we list below are necessarily quite general. Make sure that you also think about steps that may be appropriate for your, specific, organization.

How to Take Responsibility

To fulfill your obligations as a leader and to be fully responsible for your organization's actions, you need to build an accurate understanding of the organization, and of what's going on within it.

Follow the steps below to build and maintain this.

1. Understand and Confirm Your Organization's Mission

Your first step is to re-examine what your organization aims to do. Of course, it will have a mission statement and other documents that outline its remit, and you should look at these as your first step.

However, it pays to reflect on this mission statement, and to consider how faithfully it represents the purpose of the organization. Is it still correct? And is it likely to motivate people to behave in the right way? If you have doubts, then you need to clarify these, one way or another.

2. Analyze Risks

Once you understand what you're trying to achieve, you need to think about what could go wrong. How could your organization let people down, and what would the consequences be?

Conduct a risk analysis to identify potential problems and their consequences. This exercise can be time-consuming as you'll need to dig deep into potential issues, but it will yield powerful information. By considering all levels of risk, you'll also gain a good grasp of the many different roles and processes within your organization, as well as the potential risks involved in each.

Tip 1:

Some of this groundwork for this analysis can be done before you step into your new role.

If possible, spend time with the outgoing leader before his or her last day, and have an honest conversation about both the role and the organization. This will give you a good understanding of problems that go with the role, the ways that crises have been averted in the past, and the pressures on different colleagues.

Tip 2:

It's likely that you'll need to look outside your organization for many of the risks that might occur. For example, your team may be affected by key customers' decisions, or, in non-profit or government organizations, by those of external funders or government bodies.

While you can't always know how these groups will behave, you can look for patterns, and you can scan your environment to avoid unpleasant surprises.

3. Understand Key Stakeholders

Who holds the real power over your organization? Who does it serve? Who controls the resources that you need, and how do they make decisions? Conduct a stakeholder analysis to identify the people whose views matter most, so that you can find out "what makes them tick."

Do your best to forge meaningful connections with these people, early on. If you can, call or meet them before your first day and ask for an open conversation. What is their experience with your organization, and what issues are they most concerned about?

In particular, talk to key internal and external clients. What problems are they facing? What's working well? These early conversations will help you identify problems that you may need to address quickly.

4. Understand Processes, Values, Culture, and Management Structure

Next, conduct a thorough review of your organization. This is likely to be a substantial project,

and you may need to assign members of your team to help you with it. Your aim is to get a full picture of how your organization's processes, people, culture, values, and management structure help or hinder its ability to deliver what your customers expect.

Then explore the key functions of your organization in detail. Look at roles and responsibilities, work flows, information and budget management processes, and ongoing projects. Look for evidence that procedures are being followed - and that they're working.

Culture and values also play a huge part of how your organization serves its customers. Look at how these affect processes, and at how they may need to change to make your organization more successful.

Tip:

The McKinsey 7S Framework can help you identify different elements of your organization, and help you think about how they relate to one-another.

5. Audit and Review Internal Systems

You need to ensure that the information you rely on is correct and comprehensive. This means that you can monitor your organization effectively to ensure that it's doing what it should do.

Ask questions such as:

- When were the organization's accounting systems last audited? What were the conclusions?
- Are there any issues with the accounting system that's in use? If so, what needs to change?
- What people-related problems could there be? What risks do these present?
- What risk management systems are used? And do these report effectively on the risks you've identified?
- Are goals and targets appropriate, and are they likely to motivate the behaviors that you want?
- Is management information useful, appropriate, accurate, and robust? And how well does it monitor delivery of the organization's mission?

6. Challenge Your Findings

Now it's time to compare your risk analysis with the information that you've gathered about how your organization works. This comparison will help you see if reality diverges from what has been planned.

Question everything, and use common sense. For example, look for the following:

- **Teams with excessive workloads:** What do members of these teams *not* have time to do? What risks does this present? How does this affect the organization's mission?
- **Outcomes that seem "too good to be true":** Are corners being cut?
- **Bottlenecks that could cause serious delays:** What are the implications of these?
- **Inefficient work flows:** Is effort being spent at the wrong stage of a process?
- **Departments with high staff turnover or sickness:** Are there management or process problems in these departments?

7. Be Constantly Curious

Your work doesn't stop once you've made sure that current procedures are working. You must continue to scan for new problems, and prevent them from escalating. Build time into your schedule to do this.

Look for the right balance between micromanagement and staying informed about people, events, and trends.

Also, it's likely that you'll have additional representational responsibilities, now that you're in a leadership role - for example, you may have event organizers clamoring for your time. So, prioritize these demands carefully so that you can respond to sudden demands on your time. This way, you'll be better placed to manage crises calmly.

And remember the idea of management by wandering around. This is an effective way of gathering information from your colleagues on a rolling basis, including getting feedback on processes, workloads, and customer expectations. Visiting all parts of your organization also builds trust, so that colleagues are more likely to report problems to you before they escalate.

Last, schedule brief but regular meetings with your team to discuss issues, trends, and risks. Work out which matters you expect to be kept informed about - these could be issues that are problematic, or that are high-risk or fast-paced - and ask for regular updates on these.

Key Points

When you step into a new organizational leadership role, you'll be shouldering a lot more responsibility than you're used to. You're no longer simply in charge of meeting targets and deadlines: you now have an obligation to your colleagues and your customers to make sure that everything appropriate is being done to deliver your organization's mission, safely and reliably.

To prepare yourself to meet your new responsibilities, follow these steps (among others that you may identify):

- Understand and confirm your organization's mission.
- Analyze risks.
- Understand key stakeholders.
- Understand people, processes, values, culture, and the management structure.

- Audit and review internal systems.
- Challenge your findings.
- Be constantly curious.

Much of your new role involves gathering information and assessing it objectively.

Make sure that your schedule is flexible enough to cope with sudden problems, and build trust among your colleagues, so that you'll be best placed to hear about issues early on. This is likely to need careful prioritization, but it's a key part of your new role.

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A Final Note

Make sure that you prepare thoroughly when moving into a new role. After all, if you just "swan into it," you risk failing in a spectacular way.

Next week we explore steering clear of embarrassment on a smaller scale, when we look at **cultural faux pas** to avoid when you're doing business with people from other countries.

See you then!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James".

James Manktelow

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