STRATONOMICS

HOW TO IMPLEMENT STRATEGY USING POSITIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Imagine your teenage child is on their **third** driving lesson.

Before the lesson starts, the driving instructor says, “During the last two lessons, your driving was slightly below average. I hope you have a plan to improve. Today, I expect you to display a 25% improvement.”

The instructor further tells the teenager, “go drive for five miles, carefully tracking different metrics like mileage and number of stop signs encountered. Report back at the beginning of the fourth lesson. We will evaluate your driving performance then.”

Will you continue the driving lessons? Most say they won’t. But, why not?

Like any senior executive, the instructor:

- Provided clear, critical, and unvarnished feedback about past performance
- Set clear performance expectations about future outcomes
- Asked the teenager to track objective performance metrics
- Encouraged the teenager to self-reflect, take ownership of their driving, and learn from previous experience.

If you would not use this approach for driving lessons, why would you use it for running a company? This approach uses negative accountability.

Despite checking all the boxes, this approach is destined to fail.

The Failure of Negative Accountability

In a 2015 study, 91% of executives ranked “improving the ability to hold others accountable in an effective way” as one of the top leadership needs. Yet, 82% admitted that they have “limited to no” ability to successfully hold others accountable.[i]

Employees are equally wary of accountability practices: 70% state that executives cannot rate performance objectively and 62% believe their company’s accountability process does not drive performance.[ii]

No wonder, 69% of employees feel they are not living up to their potential at work.[iii]

These failures can be attributed to accountability practices such as setting goals based on output, looking in the rearview mirror to monitor activities, evaluating performance based on negative deviations from output-based goals, using a punitive and divisive approach to motivation, and celebrating large improvements in output while ignoring small and consistent improvements in inputs.

Positive Accountability: What is It?

Positive accountability embraces several elements.

Focus on controllable inputs, not outcomes: Instead of focusing on high-level and abstract outcomes such as “25% improvement in driving” positive accountability focuses on small changes to inputs—specific activities and behaviors—that the teenager controls. As examples, the teenager can control how they handle the steering wheel, press on the accelerator, and use the brakes. These input behaviors become the focus of positive accountability.

Asking the teenager to focus their attention on controllable inputs increases their perception of self-control and builds self-confidence. It also helps the teenager understand the linkages between actions and desired outcomes.

NOT THIS: “You need to show a 25% improvement in driving. Pay attention.”

BUT THIS: “Make sure you always remove your foot from the accelerator and place it on the brake when you see a stop sign.”

In any given period, focus only on one input: Instead of multiple inputs, the instructor should sequentially focus on *the one input that will have the largest impact on outcomes*. When the teenager achieves competency in one input, the instructor moves to the next input.

NOT THIS: “Let’s work on braking, and acceleration, and steering-wheel balance, and…”

BUT THIS: “In the first lesson, let’s focus on balancing the steering. Let’s get better at that, then we will move to braking.”

Focusing on the one input with the biggest impact on output maximizes the benefit of each lesson and builds the teenagers self-confidence.

Sequential rather than parallel processing is more beneficial for accountability. Trying to simultaneously improve multiple inputs not only overwhelms a person but also prevents them from seeing the “cause-and-effect” between their effort and outcome. You are left wondering “which of these efforts really improved the outcome?”

Don’t drive by looking in rearview mirror, look to the road ahead: Using past performance on an output as a baseline to set future goals focuses attention on the past—it’s like driving by looking in the rearview mirror.

NOT THIS: “Keep looking in the rearview mirror to stay attentive to the road ahead.”

BUT THIS: “Keep your eye on the road ahead. During this lesson we will pay attention to steering-wheel balance.”

Executives make this mistake in quarterly business review meetings. They evaluate past quarter’s performance to speculate what should be done differently next quarter.

Stop using negative deviations from past output to improve performance: Using past outcomes as a baseline to evaluate future performance is a punitive and divisive approach that tears down the teenager. In contrast, positive accountability highlights *small and positive deviations* in the one most important input.

NOT THIS: "Your driving has been lousy—you ran a stop sign, you sped, and you did not stay in the lane. What can you do to improve?"

BUT THIS: "During this lesson we were focused on removing your foot from the accelerator to the brake. You did a nice job at this stop sign. Next, we will have three stop-signs in a row, so stay focused. Nicely done on braking."

Executives should celebrate small, positive deviations in the most important input. This makes employees feel engaged and helps them stay focused. Over time, these small but consistent positive deviations yield large improvements in outcomes.

Consistent small wins in inputs yield large rewards in outcomes: Instead of pursing vague and impossible goals like "25% improvement in driving," positive accountability focuses on small wins—small and consistent improvements in input activities and behaviors.

NOT THIS: "We need to show dramatic improvements in driving. Any ideas?"

BUT THIS: "Consistently remove your feet from acceleration to brake at a stop sign. Soon this will become your habit. As you do this more often, you will become a safer driver."

By celebrating small wins in controllable behaviors and actions—you get many, many more opportunities to reinforce positive behaviors. When the desired input behaviors occur more frequently and more consistently, they become a system of habits. When small input behaviors become mutually reinforcing, they create a system that delivers successful outcomes more consistently, more often, and more predictably.[iv]

Case Study: Succeeding with Positive Accountability

A below-average to failing high school in an urban school district lagged in several outcomes: poor reading and math scores, below average attendance, low graduation rate, and high teacher turnover.

The principal had launched and tried many different strategic initiatives to improve outcomes—different types of teacher trainings, software programs aimed at math and reading, offering free tutoring to students, curriculum assessments and improvements, a positive-culture initiative to motivate students, to name a few. None worked. Everyone agreed the overall performance needed to improve. Yet, they could not agree on the next set of improvement initiatives.

The school was caught in a downward spiral of negative accountability—focus on outcomes, global metrics based on past, and initiatives with dubious linkages to desired outcomes. The school changed course using a customer-based strategy.

Step 1 – Level Setting: Using a structured approach to gather the beliefs and opinions of senior executives, middle managers, and frontline employees (teachers and staff), the principal discovered there was only 23% agreement among her team. She needed to focus her team on a singular strategic goal.

Step 2 – Create Customer-Based Strategic Focus: A structured assessment of the school's customers—parents—showed that academic excellence in reading was the one thing that drove the biggest lift in in customer value. Thus, reading became the school's strategy. Although senior management deemed other outcomes important, they were deferred to the future.

Positive accountability only works if the entire organization is focused on *a single strategic area driving value for most of the company's customers.* Middle managers and front-line employees find meaning when they provide value to customers. They become disengaged when catering to abstract ideas such as senior executives' personal mission, vision, goals, values, desires, or hunches.

Step 3 – Implement Strategy Using Positive Accountability: Instead of launching more initiatives, the principal worked with her team to identify key parts of everybody's job that directly related to reading score improvements. Each person was then held accountable for the input—activities—that created the biggest lift in reading scores. These activities became their daily work. As examples:

- Language teachers were spending 30-40% of their time in meetings related to school-level initiatives like new-building planning. Instead, they were asked to spend more than 80% of their time on reading-related activities such as working on lesson plans and teaching students to read. The principal made asked questions such as: how much time have you spent helping the five students who are behind in reading? What specific chapters did you cover in class?

- The deputy principal met weekly with staff members to ensure the library had all the assigned reading books available for students to check out. Have we ordered enough books? How many reading tablets do we have? Did you work with central administration to get ten more tablets for our campus?

- The principal restructured her time so that she was spending more than ten hours a week holding her direct reports accountable for specific input behaviors.

- If there were conflicts or misunderstandings among different employees or departments, the principal intervened to resolve them. Instead of "enforcing," she became a conduit to quickly resolve issues and speed up implementation.

Step 4 – Monetize Strategy Implementation: Within six months, the school's reading scores improved. The school did not start a single new initiative. The employees did not do any extra work. Instead, they became more focused on and spent more time on those aspects of their jobs that directly affected reading. Over time, they became more engaged because of the clear connection between their daily work and customer value they created.

Key Considerations In Using Positive Accountability

To become customer focused, the organization must first statistically identify its customers' most important value driver and then the one input with the biggest lift potential in customer value. Then the CEO can cascade positive accountability throughout the organization.

Implementing positive accountability also requires a CEO to get rid of ineffective processes to which they are habituated. These can include quarterly business-review meetings, metrics dashboards, output-based KPIs, elaborate process manuals, detailed plans, and monitoring meetings. These should be replaced with frequent and short meetings—a 15-minute weekly meeting is the most effective cadence for positive accountability.

Author Bio

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Suggested Citation

Mittal, Vikas (2023), "How to implement strategy using positive accountability," *STRATONOMICS© Insight Series,* April, 1-5. **Free download: https://ccubes.us/k12/briefs/**

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