

# Empowering people to say “no” raises accountability

By Gordon Dmytriw

Research cited in a recent HBR article suggests more than 50 percent of managers have trouble holding people accountable. The article’s authors claim it is the most shirked leadership responsibility in the workplace and is no less of a challenge among C-suite leaders than midlevel managers and supervisors. We see this challenge in our own work helping companies build and nurture intentional cultures. While the article does an excellent job scoping the problem, it doesn’t address practical ways to solve it.

Here are some thoughts on how to increase the level of accountability in your organization.

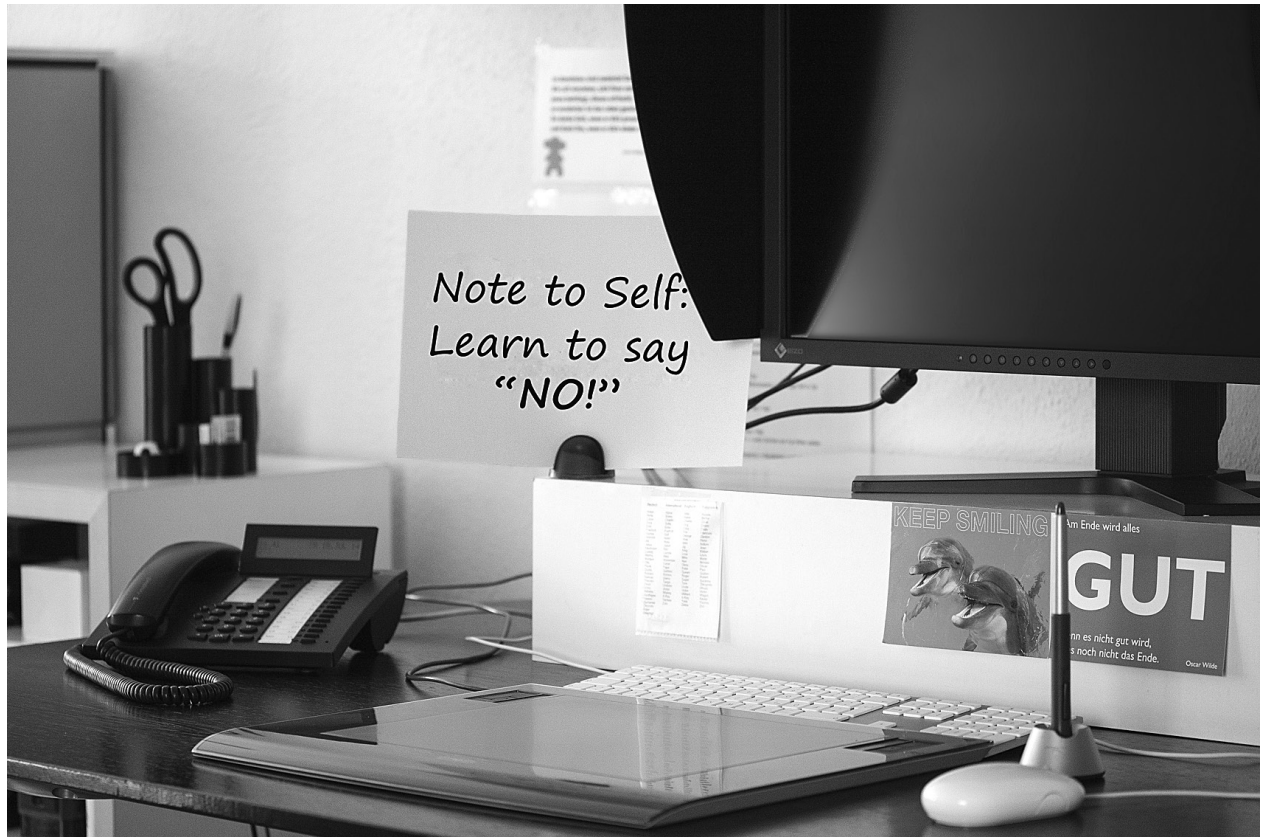
We’ve talked about the idea of co-accountability before. Co-accountability is the responsibility we have to hold ourselves accountable to holding others accountable to their commitments. Giving people the tools to be co-accountable while protecting organizational collegiality is an important part of the work Think Shift does, but it is only part of the solution to raising the level of accountability. There is another factor to consider that many organizations have trouble with: creating an environment where it’s OK to say “no.”

In a recent training session with a client in Atlanta, we wrestled with their difficulty in holding high performers accountable to their commitments. After all, high performers are like the straw that stirs the corporate drink. Management consistently leans on them when the going gets tough. Need something done? Ask a busy person. We rely on them, often unrealistically so, because they accept the responsibility of meeting their commitments, and as result we trust them to do more. It’s a vicious cycle that ends one of two ways: missed commitments or burn out.

I’m sure you recognize this behavior in your own company. Like you, our client has high expectations and asks people to do more. They’re also a collection of people who are predisposed to saying “yes” and are naturally motivated to support one another. “No” is not part of their vocabulary, because to say so would be to not only let their colleagues down, but – among their highest performers – to admit weakness. And yet, saying no is precisely the behavior the culture must encourage if it is to avoid burning out its best people and meet more of its commitments.

Leaders should nurture cultures in which saying “no” is an option.

When someone agrees to a request, we have the expectation they will deliver (and the obligation to hold them accountable if they don’t). Isn’t it only right to give them the ability to weigh their obligations and, if they realize they can’t deliver, decline? What’s the point of agreeing to



Giving employees the option to say no makes for a healthier work environment for everyone.

something if you don’t have the capacity to execute? It’s a recipe for failure and yet, we load up our top performers, and cross our fingers, expecting they’ll come through and hoping they don’t burn out.

As simple as it sounds, managing commitments is not easy in highly engaged cultures.

Paradoxically these cultures often have the toughest time with accountability, because they have the tendency to cut performing colleagues some slack, expecting the same when their own heaping plate overflows and something gets dropped. By giving your people the ability to negotiate fair, reasonable and clear expectations and by coaching them to push back and be honest about what’s realistic, you not only empower them, but lay the groundwork for holding them accountable if the need arises.

As with all organizational change, creating a culture where “no” is an option starts at the top.

Leaders must model behaviors that make it OK to say no. They should:

- be realistic with their requests and not count on others to bail out their own planning deficiencies. In other words, don’t let authority trump decency.

- encourage delegates to ask questions and clearly understand expectations and timing. Without clarity of “the ask,” assessing its impact is impossible.

- be prepared to evaluate their own level of desperation and negotiate different deliverables and dates.

- be prepared to re-prioritize existing commitments by honestly assessing the dislocation their request will create.

- coach delegates to be realistic when making commitments and challenge automatic “yeses” from top performers.

Putting the option of “no” on the table fosters richer conversations and generates options that would otherwise remain hidden. It also empowers the task owner and emphasizes the expectation of performance, making it easier to hold them accountable.

There is another benefit: the need to have those difficult and dreaded accountability conversations is diminished because fewer commitments are missed.

These two concepts – managing commitments and higher levels of accountability – are inexorably entwined. It is incumbent upon managers to make sure that, before they make someone to face the music, they’ve given them the chance to help write the score.

## Securing our Energy Internet

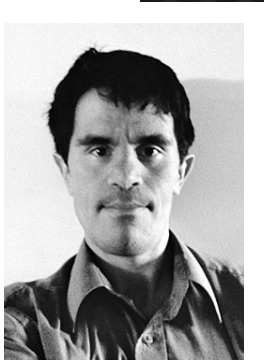
The future battle for renewable energy and cleantech advocates may not exactly be with oil and gas executives, or apathetic politicians, but rather to fend off breaches in privacy and digital security.

Globally, our energy and transportation is currently going through a steady (albeit slow) transition where we rely on fossil fuels, to using renewable energy and electricity.

Environmentalists, cleantech entrepreneurs have been leading the charge as we are seeing results. Carbon emissions have fallen in the US energy sector, while investment in renewables increased in 2015, according to Bloomberg New Energy Finance. Meanwhile, ComputerWorld notes Tesla Motors has received 325,000 pre-orders for its more affordable electric vehicle, the Model 3.

With over 160 nations signing onto the Paris Accord to keep global temperatures below the 2C threshold, the world is going to renewable energy and cleantech.

Much of this transition involves switching from “dumb”, slow, analog systems, towards, “smart” digitized systems, lead by the rise of the Internet of Things, which according to some reports will have 50 billion connected devices by 2020, according to Cisco. Examples of this includes switching towards Smart Grids, which will have an estimated economic value of \$400 billion US by 2020. Others include examples of the digitization of energy includes using smart phones or tablets to manage energy systems, including Nest. Solar energy companies like SolarCity also have smart phone apps which allow their consumers to see how much solar energy



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On the internet of things, security is still a concern that needs to be addressed. Photo by Yuri Samoilov.

they are using.

While advancements in information technology, including IoT, will make the transition towards a clean energy economy easier, it also has possible severe privacy and risks which governments, and utilities like Manitoba Hydro should watch out for.

A 2012 US congressional report suggests smart meter technology could become profitable to third-party including criminals, who are looking to hack into data from a charged electric vehicle to plan a house hold robbery.

Hackers have already tapped into digitized energy systems globally.

Case in point, in 2013, dubbed the “Dragonfly incident,” renewable energy companies were targeted by hackers, thought to be from Eastern Europe, with spam, while reaching

three company networks in a span of a few months, according to Bloomberg.

Meanwhile, in 2010, hackers were believed to strike into a Puerto Rico utility, underestimating their usage, which caused the utility to lose \$400 million US, and caused them to call in the FBI to investigate.

Raj Samani, Chief Technology Officer For Europe, Middle East and Africa at McAfee Inc., a division of Intel Corp., told Bloomberg in 2013 that “Attacks against the grid have moved from theory to reality.”

Marc Goodman, digital security expert, and author of the 2015 book Future Crimes, went further suggesting “The Internet of Things will become nothing more than the Internet of Things to be hacked, a cornucopia of malicious opportunity for those with the

means and motivation to exploit our common technological security.”

While many utilities are working towards securing the grid system, including spending millions and adding cyber security surcharges, much work needs to be done. The next big challenge for environmentalists, and cleantech supporters will be to ensure our Energy Internet system is secure from hackers, malware, and other security concerns, which could put a kink in the renewable energy revolution.

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