

► BUILDING CAPACITY



Darryl Booth, MBA

Building Capacity Through an Accountability Framework

Editor's Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the practice of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the *Journal* publishes the Building Capacity column to educate, reinforce, and build on successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

Column contributors are guest authors. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of NEHA.

Darryl Booth has been monitoring regulatory and data tracking needs of environmental public health agencies for over 20 years. He is the manager of U.S. operations for Hedgerow Software.

I met with a long-time colleague this week. Our careers took different paths. While we talk less frequently, it is always fascinating to delve into her world. In her position—a dream job with a dream company—the leadership employs a “corporate” vocabulary, characterized by rapid-fire acronyms, initialisms, and vague jargon. “It’s meaningless,” she complained. “I often have to go back and ask what was really agreed on.”

As Lucy Kellaway of the Financial Times has noted, corporate language often sounds like action without substance. For example, “Bob will ping Sally by year-end and circle back on the KPIs to ensure alignment” is the kind of sentence that makes everyone nod while nothing actually happens (or is expected to happen). Kellaway calls it “corporate guff.” Perhaps we can borrow the term as “government guff” for our line of work.

Just for fun, browse Kellaway’s Guffpedia for a listing of business jargon and corporate nonsense at <https://ig.ft.com/sites/guffpedia>.

Government and public health are replete with acronyms and initialisms, a practice that makes insiders feel efficient and leaves everybody else feeling somewhat confused and uninitiated.

Accountability

One word that I have seen during my entire career is accountability. It is the word that is emphasized when something is both important and attributable to the actions of a single person or group.

But the word choice left me wondering. When my boss says, “Help Quinn understand that they are accountable for getting the program going,” does that mean that Quinn could be fired or disciplined? Do we have an agreement

on the task and implications between Quinn and our leadership? What if things change? What if this task cannot be accomplished?

According to author and speaker Peter Bregman in his online essay, *The Right Way to Hold People Accountable*, the phrasing “accountable” is effective and fair when we have clarity in five elements:

1. Expectations
2. Capability
3. Measurement
4. Feedback
5. Consequences

Expectations

Here, leaders should invest the time to define what is expected and the potential consequences. Bregman counsels setting expectations on outcomes, measures, and methods. In my world, the definition of “done” is sometimes poorly defined. If the software works, is it done? What about testing, documentation, and training materials? Those elements would go into my definition of done.

Under methods, we could use the example of delegation. If Quinn has authority and permission to delegate, but those resources are unavailable, then that expected methodology is not really valid.

Capability

Does Quinn possess the ability, authority, and resources to achieve the goal? If not, how is that gap going to be closed and by whom? Is that person also accountable for Quinn’s outcomes?

Measurement

It seems obvious, but I will point out that this element is key. The definition of done

is usually nuanced. The element can be best accomplished by breaking down the objective into smaller, measurable parts. Here is the opportunity to avoid surprises. Leadership hates surprises.

Feedback

The ongoing discourse on the objective and its parts should go both ways. That is, Quinn can tell the leader where they are struggling and need help, and the leader can augment and clarify Quinn's understanding of the task. This feedback also covers the inevitable "things change" question.

Consequences

By including consequences, Bregman taps into my basic question: What does it really mean to be accountable?

Bregman suggests that leaders have three choices: **repeat**, **reward**, or **release**:

- Repeat if the five steps above were not followed effectively. This responsibility is shared by the employee and leadership.
- Reward if successful. This choice could mean praise, promotion, or something similar.
- Release from role, position, or authority if Quinn could not be accountable.

So, accountability is a participative exercise in which leadership and the organization work

continuously through the five elements, which include making adjustments all along the way.

I suppose it goes without saying that release should not be needed very often and, even then, release would rarely mean termination.

Building Capacity

Bregman's model establishes for me that accountability has little to do with termination or punishment. It is much more about discipline to adhere to a process. The five elements are really a test of leadership, setting up Quinn and the whole organization for success.

When we talk about building capacity in this column, we are exploring strategies to accomplish and expand on the important work done among environmental health professionals. The call to action is twofold. First, to encourage and expect accountability, which is a necessary concept. The second is to acknowledge the entire framework around accountability, a framework that seems to be equal parts leadership, communication, and action. Without that framework and a commitment to it, perhaps one should refrain from choosing the word accountability in this sense.

All this information is to respectfully suggest that accountability is a superpower, invoked when the stakes call for the organization's full commitment. In my own organi-

zation, I think I will choose my words carefully before I utter the word accountable. But when I do, I will know that leaders also are, of course, accountable. ✨

Corresponding Author: Darryl Booth, U.S. Operations Manager, Hedgerow Software.
Email: darrylbooth@hedgerowsoftware.com

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The *Journal* seeks guest authors for the Building Capacity column. Our goal is to provide a platform to share capacity building successes occurring across the country and within different sectors of the environmental health profession, including academia, private industry, and state, local, tribal, and territorial health agencies. Submissions will be reviewed by the NEHA technical advisors for data and technology and *Journal* staff for appropriate content, relevance, and adherence to submission guidelines. To learn more about the submission process and guidelines, please visit www.neha.org/contributors.

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