

# **INSPIRING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

Unlocking the  
brain's secrets to  
employee engagement,  
accountability,  
and results

**ELAINA NOELL**

Inspiring Accountability in the Workplace  
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Managers who motivate create moments.

Leaders who inspire create momentum.

—ELAINA NOELL

The final time Ralphie was put in front of the maze, BOOM! He recognized the maze (associated with expected reward) and experienced a dopamine hit. He traveled through and reached the end, anticipating and expecting cheese. But this time...there wasn't any cheese.

Ralphie's dopamine plummeted, dipping below the normal baseline. This drop is especially devastating because his brain, expecting cheese, was already experiencing dopamine in anticipation of the reward. When this expectation was not met, *the experience was much worse than if Ralphie had never expected cheese initially.*

You can see the relationship between the primary dopamine impact and one's baseline, the sensory input that becomes associated with expecting the reward (**cue**), and experiencing (or not experiencing) the reward itself.

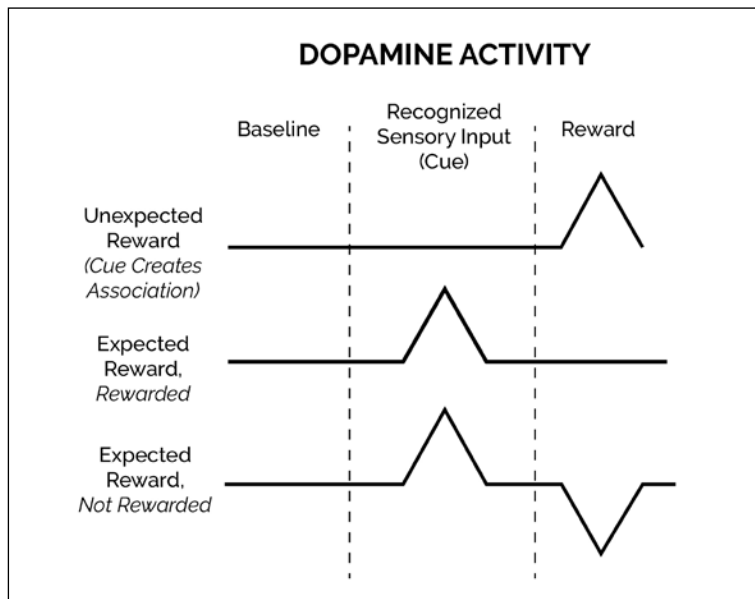


Figure inspired by "Reward prediction and subsequent dopamine activity model" by Rebecca Clements.

One clear explanation of how dopamine is released in response to reward prediction and learning is from Trevor Haynes, a research technician in the Department of Neurobiology at Harvard Medical School. In his 2018 article, "Dopamine, Smartphones and You: A Battle for Your Time," Haynes writes, "Unexpected rewards increase the activity of dopamine neurons, acting as positive feedback signals for the brain regions associated with the preceding behavior," like when Ralphie unexpectedly discovered cheese. Haynes continues, "As learning takes place, the timing of activity will shift until it occurs upon the cue alone," like Ralphie getting the dopamine boost from seeing the maze, "with the expected reward having (little or) no additional effect. And should the expected reward not be received, dopamine activity drops, sending a negative feedback signal to the relevant parts of the brain, weakening the positive association." Haynes highlights that the dopamine reward system works off of *anticipation* and *reinforcement* of the association between a particular stimulus or sequence of behaviors and the feel-good reward that follows.

He explains, "Every time a response to a stimulus results in a reward, these associations become stronger through a process called 'long-term potentiation.' This process strengthens frequently used connections between brain cells called neurons by increasing the intensity at which they respond to particular stimuli or sensory information."

Haynes states that this neurological feature is why individuals continue to play casino games. If you've ever played slots, you'll have experienced the intense anticipation while those wheels are turning — the moments between the lever pull and the final reveal provide time for our dopamine neurons to increase their activity, creating a rewarding feeling within the anticipation, simply by playing the game. This keeps us engaged in playing.

But eventually, as negative outcomes accumulate, the loss of dopamine activity incentivizes us to disengage. Haynes concludes: "Thus, a balance between positive and negative outcomes must be maintained in order to keep our brains engaged." We must experience enough

engagement before, during, and after efforts. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 10.

- **Inevitable Results:** When followed consistently, the Results Model makes getting the results you need inevitable. With regular Revisiting and calibration on the biggest problem areas, it unpacks both overt and hidden obstacles to productivity and accountability. Be it related to behaviors, changes, outcomes, or goals, success is inevitable when Revisiting is unavoidable.

The Results Model encompasses the best of Inspiring Accountability’s methodology. Taken in tandem with the models discussed in later chapters — such as the Hierarchy of Human Needs and the Engagement and Experience Loop — you will be provided with the proper tools to bring accountability to your team in a positive and productive way. These key concepts add substantial power and influence to what may appear as a simple model.

### Introducing the Results Model

The Results Model consists of seven important steps that can be utilized for success in companies of two, 2,000, or 200,000.

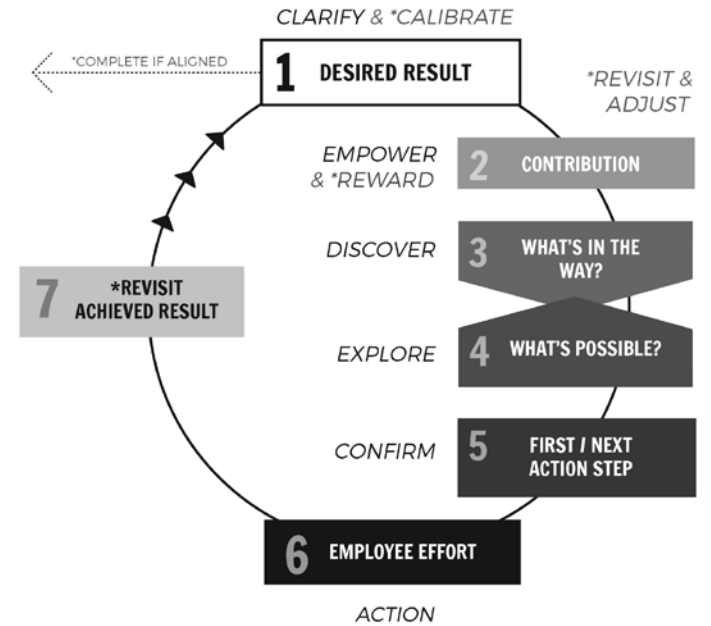
Let’s take a look at the Results Model, see it in action, and outline each step.

The Inspiring Accountability Results Model is a process to get better and better results from your team (**proactive accountability**), as well as a positive and productive method to respond when results aren’t met (**responsive accountability**).

As a leader, you’ll use the model to Revisit during **Results Conversations** on their own or as part of one-on-one meetings with your employees. You’ll be able to use the informal method of asking, “What’s in the way?” and “What’s possible?” in every accountability conversation you have.

## INSPIRING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE RESULTS MODEL®

Your Ultimate Accountability Tool to Getting Results



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### Steps of the Results Model — A Quick Breakdown

Let’s look at a brief summary of what’s accomplished in the seven steps of the Results Model. Consider these an overview to see the big picture, and the following chapters will provide more detailed discussions of the concepts and how to implement the steps.

## The Results Model — Clarify the Desired Result Using the Accountability Anchor Conversion Process

The Accountability Anchor Conversion process creates a clearly defined Desired Result that an employee works toward and by which a leader calibrates the employee's success. The converted Desired Result becomes an effective accountability tool. A leader can then effectively “anchor” the employee to a clear expectation, closing the distance between the actual result and Desired Result.

Much like a ship at sea, the Desired Result keeps the employee tethered to the ask, task, or project and is a clear point of reference for what is expected and what defines success.

Desired Results with vague success criteria lead to equally vague results. If you want specific results that meet your exact expectations, you start by clearly defining these expectations for your employees. Employees feel it's unfair to be held accountable for a missed result if they misunderstood an expectation that could have been clarified.

Without an anchor, employees can drift, and drifting employees don't know if they've made progress. Employees should know how well they are meeting expectations to remain incentivized to engage. Desired Results are only strong “accountability anchors” when they are clear enough to calibrate specifically how far an employee is from where you want them to be. Employees should always be able to return to the anchor when they need clarity and direction, and you will return to the anchor to keep them accountable and on track. The goal is to create a Desired Results so clear that, when used in the Results Model, it becomes inevitable that an employee will successfully achieve it.

To inspire accountability (and engagement), employees must know the following four components, all of which the Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist clearly addresses with actionable clarity:

- What you expect
- Why the ask or improvement is worth doing
- What details will ensure expectations are exactly met
- How to start



Once you have mastered establishing strong accountability anchors, you will create a more productive and rewarding environment that saves everyone time and energy.

### The Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist

Take a moment to think of a current challenge you'd like an employee to improve upon or Desired Result you'd like to see an employee achieve. Use this as a working example as we go through the following process to clarify your Desired Result into an effective accountability tool, starting with this overview checklist:

- 1. Identify the Desired Result
- 2. Is there a clear moment of achievement?
- 3. Is it achievable within three months or less?
- 4. Is it stated as what you want (not as stopping what you don't want)?
- 5. What are the Actionably Clear Expectations and Specifications?
- 6. What is the contribution context?
- 7. Is it confirmed in writing?

#### 1. Identify the Desired Result

Whether it's an ask, task, project, or behavior, start with the Desired Result you want the employee to achieve. For your employee, the Desired Result is a positive synonym for a new expectation or request for change.

## Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist — A Quick Reference

Use this section as a reference guide to convert a Desired Result to an effective accountability tool, and soon this process will occur more naturally with very little time and effort.

### 1. Identify the Desired Result

- What do you want?
- What do you want to be different?
- What will it look like when it's different?

### 2. Is there a clear moment of achievement? What is the clear moment when the employee will know "I did it!" and where you can offer "You did it!"?

- Where is the first place an employee can see evidence of this success?
- How will my employee and I both know the expectation has been exactly met?
- How can I be more specific about what successful completion looks like?
- What definitions are being assumed or would benefit from a clearer definition?
- Remember, this is clarifying what it looks like when the result is fulfilled, not how to get there.

### 3. Is the Desired Result achievable within three months or less?

- What's the soonest indication I could see that progress has been made?
- What is the first evidence of success or sign of progress that can be completed within three months?

### 4. Is the Desired Result stated as what you want (not as stopping what you don't want)?

- Is what I'm asking for reflecting the positive result, behavior, or change I want to see versus want to stop?

### 5. What are the Actionably Clear Expectations and Specifications (ACES)?

- What does the employee need to remember to include to be successful?
- Is there anything they've often forgotten to include or be in compliance with?
- Is there anything I tend to forget to include that would be useful to point out proactively?

### 6. What is the contribution context?

- Why does the Desired Result matter beyond personal preference? What is important about the Desired Result? To whom or what does it meaningfully contribute?
- What is the negative impact of not having the Desired Result currently? To whom, what, when, how, or where does it negatively contribute?
- What is the expected positive impact of having the Desired Result fulfilled? To whom, what, when, how, or where will it positively contribute?
- How will fulfilling this help the employee fulfill the need to be seen as contributing, competent, and important?

### 7. Is it confirmed in writing?

- Add to their Results List or offer in accessible and agreed upon writing.



INSPIRING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE  
**Hierarchy of Human Needs  
 in the Workplace®**



from harassment and verbal abuse. It’s no secret that everyone deserves to feel emotionally safe at work, and given that harassment training is required by law, there’s great progress toward making this a given. Yet, until a company has strong values and a firm accountability system to adhere to those values, emotional safety may not be pronounced among employees.

When an employee is hired, they opt-in for their pay. Interestingly, when employees feel they are *fairly* and *adequately* paid, money is not the foremost need. You’ll learn more about this later in this chapter.

**Level 4: Baseline Culture Needs —  
 Connection and Belonging**

**Primary Neurochemical:** Oxytocin when fulfilled

**Primary Source:** Company culture, values, peers, hiring a “good fit”

**Questions Asked by Employee:**

- How well do I fit in this company culture?
- What do I need to do to belong?
- How will I know I belong?

My experience working with clients has revealed that the need for connection and belonging (and oxytocin) in the workplace varies individually more than any other need. I’ve seen connection and belonging with peers compensate for a manager not fulfilling the top three needs (covered next). This can retain an employee...for a while.

Take Gallup’s controversial employee engagement survey question: “Do you have a best friend at work?” In Gallup’s 2018 article defending the survey question, entitled “Why We Need Best Friends at Work,” author Annamarie Mann cites, “Our research has repeatedly shown a concrete link between having a best friend at work and the amount of effort employees expend in their job.”

Mann continues, “When employees possess a deep sense of affiliation with their team members, they are driven to take positive actions that benefit the business — actions they may not otherwise even consider if they did not have strong relationships with their coworkers.”

**Level 5: Baseline Safety Needs —  
 Safety, Health, and Well-Being**

**Primary Neurochemical:** Negative neurochemicals when threatened (Adrenaline, Norepinephrine, Cortisol)

**Primary Source:** Company

**Questions Asked by Employee:**

- How emotionally and physically safe do I feel at work?
- How much do I feel a general sense of well-being?
- How fair and adequate is my paycheck (financial security) for the work I do?

Physically safe environments include standards like clean, running water, electricity, and a sense of security. An emotionally safe work environment, however, can be more subjective. An emotionally safe work environment is where an employee feels accepted and free

What motivates the brain to create these associations that automate aspects of our experience? When it comes to the brain, safety is the top motivator, led by the creature brain, and these associations create a sense of safe predictability.

As discussed in previous chapters, the oldest part of our brain, the reactive creature brain, is highly protective when it senses perceived threats to our safety. The operative word here is “perceived,” as the reactive creature brain doesn’t clearly differentiate between physical and emotional safety or between real threats and imagined threats.

The creature brain’s seniority means that our brains place extremely high value on keeping us safe from perceived threats, and the creature brain often becomes our brains’ first responder.

To our creature brain, predictability is coded as safe, whereas uncertainty or not knowing what’s next or what to expect is generally coded as less safe. This need for predictability makes it attractive for our brains to try to group familiar or similar sensory input into an automated input-response loop.

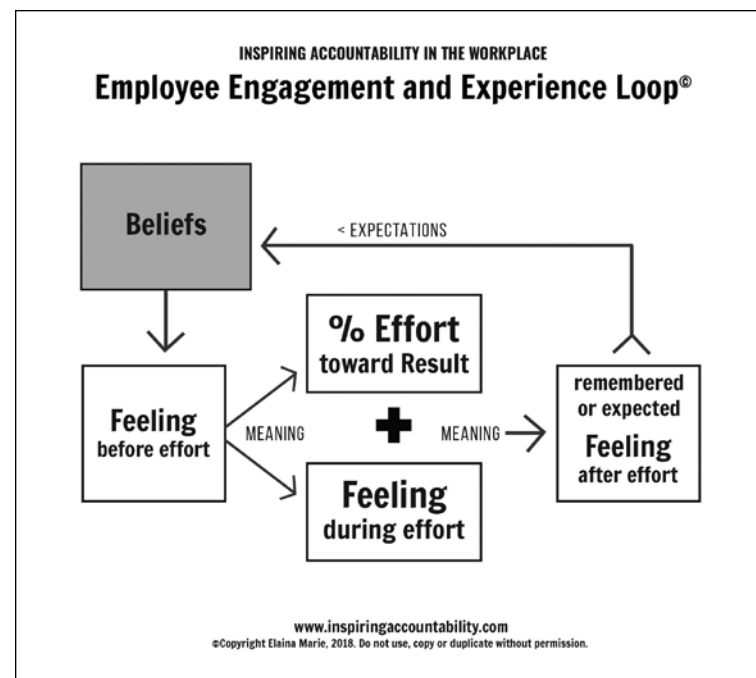
The brain creates a safe sense of predictability by connecting dots between situational experiences and ultimate outcomes. This data is then used to create a subconscious loop of association and expectation.

Let’s recap what we’ve learned so far:

- Engagement is driven by feelings.
- Feelings start as neurochemicals.
- These feelings get triggered positively or negatively by how our needs are fulfilled or threatened.

Next, you’ll learn how this loop comes full circle:

- We create meaning, beliefs, and expectations based on these needs.
- These beliefs and expectations become our experience.



There’s one more important step that solidifies the Engagement and Experience Loop: *How we create meaning, beliefs, and expectations.*

### Meaning

Take a moment to consider differences between feeling nervous and feeling excited. Physiologically, there isn’t much of a difference. Our heart beats faster, our breathing accelerates, and our palms get sweaty. *The difference is the **meaning** we attach to what we’re experiencing or expecting to experience.*

Meaning is the explanation we create to make sense of a new experience, which usually determines our response (how we feel) before, during, or after the experience. Meaning is how we make sense of a moment. The details of what’s happening remain the same, but the meaning we make creates different feelings about it and, therefore, completely different experiences.

If we expect the event will result in something positive for us, we

You might've noticed the non-why questions explore possibilities from a rational, exploratory purview, whereas "why" invites a defense.

Imagine you took a few wrong turns on a route home you thought you could easily maneuver. To get back on track, you load your navigational app and enter your destination. Imagine, instead of quickly getting the next step to the most direct route home, the route pauses to load while you get berated with questions like: "Why did you make so many wrong turns? Why aren't you at your destination yet? Have you thought about how much time you've lost due to the mistake you made?"

It's easy to see that these questions are unnecessary, a waste of time, and likely triggering. All that matters is getting back on track as efficiently as possible. The only priority for both a navigational system and an inspiring leader is to assist employees in getting from where they are to where you want them to be as efficiently as possible. Asking triggering "why" questions unnecessarily delays getting to the Desired Result.

## Engaging Leadership Language: A Quick Language Guide

We've learned some ways language reveals major distinctions between a traditional accountability manager and an Inspiring Accountability leader. By being intentional with your language, you'll see these open up greater opportunities to empower and engage (for improved proactive accountability) and contribute to reducing triggering experiences for your employees (for improved responsive accountability).

Here's a quick reference guide that reviews and expands on additional components of Engaging Leadership Language.

### Require Engagement

**Inviting ( Not requiring engagement) vs. Engaging Questions (requiring brain engagement and participation):** Expect and require a thoughtful answer versus inviting a yes or no response, avoiding *is, are, can, or do*, and use *what* or *how* instead.

- "What ideas do you have?" instead of "Do you have any ideas?"

**Asking to Develop:** Empower employees to develop their problem-solving skill set. Ask three engaging questions before sharing your opinion, even when they ask you for yours first.

- "What do you think is the best response?" instead of telling them what you think the best response is first.

### Inspire Possibility

**Imagining and Envisioning:**

- "What do you imagine is possible...?"
- *What do you envision for...?"*

**Obstacles:**

- "What got in the way?"

**Solutions:**

- "What's possible?" and, "Given what's in the way, what's possible?"

**Trying a new behavior for a period of time:**

- "What do you think of **trying** this out for [an amount of time]?"

**When vs. If:**

- "**When** you [successfully practice a new behavior, achieve result, etc.]" vs. "**If** you [successfully practice a new behavior, etc.]."

**Preventing Feeling Overwhelmed:**

- "Where can you start?"

## Perception Language

**Noticing and Appearing:** Shares an experience through your perception with room for their perception, versus an accusation.

- "I noticed you were upset in that meeting."
- Similarly: "*It seemed like...*" or "*It looked like...*"

**Thinking and Feeling:** "Thinking" and "feeling" give context to the recipient that you're on their side and won't shut them down if they speak candidly.

- "What did you think about...?" "How would you feel about...?"

**Wondering:** By staying light and curious, you're showing there's room for other opinions.

- "*I'm wondering if you...*"

## Model Accountability

**Acknowledging your own contribution first:**

- "*I realized I could have...*" or "*I'm sorry.*" or "*I wish I would have...*"

## Avoid Triggering Language

**Talking About "We" Instead of "You" or "I":** Using "we" is less triggering than "you," even if you rhetorically mean "you."

- Hear the difference in "*What can **you** do about it?*" versus "*What can **we** do about this?*"

**Remove the Personal Reference:** Sometimes it's better to leave the "we" out and keep it neutral. For example, asking "*What got in the way?*" instead of "*What's wrong with you?*"

- "*What can be done about this?*" instead of "*What can you do about this?*"

**Asking:** Asking instead of telling is vastly more empowering for an employee. Ultimately, it's better for engagement and receptivity, as many people are triggered being told what to do. Asking is more respectful, and in applicable circumstances, telling reduces empowerment and accountability because whoever generates the idea has the most inherent accountability for the idea.

- "*Could you/Can you...?*" instead of "*I want you to...*" or "*Do this...*"

**Acknowledging the Positive to Soften the Negative:** Genuine positive acknowledgment builds some neurochemical currency, and at a minimum, softens the negative feedback.

- "I saw that you \_\_\_\_\_, which is great. I am curious about [this other thing that's a part of it...], though? Could you speak to that a bit?"

**But:**

- **Avoid:** "*You're doing great, but you could improve here.*"
- **Instead:** use "and" instead. "But" cancels out the acknowledgment.

**Should:**

- **Every "should" can be a question with "could"**
- **Avoid:** "*You should have done this.*"
- **Instead:** "*What could you have done to get a different result?*"

**Why:**

- **Avoid:** "*Why did this happen?*"
- **Instead:** use the less confrontational, "*What got in the way?*"
- You'll get the same answer with better results.

**Dealing with People:** We deal with problems, not people. It's much better to use phrasing such as: talk with, have a conversation with, address, work on, brainstorm, work on a solution with, etc.

- **Avoid:** "*I have to go deal with Paul.*"

- **Instead:** *"I need to have a conversation with Paul."*
- **Avoid:** *"I'm dealing with the marketing department."*
- **Instead:** *"I'm working with the marketing department to resolve..."*

### Weak Accountability Language from Employees

#### They/Them:

- *"They — the higher ups — don't let me do..."*

**"Trying" to avoid committing:** Trying to do better next time without clear action steps won't effectively activate Accountability Attention to break old patterns. It's equal to, "I'll try to remember to do this differently," but the brain doesn't work this way. The brain doesn't "try" to do things differently, it just runs established response patterns and programs. You have to update the program before you need to use it so it will activate and run as you'd like in the future. An intention to *try* to remember won't change anything without a plan for *how* to remember.

- *"I'll try to do better."*

#### Idea vs. Commitment:

- *"I could do..."* versus *"I will do..."*

There are myriad ways to use Engaging Leadership Language to get better results from your team in positive and productive ways. Keep employees engaged, receptive, and resourceful, provide more room for employees to be accountable for solutions, and inspire stronger employee contribution.

### Integration Questions:

1. Where is the first place you'd like to start developing your 4C's to be more caring, curious, careful, and comfortable in your approach to providing feedback?
2. How can you start using Engaging Questions instead of Inviting Questions?
3. How can you practice increasing your perception language?
4. What other Engaging Leadership Language tips do you see bringing you better results from your team? Which three would you like to start actively practicing?

### Key Take-Aways:

1. How you approach a conversation greatly impacts how it ends. Using a positive approach for negative feedback helps the employee expect a conversation that will end positively, contributing to their engagement, receptiveness, and resourcefulness throughout the conversation.
2. The **Four C's** approach for accountability conversations will help you establish a positive and productive mindset for approaching uncomfortable accountability conversations. The Four C's establish you as **caring, curious, careful, and comfortable**.
3. When your employee isn't performing to expectations, be curious about *what's in the way* of them meeting their needs and *what's possible* for their growth as an employee.
4. If you care about results, you must also care about the people getting the results.
5. Employees who feel great get great results. Employees who feel seen as contributing, competent, and important provide their best effort toward results. A caring approach, even when providing negative feedback, can keep their needs and dignity intact.
6. Feedback should always leave the recipient inspired to improve.
7. When an employee feels you genuinely want to support their development, you can have radically more positive and productive conversations.

Create **Proactive Accountability Measures** to make it nearly impossible for employees to fail.

Leave the problem-focused traditional accountability in the past, and let the Results Model evolve your team to be curious, solution-seeking, and initiative-taking contributors. As you utilize **Possibility Thinking**, ask, “What’s in the way?” and “What’s possible?” so employees begin to think this way themselves, relieving you of the frustrating and now outdated method of pressuring, pushing, and pulling for results.

While all of these steps are in service to your employees, they will serve you as well —exponentially — as you continue to inspire the best from your employees.

***Above all, make it work for you.*** Sometimes you will need to fire an employee. Or if you’ve offered rounds of Revisiting, sometimes you need to directly ask an employee what’s going on without using Inspiring Accountability language. Now that you have the foundation, you can improvise what works best for you and your team.

For unanswered questions, explore for yourself how to fill in the blanks. Visit [inspiringaccountability.com](http://inspiringaccountability.com) for more resources and services. Hire me to help you implement a culture of accountability through training, coaching, and consulting. Or be your own best resource and schedule a personal revisiting with this book and its concepts to continuously improve your leadership effectiveness.

As Napoleon Hill says, “Start where you stand, and work with whatever tools you may have at your command.” From here, anything is possible.

For engagement and accountability consulting, leadership coaching, and training consultations, or to access additional resources, please visit [www.inspiringaccountability.com](http://www.inspiringaccountability.com).

## Glossary

**Accountability Anchor:** A clearly defined Desired Result that an employee works toward and by which a leader calibrates the employee’s success. With an Accountability Anchor, a leader can effectively “anchor” the employee to a clear expectation, closing the distance between the actual result and Desired Result. Primarily created using the Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist.

**Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist:** A series of criteria to convert an expectation to an effective accountability tool. The output is a clear Desired Result qualified by Inspiring Accountability methodology that can be productively Revisited using the Results Model.

**Accountability Attention:** The extra attention our brains provide to efforts and their corresponding Desired Results simply because there is expected and non-negotiable Revisiting.

**Actionable Clarity:** Knowing exact steps, tools, and strategies to take action to get the results needed, and a crystal-clear concept of what success looks like when expectations are fulfilled.

**Actionably Clear Expectations and Specifications (ACES):** ACES provide a clear reference sheet for exact requirements needed to achieve the Desired Result. ACES take into account the details, format, and specifications required to successfully meet expectations. Leaders can maintain an ACES checklist to have in meetings to quickly evaluate what details could possibly be included, especially if important specs are forgotten from time to time.

**Active Effort:** Effort with productive action, usually in an energized state of engagement. Opposite of Anxious Effort.

**Adjusting:** The Results Model process of Revising any aspect that will help an employee better meet expectations. These can include adjusting the Desired Result, the effort toward the result, an aspect in the way, or expanding on what's possible.

**Adrenaline:** A hormone secreted by the adrenal glands, especially in conditions of stress. Increases rates of blood circulation, breathing, and carbohydrate metabolism, and prepares muscles for exertion. Also called Epinephrine.

**Agile Project Management Methodology:** A popular format of managing projects from an almost real-time calibration of what's possible.

**Anxious Effort:** Avoidant, unpleasant, and unproductive effort caused by too much uncertainty or too little optimism in approaching a task, usually when we expect the outcome might damage our ability to be seen as contributing, competent, or important. The antidote is having actionable clarity, feeling confident (perceived capability), feeling the task is important (contribution context), and being optimistic about the outcome.

**Assumptions:** Subconscious or hidden beliefs.

**Baseline of Expectations:** When we are exposed to new information or a new experience, we eventually make enough meaning to figure out what we believe we can reliably expect from a co-worker, a manager, and the world in general.

**Belief:** A decided generalization about our experience that helps predict and create future experiences to make life predictable and therefore safer. Beliefs then become the filter for what we see and hear, directly informing our behavior and determining our decisions. Meanings make sense of a moment, but beliefs are generalized to make sense of related moments *forever*, and are applied to every future moment of similar context, solidifying the loop.

**Brain:** See Creature Brain or Human Brain.

**Burnout:** When employees are running on neurochemical fumes or at full-on depletion, sometimes associated with long-term Anxious Effort. Employees want to work because it is the means to contribute meaningfully, but they need to be neurochemically refueled to persevere through today's overwhelming workplace demands.

**Calibration:** The act of comparing what was achieved with the Desired Result, determining how precisely an employee met expectations.

**Capability:** One's abilities and the current capacity to access and demonstrate these abilities. Humans have more ability than capacity to utilize it.

**Careful:** As a component of the Four C's approach for accountability conversations, the stance of being conscientious to acknowledge the part of the behavior or intent that was positive and that leaders want to continue seeing, despite the other requested changes in execution.

**Caring:** As a component of the Four C's approach for accountability conversations, providing feedback is in service of employee development, not simply as a means of preference or critique.

**Closed-Ended Questions:** Questions that prompt a yes-or-no answer. They don't engage someone as much in creating accountability because they don't require actual consideration to answer.

**Comfortable:** As a component of the Four C's approach for accountability conversations, beginning the conversation modeling the comfortable tone, body language, and mindset you want your employee to maintain throughout the conversation. For many leaders, looking at these development opportunities as conversations instead of confrontations, in addition to establishing a curious, caring and careful stance, helps create a more conversational and comfortable approach.

**Competent:** Being seen with the ability to meet expectations in any given moment. The second most important human need in the workplace to influence engagement and accountability. Often,

the most triggering of the Hierarchy of Human Needs in the Workplace when threatened.

**Confidence:** Belief in one's ability to be competent (successfully meet expectations). Confidence significantly influences an employee's engagement and actual success. Confidence is a created perception, one that leaders can almost completely construct, and it's as easy to build up as it is to tear down.

**Contribution:** The action (effort) toward benefiting something or someone bigger than oneself in a valuable or meaningful way. To be fulfilled, employees must know how their work contributes (the resulting effect or impact), which is most often communicated or reinforced by his or her leader. The most important of the Hierarchy of Human Needs in the Workplace to influence engagement and accountability.

**Contribution Context:** Intentionally and proactively communicating why an ask, task, or project is meaningful. It highlights why the work an employee is doing qualifies as a meaningful contribution.

**Contribution Conversations:** Primarily used for longer-term goals. The contribution conversation approach leaves the employee reaching to contribute instead of the manager pulling for it. The employee will determine how they contribute, how their efforts can best be utilized, and ask for what they need to be successful.

**Cortisol:** A steroid hormone commonly called "the stress hormone." Cortisol curbs functions that would be nonessential in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system, and other growth processes to prioritize systems more beneficial to the threat.

**Creature Brain:** Slang term for the parts of the brain that manage our threat-response system, commonly known as "fight, freeze or flight." This part of the brain does not think rationally and operates mostly from associations that connect a perceived threat with a physical neurochemical response.

**Cue:** The sensory input, or what is noticed with the five senses, that becomes associated with expecting reward.

**Culture Values and Action Steps (CVAS):** Words or short phrases that describe how employees are "expected" to consistently act, interact, and prioritize; defined with actionable clarity. General descriptors and personalized action steps are added.

**Curious:** As a component of the Four C's approach for accountability conversations, the stance of wondering, "What's in the way?" of an under-performing employee trying to get their needs to be seen as contributing, competent, and important. This also includes asking yourself, as a leader, "What's possible?" for their growth. Curiosity combines the Results Model questions with the Hierarchy of Human Needs.

**Daily Standup Meeting:** Inspired by Agile Project Management Methodology, a quick "standup" meeting held daily for a team, maximizing the accountability in more frequent revisiting. In Inspiring Accountability's format, this includes reporting: 1) "How did you contribute successfully yesterday?" 2) "What's in the way today?" 3) "What's possible today?"

**Desired Result:** A goal, objective or expectation clarified enough using the Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist to be used to inspire accountability and be Revisited in the Results Model.

**Dignity:** The sense of inherent worth that comes from being human. A sense of dignity is exactly what is honored and protected when we feel that we are contributing, competent, and important.

**Disengagement:** Feeling negatively and hesitant about a task, resulting in less enthusiasm and effort during the task.

**Dopamine:** Neurochemical released with a feeling of "I did it!" When it comes to personal accomplishment, reaching a goal, or completing a task, dopamine rewards us for favorable behaviors and motivates us to repeat them.

**Effort:** The conscious and subconscious choice to apply an amount of capability through attention and action.



**Employee Engagement:** The percentage of *effort* toward the results and the *feeling* experienced during this effort.

**Empowerment:** Actual or perceived authority and external ability to take action to fulfill one's role and responsibilities. Except for one's perception of their own authority, empowerment is determined by factors outside of oneself.

**Engaged (in work):** How much are employees feeling seen as contributing meaningfully, competently, and importantly? And how much effort are they offering?

**Engagement:** The experience of feeling engaged, having interest, putting in effort, taking action, and feeling good doing it.

**Engagement and Experience Indicators:** Synonym for neurochemicals.

**Engagement and Experience Loop:** Feeling confident and optimistic about engaging in a task, on a project, or with a person, resulting in positive feelings and effort during the action or interaction that solidify a pattern of engagement.

**Engaging Leadership Language:** Language tools that leaders can use to inspire accountability and get better results in conversations with employees, primarily facilitating engagement, receptiveness, and resourcefulness.

**Engaging Questions:** Asking a question that requires thought, attention, and a participatory response. These "open-ended" questions usually start with *what* or *how*, and require the brain to formulate a unique answer and thoughtful response. Alternative to "Inviting Questions."

**Excuses:** Self-protection in an attempt to justify why we didn't meet a Desired Result. Excuses are golden opportunities to unearth and address what's in the way so leaders can explore what's possible.

**Expectations:** Predictions about what will happen or be true whenever we experience familiar sensory input.

**Explanation Meaning:** Creating meaning to rationalize what's happening. Explanation meaning answers, "Why is this happening? What is it about me, another person, group, situation, or environment that is making this happen?"

**Four C's:** Key components of one's leadership approach that establish a positive and productive mindset for approaching historically uncomfortable accountability conversations. The Four C's are to be caring, curious, careful, and comfortable.

**Guilt:** A feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, whether real or imagined.

**Hierarchy of Human Needs in the Workplace:** Inspiring Accountability's modern version of Maslow's hierarchy tailored to address employees' needs in the workplace, giving leaders clear guidance on what to address when engagement and accountability are low.

**Human Brain:** Slang term for the parts of the brain that manage rational thought and resourcefulness; primarily the prefrontal cortex.

**Important:** A perception of being personally and professionally valued. The third most important human need in the workplace to influence engagement and accountability.

**Impossible Expectation Threshold:** When what's expected feels more impossible than inspiring or trying to focus on too many behavioral changes at once. Once the threshold is crossed, employees respond as hopeless and worried about disappointing their leader, not inspired.

**Inattentional Blindness:** What we choose to pay attention to can make us consciously blind to even the most obvious of conflicting evidence. Contributes to how difficult it is for our conscious brain to notice or care about exceptions to our beliefs. Also called perceptual blindness.

**Indignant:** Feeling or showing anger or annoyance to prove we are worthy. This often looks like getting angry or resentful, grasping to prove one's self, acting out, disconnecting, or shutting down completely.

**Innovation and Efficiency Meetings:** Regular team meetings held every one to three months to unearth what's in the way of success and to brainstorm what's possible to improve innovation and efficiency.

**Inspiring Accountability:** A modern leadership methodology including proactive and responsive accountability strategies that

inspire employees to be engaged in their work, receptive to feedback and improvement, and resourceful toward results.

**Inviting Questions:** Asking a question that only invites the brain to passively respond, producing a simple answer like yes or no. These “closed-ended” questions often start with *is, are, can, or do*. These may *imply* a more thorough response is needed but don’t actually require it by the nature of the question. Use Engaging Questions instead.

**Leadership Principles and Action Steps (LPAS):** Leadership values that define what it means to be a leader at a given company, highlighted with actionable clarity. General descriptors and personalized action steps are added.

**Meaning:** The explanation we create to make sense of a new experience, which usually determines our response (how we feel) before, during, or after the experience. Meaning is how we make sense of any given moment. The details of what’s happening may be the same, but the meaning we make creates different feelings and, therefore, a completely different experience.

**Micromanaging:** When a manager’s behavior causes the employee to sense a distrust of his or her competence. The better alternative is to check in with the intention to see if the employee needs any support to stay on track to meet the result, supporting competence instead of doubting it.

**Natural Consequences:** Issues that naturally occur when a Desired Result is not met. Natural consequences simply exist and don’t require criticism, judgment, or punishment to empower an employee to start fixing them. Natural consequences offer opportunities for the leader to empower an employee to correct a situation, whereas punishment doesn’t actually relieve or compensate. Natural consequences support dignity whereas punishment degrades dignity.

**Needs:** See Hierarchy of Human Needs in the Workplace.

**Needs Impact Meaning:** Usually *subconscious*. Needs impact meanings answer the questions, “How does this fulfill or threaten my needs?” or “What does this mean for me?”

### **Neurochemicals (Engagement and Experiences Indicators):**

Chemicals our brains release in response to sensory information, which affect our nervous system, health, and sense of well-being in a variety of different ways. These include dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, adrenaline, and cortisol. They create our feelings and internal experiences as well as reward and incentivize effort and behavior. They let us know if we are feeling engaged (or not). In the workplace, when neurochemicals feel good, engagement and resourcefulness increase. When neurochemicals feel bad, engagement and resourcefulness decrease.

**Norepinephrine:** A hormone released with adrenaline during the fight-freeze-flight response to help the physical responses and sensory systems become more responsive, shifting blood flow to areas like the skin and muscles.

**Open-Ended Questions:** Questions that require the employee to think and respond with a unique answer. In addition to requiring engagement and accountability, you get a real response instead of a rhetorical one. Used in Engaging Questions.

**Ownership:** A false and unuseful synonym for accountability, usually because empowerment is not equal to the ownership demanded. Look for more specific words and phrases to accurately describe the behavior sought in employees.

**Oxytocin:** Neurochemical released when experiencing a feeling of “We did it!” Creates feelings of connection and trust. Oxytocin is also the feeling of friendship, love, and connection. Workplace environments fostering oxytocin are marked by effective, collaborative, and celebratory teams.

**Perceived Capability:** Expressing genuine belief in another’s abilities in a way that raises their own perception of what’s possible. Can provide advance “You can do it” serotonin reward.

**Perception Language:** Questions or statements that allow multiple perceptions of an event or interaction; a linguistic tool part of Engaging Leadership Language.

**Perceptual Blindness:** See Inattentional Blindness.

**Perks:** Appreciation celebrations offered regularly (expected).  
Important to why employees cite it's positive to work at a company. Perks are nice but offer only a small serotonin boost.

**Possibility Ceiling:** The limit on what one believes is possible, especially in relation to an employee's potential, abilities, and competence. Each employee has their own possibility ceiling, and a leader's beliefs of what's possible for the employee can expand or contract that.

**Possibility Thinking:** When the brain is re-trained to think more about what's possible than what's in the way; built into the Results Model.

**Prefrontal Cortex:** The most newly-developed segment of our brain responsible for executive function, generalized as an origin of rational thought compared to the creature brain's reactive impulsivity.

**Proactive Accountability:** How to best ensure the result is met the first time, preventing a need for responsive accountability.

**Proactive Accountability Measure (PAM):** Any proactive tools and methods that make it easier for an employee to meet expectations.

**Receptive/ness:** One's willingness to thoughtfully listen to feedback, participate in improvement, and be accountable for their contributions.

**Resourceful/ness:** One's interest and ability to contribute to creating solutions. In an engagement context, one's availability to access the rational, problem-solving prefrontal cortex part for our brain (in an un-triggered state).

**Responsive Accountability:** Responding productively if the result is not met to better get the result in the future. "Productively" includes maintaining employee engagement, receptiveness, and resourcefulness.

**Results Conversations:** The Results Conversation is dedicated time in one-on-one meetings to conversationally present a new Desired Result or Revisit an active one, using the Results List as to guide the conversation. May also be applied to team meetings when useful.

**Results List:** A list of active Desired Results, having been qualified through the Accountability Anchor Conversion Checklist, that employees are actively working toward. Employees use this list as a base agenda they maintain and bring to one-on-one Results Conversations or team meetings.

**Reticular Activating System (RAS):** Acts like a bouncer between our conscious and subconscious, deeming what is important enough to bring from our subconscious into our conscious awareness.

**Retribution:** Punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrong or criminal act. An unproductive traditional accountability strategy.

**Revisiting:** The act of using the Results Model format to follow up on a previously introduced Desired Result. A leader specifically helps the employee continuously improve by Revisiting the impact of their contribution toward a result, calibrating how well expectations were met, and adjusting what's needed to better get the results. Accountability always requires revisiting.

**Reward:** A neurochemical response that feels positive, usually from dopamine, serotonin, or oxytocin. Rewards are usually received as recognition, celebration, and fulfillment, and satisfy our need to be seen as contributing, competent, and important.

**Self-Protection Effort Withholding:** When we subconsciously limit giving our best effort to protect ourselves from our best not being good enough.

**Self-Protection Mode:** Becoming defensive and putting one's own needs over the company's when under perceived threat. Primarily activated by a fear of being fired or seen as a poor contributor, incompetent, or unimportant.

**Sensory Input:** What we consciously or subconsciously notice with our five senses. The brain evaluates this information for meaning, establishes beliefs, and looks to make associations based on similar input. This process and the patterns that result create an Engagement and Experience Loop. Senses include what we see, hear, smell, feel (physically or emotionally), and taste.

**Serotonin:** Neurochemical released with an acknowledgment of “You did it!” or equivalent. Creates feelings of significance when recognized for having done a good job or completing something successfully.

**Shame:** A painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior. A loss of respect or esteem; a person, action or situation that brings a loss of respect or honor. As a verb, (of a person, action or situation) make (someone) feel ashamed.

**Success Criteria:** How the employee and leader will know the employee met expectations and/or achieved the Desired Result. Answers the question, “How will we know when you are successful?” The actionable clarity required to create success criteria also indicates the completion moment that will release rewarding dopamine and serotonin. Without actionably clear success criteria, an employee may not experience positive neurochemicals. Includes ACES.

**Threat-Response System:** The physiological process the creature brain uses to protect and defend against threat, although disproportionately out-of-date for workplace threats. Includes the fight-freeze-flight response, feeling triggered, and the effects of adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol. Diminishes the very receptiveness and resourcefulness we need most in these moments.

**Traditional Accountability:** (Of a person, organization, or institution) required or expected to justify one’s actions or decisions. *Synonyms:* responsible, liable, answerable; to find blame.

**Trigger and Disengagement Loop:** Feeling negatively and hesitant about a task, project, or person, resulting in less enthusiasm and effort during the action or interaction. Activated when under threat or negatively associated, solidifying a pattern of disengagement. The inverse of the Engagement and Experience Loop.

**Triggering:** When something perceived as threatening jolts one into a tense, self-protective, and unresourceful state. Often caused by a neurological response that releases adrenaline and cortisol.

Known as the fight-freeze-flight response, and, more often than not, includes freezing and fawning in the workplace. Usually triggering threats arise from the neglected or damaged needs to be seen as contributing, competent, or important (see *Hierarchy of Needs in the Workplace*). Also referred to as “being triggered” or in a “triggered state.”

**Trigger Trench:** Slang to describe the brain learning to trigger the same neurons each time in response to similar experiences, strengthening and solidifying the connection with every repetition. Usually results in an exaggerated response to smaller evidences of the trigger, seen easily in minor pet peeves that produce disproportionate frustration.

**Values:** Words or phrases that describe how employees are expected to consistently act, interact, and prioritize within a company. Values without effective accountability structure are only invitations. Values can be excellent accountability anchors only when defined with clear action steps.



## About the Author

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Elaina Noell is the founder and principal of Inspiring Accountability in the Workplace. Her management strategy consulting firm utilizes neuroscience to empower leaders to design company cultures that increase employee engagement, productivity, and accountability.

In 2015, after holding tenure as a VP of Marketing at a busy financial institution just north of San Francisco, Noell left the marketing world to backpack South America and finish her first book, *Happiness is Overrated — Live the Inspired Life Instead*.

Continuing her study of human dynamics and happiness, Noell became a certified Transformational Neuro-Linguistic Programming coach at the esteemed NLP Marin, and now helps individuals and organizations update old patterns to carve new pathways toward success.

Her approach focuses on working with natural human brain proclivities to positively inspire sustainable results instead of trying to enforce ideals that lead to defensiveness, frustration, and disengagement.

Noell combines her coaching experience and skillset to bring powerful, transformative, and actionable content to workplaces committed

to authentic excellence. She helps leaders and employees contribute in ways that maximize personal and professional fulfillment.

Based in California, Noell offers Inspiring Accountability culture design, employee engagement consulting, leadership development trainings, and one-on-one leadership coaching. Her approachable style and wit leave clients of all levels feeling empowered, hopeful, and ready to take action.

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