BirdsEye - Culture Leaders Network
Transformational Success Stories Guest # 6

Thomas Raffy

Associate Vice President, Public Affairs and Philanthropy, Assumption Life

White Paper Topic:
A Culture of Accountability & High Standards of Excellence

Creating a Culture of Accountability

PEAK EXPERIENCES
LEADERSHIP — CULTURE — PERFORMANCE

White Paper:
A Culture of Accountability & High Standards of Excellence
By Thomas Raffy

Question # 1: How would your staff define accountability? What does it mean to them?

In our Marketing and Communications team, accountability is defined as ownership, not oversight. It's not about being micromanaged or reporting to someone—it's about treating your projects, commitments, and decisions as if they were your own.

To my team, accountability means: "I care about this, and I will do what it takes to deliver with excellence." It's about trust: trust that each person will follow through, be transparent about progress, and speak up when they need support. It also means recognizing that everything we do reflects not just on the individual, but on the team as a whole—and by extension, on the organization's brand and values. So when someone on our team says, "I'll take care of it," it's more than a task—it's a promise.

Question # 2: How In what ways did you leverage strategically to have accountability be a very positive construct for your staff?

One of the most strategic things we did was redefine accountability in a way that removed fear and replaced it with pride. We made it clear from the beginning that accountability isn't about blame—it's about contribution.

We also tied accountability to our sense of purpose. Our team doesn't just "communicate"—we inform, inspire, and protect the company's reputation. When you connect accountability to purpose, it becomes a motivator rather than a weight. We also role-modeled it consistently. Leaders in our team show up, admit when they drop the ball, and share openly about what we're learning. That transparency creates a safe environment, and it sends the message: accountability isn't perfection, it's ownership.

Finally, we celebrated it. When people went above and beyond or proactively took ownership, we acknowledged it—privately and publicly. That helped build a culture where accountability is seen as a strength.

Question # 3: In your experience, which of the constructive leadership mindsets drive high standards and excellence and accountability. Why so?

Two mindsets come to mind: self-actualizing and achievement-oriented leadership.

A self-actualizing leader leads with purpose and authenticity. They are open, self-aware, and not afraid to grow or admit mistakes. That sets a tone of trust. When leaders operate from this place, others feel more willing to step up and take ownership because the environment is safe.

The achievement mindset brings focus and drive. It's about setting ambitious goals, pursuing excellence, and measuring progress—without falling into perfectionism. It brings clarity: What are we trying to achieve, and how will we get there?

Question # 4: Currently Assumption Life is living within a culture of high achievement and strong levels of leadership and staff accountability. What were two or three key lessons that occurred "along the way" to truly becoming a culture of accountability?

Lesson one: You can't have accountability without clarity. People need to know what's expected of them and why it matters. We learned the importance of aligning on objectives, roles, and outcomes. Without clarity, accountability becomes confusion.

Lesson two: It's not accountability unless it's modelled from the top. When leaders own their part —admit when they fall short, ask for feedback, and hold themselves to the same standards—it creates a ripple effect. Accountability becomes cultural, not hierarchical.

Lesson three: Mistakes are part of the process. We had to lean into a culture of learning. That shift —focusing on growth rather than fault—was essential in building a healthy, high-performing culture where accountability is normalized.

Question # 5: How have you handled people the lack of accountability and / or relate with people that have a really negative experience with the concept of personally accountable (at any level within the organization) — to move more towards a culture of learning / accountability versus a culture of blame? How were you able to help shift their attitude towards higher levels of shared accountability.

When someone has had a negative experience with accountability—often tied to blame or micromanagement—it's important to first validate that experience. You can't force someone into a mindset shift if they feel unsafe or judged.

So we take the time to listen and reframe. We talk about accountability as empowerment, not punishment. We show how it's about being trusted, not controlled.

Then we focus on small wins—areas where they can take ownership and feel supported. As they begin to succeed and see the impact of their contribution, the mindset starts to shift.

Also, when they see others around them modelling healthy accountability—and being recognized for it—that social proof helps. Culture is contagious. When accountability is part of the environment, it becomes easier for people to lean in rather than resist.

Question # 6: Does a more constructive culture foster higher levels of accountability? What's the link between "accountability and culture?"

Absolutely. A constructive culture is the foundation of real accountability. In a defensive culture, people hide mistakes, avoid risks, or shift blame. In a constructive culture, people step up, take ownership, and work collaboratively toward shared goals.

At Assumption Life, we've seen that when people feel safe, respected, and connected to purpose, they naturally take more ownership. They hold themselves accountable—not because they have to, but because they want to.

Culture shapes how people behave when no one's watching. If the culture says "we support you, we trust you, we grow together," then accountability becomes embedded in the way people operate every day.

Question # 7: What advice would you have others that are looking into it strengthening achievement accountability into their workplace culture?

Start by defining what accountability actually means in your context. Make it real, relatable, and positive—not something abstract or punitive.

Then, model it—at every level of leadership. Own your part. Show that it's okay to make mistakes if you learn from them. That vulnerability builds trust.

Focus on clarity and alignment. People can't be accountable for what they don't understand. Set clear expectations, but give people the autonomy to own how they deliver.

Finally, celebrate accountability. Reinforce it in your feedback, your team rituals, and your recognition practices. Culture change happens in the small moments. Build those habits, and they'll scale.

Closing Comments by Thomas:

At Assumption Life, we've been on a journey to build a culture that is human, high-performing, and deeply rooted in shared leadership. Accountability and excellence are not just goals—they are outcomes of a culture that values clarity, trust, and purpose.

As a leader, I've seen the difference this makes—not just in results, but in people. A constructive culture helps individuals grow, teams thrive, and organizations deliver in ways that are sustainable and meaningful. And I truly believe that's the kind of culture worth investing in.