

Framing the Challenge: Accountability in the Post-2008 World

Michael McCain, CEO, Maple Leaf Foods

Thank you for inviting me to speak today, as you deliberate on two topics that are very close to my heart – improving the delivery of mental health in Canada; and the critical importance of accountability in achieving your desired outcomes. I have immersed myself deeply in these two issues over a number of years; and while you have forgotten more than I will ever know about addiction and mental health, I hope that by sharing my views on the topic of accountability, I can help frame your discussions today and tomorrow, and contribute in some way to the continual improvement of service delivery and results for your patients.

To this point, my involvement in the field of mental health has largely been on the fundraising side, through my personal involvement and family's initiatives with CAMH. There are three reasons why I am so connected to CAMH. First, it is a ubiquitous issue which affects every family in our society in some way. You know the statistics. Second, CAMH is a world class institution, with leading edge research supporting their clinical care. I believe we need to support and nurture these gems in Canada. Finally, mental health and addiction is a social justice cause, characterized and defined by overcoming the stigma attached to its existence.

Notwithstanding this, it is also a cause with a direct effect on our economy. The numbers I have been exposed to indicate that every day in this country, half a million people are absent from work due to mental illness or addiction; and many more come to work while suffering from their effects. Making an impact on this issue can have an enormous influence on our society – socially and economically.

What I have witnessed and learned through my experience with CAMH has opened my eyes to the challenges we face, the progress being made, and the great potential for further advances in the field. The organizers of this week's workshop believe that a key enabler of those advances will be a step change in the collection and disclosure of data, particularly on outcomes. The hypothesis is that measuring the outcomes of treatments, and taking accountability for the results, is a critical part of helping more of our friends, family and fellow citizens regain healthy, productive, ultimately satisfying lives.

I support this hypothesis. I would like to devote my remarks to the experience of a private sector leader, and that of our organization, where accountability is in the DNA of our culture. We spend a great deal of time exploring this topic. I will be very brief in my remarks, so we can leave as much time as possible for discussion.

I would also highlight that what happened to Maple Leaf Foods in 2008 was only a single vignette of demonstrating accountability in a crisis moment. We did what we did because it was ethically right, reflected our core values and we felt our behaviour would reward us long term in protecting the viability of our commercial enterprise. That is a different kind of accountability in some respects, to what needs to be applied day in/day out in achieving the outcomes you desire.

May I offer you TEN thoughts on the topic of accountability that may contribute to your discussion:

1. Accountability must be rooted in core values

While a culture of accountability implies a focus on results, it does not imply the pursuit of results at any cost. It must be integrated and balanced with the full set of values that define the culture of your organization. Organizations exist to achieve an outcome – and to achieve it in the right way. In the Maple Leaf organization, we have defined six statements that we term our Leadership Values, which govern how we work together, make decisions and evaluate our performance. Second among those is “Deliver Winning Results,” which includes owning accountability to deliver; but first on the list is “Do What’s Right,” and these two are integrated with values relating to collaboration, analytical rigour, learning and transparency. I encourage each of you to define what ‘achieving outcomes, the right way’ means in the context of your organization.

2. Taking accountability can be uncomfortable

When we assume accountability, we know that we will be held to account for any result, good or bad. The risk of a negative outcome is always present, and with it will come negative consequences. Without risking the discomfort of negative consequences, we cannot realize the reward of accomplishing something worthwhile.

3. Holding accountable can be even more uncomfortable

Assuming accountability for an outcome is a matter of personal choice; we know the risk in advance and accept the outcome, favorable or not. We may be disappointed or embarrassed, but these are internal emotions. Enforcing someone else’s accountability, however, always carries the potential for conflict. As leaders, we need to accept that healthy conflict may be the price of results.

4. Accountability delivers results

With the inevitable discomfort, the obvious question is: why does it matter? It’s very clear. High levels of accountability in any construct, delivers a better result. When no goals are set or no one is on the pin to meet them, positive outcomes are sheer luck. When proper accountability systems are in place, winning results are a regular outcome. If we genuinely care about better outcomes, we will embrace higher levels of accountability naturally, even if it is difficult or stressful.

5. Place value on results, not effort

Creating a culture of accountability requires that we emphasize outcomes, not the effort expended to achieve them. It’s human nature to value effort; we all root for the person who is trying the hardest. As leaders and stewards of our respective organizations, though, it is critical that we keep our eyes on the prize. Given the choice between success with minimal effort, or strong effort without success, the ethos of accountability requires that we value the former.

6. Manage consequences proactively

The “ABC” model of behavior is a simple construct. For every behavior, there are events or conditions which precede it – or “Antecedents” – as well as Consequences that flow from it...Antecedents; Behaviors; Consequences. If you want to manage behavior, you need to manage the antecedents and consequences – positive and negative. And you need to craft them and communicate them *before* the behavior, in order to impact it. Overtly managing consequences is clearly the most powerful of these in driving behavior and ultimately accountability.

7. Accountability and transparency are synonymous

If you ‘Google’ these two terms, you will find them consistently paired together as the backbone of good governance. The logic is clear – being accountable for a result requires that others have visibility to that result. This is especially relevant in the public sector, where the existence of

multiple stakeholders and the absence of a 'bottom line,' publically-reported financial result create the need to openly share other performance metrics.

8. Measurement is essential

We subscribe to the axiom – “Manage it by measuring it”. It’s always amazing in human nature how the application of a yardstick, with consequences attached to that yardstick, makes things get better. This truth not only appeals to competitive instinct, but also underpins visible accountabilities. Applying core metrics of successful outcomes is essential to this mandate.

9. You are not different

I’ve always believed the two most dangerous words in any organization are “we’re different.” It’s the common refrain of those wishing to avoid the clarity of accountability - in direction, in measurement or metrics, and ultimately in outcomes. Sometimes you are different, but more often you are not, and finding the common path, even if it has flaws, can supercharge the accountability for better outcomes.

10. Be an “Agent”

When accountability for an outcome delivers stress or adversity, we typically might see five different types of responses. The first is the “*Deflector/Not me*”. They try and deflect responsibility for an issue. Then there is the “*Victim/Poor Me*”. They put the spotlight on the challenges rather than accepting accountability. The third is the “*Personalizer/It’s Me*”. These people focus on blame, even on themselves, rather than solutions. The fourth is the “*Denier/No problem*” who consistently ignores problems and outcomes, pretending the issue doesn’t exist and hoping it will go away. None of these first four responses are healthy in achieving an accountable, successful result.

The only response that achieves the desired outcome in the face of adversity is that of “*The Agent*,” who says “here’s what I’m going to do.” They attack the issue armed with data and discipline to learn, change and act where appropriate to ensure their accountability is delivered. If you personally care about your accountability, you must be an Agent to deliver winning results.

This leads to a final thought on accountability. My remarks have focused on the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of accountability – what I believe we need to be accountable for, i.e. results; and how to ensure that a culture of accountability takes hold, by valuing results versus effort, managing consequences, measuring and sharing data, and acting as Agents. Another key question, though, is, ‘accountable to whom?’ In order to define the nature of accountability, we need to understand who will hold us accountable, and what the needs of each stakeholder is. I encourage you to dedicate some mind time to considering the varied needs of patients, taxpayers, and even yourselves and your colleagues, in determining the types of outcomes that are most in need of measuring and sharing.

As you continue your dialogue on these subjects, and your efforts every day to improve the lives of so many of our fellow citizens, I wish you the courage to take on change, and the success which I’m sure will follow.