



**tom brown**  
*inside*  
*leadership*

# Can Do, Should Do, Must Do

Authority, Responsibility,  
Accountability

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## TOM BROWN



The words *authority*, *responsibility*, and *accountability* are old friends to the management profession. They have been helping managers set operational boundaries for years.

As the Management 101 professor declared: “By making it crystal clear who is authorized to do things, who is to make sure things get done, and who will be checked on whether they are done... a manager defines how a workplace is supposed to operate.”

But, having seen the managerial clutter in many organizations, I am convinced that those words are, for many managers, merely clichés. They do not represent concepts that are rigorously practiced, clarified, championed, and insisted upon.

Result: In many retail stores you find employees who “want to help” but are not sure what they can actually do. In one store I visited, even the assistant manager wasn’t sure if she could exchange an item. “I’d feel better if the owner were here,” she said.

Result: A senior manager in a financial-services company thought that “immediate action” was called for to seize a hot opportunity. But with the CEO out of town, the manager stewed and brewed — and ultimately tried to persuade other senior managers to act collectively. Finally, when the CEO did return, the group approached him about the opportunity — which, by then, had lost much of its appeal.

Result: A group of middle managers in one company heard their CEO espouse a newly minted statement of company values. In unison, they agreed that the words sounded fine. But over coffee later, one manager confided that he didn't think there was any real mandate to change operational priorities — which admittedly needed wholesale revamping. “I don't think I'm empowered to make key changes at my level,” he lamented.

It is easy to cite lower-level managers as “the problem” in each of these cases — and to suggest that they lacked imagination, enterprise, or managerial mettle.

However, at least half of the problem stems from fuzzy operational guidelines.

Put aside authority, responsibility and accountability for a minute and consider how clarifying six simpler words might make a world of difference in your own shop:

- Do the right people in your business understand what they CAN DO?

Authority means clarity about what people can do. Who can sign requisitions — and for what amount? Who can stop assembly-line work? For what reasons? Who can alter shipping schedules? Who can change design specs on a product that is causing production problems? Who can call an interdepartmental meeting to resolve confusion about the internal transfer of materials?

If such questions are unanswerable by people in your organization, it suggests there's a high level of confusion over what people can do. And when confusion reigns, businesses flounder.

- Do the right people in your business understand what they SHOULD DO?

Responsibility means clarity about what people should do. Who is supposed to implement the firm's statement of values? Who is to look after customer relationships? Who is to think about keeping costs down? Who is “in charge of” making sure that teamwork is more than just talk?

When “everyone” is responsible for addressing critical issues like these, then there is a great probability that no one feels that he or she is really expected to act upon these critical matters. So efficiency suffers.

- Do the right people in your business understand what they MUST DO?

Accountability means clarity about what people must do. If we go over budget, is it O.K.? If sales don’t meet the quota, is that all right? Whose job or bonus is on the line for this? If scrap and rework rates soar next month, will any one person have to explain why and how it occurred? If the communities in which we operate begin to hear that our business doesn’t “give a hoot” about civic projects, will anyone be asked to provide concrete evidence to the contrary?

“What isn’t measured isn’t done,” a manager once told me. And when people are uncertain about the criteria by which they are about the criteria by which they are to be measured, chaos often results.

“How will my performance be gauged?” is a question everyone should be able to answer. But, sadly, for many people, performance measurement is a muddle.

That’s because confusion can be caused when top management — intentionally or not — fails to make sure that no one comes to work without full knowledge of all the things he or she can do, should do, and must do.

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**Tom Brown** is a champion of vanguard thinking about leadership.

The author of hundreds of articles, he also wrote the first online book on leadership: *The Anatomy Of Fire: Sparking A New Spirit Of Enterprise*, which explores the look and feel of leadership in the 21st Century. To learn more about Tom, including his major role in *Business: The Ultimate Resource*, the largest handbook/database ever on managerial leadership, go to [www.tombrown.us](http://www.tombrown.us).

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