

10 PRINCIPLES OF EXECUTION

BLOGS

OKRS

Writing clear OKRs are essential to alignment and accountability

By Paul Barker | 29 Mar 2022 | No Comments

We put a lot of emphasis on the need to write clear OKRs. We spend hours with teams to interrogate their OKRs, asking what seems like endless questions.

There's sound reasoning for our interrogation. We aim to help teams work together more effectively in pursuit of their goals. Goals (or OKRs) are often not met, and accountability is often blamed, but a lack of accountability is not the original offender.

You see, accountability is like the naughty little brother – the little brother always gets blamed, doesn't matter what happens. Yes, he's naughty, and most of the time, he's had a role to play, but the older brother isn't innocent. He gets away with it way too often because he's clever, sometimes even sly. He's quiet and reserved and often behind the scenes.

Clarity is accountability's older brother.

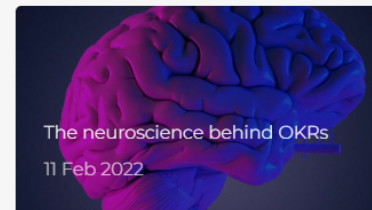
Clarity is a prerequisite for accountability

We often blame "accountability" when things don't get delivered. Someone wasn't accountable or wasn't held accountable. Subsequently, we want to fix that with reporting structures, delegated authority matrices and RASCI models.

Sure, accountability is often to blame. I'll even go further and say it's mostly to blame. But accountability has an older brother, clarity. Clarity was there before accountability, and 'clarity' is seldom innocent. 'Clarity' needs to be investigated and considered the same way we investigate accountability when things don't get delivered.

In The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, Pat Lencioni plots a model leading to results. Each layer of the pyramid is a prerequisite for the next. You need Trust before you have healthy Conflict. Healthy Conflict is required before you can Commit. You need to Commit before you can have Accountability. And to ultimately drive Results, you need Accountability.

In his model, Commitment is what drives clarity. He defines it as a commitment to the plan and the deadline, which overcomes ambiguity.



The neuroscience behind OKRs
11 Feb 2022

Unpacking the complexities of
OKRs and alignment

22 Mar 2021

10 Principles of Strategy
Implementation: Increase Your
Odds of Success

22 Jan 2022

Strategic Direction: The
Cartography of Execution

4 Nov 2020



“Small gaps in commitments lead to large vortexes lower down in the organisation.”

Pat Lencioni

Why clarity is important

Accountability means I am answerable or liable for something – I can be held to account. Accountability can't be delegated; the buck stops here. If I'm not clear on what that something is, I can't be held to account for it.

One strategic initiative that we've seen many times over the past few years is “agile transformation”. If agile transformation is a goal, and we're not transforming, why is no one held accountable? Simply because it's the most ambiguous goal we can imagine. There's no clarity on what it means, what will be achieved, what success looks like and the impact. It's impossible to hold anyone accountable with this sort of ambiguity.

When we help teams with agile transformation, we start with the why and the reason for the transformation. Then we set up clear goals that will be pursued through the process, with a measurable impact. These are all elements of the OKR methodology.

How to write clear OKRs

Here are seven tips to help write clear OKRs.

1. ALIGN TO COMPANY-LEVEL OKRS

The process to write clear OKRs starts before you start writing your OKRs. By aligning to a higher level of OKRs (teams align to departments, departments align to the company), you create an understanding of the rationale behind an OKR. It's not just about the OKR you pursue but also about the higher-level company or department OKR.

2. DEFINE A TEAM MISSION

A mission or purpose statement defines why we are here. Describing the team's purpose in a single succinct statement is an incredibly useful starting point in the OKR process. Instead of just being a finance team, you can be “the enablement partner for our growth aspirations”. It sounds simple, but this statement provides a collective starting point for the entire team.

3. WRITE SHORT OBJECTIVES

Research shows we process sentences significantly better if they are 14 words (or less). We always try to stick to the 14-word rule.

4. DEFINE “WHY” AND “WHY NOW”

The description (the why and why now) is one of Ben Lamorte's best inventions. He recommends that for every Objective, write a short description to specify why that Objective is important and why it's crucial now. This usually informs Key Results but, more importantly, provides some context to each OKR, almost like a rationale for being (refer to Ben Lamorte's OKR Fieldbook for more on descriptions).

5. ENSURE KEY RESULTS ARE SPECIFIC (NOT NECESSARILY DETAILED)

Specific and detailed are not the same. Key Results are never tasks – tasks are the details, but Key Results should be specific. For example, “10 new clients” is not specific. “Issue invoices to 10 clients that have never been invoiced before” is specific.



6. ENSURE KEY RESULTS ARE MEASURABLE

A Key Result should have a metric linked to it. **Marissa Mayer** (while working at Google) would say if it doesn't have a metric, it's not a Key Result. We'd not go quite as far – Key Results can be milestones or define a baseline, both of which don't have metrics. However, both can be measured at the end of the cycle.

7. ENSURE KEY RESULTS ARE OBJECTIVELY VERIFIABLE

When it comes to Key Results, we always ask, "at the end of the cycle, when I walk into your business from the outside, where can I see this measure?". Don't tell me something is 80% done or a document is being used – show me where I can see it.

Once you have this level of detail, we can start talking about accountability. We'd recommend a person be attached to each Key Result (not only at an OKR level), but it's futile having this conversation before we have clarity on the Key Results.

Clarity is an element of communication. To talk more doesn't help; we need to clarify our communications. If you communicate well, you start building trust, and trust increases the speed at which we can do business (see Pat Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*).

“Only through clear and constant communication can you build trust and buy-in within the team.”

Kara Lambert

This statement is even more true in a virtual or remote world where we work on shared goals from different sites. If we are pursuing an OKR together and need to work on it together, we need to be on the same page – surfing the same wave.

As objective facilitators, we help teams create clarity by assisting them with their OKR setup and critically thinking through a set of questions that guide every OKR towards a clear outcome.

Resources:

- Wylie Communications (2020) 'How long should a sentence be?', Available at: <https://www.wyliecomm.com/2020/03/how-long-should-a-sentence-be/> (Accessed: 8 March 2022).
- Lenioni, P 'Teamwork: The Five Dysfunctions of a Team', *Table Group*. Available at: <https://www.tablegroup.com/topics-and-resources/teamwork-5-dysfunctions/> (Accessed: 5 March 2022).
- Hale, M (2015) 'Want OKRs to Work at Your Company? Make Sure You're Asking This Question.', *Khorus*, 20 February. Available at: <https://www.khorus.com/blog/want-okrs-to-work-at-your-company-make-sure-youre-asking-this-question/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt's%20not%20a%20key%20result,system%20loosens%20and%20falls%20apart> (Accessed: 5 March 2022).
- com (2022) *Objectives & Key Results*. Available at: <https://okrs.com/> (Accessed: 8 March 2022).
- Lamorte, B (2021), *The OKRs Field Book: A Step-by-Step Guide for Objectives and Key Results Coaches*, Wiley, New Jersey.





Fry The Big Fish Newsletter

Sign up here for regular inspiration and advice to do less and achieve more. We explore methodologies like Objectives and Key Results and share some of our insights every month.

[Privacy Notice](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)

☐ I have read and agree to the [Privacy Notice](#) and [Terms & Conditions](#)*

SUBMIT



your ESG Goals

16 Aug 2022



How perfection hampers progress in strategy execution

25 Jul 2022



Haven't met your OKRs? Understand what went wrong before you reset OKRs

16 Jul 2022



Search...



Call us: +1 437 800 5430 | +27 11 215 8360

RECENT POSTS

[Outcomes and tasks | When to focus on which](#)

[OKRs as a strategic GPS | Enabling effective strategy execution through the unknown](#)

[OKRS for Impact | Achieving your ESG Goals](#)

[How perfection hampers progress in strategy execution](#)

[Haven't met your OKRs? Understand what went wrong before you reset OKRs](#)

RESOURCES

[The Starters Guide To OKRs](#)

[Outcomes-Based Goal Management](#)

[The Four Categories of Prioritisation](#)

[Four questions to ask yourself about your teams communication ability](#)

