Don't Count Us Out
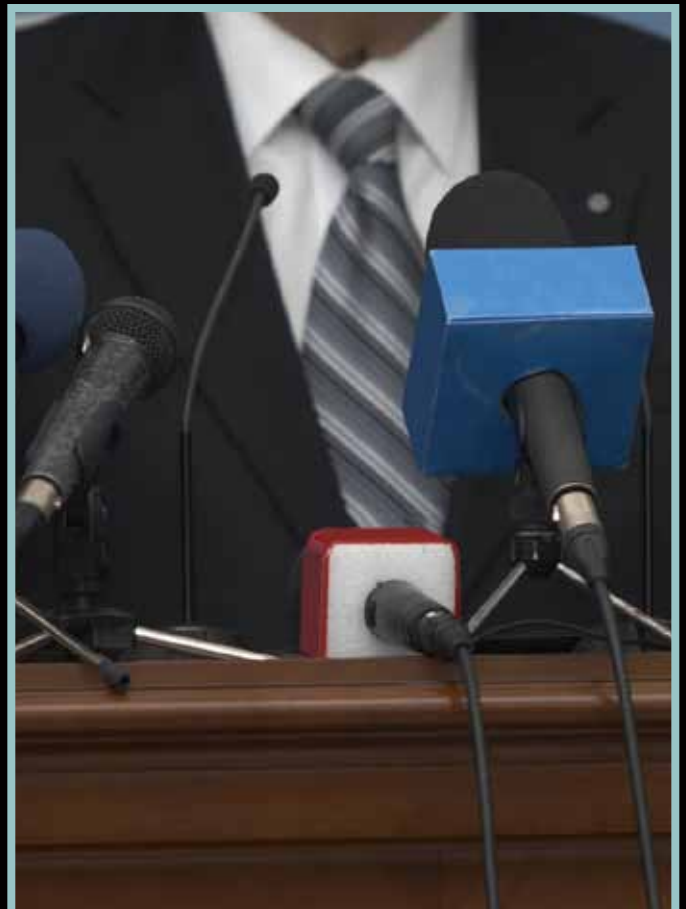
HOW AN OVERRELIANCE ON ACCOUNTABILITY COULD UNDERMINE THE PUBLIC'S CONFIDENCE IN SCHOOLS, BUSINESS, GOVERNMENT, AND MORE

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

ACCOUNTABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

by David Mathews

The Kettering Foundation studies democracy from the perspective of citizens who want a stronger hand in shaping their future. One way to have greater control is through institutions that are responsive to people and effective in doing the work these institutions are mandated to do. To demonstrate to people that they are, indeed, responsive and effective, most institutions, governmental and nongovernmental, have devised reports to show how they are being accountable. These reports are based on various standards, benchmarks, and performance measures, which institutions believe give citizens assurances of accountability. Even though the demonstrations of responsiveness and effectiveness vary, they have so much in common that institutions seem to be caught up in a veritable "accountability movement."

If this movement is demonstrating true accountability, why, then, we wondered, do institutions suffer from a huge loss of public confidence? Citizens don't consider many institutions, from public schools to government agencies, to be either responsive or effective. Given this lack of confidence, the accountability movement doesn't appear to have met its own standards. We asked Public Agenda to join us in trying to understand why.

This report complements research that has been going on at Kettering for more than a decade. I'll try to explain why the question we brought to Public Agenda goes beyond being intellectually interesting; it is critical in a number of fields, including education, philanthropy, and government. Kettering's research focusing on accountability began in 2001 with a study done with Doble Research Associates. We asked John Doble to follow up on earlier research on the lack of a public for the public schools. In that study, we had found many Americans moving away from public schools; they had little sense of ownership or responsibility, which was a result of feeling that they couldn't bring about the changes in the schools that they wanted. They didn't find the schools responsive or effective.

Citizens don't consider many institutions, from public schools to government agencies, to be either responsive or effective.

School officials, on the other hand, thought that they were being accountable, citing the voluminous test score data they published. They believed performance measures were in line with the public's demand for higher standards. Doble found, however, that although people might appreciate the information, they weren't persuaded that the schools were doing a good job. Citizens

interviewed in the Doble study felt students should be held to high expectations but that test scores were only one indication of school performance and didn't reflect all the concerns they had, such as those about the character and values of young people. Interestingly, these citizens believed that they and their communities should be held responsible for what happened to the next generation, not just the schools.

Four years later, a study Kettering did with Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) reinforced what we learned from the Doble report. The McREL research suggested that who should be accountable—and for what—is an issue that needs to be decided through public deliberation. When accountability is externally defined, it tends to disenfranchise those most directly affected by it. These two studies were not extensive enough to be cited as definitive proof, but they led us to look further into the way the public understands accountability.

For communities, perhaps the most problematic of all the unintended consequences of the accountability movement has been the effect on collective or civic learning.

Kettering also encountered accountability in working with grantmaking foundations and nongovernmental organizations interested in building civic capacity in communities. Most grantmakers felt they were being accountable when they used measurable benchmarks to judge the impact of their funding. These benchmarks were then translated into performance measures by the NGOs that received

their grants. This all seemed fine until we began to get reports of unintended consequences. Some foundation officials were aware that externally imposed objectives (and the performance measures based on them) might undermine building the capacity for community self-determination, which they intended to promote. But, they explained, their boards required proof of impact. Grant recipients, for their part, complained that the indicators were often irrelevant and that they diverted time and energy away from important work. However, recipients said they needed the money and had to "play the game" to get it.

For communities, perhaps the most problematic of all the unintended consequences of the accountability movement has been the effect on collective or civic learning. One of the most telling characteristics of high-achieving communities—those where citizens are in the habit of coming together to solve problems—is the way these communities learn collectively from their efforts. This type of learning involves citizens evaluating both outcomes and goals. And it involves assessing the community itself—the way it performs—as well as the results of projects. Accountability protocols typically use outside (objective) evaluators to measure outcomes against predetermined goals. While such evaluations have merit, they are quite different from the evaluation that goes on in civic learning.

The untoward effects of accountability measures, we found out, fell not just on grant recipients; they touched the organizations making grants or providing services. A recent study done with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation shows that the pressure to demonstrate accountability through measurable impact has been turning the focus

of grantmakers inward to concentrate on professionally defined expectations and away from the groups and communities they aim to benefit. Furthermore, the need to demonstrate that grants are successful is creating a disincentive to invest in building local civic capacity. Why? Investments in capacity building make it more difficult to prove that external influences, not indigenous ones, have brought about changes.

Ironically, accountability measures can be an impediment to realizing one of the most cherished objectives of philanthropy, which is to foster innovation. A research report done with Kettering by George Frederickson, *Easy Innovation and the Iron Cage,* found that the benchmarks and other performance measures used to demonstrate impact had a deadening effect on innovation. Inventive enterprises that communities undertake to strengthen their civic capacity don't always produce the definitive outcomes that performance measures have imposed. And the direction that the enterprises take may change as experience dictates. Inventive communities usually have to make the road by walking it. Certainly, the civic entrepreneurs involved in exploratory ventures recognize the need for clarity of purpose, and they want to know if their efforts have had positive effects. Still, preordained accountability measures, particularly those externally imposed, can inhibit their willingness to experiment. Consequently, rather than play the game, some civic innovators have refused to work with outside funders, which not only imposes a hardship on them, but also is problematic for grantmakers who pride themselves on supporting innovation.

Much of what we have heard from grantmakers and grantees echoes what we heard

from government officials and those who receive government funding. The information we have is suggestive, not definitive; but, clearly, accountability requirements don't always improve performance or result in greater confidence in the institutions involved. Brian Cook's explanation of what is going awry seems plausible. Cook observes:

> An increasingly vicious circle has emerged in which anxiety about control and accountability . . . has led to more extensive, more complex controls, which in turn have increased the bureaucratic distance between administrators and the public they are expected to serve. This distance then raises new worries about control and accountability and brings about the introduction of another layer of controls.

Cook goes on to argue that the result has been the opposite of what the accountability reforms intended.

As you can see, the foundation's reasons for looking into the accountability movement are considerable; so we wanted to do further research to understand why there is such a gap between institutions that think they are being quite accountable and citizens who have just the opposite perception. In particular, given our focus on citizens, we want to look into what accountability measures imply, perhaps unintentionally, about citizens' role in democracy.

This report is a welcome addition to our studies; it throws new light on many of the questions we have been trying to answer. And we think readers will benefit especially from the report's insights into what citizens value when they think about accountability. Knowing what concerns citizens is a starting point for closing the credibility gap that has opened up around accountability measures.

INTRODUCTION

This report describes a potentially corrosive gap between the way leaders in government, business, education, health care, and other sectors define accountability and the way typical Americans think about it. Leaders and the public generally agree that the country's major institutions—its schools, businesses, and government, for example—can and should improve. Both groups see rebuilding public confidence as a vital goal. But leaders and the public typically come at the

Many leaders believe that increasing accountability is a good way to build (or rebuild) public confidence— to show citizens and consumers that institutions are improving and are worthy of the public's trust.

issue of accountability from vastly different starting points. Their assumptions, definitions, and expectations are often worlds apart. The upshot is that the strategies many leaders rely on to persuade the American public that they are being "accountable" are almost certain to disappoint.

In the following pages, we summarize in-depth qualitative research conducted by Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation in 2010 and 2011. Our report analyzes observations from focus group discussions with members of the public, along with one-on-one interviews with experts and leaders who have examined accountability issues in different sectors. Our aim is to explore and reveal how the lay public defines accountability and test whether leadership efforts to increase it in key sectors like education and government are meeting the public's expectations.

With accountability's emphasis on setting benchmarks, collecting data, measuring performance, disclosing information, and organizing systemwide reforms, many leaders see it as the principal way to ensure that their institutions meet their goals. Many also believe that increasing accountability is a good way to build (or rebuild) public confidence—to show citizens and consumers that institutions are improving and are worthy of the public's trust. Even though accountability strategies, such as data collection and judging performance on quantitative measures, are helpful management tools, the research described here shows that they fall short in addressing the public's most potent concerns. At best, they strike much of the public as complicated and perhaps marginally informative. At worst,

they risk pushing the public and leaders even farther apart.

In this report, we offer three avenues for explaining and thinking about the dramatic differences between the way leaders and the public define accountability.

- In Section I, we present a concise, side-by-side guide to the key differences between the way leaders and the public see the main elements of accountability. Our analysis of the leadership perspective is based on interviews conducted for this project as well as background research. These are summarized more fully in the Appendix. Our recap of the public's views is based on focus group research, along with analysis of existing public opinion data and a review of earlier studies from Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation. In this section, we also suggest some broad guidelines for addressing the public-leadership disconnect that has emerged.

- In Section II, we present a fuller picture of the public's alternative vision of accountability by summarizing what we heard in the focus group research.

- In Section III, we offer three scenarios for prompting discussion about the different perspectives leaders and the public bring to accountability issues. We describe three recent controversies in education, housing, and health care that demonstrate how and why leadership notions of accountability so frequently miss the mark. We then offer a series of questions that could be used to open dialogue between leaders and the public on how to address and merge their differing perspectives. Our intent is two-fold: to suggest the dimensions of the leadership-public gap on what "accountability" means by presenting concrete, real-life examples; and, to use these and other scenarios to prompt more discussion about this subject in a variety of audiences.

Left unattended, the gap between how leaders and the public define accountability could further erode the public's trust of its leaders in the public and private sectors alike and thus undermine the country's ability to solve some of its urgent problems. What we have seen in conducting this research however, convinces us that it is possible to merge these two perspectives in ways that will enrich our ability to solve the nation's problems. With effort and good will, the two perspectives can be reconciled, but first each must be understood.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE STUDY

- This research, conducted through focus groups and interviews in six cities around the country, was designed to explore and reveal how the lay public defines accountability and to test whether leadership efforts to increase it in key sectors like education and government are meeting the public's expectations.

- The research suggests that even though accountability strategies, such as data collection and judging performance on quantitative measures, are helpful management tools, they fall short in addressing the public's most potent concerns about how key institutions are working.

- At the core of Americans' frustration about "lack of accountability" is the fear that too many Americans have become "selfish" and that the balance between "rights" and "responsibilities" is out of kilter. Most of the focus group participants brought an alternative definition of accountability to the table—one that centered on a better balance between rights and responsibilities and focused on individuals—both leaders and ordinary citizens—behaving more honorably. Most simply did not see how the country can solve its problems without this.

- A lack of fairness in society was another key concern for people in the groups. Most showed remarkably little resentment toward people who become wealthy and famous through intellect and hard work; their complaints were not mainly about wealth itself. Rather, the concern was that some people have greatly prospered by going around the rules, while so many other Americans have been hammered.

- For the public, being able to reach someone who listens to you and treats your ideas and questions respectfully is another important dimension of accountability. Based on what we learned in these focus groups, this human connection is generally more meaningful to people than accountability measures like performance indicators and progress on benchmarks. For most people, not being able to talk to someone is a signal that the institution doesn't genuinely care about the public.

- For most Americans, the return to accountability is not the job of leaders alone. Time and time again, people in the focus groups spoke about their own responsibilities and the near impossibility of solving problems without a broad base of responsibility at every level of society.

- Because the public sees lack of accountability as a vast expanse of moral and ethical lapses, this is not a quick-fix problem. But it is possible to merge the leadership and public perspectives on accountability in ways that will enrich the country's abilities to solve its problems. Closing this gap will depend on whether leaders approach the task with good will and a readiness to listen to the broader public's concerns with respect and open-mindedness.

SECTION I:
THE GAP AT A GLANCE

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *accountability* as "an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions,"[1] but the concept of accountability has taken on a more concrete and systematic meaning in recent years as a way for leaders to demonstrate to the public that their institutions are effective and that they are making progress on key goals. We provide a more detailed discussion of how leaders in various sectors talk about the importance of accountability, and how they are working to improve it, in the Appendix.

In K-12 public education, for example, the "accountability movement" was a response to broad and very legitimate concerns that too many schools allowed students to graduate without needed skills and that schools, teachers, and principals had very little incentive to do better. Many critics charged that educators faced almost no sanctions even when the majority of their students failed to master basic skills and that the system, overall, tolerated mediocrity rather than aiming for excellence.

In response, leaders at the national, state, and district levels began to focus much more intently on holding schools, educators, and students "accountable." Leaders began to collect quantitative data, such as test scores and graduation rates, that would help them de-termine whether schools and educators were performing well and meeting their goals. With more attention to accountability, schools, teachers, principals, and others who repeatedly fail to show progress are now more likely to be subject to sanctions of various sorts. Educational leaders have become more "transparent" and forthcoming about how well the system is performing. Many districts release data about student scores, graduation rates, teacher turnover, and other key indicators. In many cases, accountability systems are set up

For most people, the basic idea of accountability and many of its key principles are unobjectionable. Hardly anyone opposes collecting data that gives decision makers better information about how well institutions and their employees are performing or that allows individuals to make more informed choices.

to allow families greater choice about what schools their children attend, either within the traditional public system or through charter schools or vouchers that allow parents

to send their children to private schools with taxpayer support.

For most people, including many of the respondents interviewed for this project, the basic idea of accountability and many of its key principles are unobjectionable. Hardly anyone opposes collecting data that gives decision makers better information about how well institutions and their employees are performing or that allows individuals to make more informed choices. Providing incentives,

Is accountability, as leaders currently define it, creating a more productive relationship between leadership and the public—one that enhances problem solving and generates more public trust and cooperation?

setting up sanctions, being more transparent —all of these are classic elements of good management and leadership. Whether it's a governor or mayor, a CEO, a classroom teacher, or even a parent heading up a household, many of the key ideas embedded in accountability can play a positive role.

The question we take up here is not whether the concept of accountability includes important and useful ideas—it clearly does. Our question is whether accountability, as it is currently being institutionalized in

areas like education and government, is an effective response to the public's deep-seated concerns. Is accountability, as leaders currently define it, creating a more productive relationship between leadership and the public—one that enhances problem solving and generates more public trust and cooperation?

As we explain in greater detail in the following pages, the public's starting point on most aspects of accountability is dramatically different from that of most leaders. Regrettably, the gap between the way leaders and the public typically think about accountability contains the makings for routine miscommunication: leaders believe they are bolstering public trust and yet the public is still not reassured.

The chart on pages 11 and 12 suggests some of the key points of difference. We have borrowed the philosophical concept of the dialectic here, presenting two starkly different points of view as a means to prompt discussion and, we hope, resolution. We recognize that many leaders share some portion of the public's priorities and concerns and that typical citizens often value aspects of the leadership view. For many Americans, there is a healthy middle ground on accountability, or at least the promise of finding one. Nonetheless, in the current environment, there are discrepancies between the way leaders and the public define accountability that simply have not received as much analysis as they warrant.

The Leadership Model	The Public Model
A difference in semantics Leaders typically see accountability as a solution to a problem, a way to provide the right goals and incentives for their work.	**A difference in semantics** Much of the public has a minimal grasp of accountability as leaders define it. People often talk about a lack of accountability, but their concerns are quite different from those of most leaders.
Accountability as measurement Leaders tend to see lack of accountability as caused by a lack of adequate measures for performance. The solution is better measurement, which will drive improved performance.	**Accountability as responsibility** The public sees the problem as a lack of responsibility among those in charge. As long as irresponsible leaders remain in power, they can "cook the books" to make the numbers look good. The solution is to replace irresponsible leaders with responsible ones.
A reliance on technical solutions For leaders, increasing accountability means identifying specific targets and benchmarks that can be measured to improve how a system works.	**A focus on moral problems** For the public, increasing accountability means addressing ethical and moral issues— lack of responsibility, greed, selfishness, arrogance, laziness, lack of compassion.
Quantitative measures Leaders put their faith in quantitative measurements. In their view, a good way to address problems is to collect data that will show whether targets are being reached.	**Qualitative measures** Typically, people know almost nothing about specific measures, and they rarely see them as clear-cut evidence of effectiveness. For most people, the best evidence that a system is working is its responsiveness and the personal interactions they have with it. "You can't even get a human being on the phone" is perhaps the chief indicator of failure.
A focus on performance Leaders tend to see the challenge of accountability as making sure that institutions (and the individuals working in them) meet the quantitative targets that have been established.	**A yearning for people to be responsible** The public sees the challenge as reestablishing a much wider commitment to individual responsibility. The public believes that individuals at every level need to think more about how their decisions and actions affect others.

The Leadership Model	The Public Model
Assumes good faith Leaders often presuppose that people accept and are reassured by the accountability measures they institute.	**Beveviled by lack of trust** Many Americans are deeply skeptical about the accuracy and importance of quantitative measures. Many are supremely alert to the ways in which "numbers" can be manipulated or tell only half the story.
Targeting specific mechanisms Leaders often try to demonstrate their responsiveness by fixing specific glitches in the system—for example, focusing on performance pay for teachers in trying to increase accountability in education.	**Looking for broad solutions** Most people do not focus much on specific reforms. Typical citizens are more often looking for reassurance that leaders and professionals understand their concerns and share their goals. Most, for example, are not particularly caught up in the pros and cons of performance pay for teachers. Typical citizens are more likely to be concerned about social and behavior problems at the school and whether there is a good climate for teaching and learning.
Risks and rewards understood statistically Leaders see risks and benefits in statistical terms. If a medical procedure is not effective statistically, or if a school does not perform based on test scores, there is a problem.	**Risks and rewards understood personally** The public tends to see risks and rewards in individual, personal terms. If a medical procedure helps one person or if a school is warm and welcoming to its students, it has value, even when statistics suggest otherwise.
Interest of the institution Leaders are focused on their institution and what kinds of changes will make it function more effectively. Many are often stunningly disconnected from broad public concerns. Even when leaders are attuned to public goals, their expertise and jargon often limit their ability to work productively with and for the public.	**Interest of the public** Many people today are alert to, and often resentful of, institutional systems that seem to treat the public/customers as "cogs in the wheel," rather than as individuals. Many believe that institutions are increasingly impervious and unresponsive to individuals' questions, priorities, or problems.
A confidence in the benefits of transparency and disclosure Leaders tend to place enormous reliance on providing detailed information and choices to the public—the more detailed the better in many circumstances.	**Confusion and lack of trust** Many members of the public feel confused and overwhelmed by the detailed information they get in the name of "disclosure" and "transparency." Many fear they are being manipulated by the complex presentations. More and more statistics often do not reassure.

Is it possible to address the public's concern?

Leaders in nearly every sector of American society have felt the sting of public distrust, and many are demoralized by surveys that routinely show that most Americans see leadership as out-of-touch, uncaring, or unable to solve the nation's most pressing problems. Many leaders hope and expect that the accountability systems they are developing and institutionalizing will address Americans' frustrations and lack of confidence. Based on the research summarized here, that is not likely to be the case.

So now what? At first glance, the discrepancies between the way leaders and the public think about accountability seem utterly daunting. The public's concerns about values and ethics seem too intangible and free-floating. Many leaders view moral issues as outside the domain of their institutions. But the discrepancies tell only half the story. This research also provides useful clues on how leaders of good will and vision can reconnect with typical citizens and how they can reknit the relationship between institutions and the public they serve. What's more, some of the public's alternative thinking could actually help leaders solve problems.

Given the depth of the public's frustration, it will take time, flexibility, and persistence to turn the tide. Even so, there are steps leaders can take.

Acknowledge and accept the legitimacy of the public's alternative framework

At the core of Americans' frustration about lack of accountability is the fear that leaders don't understand or share their concerns. For much of the public, the equilibrium between individual rights and individual responsibilities has become distorted. Most simply do not see how the country can solve its problems or how institutions can work effectively for all of us unless a more appropriate balance is restored and individual human beings behave more conscientiously and honorably. The public's fears that selfishness and callousness have gained a foothold in American society were aggravated and inflamed by the recent financial crisis and mortgage bubble, but they are not new. They have been growing steadily since the 1970s.[2]

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widespread and of long standing, their desire "to be heard" on this issue is almost palpable. Leaders do not have to agree with every aspect of the public's critique, but accepting it as a legitimate part of our national discussion on how to do better is crucial. Unfortunately, the language of accountability—with its focus on numbers, metrics, benchmarks, and transparency—is not reassuring. For many Americans, it seems to have almost the opposite result, conveying that leaders do not understand or accept the ethical, moral, and human dimensions of the problem.

This crosstalk is apparent in education. Most members of the public welcome the

increased focus on teacher effectiveness and believe that schools should do more to protect children from teachers who are ineffective or burned out. But the focus on test scores, teacher evaluation, tenure, and compensation policies strikes a lot of people as somewhat off

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the point. Many are dubious about whether test scores are the best measures of teacher effectiveness (or student learning for that matter). Most say the chief problem in American high schools is poor student behavior and lack of motivation, a problem that teachers can't solve alone and that has not received much attention in current accountability discussions.

Depend less on data and standard communications strategies and more on dialogue

In many respects, this research reveals a very common human communications problem. Like the fable of the blind men and the elephant, people in different circumstances often focus on different aspects of complex, multifaceted problems. Leaders are focused on organizational issues (as they should be) and on the legitimate challenge of managing large, intricate systems in times of change and

turmoil. The public is focused on whether our society has the values and priorities that will strengthen us as a nation. We should see the public's concerns in this area as an asset rather than as a problem.

The difficulty is that when people come to an issue with radically different frameworks—as in this case—traditional one-way, data-heavy communication is generally not a good solution. People are skeptical and alert to being manipulated or "spun." Even when the numbers are credible and important, they often raise more questions than they answer for much of the audience.

Columnist David Brooks offers an example. He describes new policies at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to gather better data on homelessness among veterans and carefully monitor the impact of government's efforts to reduce it.[3] Brooks reports that the new approach sets up "a clear numeric definition of success," and he views the efforts of the administrators with some admiration. But Brooks also wonders whether the focus on the data misses something: "I was struck by the vast difference between the way a government sees the world—numerically and organizationally—and the gritty and unpredictable way the world sometimes looks to, say, a crime reporter or a homeless veteran himself."

The numbers matter and having them is useful, but they do not tell the whole story.

Now, more than ever, leaders need to reach for the strategy of engaging members of the public in genuine dialogue. In a dialogue, the goal is not to convince the public of pre-selected "solutions." Rather it is to share the

concerns of both public and leaders, recognizing that each has knowledge and expertise that can be brought to bear on the problem. In a dialogue, the goal is to spend as much time listening as talking.

Dialogue among stakeholders within institutions, as well as with the public, could be a game-changer in some sectors. In Public Agenda surveys of classroom teachers, for example, most say that when district leaders come to the school to talk with them, it's rarely to hear their concerns or seek their counsel. They say it's mainly to get their support for solutions that have already been determined without their input.

Leaders don't have to do it alone

For anyone working to improve key institutions in government, education, higher education, health care, and other sectors, this research has some surprisingly good news. For most Americans, the return to accountability is not the job of leaders alone. Time and time again in the research, people spoke about their own responsibilities and the near impossibility of solving problems without a broad base of responsibility at every level of society.

For the public, educators can't just "deliver" good schools unless parents and students are more accountable too. It's hard for businesses to operate accountably if their customers are reckless and irresponsible. The same goes for health care when patients don't fulfill their part of the bargain. Government cannot function unless citizens take up their own responsibilities as well.

In an effort to respond to public criticism, leaders may be assuming too much of the burden for improving our key institutions.

What's more, they may be missing out on the catalytic effect of having the public shoulder some of the weight along with them.

By pursuing wide-reaching reform in the name of accountability, American leaders have already demonstrated a remarkable willingness to change old habits and think anew—to look for more effective, more innovative solutions. Their challenge now is to sustain the energy and resolve that gave birth to the accountability movement and apply it to a more expansive definition that incorporates the public's concerns.

Related Reading

Arumi, A.M., R. Wooden, and J. Johnson, with S. Farkas, A. Duffett, and A. Ott. *The Charitable Impulse*. New York: Public Agenda and Kettering Foundation, 2004.

Farkas, S., A. Duffet, J. Johnson, and B. Syat. *A Few Bad Apples? An Exploratory Look at What Typical Americans Think about Business Ethics Today*. New York: Public Agenda and Kettering Foundation, 2003.

Frederickson, H. George, and M. Dubnick. *Accountable Governance: Problems and Promises*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011.

Harwood, Richard C., and J. Creighton. *The Organization-First Approach*. Bethesda, MD: The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, 2008.

SECTION II:
ACCOUNTABILITY—
THE PUBLIC'S DEFINITION

Based on a recent survey, less than half of Americans have "a great deal of confidence" in public schools, colleges, major companies, organized labor, law firms, the press, the courts, and the justice system.[4] For Congress and Wall Street, the numbers plummet to 8 percent.[5] Out of the 16 institutions covered in the survey, only the military and small business enjoyed the full confidence of the majority of Americans.[6]

CURRENT CONFIDENCE IN LEADERS OF INSTITUTIONS

(Harris Poll, March 2010)

"As far as people in charge of running (READ EACH ITEM) are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?"

	A Great Deal (%)	Only Some (%)	Hardly Any at All (%)
The military	59	30	9
Small business	50	4	25
Major educational institutions, such as colleges and universities	35	49	13
Medicine	34	47	16
The U.S. Supreme Court	31	46	21
The White House	27	38	33
Organized religion	26	44	24
The courts and the justice system	24	54	19
Public schools	22	54	22
Television news	7	54	26
Major companies	15	56	27
Organized labor	14	49	31
The press	13	47	39
Law firms	13	54	28
Congress	8	41	48
Wall Street	8	43	45

Rather than feeling a connection between themselves and the key institutions in their lives, many Americans are wary, disappointed, distrustful, and disengaged. They wonder why leaders in so many spheres seem unconcerned about the priorities, needs, and struggles of typical citizens.

To their credit, many leaders in government, business, education, health care, and other spheres seem increasingly concerned about this disconnect and are eager to address it. Unfortunately, many have also latched onto the concept of accountability as the principal means of reassuring and reconnecting with the public.

As we have noted, leaders who count on standard accountability strategies to reconnect with the public risk miscommunication and crosstalk. Even more important, they often fail to address the public's most deeply felt concerns.

To a large extent, leaders and the public are simply on different wavelengths in their judgments about how to rebuild public trust and reconnect typical citizens with the institutions in their communities and the country-at-large.

In this section, we describe the public's views on accountability based on interviews and focus groups with typical Americans in cities and towns across the country. (See Methodology on page 38 for details.) Nearly every person we spoke with believed the major institutions that affect their lives are broken in serious and fundamental ways. And nearly every person we spoke with wanted a different kind of relationship with the institutions that serve them.

As we talked to people about why they have so little confidence in their leaders and institutions and what kind of relationship they want instead, we heard recurring themes

about what is missing and what needs to change. Taken together, the public's concerns and comments constitute an alternative

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framework for thinking about accountability—one that merits genuine attention from leaders in government, the private sector, education, health care, and other arenas.

This public conception does not necessarily invalidate everything leaders are currently doing to ensure that their institutions are more accountable. Some of these strategies are clearly useful in evaluating how institutions work and determining how they could function more effectively. But the concepts, terms, and reference points that typical citizens use when they think about accountability are vastly different from those of most leaders.

Based on this research, the public's lack of confidence and sense of alienation is likely to persist unless the two concepts are merged and blended into a new approach.

Accountability—Leadership's word, not the public's

At the most basic level, the word *accountability* has very little resonance with most members of the public. It may have a Wikipedia entry (and typing the word into Google yields 45 million citations in less than 17 seconds), but based on what we saw in our focus groups, typical citizens rarely use the term spontaneously. In fact, perplexed looks and silence were the more typical responses when the moderator asked participants what the word *accountability* meant to them.

Focus group participants were somewhat more likely to respond to, and to use, the phrase *lack of accountability,* and many agreed that lack of accountability is a problem in American society. Yet in nearly every instance, people in the focus groups almost immediately shifted the conversation away from talk about accountability to talk about personal responsibility. Many of the people we interviewed believe that Americans generally are less responsible and reliable than they were in the past, and nearly all of them called for a society in which more people behave responsibly. For the public, it is the lack of responsibility, rather than the lack of accountability, that has the greater resonance.

Perplexed looks and silence were the more typical responses when the moderator asked participants what the word *accountability* meant to them.

But closing the corrosive gap between leaders and the public on this issue requires more than a change in vocabulary. In focus group after focus group, it was apparent that for most participants, the phrases *lack of accountability* or *lack of responsibility* serve as catch-all terms for a tangle of distrust, doubt, disappointment, and anxiety that are only marginally addressed by standard accountability practices, if at all. Most of the people we spoke to were less interested in statistics showing improvement than they were in whether institutional leaders shared their goals. Most were less concerned about transparency than they were about whether they could speak to a human being who has the motivation and authority to help them with a problem.

We have identified five key components that form the core of accountability for the general public based on what we learned in the focus groups. Here is what people told us when we asked them what accountability means to them.

1. For the public, accountability means individuals at every level behaving more responsibly. For the public, lack of accountability occurs when people are so self-absorbed and uncaring that they refuse to accept responsibility for their actions.

"It's all about me, what I want, what's best for me," is how a woman in Dayton, Ohio, summed up what lack of accountability meant to her. In different parts of the country and among Americans from all walks of life, questions about accountability repeatedly evoked intense concerns that too many Americans are selfish and self-absorbed and that their rapt focus on their own interests is often accompanied by a stunning lack of concern about the needs of others. "People really don't care about everyone else," a woman in Washington, D.C., told us. "It's everyone for themselves."

In an Albuquerque, New Mexico, focus group, several participants explicitly defined lack of accountability as selfishness and self-centeredness. "The lack of accountability, I think, comes from a selfish viewpoint," one man told us. "I don't have to be accountable to anybody. If I can do my job, and I can get my paycheck, and I can buy what I need, that's all that matters, and what happens to you doesn't matter." Another man rejected the idea that accountability is mainly about information and leadership. "The problem is with the people," he said: "It's not with the lack of experts, and it's not with the lack of knowledge. It's with an unwillingness to care."

Many respondents talked about what they saw as Americans' tendency to think about their rights rather than their responsibilities, and for many, the willingness to accept responsibility was the cornerstone to accountability. "We're always trying to pass the buck, trying to blame somebody," a man in Albuquerque said. A Boston, Massachusetts, man made a similar point. "A lot of times when the light is shed on people [who] have done something wrong . . . instead of standing up and saying, 'Yeah, we did this—oops.' They're like 'No, it was him. It wasn't me.'"

Many people talked about government or corporate leaders or other professionals who evaded responsibility for their misdeeds, but the overriding sentiment was that this lack of accountability, or lack of responsibility as the public defines it, infects our entire society. "I think our society has such a twisted perception of what they think is rightfully theirs," a San Diego, California, woman explained. "And it starts from the young kids all the way to the adults. . . . I think that has a lot to do with accountability." An Albuquerque man also saw the problem (and the solution) as affecting nearly everyone. "I think [we], as

citizens, need to be more accountable [for] our own actions," he told us.

Most of the focus group participants were quick to connect a more self-centered culture—one where people focus on their rights rather than their responsibilities—with a society that's unable to solve its problems. "You can't have [a 'just me' attitude] in a society—not for a society to be successful," a man in Birmingham, Alabama, said. "We can't live alone. No man's an island, so you have to think about the people you're working with and working for."

2. For the public, accountability means ensuring fairness. For the public, *lack of accountability* occurs when rich, powerful, and well-connected people get away with breaking the rules, while average people pick up the pieces and pay the price.

Americans' furious response to the 2008 Wall Street bailouts and bankers who wanted multi-million dollar bonuses even after tax-

payers rescued their bankrupt companies surfaced frequently in the focus groups. This theme suggests another key component of the public's basic definition of accountability—things should be fair.

Not only did taxpayers have to bail out the banks, they told us, but the people who fomented the crisis got off scot free.

Surveys show that 7 in 10 Americans believe government should have allowed the teetering banks to fail during the financial crisis,[7] and many of the focus group participants described why the decision to rescue them—though reasonable and necessary to most economists and policymakers—was so troubling to them. Not only did taxpayers have to bail out the banks, they told us, but the people who fomented the crisis got off scot free. Some even appeared to prosper while so many less-powerful Americans suffered.

"If I was . . . one of those guys that had ruined billions of dollars," an Albuquerque man said, "the way I was raised, I'd expect to be in a lot of trouble, much less keeping my job and doing the same thing quite possibly over again." Another man in the group echoed the same point:

> I think it goes back to the conversation about accountability that we had earlier. . . . Success is not ruining the lives of hundreds—if not thousands of other people—so that you can have more money than you could ever possibly spend. Punishing somebody would mean putting them in jail. Taking away their $1.5 million bonus, so that they only have to figure out how to live off of $2.5 million that year is not a punishment.

A San Diego focus group participant expressed a similar view:

> How can [companies] be accountable if they're making tons and tons of money, and then when they [do] something wrong, they don't go to jail for more than three, six, nine months? . . . The average guy or average girl that gets caught with drugs or doing something horrible is going to jail for 5, 10, 15 years.

A Boston woman pointed out the fundamental unfairness of it all: "After the bailout . . . they still got bonuses and stuff. I don't think it's right, because they took a bailout for the company that taxpayers have to pay. . . . I think it's pretty wrong."

The bailout may have provided the most galling example of a system that lacks basic principles of fairness and fair play, but many focus group participants also pointed to more entrenched problems in the economy and government: "I think it's always been that way," a Boston man said. "Money talks, and to me, if you've got money, you can get away with more." For a woman in the group, the tax code was another example of unfairness. "If you try to compare the tax rates of the CEO and the janitor," she told us, "it just may turn out that the janitor, percentage-wise, pays more in taxes than the CEO."

Based on this study, and others conducted by Public Agenda and Kettering, most Americans admire people of accomplishment and show remarkably little resentment toward people who become wealthy and famous for their endeavors—a Bill Gates or Steve Jobs or Warren Buffett. In fact, 90 percent of Americans agree with the statement "I admire people who get rich by working hard."[8] The public's complaints are not so much about wealth itself as they are about the perception that some people circumvent the rules and

prosper while so many other Americans are getting hammered. As one man in Dayton put it, "I think some of the wealthiest corporations and individuals need to give back more to the people that made them rich. . . . A lot of them aren't giving back to society that put them where they're at."

And a number of participants did seem mystified by what they saw as an almost unquenchable appetite for money and power among people at the top. This comment from a woman in Boston was typical: "I've worked for several *Fortune 500* companies where there's absolute greed at the top. It's like, 'Do you really need to make $80 million a year? What are you going to do with that? How could you even spend that in your lifetime?'" The important takeaway here is that it is the unfairness and sense of outright greed that seems to violate the public's principles—not wealth per se.

Surveys have repeatedly shown broad public concern about inequality in the economy and government. Nearly 6 in 10 Americans say that the wealthy have mainly benefitted from the country's recent economic policies, not the poor or the middle class.[9] And nearly 6 in 10 Americans (58 percent) also say the nation is losing ground on the rich/poor gap.[10] Almost two-thirds of the public (64 percent) believe that "government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves," compared to 28 percent who say "it is run for the benefit of all the people."[11]

What is notable in these focus groups, however, is the degree to which the participants tied fairness to the idea of accountability, and the degree to which many argued that unless wealthy and powerful people paid a visible price for their irresponsibility and bad behavior, the system just wasn't being accountable.

3. For the public, accountability means acting honorably and not taking advantage of people. For the public, *lack of accountability* means manipulating people or exploiting their lack of knowledge and sophistication for profit or power.

The mortgage bubble provided another common point of reference for people as they pondered the meaning of accountability and reflected on what they want from leaders and major institutions. In talking about the mortgage crisis, participants repeatedly emphasized that many borrowers were irresponsible and even greedy in some cases.

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Even so, nearly everyone said it was the banks that demonstrated the greater lack of accountability. As one man in Albuquerque put it, "You can't blame somebody for wanting something, but you can damn sure blame the banks. . . . They had the power to say no."

By persuading uninformed, gullible consumers to take on risky loans and by urging their employees to push the loans, the banks repeatedly demonstrated a lack of accountability, in the public's view. And in every focus group, at least one or two people

described how banks had violated their sense of trust and fair play based on personal knowledge.

In Boston, a man criticized the banks for tempting susceptible borrowers instead of advising them to be more prudent.

> There should be people that are saying, "Is this really right for you?" as opposed to . . . that little dangling carrot thing. . . . Well, who do you believe? Now you're in a situation where if you're a first-time owner, they're saying, "Oh, yeah, no money down. It'll be great. You'll have your own house. You don't want to pay rent, mortgage, or buy a property and then flip it." It's just sad.

Another man in Boston talked about how difficult it is for the average person to push back against the banks' enticing sales pitch.

> It's hard to do when they're selling you the American dream. You've been hearing [about] the American dream all your life. . . . It's hard to do when somebody's putting it right in your face and saying, "You can have this. You can have that home that you've always wanted—your family, the white picket fence, and the dog. It's all yours. You can have it for this, for zero."

In Albuquerque too, most of the group believed that professionals in banking and real estate have a higher obligation and that they violate it when they encourage customers to take on more debt than they can afford. "Real estate people, to a certain extent, yeah, they should be more honest with their customers," one man said. "I should know how much I can afford, but they go to enormous lengths to convince me that I can afford more than I can. That's how I see that."

Another participant in the Albuquerque group told this story:

> I have a friend whose job was to . . . literally convince people to get mortgages that they could not possibly afford to pay. . . . He spoke Spanish fluently, so that was his target audience. He convinced himself that by putting Spanish-speaking-only families, who could not afford it, into homes with mortgages that they would not be able to pay five years down the road, he was forcing them to create a better life for themselves. He believed this to be true. Five years later, they're all sitting on the streets in the Bronx. . . . Do I think you should know better? I do. But I also don't think that you should be homeless because you don't know any better.

A Birmingham man reiterated this theme, but he believed that front-line bank employees were often victims too, pressured by their bosses into making sales and meeting quotas.

> I think everybody has some responsibility in this, but I do think [the banks] have *more* responsibility. They should be responsible for not trying to dupe individuals or force employees [to do it] just to keep a job. . . . So yeah, the company has some responsibility [for] that because [as an employee] I have to do what I have to do to feed my family. So I've got to sell this lie to this person.

Most of the people in the groups did not accept the idea that all consumers are protected by the detailed information and disclosure

documentation that banks and other institutions provide.

As we have noted, some focus group participants repeatedly said that many borrowers didn't behave responsibly. But most also said that the banks and the real estate industry, because of their greater knowledge and sophistication, had an even greater responsibility that they failed to meet. They may have obeyed the law and disclosed full details about their loans, but they took advantage of people's lack of education and foresight. The banks were careless stewards of the broader good, and in that, they failed to measure up to the public's definition of accountability. As a man in Albuquerque put it, "Somewhere those morals in businesses stopped."

4. For the public, accountability means listening to the public and responding to people's concerns personally and with respect and courtesy. For the public, *lack of accountability* means relying on unresponsive, impenetrable, often mechanical systems that are essentially aimed at keeping the public at bay.

The frustration people feel when they call a company and get voice mail instead of a human being was evident when Public Agenda surveyed Americans about courtesy and rudeness some years ago. More than 8 in 10 Americans "strongly" agreed that getting a recording and not being able to speak to a person was exasperating—it produced the highest number in the entire survey. More people complained about not being able to talk to someone than about rude drivers, noisy teenagers, loud cell-phone conversations, and a host of other modern annoyances.

Being able to reach someone who listens to you and treats your question respectfully is another important element of account-

ability for the public. At least based on what we heard from participants in this study, this human connection is far more meaningful to people than accountability measures like performance indicators and progress on benchmarks. For most people, not being able to talk to someone is a signal that the institution doesn't genuinely care about the public. As a man in Dayton put it, "At the root of a lot of people's frustration [with the government] is that nobody seems to care."

> **Being able to reach someone who listens to you and treats your question respectfully is another important element of accountability for the public. This human connection is far more meaningful to people than accountability measures like performance indicators.**

In Albuquerque, several people essentially judged local elected officials and businesses on this basis. "I don't see them calling you back," one woman said. "I can't even get somebody to get us a recycle bin at our school to call us back, and that's all city. It's your 311, and they don't. . . . I've tried to call (names of local elected officials), and all of them. You don't hear back from them. Unless you're in their direct party, and there's something for them in it, you won't." Another man in the group talked about what happened to him during the health-care debate in 2010. "During the health-care thing, I also called Congressmen, and their phones wouldn't even be picked up. They either just rang or busy. No answering machine, no nothing."

For one woman in the group, getting a personal call back was her main criterion for judging whether her child's school principal was doing his job. "If you call and leave a message for them, and they never call you back, that right there is a clue to you. They should be calling people back, parents back. . . . If you have to make a phone call to the principal, there's an issue, so you should get a phone call back from the principal—not the assistant principal, not the aide, the principal."

In these conversations, many of the respondents did seem to make a distinction between "getting your way," and "being heard or listened to." The distinction is important, and it probably merits further exploration in subsequent research.

In Boston, one man talked about what happens when leaders aren't available to the public and cut themselves off from it. "They have to be reachable," he said. "You have to be able to touch them. . . . The average Joe or Jane needs to reach out and be able to touch these people, and they need to be able to hear your voice and feel, not just hear, but feel what your point is."

For many of the participants, not being able to speak to leaders and institutional representatives directly and personally was symbolic of a broader unwillingness among leaders to listen to the public. An Albuquerque man voiced his frustration with Congress, which, from his perspective, repeatedly ig-

nored the public's views. "It's just they don't listen to what we say. . . . I mean you look at the health-care bill [which] was so unpopular. It was passed anyway. The financial reform act was so unpopular, but it was passed anyway. The Iraq War, so many people were against it; it happened anyway." A Birmingham woman struck the same note: "I think [politicians] all have a personal agenda and they're not listening to what the average American has to say to them."

Surveys confirm that these judgments are very common. Only 12 percent of Americans say Congress does an excellent or good job "understanding the needs of people like yourself."[12] Politicians may be listening to some of their constituents, but most Americans doubt that typical citizens' views are the ones that matter. Two-thirds of the public (66 percent) says that "middle-class people in the country" get less attention from government than they deserve. Meanwhile, 50 percent say that Wall Street gets too much attention from government and 45 percent say the same for business leaders generally.[13]

In these conversations, many of the respondents did seem to make a distinction between "getting your way," and "being heard or listened to." The distinction is important, and it probably merits further exploration in subsequent research. In policymaking, it is simply not possible to please everyone. However, many of the people we interviewed seemed to be calling for something different. Many emphasized that what they really wanted was for leaders to understand and absorb their point of view, to empathize and appreciate their situation even if they weren't able to do what the person wanted or to make all of their problems go away.

5. For the public, accountability is a two-way street involving both leaders and typical citizens. For the public, *lack of accountability* occurs when individuals avoid responsibility for their actions—whether they hold positions of power or are just average citizens.

If there's one piece of good news for leaders in this study, it's that most people don't seem to view accountability as something leaders are solely responsible for. They see it as a shared duty, and many seemed as frustrated by the irresponsibility of neighbors and fellow citizens as they were by irresponsibility among the powers that be. Very few fell into a pattern of seeing leaders as the bad guys while portraying the public as complete innocents.

Rather than putting the entire blame for their problems on leadership or "the system" many focus group participants freely acknowledged their own mistakes. "I used to buy the big TVs. I bought just all kinds of stuff running my credit cards," one man told us. "But then I got laid off. I didn't plan, so all the rebuilding I've done over the past couple of years, all this work was caused by me because I knew better when I saw that 60-inch flat screen TV, but I still swiped the card anyway."

In conversations about schools, participants widened discussions on accountability for principals and teachers to include accountability by parents and students.[14] "If you bring them into this world, you're responsible to see that they're educated, however it is," said a woman in Dayton. "And we have too many [parents] in a lot of systems that don't—they just blame it on the teacher, yet they don't support the homework."

In talking about joblessness, an Albuquerque man pointed out the dual responsibility as he saw it: People need to look for jobs, and the unemployment office needs to prod them to do it.

> We have a lot of people that just don't even want to work. Everything's handed to them. . . . What [is the unemployment office] doing besides asking you, "How many people did you contact this week? Two? You looked for two jobs this week? Okay, here's money."

Personal accountability was a dominant theme in Boston too. "Accountability is you," one woman said. "You're accountable—your own self. You're accountable for your actions, your own actions, not anybody else's."

That prompted another man to explain how important personal accountability is in health care. "Yeah, health, the way you feed your kids, what you bring into your home for your children to eat, what you purchase at the supermarket—that all affects your family. You're like that CEO of your home, so the accountability falls on you."

Several of the focus group participants worried about a lack of accountability among voters: "I've worked for organizations that our entire goal was to educate voters," one woman said. "We went out and talked to people. The fact of the matter is no one—95 percent of the people that I tried to talk to didn't want anything to do with me. They don't want to hear it. They want to get mad at a politician

for not reading all of the health-care bill . . . but if someone tries to sit down with them and go through it and put it in laymen's terms . . ."

Given their belief that accountability means accountability for everyone, including the public, most people we spoke to believed that the only way the country can rise above its current problems is for average citizens to be less passive and get more involved.

In Birmingham, participants remarked that Americans have become too "complacent" when it comes to speaking out and holding leaders accountable. Said one Birmingham man:

> I just feel like we, the people, aren't holding leadership and education—we're not holding them responsible. We just tend to accept things when we don't speak up, when we don't make a voice for ourselves. We just allow things to happen, and we complain in this group, but not to the ears that need to hear, so I think it's us. I think we have to take some responsibility for not having a voice.

At the local level, one man in Dayton insisted that citizens be the "eyes and ears" of their communities when it comes to reporting things like potholes or other problems that need fixing: "You have the action to call the city yourself and tell them about the problem. . . . I mean, because they're not going to see every pothole." And a similar comment was made by a man in D.C., "I think it's [up to] the individual. I mean, if [you're] not getting service, then you've got to deal with it. It's on you if your trash is not picked up like you want it to be picked up."

In this study, the focus group discussions typically closed with the moderator asking the participants what should be done. Here is the advice from Boston:

> "You need to step up. People just need to step up more."

> "Take small steps forward."

> "Be a whistle-blower."

> "Another thing would be, like, you can write your senator. You can call them. I've called before. They don't usually answer, but go to the website. Sign up for an e-mail blast about something you care about. There's all these small things you can do, and you'd be surprised when you get an e-mail blast, and you get a new small piece of information of something you care about. You'd be surprised. You actually want to do something about it."

> "Have the confidence to believe that you can make a change. Have that confidence."

> "Don't be defeated before you try."

It's easy to dismiss these comments as lip service, or shrug them off with the comment that all these things are much easier said than done. Yet in an age when so many Americans are alienated from politics and distracted by popular culture and their own private lives, this exchange is remarkable. What's more, it comes after two hours of discussion about Wall Street, the financial crisis, the mortgage bubble, the selfishness of modern America, the rich getting richer while the poor are getting poorer, and no one willing to talk to you on the phone. Rather than leaving the room disgruntled and discouraged, this group was able, somehow, to return to some very basic principles of democratic decision making and government.

As leaders struggle to make institutions more accountable, one message from this research is that the integrity and moral strength of individual Americans is an asset that needs to be brought to the table. Far from being passive recipients of mechanical accountability policies that are served up to them, most of the people we spoke to were looking for ways to encourage and prod individuals to be more personally responsible and more accountable to each other.

SECTION III:

THREE SCENARIOS TO PROMPT DISCUSSION

Given the chasm between the way leaders define accountability and the way typical Americans talk about it, can the conflicting perspectives ever be merged? What could leaders do to address the public's pervasive mistrust—a mistrust that persists despite efforts by leadership to demonstrate that it is accountable and working hard on the public's behalf?

Because the public generally defines lack of accountability as a vast expanse of moral and ethical lapses, this is not a quick-fix problem. What's more, although the research here provides useful guidance, the precise remedies are not always immediately obvious. In the most fundamental sense, many Americans believe that they, along with their concerns and values, have been shunted aside by decision makers in federal, state, and local government, in the private sector, and in key areas, such as K-12 education, higher education, and health care.

However, ignoring or trying to "live with" such a huge disparity between leaders and the public is a recipe for alienation, cynicism, and gridlock. The potent distrust this research has uncovered demands a leadership response. Our hope is that conscientious leaders will begin a serious, purposeful conversation on how to close the corrosive gap between themselves and the broader public.

Some examples to ponder

In our closing section, we describe three recent examples that illustrate the divide between leaders and the public, which could be used to launch that discussion. In each situation, leaders were acting accountably by their own lights—doing what they believed their institutions and the broader society expected and wanted. Yet in each case, the public response reveals the vast gap in priorities and outlook. Each illustrates a different kind of disconnect and offers an opportunity to consider whether different kinds of decision making, communication, and engagement might produce different results.

We discuss each of these examples in terms of five principles describing how public trust can be formed and undercut:

- Identifying and merging the differing perspectives
- Localizing and personalizing the problem and the solutions
- Encouraging dialogue about risk and reward
- Helping people envision more positive outcomes
- Communicating through trusted sources

These principles are derived from the substantial body of work on the public's role in politics developed by Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. For each principle, we pose questions aimed at advancing a national conversation on how to rebuild the connections between leaders and the public and how to address the public's abiding fear that its priorities and values count for little in leadership circles.

Closing Persistently Failing Schools: A Failure to Engage the Public
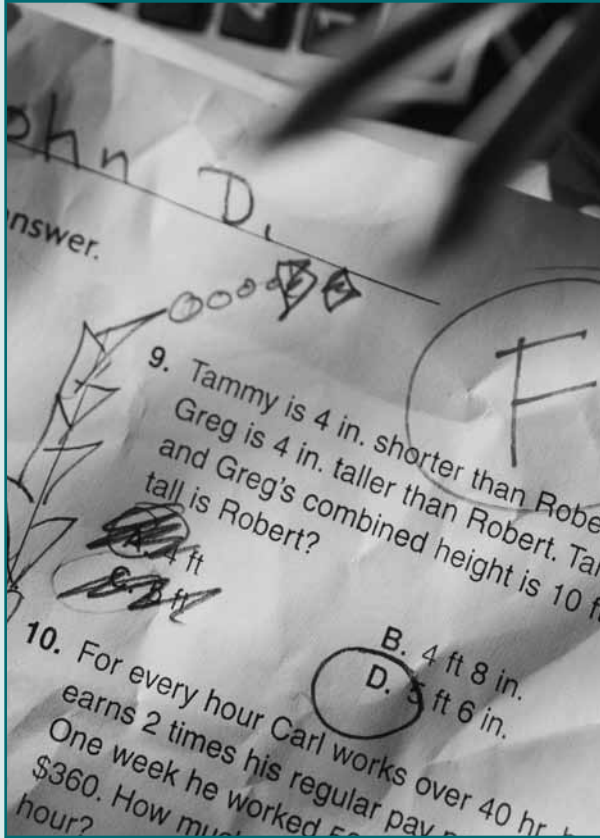
Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls them "dropout factories," the bottom five percent of the nation's schools that have repeatedly resisted attempts at reform. Aiming, finally, to be more accountable to the public by providing good schools for every student, national, state, and local education leaders are saying "enough is enough." To save another generation of poor families from brutally inadequate schools, superintendents and other district leaders, often with the support of mayors or governors, are making plans to close the worst of them. For example, Joel Klein, chancellor of the New York City Department of Education between 2002 and 2011 and Michele Rhee who was chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools between 2007 and 2010, both closed schools with extremely poor academic records.

In most cases, leaders plan to replace the failing schools they close with smaller, more innovative, and more effective ones. Many of these new schools are being developed by nationally respected educators. Some are charters that have invented new approaches to learning, which are already showing success for low-income students. In some communities, leaders plan to offer parents a choice of different schools—all focused intently on student success. Parents would no longer be forced to send their children to large, unsafe, persistently failing schools.

But rather than being greeted as bold reformers who have the children's best interests at heart, these leaders are often seen as uncaring bureaucrats ready to trample on communities and their schools. Many community residents see them as "outsiders" who "don't know or understand us." Some fear that this leadership strategy is a subtle, but stealthy movement designed to destroy public schools and move to a system of vouchers and charters.

The leaders and districts believe they are being accountable. Many members of the public think they aren't listening and don't even care.

Identifying and merging the differing perspectives

Each side has legitimate concerns, and each exhibits troublesome gaps in knowledge. Leaders believe the status quo is harmful to children. They often point out that these persistently failing schools have been immune to improvement for years, despite repeated attempts at reform. They provide detailed and compelling information about the school's shortcomings, but complain that the public hasn't accepted the information or even paid attention to it.[15] At the same time, leaders often seem tone deaf to the emotional resonance and centrality that schools hold in a community.

To most parents and community members, the idea of closing a school seems extreme and counterproductive. It represents a genuine loss, and most people don't understand why school leaders don't just "fix the school" instead of closing it. However, parents and community members are often dangerously uninformed about the educational risks their children face in existing schools. Despite their strong belief in the importance of education and good schools, many parents and community residents do not have good points of reference—they believe their children are receiving a good education when in fact the school is seriously inadequate.

Addressing these two perspectives requires more than just giving the public more information. Closing this gap requires a kind of dialogue that allows leaders and the public to absorb and truly understand the differing perspectives. It also requires building relationships so that each group is less isolated from the other and less distrustful.

What would promote a more meaningful exchange of views here? How can districts go beyond presenting information about the school's failures, such as test scores and drop-out rates? What do people need beyond "the numbers"?

Public participation in discussions on troubled schools generally takes the form of the classic "public hearing." Leaders are in the dock. Residents are invited to the microphone for their allotted two-minute comment. Genuine two-way communication is almost nonexistent.

Localizing and personalizing the problem and the solutions

Public participation in discussions on troubled schools generally takes the form of the classic "public hearing." Leaders are in the dock. Residents are invited to the microphone for their allotted two-minute comment. Genuine two-way communication is almost nonexistent. What would more authentic two-way discussions on community schools look like? How can leaders short-circuit the "district-versus-the-community" dynamic that so often seems to predominate?

Encouraging dialogue about risk and reward

There are risks and trade-offs to closing a school, including the possibility that the replacement is less effective than leaders hope.[16] At the same time, there are substantial risks to tolerating persistently failing schools. As part of the process, leaders and the public need to engage in dialogue on both risks and rewards rather than conduct a kind of parallel talkathon in which leaders hold forth on the risks of keeping a school open while the public talks about the rewards—or vice versa. How can leaders and the community share in weighing the risks? What role can engagement and "choice work" play in helping people participate in deliberating the choices?

Helping people envision more positive outcomes

Proposals to close schools unleash deep fears about change; communities, students, teachers, and parents typically focus almost exclusively on what could be lost, as opposed to the goal of creating better schools. Does showing people what more effective schools really look like help them better weigh the risks and rewards? How can leaders accommodate the public's affection for, and commitment to, neighborhood schools while still meeting responsibilities to the students? How can leaders and communities join together to envision and create better schools?

Communicating through trusted sources

When schools are targeted for closing, the news often reaches the community in the form of a press conference or a press release from the district office. Does bringing in local employers and higher education leaders whose views might be more trusted by the community change the conversation? Is changing the messenger sufficient here?

> **Proposals to close schools unleash deep fears about change; communities, students, teachers, and parents typically focus almost exclusively on what could be lost, as opposed to the goal of creating better schools.**

The Subprime Mortgage Debacle: A Failure of Stewardship

After several years of investigation, Department of Justice officials have concluded that they can't successfully prosecute Angelo Mozilo, the former CEO of Countrywide Financial.[17] Mozilo was a titan of the subprime mortgage business, and many Americans believe that he and other major subprime lenders should be held personally responsible for devastating the lives of tens of thousands of Americans. These leaders became millionaires and billionaires persuading middle- and low-income Americans to take on loans beyond their means to buy homes they couldn't afford.

In the heyday of the housing boom, however, these business leaders were lionized for their success and even their public service. Angelo Mozilo, for example, was president of the Mortgage Bankers Association[18] and was inducted into the National Association of Home Builders Hall of Fame.[19] In 2004, he received a Horatio Alger Award,[20] which is given to "dedicated community leaders who demonstrate individual initiative and a commitment to excellence; as exemplified by remarkable achievements accomplished through honesty, hard work, self-reliance and perseverance over adversity."[21]

Today, the consensus among both leaders and the public is that key figures in the subprime industry abandoned even the veneer of prudence and fair play in an unconscionable, nearly blind pursuit of profit. In full sight of government regulators and the country's financial and economic experts and elites, the subprime mortgage industry ran riot, pushing the U.S. economy to the brink of depression.

How did this happen? In theory, the rules of the marketplace and the sound judgment of investors and borrowers should have limited the damage. Government watchdogs, respected rating agencies, and a thriving business press all seemed oblivious to the hazards. Even after the collapse, Mozilo and other key figures don't believe that their own actions were especially reckless or reprehensible: They were merely hard-charging business people— tough competitors who were following broadly accepted industry practices.

One Countrywide officer told Congress that his company was "more a follower than a leader."[22] Mozilo, for his part, blamed the crisis not on his decisions or on his company's practices, but on a "cultural change" whereby "middle-class 'prime borrowers' . . . began flipping houses and bragging about their profits at 'cocktail parties.'" The problem according

to Mozilo was that a large swath of Americans began to see housing as "a get-rich-quick commodity."[23]

The mentality that prevailed during the subprime heyday was a remarkable shift from the country's traditional thinking about homeownership and banking. For decades, homebuyers were expected to save for a down payment; their credit histories were carefully scrutinized before being approved for a mortgage. People typically sold their houses after long years of ownership, perhaps to move to a smaller residence after the children were grown. Mortgage lending was a staid, somewhat boring slice of the banking business.

In the aftermath of the collapse, the postmortem has begun, but with little genuine dialogue on what really went wrong. The

In the public's mind, the greed and recklessness of the professionals were "enabled" by a subset of borrowers who were greedy, materialistic, and unwilling to save and plan carefully to buy a home.

banking and lending sectors are resisting tougher government regulation, although, with hindsight in mind, most are now making it supremely difficult for even well-qualified borrowers to get mortgages. The public recoils at the notion that Mozilo and his cohorts are "getting off scot free," not only escaping jail, but often emerging from the crisis with their vast wealth intact. While Americans

are largely sympathetic to people who got in over their heads, many also say that a lot of borrowers were irresponsible and unrealistic as well. How did we get this far off track?

Identifying and merging differing perspectives

Financial-sector leaders generally put their faith in the wisdom of the market and resist government oversight. During the run-up to the subprime crisis (and in its aftermath as well), they argue that "intrusive" government regulation limits their ability to provide mortgages to different kinds of borrowers. They contend that consumers benefit when financial institutions have the flexibility to develop different "mortgage products." As long as they are "transparent" by providing detailed information and choices—as long as they obey the letter of the law—most of the industry says the marketplace, not government regulators, should be the arbiter.

In the case of the subprime meltdown, however, the financial sector's perspective proved to be wildly mistaken—markets simply did not correct against the short-term lure of excess. The means of communication—fine print in documents explained by over-eager salespeople—left the public completely uninformed.

The financial sector's decision to push the envelope was aided and abetted by an attractive argument from elected officials that many more Americans should own, rather than rent, their homes. Elected officials at every level and on both sides of the political aisle evinced a remarkable confidence that housing values would always go up and that typical home-

buyers were capable of evaluating ever-more complex mortgages.

For the public, the subprime lending collapse was a moral failure by bankers who manipulated their customers and took unconscionable risks to increase their own wealth. In the public's mind, the greed and recklessness of the professionals were "enabled" by a subset of borrowers who were greedy, materialistic, and unwilling to save and plan carefully to buy a home. Most of the public believes that borrowers need protection, that what the industry provides through "choices" and "disclosure" is incomprehensible, if not downright deceitful. There's no way, many argue, that the average borrower can sort his or her way through this.

What would promote a more purposeful exchange of viewpoints here? What do people need beyond "transparency" and "disclosure"? What obligation do financial institutions and professionals have to be stewards for the public-at-large and for the customers they service? How can these two perspectives be merged?

Localizing and personalizing the problem and the solutions

In the past, a mortgage was often held by a local bank, or at least a specific bank, and that bank would either benefit or suffer if the borrower could not pay it. Moreover, the banks could deal directly with the homeowner if there were problems. Bankers weren't high-flying power brokers providing special "VIP services" to members of the U.S. Congress. They were more like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*—someone local, prominent, and respected perhaps, but not fabulously

wealthy or traveling in powerful, elite circles.

The practice of "securitizing" loans transformed the relationship between the debtor and creditor. Banks passed on the risks to anonymous investors. Borrowers' mortgages were often transferred from institution to institution as the industry consolidated, and became a national rather than local entity.

> **In the past, a mortgage was often held by a local bank, or at least a specific bank, and that bank would either benefit or suffer if the borrower could not pay it. The banks could deal directly with the homeowner if there were problems.**

There was no way a struggling homeowner could negotiate with the lender—there was no specific lender.

Encouraging dialogue about risk and reward

Although "risk and reward" is perhaps the golden rule of finance, the industry, government, the press, and borrowers nationwide were swept away by a mesmerizing vision of rising property values, virtually universal homeownership, and, for lenders and borrowers alike, the idea that vast sums of money could be lent out with virtually none of the traditional safeguards. Industry professionals believed that complex financial instruments only a handful of experts could explain, let alone probe and scrutinize, could insure them against risk. The idea that home prices would

always go up and that unemployment would stay at historically low levels enthralled potential borrowers.

There are risks in too much government regulation—it can be costly, ham-fisted, and counterproductive and, in this case, can limit home ownership to the affluent and financially comfortable. But for more than a decade, government focused on the risks of regulation with little attention to the need to protect the public. A nearly total reliance on caveat emptor provides no safe haven for the average consumer.

Most of the financial industry hasn't come to grips with its responsibilities as a steward of the public trust. Most typical Americans haven't thought carefully about these risks and trade-offs. Would enabling a broader consideration of these choices be helpful? What role should public engagement and choice work play in helping determine what went wrong and what's needed to shape a new course?

Helping people envision more positive outcomes

In this instance, leadership hyped positive outcomes to the point of generating wholly unrealistic fantasies—for the industry itself and for homebuyers. Americans' traditional commitment to savings and thrift began to crumble. Communities allowed neighborhoods to be reshaped in an onslaught of overdevelopment and suburban sprawl. The idea that there might be benefits for many Americans in renting rather than buying their homes all but disappeared. All of these ideas were devalued during the boom before the bust.

In the aftermath, many Americans believe that average consumers are at the mercy of the financial industry and that owning a home—a key component of the American Dream—will be "out of reach" for much of the next generation. How can people—and leaders in the financial industry as well—begin to develop a more genuine and realistic vision of "the positive outcome"?

Communicating through trusted sources

Given the inherent differences in priorities and outlook between the financial industry and the public-at-large, what intermediaries are needed? How can consumer protection agencies and leaders step forward to earn and fulfill the public's trust? Do we need more adversaries battling the banking industry on the public's behalf, or would the better course be to develop new entities that look to protect both spheres—that is, intent on ensuring that both bankers and borrowers play by the rules? Are there individuals and groups who would be especially credible in this role?

Recommendations for Mammograms: A Failure to Communicate

"First do no harm" is the first law for physicians, and avoiding possible injury to patients was a major consideration when the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommended against routine annual mammograms for most women under 40 in fall 2009. The task force is "an independent panel of non-Federal experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine."[24] The purpose of the panel's doctors and other health professionals is "to make accurate, up-to-date, and relevant recommendations about preventive services" based on "scientific evidence reviews of a broad range of clinical preventive health care services (such as screening, counseling, and preventive medications)." The recommendations of the task force generally influence what private and government insurers will pay for.

In this instance, the panel determined that for every 1,000 women under 40 who have routine mammograms, nearly 1 in 10 will get "false positive" results. That is, the procedure will identify something that appears to be cancer, but that proves not to be so after further testing.[25] The panel's statement also said that routine mammograms for women under 40 will identify two genuine cases of cancer for every 1,000 women tested. Thus, they recommended that most women under 40 need no longer have regular mammograms.

The outcry that greeted the task force's announcement was immediate and broad. Many women feared that the panel was putting their lives at risk in an effort to cut health-care costs. Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sibelius promptly reassured the country that the panel's doctors and scientists "do not set federal policy, and they don't determine what services are covered by the federal government."[26] The former chief of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Bernadine Healy, pointedly advised women to "ignore" the recommendations, arguing that while they might "save money," they were not "going to save lives."[27]

How can the public be assured that health professionals, now under increasing pressure to curb costs, really are keeping patient health and outcomes uppermost in their minds?

The dilemma for health professionals and their patients goes far beyond the specific controversy over mammograms. For decades, the medical community has advised people to be vigilant about check-ups and has developed a considerable laundry list of preventive tests recommended for people at various ages. Ad campaigns urge people to be on the lookout

for worrying symptoms, warning them repeatedly to "check with your doctor" and that "early detection" saves lives. Over the years, the risks, costs, and trade-offs of these various procedures haven't received much attention from medical professionals, much less the public. What's more, these new and unfamiliar ideas are being raised in the wake of a bruising and confusing national debate over health-care costs.

How can health professionals introduce the concept that extensive testing and procedures can actually endanger patients if they

There are risks in too much medicine and too much testing just as there are risks in too little, but many patients have only considered the second half of that proposition.

are conducted when they are not medically warranted and that using them routinely when they are not needed undercuts the nation's ability to provide care that does save and enhance patients' lives? How can the public be assured that health professionals, now under increasing pressure to curb costs, really are keeping patient health and outcomes uppermost in their minds?

Identifying and merging the differing perspectives

The mission of public health and prevention professionals is to make decisions that result in the best possible health for the population-at-large. Most recognize that the country already makes choices about where to put its resources and who gets what. Many are severely critical of a system that seems to

equate more health care with better health care. Many indict the current "fee-for-service" model, in which doctors and other health-care providers earn more by doing more, for nourishing and driving a "more-is-better" mentality in the public.

For patients, in contrast, the natural concern is having the best, most foolproof chance to live a healthy life. Most have imbibed several decades of the "more-is-better" mantra. Even though costs paid directly by patients are rising, Americans with insurance hardly ever focus on the cost of the various services offered to them. What's more, "you can't put a price on good health," is a common, prevailing value. Public opinion surveys have repeatedly shown that most Americans see health care as a basic right.[28]

And in this case, the gap in perspective is not just between people trained in health care and those who are not. Most doctors see their preeminent responsibility as ensuring that their own patients—the people sitting right before them in their offices—have the very best chance to avoid disease. In the case of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendations about mammograms, physicians nationwide disputed and ignored them.

What kind of national conversation or educational campaign would be useful? How can those advocating the "less-is-more" model convince the broader public that their goal is good health, not just cost-cutting? What kind of conversation should take place in professional circles as well as with the American public? To what degree should it focus on specific cases, such as mammograms and testing for prostate cancer, or on a broader conversation about over-testing and assumptions about tests that, often, are not backed up by scientific evidence?

Localizing and personalizing the problem and the solutions

Even in a cynical era, most patients put enormous trust in the judgment of the health professionals they deal with face to face.[29] A Public Agenda analysis of citizen discussions on health-care costs during the 2008 National Issues Forums series suggests that health-care providers garner little public blame for rising costs. Drug companies, insurers, and even patients themselves receive some of the blame, but most of the forum participants viewed doctors and other providers as innocent bystanders in the system, who themselves face a host of financial barriers, such as expensive schooling and malpractice suits.[30]

But the task force announcement came seemingly out of the blue from a group of national "experts." It unleashed skepticism and uncertainty among doctors and patients alike. Should these conversations be taking place in physicians' offices instead? Are physicians themselves prepared to weigh the costs and trade-offs? Many patients fear that if something is not a "recommended standard," it won't be covered by insurance, and they won't be able to afford it. What is the appropriate role for insurance here? Should doctors have the final word? Can physicians be trusted to make this decision given existing financial incentives?

Encouraging dialogue about risk and reward

There are risks in too much medicine and too much testing just as there are risks in too little, but many patients have only considered the second half of that proposition. And for doctors, the current malpractice system adds another element to the risk-reward equation.

Would enabling more Americans to think through these dilemmas be helpful? Can engagement and choice work help here? Would patients learn to weigh these risks and rewards more carefully and realistically if they had a greater financial stake in the decision?

Helping people envision more positive outcomes

Health-care experts argue that one of the most effective ways for people to increase their odds of living a long and healthy life are to avoid obesity, refrain from smoking, and get regular exercise. That is, people have ways to protect their own health that may be much more effective than routine batteries of tests and constant monitoring. Is there a way to get more Americans to believe this fact and act on it? The track record so far isn't very encouraging. What is the right balance between "taking responsibility for your own health" and taking full advantage of the advances in early detection that modern medicine offers? Who should decide?

Communicating through trusted sources

How can national experts work with private physicians and local health-care providers to open a more balanced discussion about the pros and cons of our health-care system and to give the "less-is-more" approach a credible standing? What intermediaries need to play a role when scientific reviews produce unexpected and counterintuitive results? Would patients be more trusting of "less-is-more" if the system allowed for "exceptions to the rule" that could be determined quickly and close to home? Are there individuals and groups who could be especially credible in this role?

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on qualitative research consisting of six focus groups with the general public, five one-on-one interviews with experts and leaders who have examined accountability issues in different sectors, and a literature review focusing on the leader-led accountability movement.

The six focus groups conducted were divided into two sets. The first set, in Washington, D.C., on September 22, 2010; Dayton, Ohio, on September 27, 2010; and San Diego, California, on October 6, 2010; were designed to get an understanding of how the public defines the notions of accountability and how they determine whether individuals and institutions are being held accountable. In addition, we tested different accountability measures used in education and local and city government, which gave us an acute understanding of the semantic differences between the way leaders and the public define the issue: the public focuses on qualitative rather than quantitative measures of performance, but even so, they tend to view personal responsibility—not performance measurement and transparency—as a cornerstone of accountability.

The second set of focus groups, conducted in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on January 20, 2011; Birmingham, Alabama, on January 27, 2011; and Boston, Massachusetts, on March 3, 2011; focused on the public's perception of accountability, why they see the lack of accountability as a serious problem in society, and what they thought could be done to address the problem. These groups made it clear that the public sees lack of accountability as a moral problem—that while institutions and companies should be held accountable based on public interest, ordinary citizens tend to see risks and rewards on a personal level. There was also a widespread sense that any solutions to the accountability problem would need to be broadly based and involve the public.

A literature review, which was undertaken in order to understand the accountability movement as viewed by leaders and advocates, was supplemented with five individual interviews. Taken together, this portion of our research helped us understand the "expert" side of the equation and enabled us to test many of these ideas and reforms on the public.

ENDNOTES

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APPENDIX

LEADERS' AND EXPERTS' VIEWS ON ACCOUNTABILITY

Although the idea of using measurements and providing transparency as a cornerstone of determining accountability is nothing new, the development of specific accountability measures and transparency tools has been on the rise in recent years. Faced with growing doubts about their institutions' effectiveness, government and other organizational leaders are adopting performance measurements—once considered primarily a management tool—as a lever for improving accountability and as a means to communicate with the greater public about the progress they are making in reaching their stated goals.

The following is an overview of some accountability mechanisms currently in place and what leaders and experts are saying about them. It is important to note that experts and leaders, regardless of whether they are supporters or critics of the accountability measures described here, tend to discuss accountability in ways that are different from the ways in which the public talks about it.

Leaders and experts tend to have a much more complex, nuanced understanding of the issues and tend to frame them as malfunctions or glitches in the system. They often look for solutions that are based on system reforms. Most members of the general public, on the other hand, frame issues as problems of personal responsibility or behavior and have little understanding of, or interest in, systemic issues. This kind of disconnect is not uncommon—we have seen it in other studies that Kettering and Public Agenda have completed on public perceptions of philanthropy and business ethics.

As always, there are exceptions to the foregoing generalities. Two experts have written about accountability and the ways in which its central tenets match or depart from public expectations and concerns: H. George Frederickson, professor of public administration at the University of Kansas and former president of the American Society for Public Administration, and Kathe Callahan, associate director of the Center for Executive Leadership in Government at Rutgers University. Both were also interviewed for this project.

In this appendix we summarize the following institutional efforts to systematize accountability:

- The Government Performance and Results Act
- The Obama Open Government Directive
- TrackDC
- "Vital Signs" of Bellevue, Washington
- New York City restaurant grades

Public Agenda and Kettering Foundation are currently conducting a separate study of reform in public education—comparing accountability concepts, such as those documented in No Child Left Behind, with the ways in which parents and public school principals think about and define accountability. That report is forthcoming later this year.

The Government Performance and Results Act

In 1993, under the direction of Vice President Al Gore, the National Performance Review (later named the National Partnership for Reinventing Government or NPR) began a multiyear initiative to reinvent the way the federal government conducts business. "Our goal," President Clinton said, "is to make the entire federal government less expensive and more efficient, and to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment."[1] The multiagency task force had many objectives and Congress passed over 90 laws based on the NPR recommendations.[2] One of these laws was the Government Results and Performance Act of 1993 (GPRA), which requires all federal agencies to develop strategic plans, draw up a set of quantifiable measures to assess their performance, and submit annual performance reports to Congress.[3] GPRA was hailed by President Clinton as "an important first step in the efforts to reform the way the federal government operates and relates to the American people."[4]

Even before the first performance reports were released to Congress in 1999 and 2000, the efforts of the NPR were judged by some as a sign of true progress. The Brookings Institution—reflecting the views of many experts—judged the GPRA favorably —though not without reservations:

The sustained effort [of the government reinvention effort] is truly remarkable (and deserves an A+). The administration has had important accomplishments in procurement reform (grade: A) and customer service (grade: B+) ... but the highly publicized problems with the IRS demonstrated reinventing government's problems in identifying and preventing management disasters (grade: B-).[5]

A few months after the first reports became available, however, researchers at George Mason University released a study giving many federal agencies' reports low marks for accessibility, and understandability, and questioning whether they offered real solutions to problems.[6] Concerns about the ability of GPRA to bring about genuine accountability in government began to grow. Senate Governmental Affairs Committee chairman Fred D. Thompson said in a May 2000 *Washington Post* piece, "If we don't praise or single those out who are doing a good job, and sanction those who are not, then we are not doing our job. This is more of a test for Congress than it is for these agencies."[7]

A more recent study by the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service and the consulting firm, Grant Thornton LLP, found that few agency leaders are using the performance measurements as a basis for improving inefficiencies and holding their workforce accountable. Said Max Stier,[8] CEO of the Partnership, "It's a compliance, rather than a management, exercise. Rarely is that information actually being used to better manage the outcomes we want out of government."[9]

Open Government Directive

Following in the footsteps of President Clinton, at the beginning of his administration, President Obama issued a memorandum

on transparency and open government that called on government agencies to use technological innovations to make information about their activities available to the public. After a series of feedback forums, the administration released the Open Government Directive, which required agencies to release three unpublished data sets online and designate an official to oversee federal spending information provided to government websites, such as www.usaspending.gov and www.recovery.gov.

In a press release at the launch of the directive, the president stated that his administration would "work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration."[10] The directive has been met with applause from leaders across different sectors. Ed Black, CEO of the Computer and Technology Industry Association, praised the effort, saying it could "bring more democracy to the democratic process and represents hope of a new era between the government and those it governs."[11] And Gary Bass, founder of OMB Watch, said USASpending.gov would be "incredibly important to helping restore trust in government again" by "opening a window" on government spending.

Although the Open Government Directive has attempted to increase accountability in government, experts warn that increasing transparency may not be enough to restore the public trust. The executive director of one foundation aiming to improve government transparency raised some questions about transparency initiatives like the Open Government Directive, at least in their current form. According to this interviewee, these efforts have laid the groundwork for

"more interactivity between elected officials and the public," but they may not address a basic concern of many Americans—that their elected officials aren't responsive and don't seem to care about them or their interests:

> The accountability angle [of transparency efforts] is not well developed yet. There are two problems that contribute to cynicism to government … part of it is that government has to act in a more responsible fashion before citizens believe they are more responsible and they are responding to their particular interests. The second part is the citizens themselves, rightly so, do not believe their government is responsive to them so they've become cynical about government. Period. End of story.

Even so, according to this expert, many citizens will not be able to take advantage of better systems even if they are developed—the users are more likely to be the most active segments of the public.

> We can't get 100% citizen participation. That would be ideal, but it's completely unrealistic. People are too busy; they have too much on their minds. Many people are fighting for survival; they're not going to go online and look for campaign finance information before they go out and vote. But if there are tens of millions of people who are doing this— and that is enough to galvanize a kind of cultural shift in accountability … numbers that size cannot be ignored.

TrackDC

The ideas of performance measurement and data transparency, popularized in the federal government, have also been making their way to cities across the nation. Although states like Washington have been experimenting with publishing performance data for some years now,[12] a more recent effort in the District of Columbia—TrackDC, pioneered by DC mayor Michael Fenty in 2010—is one of the more notable attempts to provide a com-

prehensive resource for citizens to examine data about their local government departments. As with other transparency initiatives, the aim of TrackDC is to get citizens more engaged in what their government is doing and to empower them to use the information to hold leaders accountable. A few months after it was launched, TrackDC won *Information Week's* national Government IT Innovators Award. In accepting the award, Mayor Fenty said:

> City services have greatly improved and the TrackDC website has played a part in those achievements by providing management guidance through data and identifying areas for improved service focus and efficiency. In addition to offering our management team directional assistance, residents are able to watch its government in action, which promotes transparency and accountability.

A common criticism of web-based solutions like TrackDC is that the information provided on websites is doing little to increase transparency because it is not user-friendly, according to George Frederickson, coauthor of the forthcoming report, *Public Accountability: Performance Measurement, the Extended State, and the Search for Moral Community*:

> Ordinary people most of the time in their ordinary lives do think in terms of things they can remember, things they can see and understand. . . . There's something about spreadsheets . . . and I'd even say PowerPoint . . . that just makes people crazy. . . . They just sort of give up and say, "Just tell me a story." . . . Just tell me a nice story.

What websites like TrackDC and others lack, argue some experts, is a user-friendly interface, and information that people care about. Some argue that information itself is not enough. As one professor, who is at the forefront of the accountability movement, told us:

> Websites that provide information are, in a way, just one initial step. . . . If there's no way of actually digesting and processing that information, then it can actually cloud the picture. . . . The second step becomes what you might call "answerability" or "justification" where the actors involved in generating that information provide you with a synthesis that says, "This is what we've been trying to achieve, this is what we think we've achieved, and here's where you can look at the details." . . . And the idea is to give you a way of both understanding what they've done, but also challenging and questioning what they've done in an informed manner. And at a time when you can still influence their decision making.

Kathe Callahan, an expert on government performance measurement, spoke with us about efforts on the local government level to increase accountability through the release of performance measures:

> The people putting information out are in control of putting that information out and how it gets presented. And how it gets presented is critical. Just putting information out there does not mean you are being accountable and that's not going to increase accountability. . . . They're erring on the side of giving you too much data and you can't make sense out of the data they're sharing with you.

Callahan's aim is not only to get officials to present data in a way that is intelligible to the public, but also to involve the public in the process of developing measures for government performance, so as to give citizens a greater sense that the data is relevant to them:

> Research shows that the closer the official, the more trust people have. On a local level, we have more trust, valid or not. The trust issue is a problem in terms of communicating the metrics

right—is the public going to believe that the data that public administrators or officials are sharing with the community? And that's where [elected officials] have to do a better job to make themselves more transparent and accountable and open to the public.

She also called for different kinds of public meetings and hearings that feature more give-and-take between officials and members of the public, something more akin to a "true dialogue . . . not the traditional public hearings we're so familiar with—citizens are given ample time to raise the issues that concern them."

Does it help to include citizens?

Efforts to include citizens in the process of developing performance measurement and reporting tools are being pioneered in places like Bellevue, Washington, with the citizen-led development of the Bellevue Vital Signs that are now reported yearly to the public,[13] and Washington, D.C., where the Neighborhood Sustainability Indicators Project recruits citizens to define neighborhood-specific goals for sustainable growth, to be monitored by D.C.'s Office of Planning.[14] These initiatives and others like them show great promise in helping performance measurements become more responsive to citizen needs. But a major obstacle in implementing such a strategy nationwide—the public's prevailing concern that their officials aren't listening to them—can derail conversations that dig into the specifics about performance measurements. In the early 2000s, the Alfred Sloan Foundation funded a nationwide effort to find ways in which citizens could inform the process of developing local performance measurements.[15] Kathe Callahan undertook a study in Montclair, New Jersey, and found that it

took a great deal of time to help citizens move beyond their concerns about communication with government. She writes:

> We started this project at a time when trust in the local government to do the right thing was at an all-time low. There were numerous questions about the legitimacy and representation of existing forms of citizen participation. Citizens were frustrated by the failure of elected officials to listen and respond to the genuine concerns of the community. Citizens who were interested in our project were not interested in performance measurement. They were interested in responsive government and they thought that we [the researchers] would somehow act as "marriage counselors" and help citizens and elected officials communicate more effectively.[16]

And later:

> The entire citizen-driven performance measurement project was a tough sell in the beginning. We found it difficult to keep people focused on performance measurement. Performance measurement is not something that generates excitement, passion, and commitment, especially from people not familiar with the concept, who therefore do not understand its value. As a result, we spent a great deal of time reinforcing the goals and objectives of this project to citizens, elected officials, and municipal managers.[17]

Restaurant grades

Governments are now also using performance measures as a way to make local businesses accountable to the public. In 2006, the New York Health Department issued a historic set of regulations that would require chain restaurants to display calorie counts on their menus, in an attempt to get diners to make healthier meal choices.[18] Years and several lawsuits later,[19] research shows that the calorie counts have had virtually no effect on influencing customers' meal choic-

es.[20] Although the calorie counts did little to make individuals accountable to themselves, the city's health department hopes that displaying restaurant grades will put pressure on businesses to be accountable to the public. "This is the biggest change we've implemented in many years," said Thomas Farley, commissioner of the health department. "Public pressure exerted by the letter grades will force restaurants to be diligent about good food-safety practices."[21]

In March 2010, New York City passed a law that requires restaurant owners to display information from health department inspections in plain view for the public. Restaurants must release a card with the department's grade——A, B, or C—in windows, on front doors or on exterior walls. The law is similar in spirit to other efforts by New York City to empower consumer choice by requiring businesses to be more transparent about themselves and what they offer.

One rejoinder came from the influential *New York Times* blog, FiveThirtyEight: after reviewing the distribution of A, B, and C scores awarded to restaurants in the first wave of inspections, Brian McCabe concluded that "the grading system is too coarse, because it masks wide variations in the quality of restaurants receiving the same grade, making it hard to say quite what it means to be an A-rated restaurant."[22] McCabe pointed out that there were four times as many restaurants that "just barely" qualified for an A as there were that "just missed" (scoring only "high Bs"). Public perception just may be influencing this odd distribution of scores, McCabe theorized, in the way that it influences the health inspectors themselves:

> Knowing that restaurants that get B grades are likely to appeal them, inspectors may be more

likely to rate a restaurant on the cusp with an A-range score; after all, the difference between 13 points and 14 is marginal, but the difference between an A and a B is meaningful. Given the subjective nature of the inspection process and the discretion that inspectors have to assign scores, the data suggest that inspectors may be disproportionately likely to assign restaurants a just-made-it A score than a just-missed B.[23]

Conclusion: A Change of Culture

Accountability measures are often criticized for flaws in their execution, but as our research with the public suggests, there may be a deeper problem if leaders place too much reliance on them as their major instrument for building public trust. One major shortfall, from the public's perspective, is that they do not directly address public concerns about personal responsibility for one's actions. Although most of the leaders we spoke with did not focus squarely on the ethical and moral dimensions of accountability, many did seem to share one broad public belief: that cultural changes in leadership are needed if any of these efforts to restore trust and accountability are to be successful.

Some also saw limitations in some current accountability strategies, worrying, for example, that putting data online is meaningless unless there is an authentic desire on the part of public officials to *want* to be more open to the public. Callahan pointed to a leadership mind-set that often blames the public rather than putting the onus on leadership to change:

> Especially in local government, we have a lot of managers and elected officials of the "old guard." They're doing things the old fashion[ed] way, [their mind-set is] "I convened the public meeting, I supplied the pizza and no one showed up, so it's not my fault. It's citizens' fault they decided

not to come," rather than [saying] "What am I doing wrong? What can I do differently to engage the public?"

A second expert put it this way:

> There is a cultural resistance [by any powerful person] to the very kind of change we want. Information is power. What we are saying is, give us more information. There is a cult resistance to putting out more information.

Both experts highlighted the need for changes in attitude and culture among leaders—suggesting that authentic transparency in government will require leaders to be more open and more questioning of themselves.

For another expert, the priority for leaders from all sectors should be a willingness to have more open and honest conversations about what accountability really means:

> The left is very concerned about the politics of the Tea Party, and [for] some Tea Partyiers . . . the behavior of the government in the past few years [has been] unaccountable. Both sides could make a claim that the government needs to be more accountable, but would come down very differently in terms of the more specific question of *to whom* does government need to be accountable, and *for what* does government need to be accountable. That level of discussion, that level of specificity—we generally haven't had [that] as part of our public discourse. If we're going to make progress in terms of what it means for accountability in any of the three sectors, we need to have a more sophisticated discourse in response to those two questions.

And later:

> What I think that means for accountability purposes—for transparency [and] for disclosure—is that senior leaders in organizations—whether it's the World Bank [or]

it's civil society—need to be much more clear: "Here's what we're accountable for, here's what we think we can reasonably achieve." . . . They need to be much more honest about that; otherwise, everyone gets burned.

Frederickson takes this a step further and offers a formulation of accountability—what he calls "vulgar" accountability—that would fit the needs of society as a whole:

> [Vulgar accountability] is the accountability of the ordinary, generally understood, or widely accepted . . . [it] stands in praise of the measurement of agency outputs and reasonable attempts to link outputs to social and economic outcomes. Vulgar accountability avoids the application of targets to performance measurement, following the wisdom of Edwards Deming who argued, in his total quality management approach, that if managers work on constantly improving processes, improved performance takes care of itself. Finally, vulgar accountability insists on honesty about trade-offs.[24]

Elsewhere he writes:

> Narrowing the concept to answerability, performance, or the management of diverse expectations pays off by yielding insights into some aspects of accountability, but we have yet to develop a . . . definition or model that captures what it means to be accountable or to hold someone to account.[25]

For this group of experts, establishing true accountability means that leaders will have to reexamine their own behaviors and motivations. In the end, leaders need to develop a clearer understanding of how their constituents, stakeholders, and the broader public define accountability, and consider how that definition may differ from their own.

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