

Authority and Responsibility - Public School Leadership

An examination of the disharmony between authority and responsibility in the American public school system and its adverse effect on student outcomes

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November, 2023

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By Blaine Helwig

On the way back from Iowa last month – after visiting my elderly parents – my wife and I drove to Texas through Oklahoma via IH-35 south. The speed limit expectation was clearly posted at 75 miles per hour; however, the highway sign included the two-word phrase, “No Tolerance.” We observed the Oklahoma Highway Patrol repeatedly pulling-over vehicles and issue speeding citations to drivers barely exceeding the posted speed limit. The driver accountability sparked my thinking about the general relationship between ‘*responsibility and authority*.’ In this case, the Oklahoma patrol officers have the *responsibility* to enforce the speed limit for safety reasons; however, they must also possess the legal *authority* to hold their clientele – the general motoring public – accountable.



Analogously, the elusive-obvious dawned on me that all management, supervisory or leadership capacities, demand both ‘responsibility’ and ‘authority’ to actively control performance and outcomes. It also occurred to me that in public education there are remarkable instances where these two factors exist non-concurrently, resulting in adverse consequences at both elementary and secondary campuses.

So, let’s examine three (3) critical situations where responsibility and authority are not aligned at critical district and school level management decisions.

Hiring New Elementary Teachers at a Campus – Andy Reid to the Rescue!

In the last three decades, classroom teachers have largely been gifted the *authority* to participate in the hiring or rejecting new teaching candidates at elementary campuses. Of course, the principal and/or assistant principal are also involved in the interview process; however, the final decision on hiring is more likely than not, a democratic one where everyone on the interview team has an equal vote. And, herein lies the root issue, since the number of teachers’ votes on the interview committee invariably overrepresent the administration’s. Consequently, in this common democratic interview process, teachers always control the majority voting block or authority in the final hiring decision.



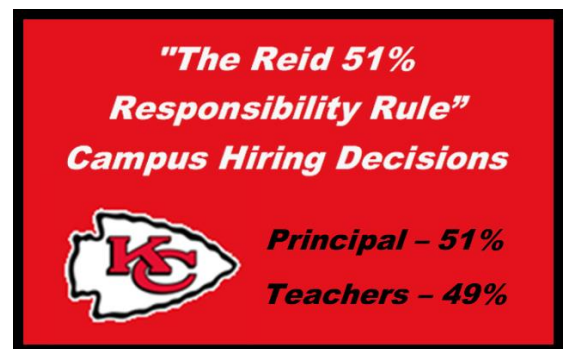
Undeniably, teachers should be a representative force in the interview process when selecting new classroom educators, because their input frequently provides invaluable insight into both grade level and classroom needs; however, the ultimate hiring decision should **NOT** be a democratic process. **Why?** First and foremost, there is incompatibility between ‘responsibility’ and ‘authority’ in a democratic vote in this situation. Teachers may desire the *authority* to hire, but if the new teaching candidate is hired and performance issues ensue of any kind, the teachers on the interview *are not held responsible*

for any of those complications. **Who is?** The campus administration! The principal must handle 100 percent of any and all of the unpleasantness with the newly hired educator. Therefore, a pragmatic situational rule must be considered to adequately address this incompatibility between authority and responsibility, while maintaining valuable teacher input as an essential element when hiring campus personnel.

Andy Reid – Head Coach of the Kansas City Chiefs – allows his offensive football players (and quarterback) to create and suggest new plays during practice. However, Andy Reid has a rule that is applicable to the hiring of new teachers. During practice, his players present their offensive creation to their Coach. Then,

the players have a 49 percent vote on the play's inclusion in their offense's playbook repertoire, but Coach Reid possesses 51% of the final voting decision. *Why?* If the play is implemented during an actual football game, but it has a negative outcome, the Coach must take the responsibility for nonperformance – **NOT** his players.

Similarly, the teacher interview committee should assist in the evaluation process of a new teaching candidate as well as vote for the candidate that they think meets their campuses and grade level needs. But the teacher vote should only count for 49 percent of the total vote, and the campus administration possesses a 51% voice in the final hiring decision. Thus, from this point forward, an elementary principal should invoke the *'Reid 51% Responsibility Rule'* with regard to all campus staffing considerations.



Curriculum Programming and Curricular Resources – Title 1 Campuses

In almost every traditional school district, as well as most charter schools, curriculum programming decisions for both Tier 1 and Tier 2 curricular resources are made at the central office or district level. Then, that curriculum is provided to the elementary campus administrators for classroom implementation. There are also a number of instructional methodologies, as well as campus leadership personnel decisions that originate at central office. Central office administrators exercise the authority in the instructional vehicle and as the driver of their campuses, but all of the 'responsibility' or 'accountability' for student outcomes are singularly left at the campus' doorstep.



In medium to high socioeconomic elementary schools, this authority and responsibility discordancy is not much of an issue. However, in Title 1 elementary schools, it can be, and it invariably **IS** a problem. *Why?* The answer is easy – student academic outcomes! In non-Title 1 elementary campuses, academic performance is high regardless of the Tier 1 curriculum adoption or the residing principal at the helm, but the same statement cannot be said of Title 1 elementary schools.

Tier 1 curricular resources are designed assuming students possess little to no prior grade level skill gaps, and in medium to high socioeconomic elementary campuses, this assumption is generally correct for the vast number of students. Consequently, there is not an issue with district authority to select Tier 1 or 2 curriculum programming and the associated responsibility for the student outcomes. In actuality, the issue exists, but again, it is immaterial since non-Title 1 schools invariably score stellar results each year in comparison to their Title 1 campus counterparts; thus, absolving their principals from taking the 'responsibility' for low student performance. In short, non-Title 1 campus administrators are much less concerned with 'regulatory' action from central office when their schools are performing well both socially and academically.

In contrast, at Title 1 elementary campuses, many students have academic literacy and numeracy gaps, and unless those gaps are directly addressed and rectified, unlike non-Title 1 campuses, a large percentage of children attending those campuses will not pass grade level standardized tests each spring. Again, as with hiring teachers at the campus, herein lies the management conundrum. The authority to select the school principal, curriculum programming and many times, Tier 2 interventions are dictated by central office; however, the campus administration bears the brunt for 100 percent of the responsibility or accountability

for student outcomes. The issue has deeper ramifications when student outcomes have **NOT** significantly improved for decades at almost all Title 1 elementary campus in large urban districts. Yet, the root issue initiates at central office, but Title 1 school principals must face the brunt of the responsibility of chronically low student outcomes.

It is important to note **IF** a handful, or a significant percentage of a district's Title 1 campuses demonstrated dramatic improvement in student performance, then the accountability or responsibility for continued poor academics could be better justified at the campus level – as it is with non-Title 1 elementary campuses. However, **IF** the vast majority of a district's Title 1 campuses are scoring student passing rates in the 30 to 60 percent range year after year, then the only question that remains is the following: *Why are central office administrators (also) **NOT** responsible for continued poor academics since they are the decision makers – the authority for campus level curricular programming and campus leadership?* Hence, there needs to be an analogous 'Reid 51% Responsibility Rule' enacted where central office administrators are **also** removed from high paying administration jobs when student results remain chronically flat district-wide. More on that topic in the concluding thoughts.



Federal Title 1 Money Distribution to The Campuses

The last management example of discordancy between 'authority' and 'responsibility' is funding related. School districts earn most of their operating monies based on student enrollment – allocated either by the State or the Federal government. For example, the State of Texas pays school districts 35 dollars per day for each student enrolled, and the Federal government provides extra funding measures to a district based on the number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Simply put, Title 1 campuses earn Federal dollars based on the number of enrolled students that qualify for free and reduced lunch.



In effect, in terms of money, all elementary and secondary campuses can be financially classified as 'revenue centers' since they provide a school district income to conduct yearly operations in all functions (e.g., human resources, transportation services (buses), police staff, construction, curriculum department, etc., etc.).

In contrast, central office administration in all its capacities, is a 'cost center' since funds are expended in their operations for personnel salaries and offices, but their daily operations do NOT generate revenue to the district coffers.

Consequently, student enrollment is the money driver in the public schools. If the student enrollment is depressed, then the revenue flowing into a school district is also depressed for either a traditional or charter public school system – and vice versa when student enrollment is high.

Interestingly, there are a significant number of traditional and charter school districts that do not distribute federal tax dollar funding to the Title 1 campuses, despite the fact that those dollars were **earned** based on students receiving free and reduced lunch. Instead, they make the authoritative decision to use those federal dollars in any manner that they feel may benefit their low-income campuses. A campus or revenue center

earns the federal money, but the authority to spend those monies lies elsewhere – in this case, at the cost center or central office. It is important to note that these federal dollars are usually between 100,000 dollars to 700,000 *additional* dollars depending on the number of low-income students enrolled at that Title 1 campus. Those federal dollars can purchase invaluable personnel (e.g., instructional coaches for literacy, math and science, library books, classroom library sets, classroom novels sets, needed furniture/equipment that support the academic vision of the campus, academic stop-gap curricular resources, school improvement initiatives, primary grade classroom carpets for literacy groups, etc., etc., etc.).

Consequently, if responsibility and authority are required in basic leadership and management functions, all Title 1 monies must be distributed back to the campus – the revenue center where those dollars are earned, needed and intended for use by the Federal government. Otherwise, the cost center or central office personnel are making decisions that are increasing costs of the ‘cost center’ that may or may not meet the social and academic needs of their Title 1 campuses.

Final Thoughts on Responsibility and Authority in Leadership

In all three examples above, it is difficult to justify accountability in any management situation if a person is not provided both the authority and the responsibility in the decision-making processes. Fortunately, two of the three examples discussed above are relatively easy to fix. The principal’s 51% decision-making rule with regard to all campus hires, and allowing Title 1 Federal monies based on low-income enrollment to flow to the campus/revenue center may be changed in a moment’s notice. Those situations require a change in policy at the campus level by the lead administrator and the other one at the district level. Done!



However, rectifying the curriculum programming issues in this country’s public schools with regard to authority and responsibility for student outcomes will never be an amicable process in large urban districts. In a word, this leadership incompatibility is a proverbial ‘can of worms’ in the public schools across the United States. So, instead of ignoring it; let’s discuss it with a potential resolution.

To begin the discussion, senior central office administrators will aggressively fight against any personal accountability for Title 1 campus academic performance. In general, district administrators view their management role as ‘*regulatory*’; however, they want ‘*advisory*’ accountability when the Title 1 academic results arrive each May. This incongruity between authority and responsibility in relation to student performance presses a status quo ideological curricular philosophy that continues year after year since there is not a personal or professional burden to bear on their end of the process.

In the pragmatic reality of the public school system in this country, the elementary campus administration is ultimately held responsible for statewide standardized testing outcomes, but the central office administration possesses the curricular authority for both Tier 1 and Tier 2. This inequitable management circumstance is a major reason why academic turnaround in Title 1 public schools is lackluster to non-existent across the country. The lack of accountability for the central office decision makers allows the avoidance of responsibility and press for positive change. It allows district administrators to subscribe to

idealistic curriculum and instructional methodologies without reflection of the merit, efficiency or effectiveness of their own personal and professional philosophies.

So, what is the main takeaway? It is the incongruity between authority and responsibility with regard to student outcomes that there is NOT improvement in educational outcomes at the mass of Title 1 campuses in the United States. Thus, if (Title 1) principals do not possess the authority decision-making power, as in the case of Tier 1 curriculum and instructional methodologies, then the campus principals (i.e., Title 1) should NOT be held solely responsible for the chronically low academic outcomes.

Why does this fundamental management anomaly exist in ONLY the public school system?

The public-school management system is unique and self-serving. Almost exclusively, all types of organizations in the United States – from public and private companies to government agencies to the four core military branches all possess fundamental managerial and organizational design based on strict adherence to authority and responsibility leadership functionality. Consider the outcome if the Oklahoma Highway patrol did not possess the authority to cite drivers exceeding the 75 mile per hour (mph) posted speed limit. Most drivers would not obey the traffic rules since there is no personal consequence from choosing to not abide by them; therefore, it is reasonable to assume that most drivers would exceed the 75 mph posted speed limit.

Why does the American public school system operate differently than all other types of organizations toward accountability in its senior leadership and management capacities?

To answer that question, it is key to fully understanding the five (5) factors that drive a unique wedge between managerial authority and associated responsibility for instructional methodology and curriculum selections in the American public school system. The primary reason for the lack of responsibility in student outcomes, despite the associated curricular authority by central office administrators, are listed below with brief explanations.

- 1.) Administrators' salaries in large urban school districts as compared to the average classroom teacher's salary.** It is important to understand the dynamics large salaries play in an administrator's ego and ability to rationalize these salary differentials when it comes to the expertise and experience, they believe they bring to their highly paid position. An elementary campus principal's salary is approximately twice that of the average classroom teacher's annual pay. A central office administrator's salary is about 3 times more for an Associate Superintendent in Curriculum or Schools, and a Chief Academic Officer (CAO) or Deputy Superintendent is about 3.5 to 5 times greater than a classroom teacher's yearly wage. At the top end of the pay scale is a superintendent. Their salary ranges between 5 to 9 times greater than the average salary of classroom teachers.
- 2.) Central Office Administrators' Prior Academic Turnaround Success.** This aspect is the most interesting element in the foundational understanding of the incongruence of authority and responsibility for student outcomes in the Title 1 schools. The central office administrative decision makers – associate superintendents, chief academic officers, deputy superintendents and superintendents rarely, if ever, have any proven track record of any level of dramatic academic improvement when they were campus Title 1 principals – if they ever served in that capacity at all. Many senior district administrators were never a campus principal, but if they did serve in that capacity, it is fair to evaluate their administrative role as a 'physical plant manager.' For more clarity of a 'physical plant manager,' please read the "***Accidental Principal***" blog at the website address provided in the footer of this document.

However, not only is their lack of prior success in raising student achievement as a classroom teacher or campus administrator not discussed, it is considered border-line unprofessional if it is referenced. In short, the following question is never asked of most campus or central office administrators, *“Based on what levels of professional success and expertise in your professional career should your advice be followed with regard to Title 1 school academic reformation?”*



3.) **The reality of NOT knowing what to do.** Basically, the vast majority of campus or central office administrators *‘do not know what problem they are trying to solve’* when tasked with significantly raising student achievement in the Title 1 schools or eliminating the infamous achievement gap. This fact is proven empirically and repeatedly each school year – pre-Covid pandemic or post Covid – as Title 1 campus academic performance remains stagnant and consistently much lower than their more affluent non-Title 1 campus peers. Consequently, central office administrators cannot be held responsible for student outcomes of the Title 1 campus, or the obvious question will rear its ugly head without increases in student performance, *“Why are administrators’ annual salaries so many times greater than a classroom teacher if they cannot lead low-income schools to heightened student results?”*

4.) **No Accountability from School Board Trustees and Charter School Board Members.** School Board Trustees at all school types do not ask administrators for academic turnaround time lines or specific details on how the latest central office curricular ‘gimmick’ will eliminate the infamous ‘achievement gap.’ The Trustees are all volunteers with good intentions, but they invariably do not comprehend the nature of these multi-billion-dollar school districts with tens of thousands of moving parts. Thus, they do not know what questions to ask their one employee – the superintendent or founder. If they did, superintendents would be easily cornered in their own reasoning and it would be readily apparent that *‘they do not know what concrete actions are needed to significantly raise student achievement and eliminate the achievement gap.’* Historically and pragmatically, if urban superintendents and founders knew what to do to improve academics at Title 1 campuses, performance in those schools would have surely improved significantly at some point in time across the United States in the last 60 to 70 years.

If dramatic and sustained improvement in Title 1 academics is desired, the superintendent and senior district administrators must be held directly accountable for student outcomes.

Additionally, the local media should also perform a ‘watchdog’ oversight of school districts in large urban areas, but there are compounding circumstances why this does not occur. One, there are so many moving parts in a multibillion-dollar operating school budget that it is almost impossible for an outsider in any capacity to fully understand the complexities of academic instruction and curricular programming and its enduring ineffectiveness. Thus, like board trustees, they do not know what questions to ask to delve into the root issues that affect Title 1 schools to counter and challenge administrators’ smoke and mirrors ‘educanese language.’

Two, public education reporters must have a working relationship with the district's public relations office. Unless they have a blockbuster media story, they generally 'play ball' and adhere to the district's company line on continued failure in their Title 1 schools. So, a school district's PR department can control the narrative very easily with local media sources.

Finally, traditional school districts and charters are deemed 'LEA – Local Education Authority' organizations. Thus, school districts control their own destiny – and they are not heavily influenced in academic results from either their state agency or the federal government. Minimum expectations – usually set low by the state's education agencies are sufficiently 'good' enough for the LEA to operate freely of external oversight. State education commissioners are reluctant to involve themselves in a district unless it is of absolute necessity. Commissioners must operate politically within a fine line with regard to LEA independence and supervision. Moreover, state and federal lawmakers are reluctant to pass legislation that challenges the concept of the independent authority of LEAs for a variety of pragmatic and political rational. Instead, elected politicians attempt legislative 'end-arounds' on the sanctity of the independence of LEAs by promoting charter school alternatives, open education resources, vouchers and school choice – to name a few.

In the end, due to a lack of external influencers, if the charter board or the board of trustees allows chronic academic performance in a district's low-income schools, a large urban district or charter system is able to sustain the consistent weight of poor student outcomes and academic mediocrity indefinitely. Analogously, these large urban school districts can exceed the 75 mile per hour posted speed limit in Oklahoma without consequence.

- 5.) Most parents are too busy to hold public school officials accountable for academics.** The majority of medium and high-income parents are busy. Frequently, there are two breadwinners in the house, and their lives are consumed by work and family engagements. Their children attend non-Title 1 elementary schools, and the vast majority of their children invariably perform quite well on standardized assessments. If their children are struggling socially or academically in school, they have the financial resources to procure highly competent afterschool tutors or commercial tutoring services. Hence, for the most part, their children are doing fine academically in the public school system, and they are too busy to evaluate and comprehend the issues in the low-income schools as well as the de facto operations of their multi-billion dollar public school district their children attend every day.

However, the educational and home situation for low-income parents is diametrically opposite that of their affluent counterparts. Many low-income parents are single mothers, and they struggle financially to make ends meet each month. Accordingly, they cannot afford private academic tutors and quality commercial vendor services when their children desperately need them. It is not only limited time that is an issue, they frequently do not possess heightened personal levels of formal education to seriously question campus educators, let alone central office.

In the end, campus and district administrators have little press from parents, politicians or the local media that should be investigating the plight of stagnating performance year after year in the public Title 1 schools. *Only the school board trustees or the charter boards have any real and immediate influence over accountability and change in the school systems.* It is for this reason that superintendents and founders do all in their relational power to 'get along' and 'shmooze' board members. The trustees are the few people that are positioned to levy

accountable change and ask difficult questions that a superintendent must answer – or attempt to answer with competency, if the right questions are asked.

What must Change to Significantly Impact Academic Change for Low-Income Students?

It should come as no surprise that central office administrators must be held responsible for student outcomes or there will continue to be little to no change in student performance. However, school trustees can't simply begin terminating senior central office administrators (e.g., CAO, associate superintendents and superintendents) for their district's Title 1 campuses' enduring poor academic performance. If so, almost every senior administrator, in every urban school district, in every medium to large urban school district in the United States would be terminated in one school year. Instead, there must be accountability in a more structured format, and that accountability **must** originate from the school board trustees or the charter board.

Holding Campus and District Administrators Accountable/Responsible - Resolution

The first issue is to determine which academic performance metric will be used. The only way to objectively evaluate administrators is by using standardized testing outcomes (that begin in third grade). Of course, there are and will always be a number of debatable issues endemic with standardized testing, but the one element that is NOT debatable, in my opinion, is that, standardized *testing is highly accurate in both math and reading*. It is well documented that many urban superintendents are opposed to standardized testing for many reasons, but in my opinion, it is mostly because the vast majority of their Title 1 campuses in their district demonstrate little to no improvement from one school year to the next.



However, the logical conundrum that campus and district administrators must rationalize when castigating standardized testing is the following situation: An urban district's non-Title 1 campuses consistently perform very well on grade-level standardized tests, but their Title 1 schools incessantly struggle. However, all district campuses – both Title 1 and non-Title 1 – are given the same assessment on the same day at the same time. So, the annual test is fair in consideration of those circumstances – it is an objective metric.

The second issue is holding central office administrators responsible for student outcomes. A system must be established that provides ample time for all administrators to be fairly evaluated for success, or lack thereof. Such a system must hold all administrators accountable/responsible for student outcomes in low-income schools. There are a couple items that must be included in this type of school district accountability system for both campus and district administrators.

- A.) Time Limit to Demonstrate Success or Effectiveness** – Campus principals should be given 3 years to demonstrate heightened and continued improvement in student outcomes at their campus; whereas, central office administrators (i.e., associate superintendent for schools and curriculum, Chief Academic Officer, Deputy Superintendent and the Superintendent) are provided 4 years for all campuses in their supervisory oversight. For example: A superintendent would be evaluated on ALL elementary campuses in comparison to a school principal, who would be accountable only for their campus' student outcomes.

B.) All district administrators (campus and central office senior personnel) must be held accountable for campuses under their direct supervision – Elementary schools with less than 85% of their students’ meeting passing standards on the State’s annual standardized assessment must show an (absolute) growth in both reading and math of 5% each school year. For example, if an elementary campus has 44% passing rates for reading, it must achieve 49% to be acceptable. The following school year, that campus must score 54% to be deemed acceptable – and 59% the subsequent school year.

Central office administrators are accountable for elementary campuses that they directly supervised. For instance, a superintendent and CAO are accountable for all campuses, but an area associate superintendent for schools is only responsible for the campuses in their supervisory region. Consequently, district administrators 5% absolute growth is an average of all elementary campuses in their area of direct responsibility. For instance, if three (3) elementary campuses have the following academic results in reading or math: (+ 5%), (- 2%), and (+14 %) growth, then the average academic growth – rounded up – equals + 6%. Thus, the district administrator has earned a ‘proficient’ rating for that school year. **Note:** campuses with students’ scoring above the 85% meeting standards in both math and reading are exempt from the accountability criteria for both district administrators and the campus principal.

C.) Administrator Student Achievement Evaluation Metric

– It is recommended that all administrators’ annual evaluation report includes an additional line-item criterion for student achievement accountability. This addition provides for either a ‘proficient’ or a ‘non-proficient’ rating. If an administrator does NOT meet the annual growth requirement, they receive an annual performance rating of ‘not proficient.’ This ‘not proficient’ rating overrides all other categories of their annual evaluation for an overall ‘non proficient’ rating for their annual evaluation review. This accountability measure emphasizes the importance of the academic role an administrator plays in the public school system.



If performance gains are not met after 3 years for a school principal or 4 years for a district administrator, they are terminated from their position. If the administrator achieves the required performance gain, their rating is ‘proficient,’ and the clock starts over for the 3- or 4-year time period for each type of administrator, respectively. Moreover, those consequences must be clearly established by the Board of Trustees specifically providing the time frame of 4 years to demonstrate consistent yearly academic improvement of an absolute 5% at all campuses under 85% of students not meeting state standards.

The authority with associated accountability/responsibility of campus academic results at central office must change if raising student outcomes with low-income students is an objective. If dramatic positive change is desired in student academics in the Title 1 campuses, then there must be responsibility at the upper management levels of the school district. Central office administrators, starting with the Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer (CAO) must be held in the same accountability stead as the campus administrator.

Three (3) things will occur when holding central office administrators accountable for student achievement. **First**, responsibility and performance expectations will structurally move down the organizational hierarchy at central office from top to bottom. Holding the superintendent and the chief academic officer responsible

will signal to their direct reports to press instructional methodologies and resources that are evidence-based and effective at low-income campuses in lieu of current and continued use of ideological curricular resources and instructional methodologies that have NOT demonstrated viability for 6 or 7 decades.

Furthermore, both central office and campus administrators will be incentivized to discontinue their ideological philosophy when they too are required to pay a professional price for their contribution in achieving or not meeting low-income students' social and academic needs. Administrators will learn that they must actually produce in high salaried jobs in order to keep them. In effect, low-income students will finally receive the attention that they need and deserve.

Secondly, it will become clear that if central office administrators cannot produce heightened student outcomes when held accountable, then there is no reason to pay those administrators inflated salaries for their leadership, guidance and academic reformation 'expertise.' There is also the mobility factor that both campus principals and district administrators have sidestepped for decades. An overriding non-proficient rating on their annual administrative evaluation for 4 consecutive years will limit their mobility to safely land in another school district since it is clear that they are unable to significantly improve academic growth district-wide.

Lastly, public schools will join the mass of governmental and commercial private and public organizations in the United States that demand authority with associated responsibility in their management and leadership structures. Otherwise, there is no basis for their leadership role and decision-making authority in those capacities, if they are absolved from responsibility of organizational performance.

