

The Leadership Responsibility for the Experience of Work

Fairness and dignity should hold throughout a person's experience with an organization. Why that standard belongs within enterprise leadership accountability, from hiring through departure.

By Lara Blackert

The experience of work is one of the most consequential systems an organization creates. It begins before employment and extends through hiring, onboarding, contribution, development, difficult moments, and departure. Yet accountability for the quality and integrity of that experience is often fragmented.

The current labor market makes that fragmentation increasingly visible. Capable people spend six months, nine months, or longer searching for work. Candidates invest substantial time in applications, assessments, and interviews, then receive no closure. Inside organizations, employees encounter unclear expectations, inconsistent decisions, or accountability without the authority required to deliver.

These may appear to be separate recruiting, culture, or management issues. Together, they reveal something more fundamental about how an institution communicates, makes decisions, exercises authority, and honors its commitments.

The executive question is not whether every experience can be positive. It is whether the organization has established a clear standard for how people will be treated when outcomes are uncertain, difficult, or adverse.

Accountability begins before employment

Candidates make a meaningful investment in an organization before they ever join it. They reorganize schedules, prepare for interviews, complete assessments, travel, and make decisions about other opportunities. The organization controls most of the information and nearly all of the process.

Business priorities will change. Roles will be paused. Strong candidates will not always be selected. Those realities heighten the need for accurate job postings, disciplined processes, timely communication, respect for people's time, and closure when a decision has been made.

These are not merely recruiting courtesies. They are early signals of institutional discipline. They influence employer reputation, access to talent, and the confidence people place in the organization before the employment relationship begins.

The leadership standard must hold inside

An organization cannot credibly promise clarity to candidates while normalizing ambiguity for employees. The same operating patterns often follow people inside: unresolved decisions, shifting expectations, inconsistent standards, vague feedback, and accountability that is not matched by decision authority.

Work will involve pressure, disagreement, accountability, and consequential decisions. Responsible leadership does not remove those realities. It creates conditions in which people can navigate them with clarity, dignity, and a fair opportunity to contribute.

When employees must devote disproportionate energy to interpreting politics, compensating for structural ambiguity, or protecting themselves from avoidable harm, the cost is organizational. Decisions slow. Candor declines. Trust weakens. Strong people disengage or leave.

Compliance is necessary, but not sufficient

Legal compliance is an essential threshold. It is not the full measure of institutional responsibility. An organization can meet the technical requirements of policy or law while still managing a process in ways that are unclear, inconsistent, or unnecessarily damaging.

Executives must therefore apply a broader standard. They should examine whether the process was fair, expectations were clear, authority matched accountability, concerns were considered with integrity, and organizational power was exercised responsibly.

Difficult decisions will remain necessary. Roles will be eliminated. Performance will be addressed. Candidates will be declined. Strategies will change. The standard is not the absence of adverse outcomes. It is the quality of leadership surrounding them.

This is an enterprise accountability

Recruiters and HR leaders are often the visible stewards of the work experience, but they cannot carry the standard alone. Candidate communication, workplace conditions, executive conduct, and the integrity of difficult decisions are enterprise leadership responsibilities.

Boards and CEOs establish the expectations that sit alongside financial performance. Executive teams determine whether accountability includes both results and behavior. Managers translate those expectations into the daily conditions in which people work. HR and recruiting functions provide the systems, judgement, and visibility needed to sustain the standard.

Accountability becomes credible when governance converts intent into evidence and action. Leaders need visibility into recurring candidate concerns, regrettable turnover, repeated employee-relations patterns, breakdowns in decision authority, and material differences between stated values and lived experience. The purpose is not to eliminate every difficult outcome. It is to identify where isolated issues have become an organizational pattern.

The standard is achievable

Many employers, recruiters, and leaders already demonstrate what responsible practice looks like. They communicate when circumstances change, provide closure, make expectations explicit, address concerns directly, and preserve dignity through difficult decisions.

Their example matters because it shows that better does not require perfection. It requires clear expectations, visible ownership, and the discipline to improve when the organization falls short.

These practices are not separate from performance. When people trust the integrity of the process, information moves earlier, decisions improve, accountability becomes clearer, and more energy remains available for the work.

A responsibility for better

Finding work. Joining an organization. Working within it. Growing. Navigating difficult moments. Leaving. It is one connected experience, shaped by the standards leaders establish and the systems organizations sustain.

Work should not hurt is a statement of institutional responsibility, not a promise of comfort. Leaders will make difficult decisions. Their accountability is to ensure that the systems, behaviors, and judgement surrounding those decisions are clear, fair, and worthy of trust.

Organizations that meet that standard do more than create a more responsible experience of work. They protect trust, strengthen execution, preserve reputation, and improve their ability to attract and retain the people their future requires.

We share a Responsibility for Better.