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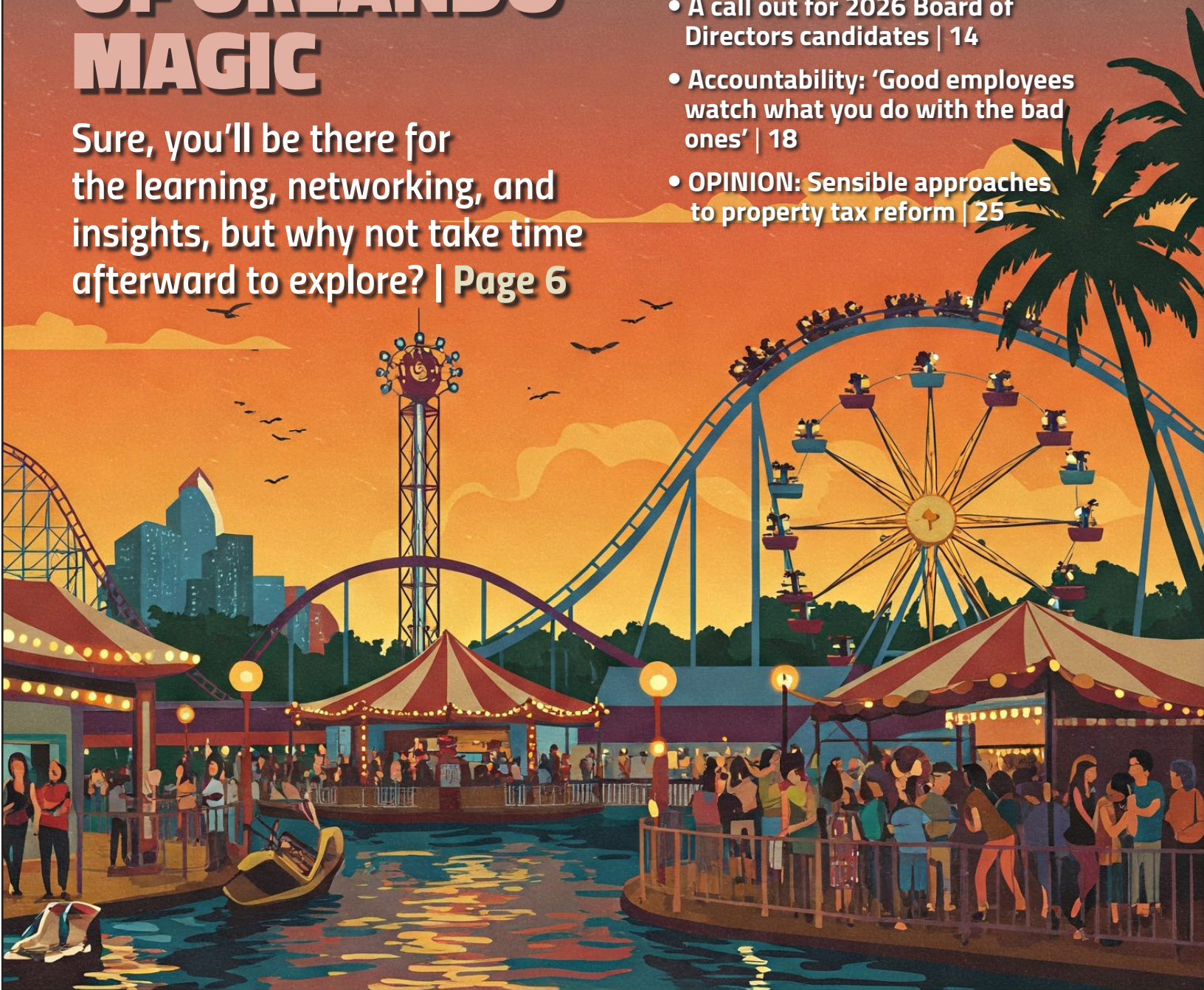
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ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025: A DOSE OF ORLANDO MAGIC

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Accountability can change a culture and bring out the best

‘Good employees watch what you do with the bad ones.’

BY CREGG DALTON

When someone exceeds a posted speed limit, law enforcement can pull the driver over and write a speeding ticket.

If a house isn’t built to code, it will fail a building inspection.

If you let the needle get to the “E” on the fuel gauge, you’ll even-

tually run out of gas and may end up stranded.

An athlete who continuously drops the ball will be replaced.

For as long as I can remember, I have been held accountable by my parents, coaches, law enforcement, and other authority figures in my life.

Yet somewhere along the way, both in our personal lives and

workplaces, some leaders have forgotten the true meaning of accountability.

How can we hold ourselves accountable in all areas outside of work but fail to do so when leading our teams?

Employees show up late, miss assignments, disregard the dress code, and fail to follow policies that are in place to serve our residents.

Some employees don't meet the minimum standards expected of their role, while others consistently do. Some leaders show favoritism, treating some employees one way and others differently. And some bosses give positive evaluations to employees they are friends with outside of work, regardless of performance.

There are also leaders who avoid working eight-hour days because they can get away with it. Additionally, some employees treat their colleagues in a disrespectful and degrading manner.

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of serving as a leader in a variety of organizations, including the military, a nonprofit, several law enforcement units, and now as an elected official in Florida.

Along the way, I've observed leaders who were not held accountable for their inactions — or their failure to act. I have also seen leaders who didn't hold their employees accountable either.

I have also witnessed some amazing leaders who were simply remarkable at holding their staff accountable.

I once heard the saying, "Good employees watch what you do with the bad ones," and I couldn't agree more.

This simple truth has shaped my leadership approach, and I'd like to share a few stories that illustrate this point.

A dead weight

I was assigned the role of "operations sergeant" at a sheriff's office, taking over a unit with low morale and some disgruntled employees.

I knew I had to get to the root of the problem.

The operations sergeant was responsible for overseeing the detectives who investigate property crimes, which, while not the high-profile crimes seen on the front

page, were still important.

These crimes had real victims, and we knew about them only because victims reported them.

Road deputies would respond, take a report, and send it to our department, where I would assign a detective to follow up.

Agency policy required that property crimes detectives read the report and contact victims within seven days.

Upon taking over, I decided to do a case review of the six detectives.

It didn't take long to realize that one detective hadn't opened, reviewed, or contacted victims on around 40 cases.

This detective had over 20 years working in law enforcement — much more experience than my own eight years — and was about 20 years older than me.

He had been in the unit for six years and had worked under several operations sergeants who had clearly turned a blind eye to his negligence.

They hadn't held him accountable.

It became clear why the other detectives were so disgruntled.

They were carrying the load for this detective. I immediately began the process of progressive discipline, which eventually led to this detective being removed from the unit.

I later learned that in his next unit, his new sergeant held him accountable, disciplined him, and eventually he left law enforcement altogether.

The change in morale in my unit was dramatic.

Once accountability was established, the team's work improved significantly, and we were recognized for our outstanding case closures, successful prosecutions, and overall performance.

Holding people accountable not only changed the culture but also brought out the best in everyone.

A bad attitude

I'd like to share another example of accountability.

In my organization, I noticed that one of our customer service representatives was not meeting the expected standards. The challenge, however, was that this employee was being supervised by both a director and an assistant property appraiser.

As a "walk-around" leader, I stay closely connected to what's happening within the organization and with our team members.

This responsibility falls not only on my leadership team but also on me. I am accountable for the overall success and performance of our staff.

Over time, I noticed this employee was frequently absent from her workstation and wearing headphones at her desk when she should have been assisting walk-in customers or answering phone calls.

She was also handling far fewer customers and phone calls than her colleagues.

On a couple of occasions, she mentioned she was looking for employment elsewhere, and she was often leaving early and arriving late.

The list of concerns seemed to go on.

To make matters more complicated, her desk was positioned out of the line of sight, which made it harder for her leadership to monitor her behavior.

I instructed her leadership team to place her on probation, document my concerns, and, importantly, move her desk so that her performance would be more visible.

The director and assistant property appraiser acted quickly, and the next day the employee quit via text message.

She simply couldn't accept the standard we upheld — being held accountable for her actions — and chose to leave rather than meet

expectations of excellence over complacency.

This situation reinforced the importance of holding everyone to the same standard, no matter their role.

When accountability is established, it not only improves performance but also ensures that we attract and retain employees who align with our values.

The second in charge

Another great example of accountability occurred when I took office as an elected official and inherited an organization with over 40 employees.

One key individual in this situation was on the executive team and essentially served as the “second in charge” at the time.

Beneath her were a few directors, several managers, and the rest of the staff.

The previous elected official had taken a hands-off approach, allowing this leader to manage the entire organization with little oversight or involvement in day-to-day employee interactions.

Initially, I decided to maintain the existing structure to better understand the organization’s layout, titles, staffing, and policies.

Over time, I began observing my leadership team closely, as any message I wanted to send to staff had to begin with them.

I needed my leadership team to reflect my actions, thoughts, and communication style when interacting with employees.

As I observed, I noticed troubling patterns in the interactions of this particular executive leader, even in the most minor situations.

When I assigned her tasks, they were not always completed according to my instructions, and when the tasks required original thought or initiative, I discovered she often resorted to copying from others given similar assignments.

Our organization had clear performance standards, and despite several counseling sessions and attempts to address these issues, the



executive leader consistently failed to meet those standards.

Ultimately, I made the decision to demote her to the role of director, aligning her position with the other directors.

I did not reduce her pay, but I did limit her responsibilities and scope of responsibilities in order to address the concerns I had regarding her performance and leadership traits.

I explained that this decision was due to her failure to meet the expectations I held for an executive leader or second in charge, both in terms of task performance and her treatment of staff.

Having held the position of second in charge for many years before my arrival, she was understandably displeased with the discipline.

It quickly became clear that she did not like being held accountable.

However, I made it clear that if I was to be held to a standard by my constituents, I would also hold her to the same level of accountability. The exact same level of accountability that we would hold the rest of our staff to. I would not overlook her shortcomings simply because of her long tenure in the role. Accountability is crucial to maintaining the integrity and success of any organization.

Less than a year later, she retired.

Throughout my decades of experience in various professions, one thing has always been clear: Accountability is essential in every

organization.

Just as we were held accountable in our childhood or outside of the office, it must remain a core part of our leadership responsibilities.

From my time in leadership roles, I’ve learned that holding all employees accountable — regardless of their title — builds trust, enhances performance, fosters professional growth, improves communication, increases employee engagement, and ultimately strengthens the team during challenging times.

I’ve mentioned the word “standard” multiple times, and through experience, I’ve learned that when employees are held accountable, they are more likely to fulfill their responsibilities and strive to meet the standard our organization believes in.

That standard is what we owe to the residents we serve every day.

Just like in our childhood, employees understand the consequences of their actions and the impact those actions have on others.

Therefore, our standard is simple: be accountable to one other and to ourselves, for the betterment of the community we serve.



CREGG DALTON is Citrus County Appraiser in Inverness, Florida.