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The Key Ingredient

Sylvia Metayer,
CEO of Sodexo
Corporate Services
Worldwide, on
how accountability
drives engagement,
innovation and
agility.

BY DAVID TOBENKIN

Sylvia Metayer knows how to lose a client: discard accountability.

Blame someone else for a problem and deny all responsibility. Taking the opposite approach—no matter how unpleasant the situation—is always better, says the CEO of Sodexo's Corporate Services Worldwide business segment. "If you want to keep a client, even if you've made a big mistake, usually saying, 'OK, I'm responsible and I'll fix it' will put you in a much better place."

"I think the biggest tension between accountability and innovation is that to be able to be free to innovate, you have to be free to fail."

—Sylvia Metayer,
CEO, Corporate Services
Worldwide, Sodexo

With operations in 80 countries that serve 75 million consumers each day, the French food services and facilities management company has plenty of clients to please. Ms. Metayer says that to power growth and further realize its mission to boost quality of life, Sodexo must continue to give managers and employees greater autonomy. During the past few years, executives have pushed a corporate restructuring to make the €20.2 billion services company less hierarchical and more collaborative. While overseeing a workforce of 120,000, Ms. Metayer has seen how a culture of accountability can ensure high-quality services and help Sodexo attract talent.

It all starts with empowering employees to deliver. "In a volatile and uncertain world, we find that empowerment and holding people accountable once they're



Sylvia Metayer at Talentsoft's annual user conference held in June 2017.

empowered is the biggest driver of engagement," she says.

"As a leader, Sylvia combines and drives authenticity, accountability and responsibility in a way that truly expresses the values and unique culture of Sodexo," says Katerin Le Folcalvez, partner, Insigniam.

IQ recently spoke to Ms. Metayer about building a culture of accountability and how it can drive innovation.

IQ: What does accountability mean to you?

Sylvia Metayer: It's being able to give action to commitments and then say, "Yes, I own

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these actions, and I own these outcomes.” To me, that’s accountability.

IQ: What does a culture of accountability look like across a large global organization?

SM: When I joined Sodexo, its CEO, Michel Landel, told me two things about the business, upon which I meditate every day. The first one concerns the accountability that we as managers have to the whole organization and to our clients. He said, “The nature of this business is to make the half a million people in Sodexo perform extraordinarily every day to their clients.” That’s the overall accountability.



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The other thing he told me, to go straight to the other side of it, reflects Sodexo’s start in food services and relates to the nature of the business. The restaurant has to open on time and start delivering meals. Whatever the situation, whatever has happened, everything must be in place and must work. Our site managers and our site teams are accountable to be able to deliver that every day on time and perfectly. That’s the breadth, if you want, of the accountability that we have. So on the one side there is almost societal accountability, and on the other there is detailed minute-by-minute accountability to our clients on-site.





Sodexo's on-site services include materials and inventory management and food service at senior living centers (opposite page).

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IQ: Have you encountered any challenges in terms of building and enforcing a culture of accountability?

SM: The thing that makes it complicated is our size and scale. As we build the business, and things like supply chains, and you transfer functions or take some direct positions away from the teams on-site, then accountabilities become shared. I think that shared accountability is difficult. I’ll give you a very simple example, once again in food services. Imagine a supply chain that is supposed to deliver bread to a site, but the supplier doesn’t deliver and the client is upset, and the consumers don’t have their bread for lunch. Who is accountable for that? When accountability is shared, people can find

that they’re not empowered or that it’s easy to blame somebody else. That’s the challenge.

IQ: Do you have a playbook for responding to that kind of challenge?

SM: There are playbooks, but in the end, it’s having good standards of behavior that is most important. What I say to my team is, “The playbooks and the processes are there, but in the end what I’m holding you most accountable for is the quality of generosity. So if you know that what you’re going to do may cause a problem for somebody, you have to go out of your way so that it doesn’t. If you believe that somebody has caused you a problem, then you have to go out of your way to make sure that it is sorted out with them or that it is forgiven.” That’s a notion of behavior to ensure that we’re all held accountable to our clients.

IQ: You once said that it is “really, really hard to be agile.” What lessons have you learned about the challenge of increasing agility?

SM: The hardest thing about big organizations

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and agility is how do you change course and ways of working without creating uncontrollable ripples in the rest of the organization? To give an example: If I want to change a compensation system in one part of France, how can I do it only in that part of France without making everybody else feel that there’s something that’s unfair?

Agility should mean that you can change course, or you can test and learn and things like that, and do it in a protected environment that doesn’t cause ripple effects throughout the organization. That’s been a challenge for us, and I honestly don’t think we have figured it out yet. We’re trying to crack it by pushing empowerment down through the organization.

There is also a second challenge: Basically, how do you get top management to give up being involved in everything? We found a couple years back that we were always getting involved in everything, and everything had to come up to us first for a decision. That challenge has been easier to overcome. We’ve made a simple decision by saying we choose to delegate a certain number of subjects to other people in the organization, even if it means working across organizations or across hierarchical levels. That has worked well. Honestly, bad decisions are still made—but not statistically more or fewer bad decisions than we had before. But it allows us as an organization to move at a considerably higher speed.

IQ: Can accountability facilitate innovation?

SM: Absolutely. In our business, a lot of innovation is at the site level. It’s as simple as someone working at a senior home understanding that it’s hard for elderly patients with Parkinson’s disease to eat at a table with the normal, standard height and, therefore, having the delicacy

of mind to imagine a table that’s higher. That way when people eat, they’re not putting things all over themselves and retain dignity. We ended up changing a lot of dining table heights in our senior homes.

This type of innovation can only come if the person who’s serving feels accountable to the person whom they’re serving. If it’s just a job and you’re just there and you have to feed people in 20 minutes or so, you don’t notice that kind of thing. But if you’re accountable to the person you’re serving, you’re accountable to your client, and you know that what you’re trying to do is provide a better experience for the people on that site. That suddenly creates all kinds of innovation.

IQ: Is there ever tension between innovation and accountability?

SM: I think the biggest tension between accountability and innovation is that to be able to be free to innovate, you have to be free to fail. People will say, “Well, if I’m highly accountable, I don’t want to take the risk, and I don’t want to fail.” I think that’s a paradigm that’s difficult. That’s why we don’t say to them, “You’re accountable to innovate.” Instead, we say to them, “You’re accountable to give your consumers the best experience” because that will foster innovation in itself. If you’re trying to give the best service possible, you actually accept that from time to time things that you’ll be trying out won’t work—and you will just try something else. **IQ**

