How to Hold People Accountable
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“Everyone on a team knows who is and who is not performing and they are looking to you as the leader to see what you are going to do about it.”

- Collin Powell, former US Secretary of State

Far too often, tasks are assigned to employees in a haphazard way, hoping that the worker will “figure it out” and deliver an adequate, even superior, performance. If this is your accountability process, you will soon realize that ‘hope’ is not a very effective strategy. There is a practical process for holding people accountable – in a way that fosters trust, respect, open communication and gets a grip on results.

We have found three reasons why managers don’t hold people accountable:

1) They aren’t clear about how to do it. There isn’t a clear accountability process in place.

2) They don’t want to be the bad guy. A recent Harvard study showed that many managers, hoping to get promoted, refrain from holding their people accountable because they want to get good performance feedback and stay in line for promotion.

3) It’s too hard. Let’s face it. It’s tough holding people accountable. It takes courage. Management must be prepared to put in the time and have the tough conversations.
You don’t build accountability by increasing rules and procedures and bureaucratizing organizations. If an employee cheats on expenses by padding his travel costs, the organization doesn’t make people accountable by requiring that everyone travel with a notary public. While there certainly are some systemic issues that contribute to greater accountability, accountability is not built with more bureaucracy. It is fostered through better conversations.

Certain key elements must be in place to have accountability. Before going through the steps to hold someone accountable, assess carefully what is present and what is missing in your own process.
An effective accountability process must contain:

i. Clarity: Ambiguity breeds mediocrity. People need to be clear about what is expected and how success is defined.

ii. Ownership: Ownership means making a decision that all blame is a waste of time. Ownership means deciding that you will never make a promise you aren’t prepared to keep. Ownership means remembering that no one but you cares about the reason you let someone down.

iii. Courage: It certainly takes courage to have the tough conversations when people aren’t being accountable. It also takes courage when we are being asked to make an agreement. Far too often we put excessive demands on our staff and then wonder why they aren’t accountable. If you don’t have the courage to push back and your boss isn’t open to negotiate priorities, then don’t expect accountability. Accountability won’t flourish in a culture of fear.
iv. Agreement: A request is not a promise. If you want to hold someone 100% accountable, then you must gain their full, 100% agreement.

v. Visibility: Visibility drives accountability. Identify your key result areas, track them carefully, and post them everywhere. Make these metrics easy to understand and highly visible so that everyone in the organization knows precisely how they are doing at all times against their agreed upon goals.

vi. Support: To be committed and engaged, people need to feel that they can talk openly about the support they require to achieve their accountabilities. Coaching and mentoring must be a part of every effective accountability process. Also, ongoing feedback is vital to the accountability process.

vii. Energy: Managing performance should be an energy producer, not an energy consumer. Celebration and recognition are integral to success.

viii. Trust: Making a decision to trust will be the one thing that changes everything.
Holding Others Accountable: A Ten Step Process

Step 1: Take A Good Look In The Mirror

Positional leaders set the tone for the culture of an organization. If a culture of weak accountability has been built, or even if you have an employee who is not achieving the results that you need from them, the first place for you to look for a cure is in the mirror.

Looking in the mirror means taking a careful inventory of your own actions. In order to get an accurate picture of how accountable you are, ask yourself as well as those who depend on you, how you are perceived in the following areas. Do you as a leader, or a group of leaders, consistently do the following:

- Do you honor the promises you make? Do you do what you say you will do? Do you come to meetings on time? Are you seen as a person who can be counted on?
- Do you take 100% responsibility for your actions? Have you stopped hiding behind such statements as, “They need to listen better”? No, they don’t have to listen better; you need to communicate better.
- Have you given up, once and for all, excuses and blame? When it comes to accountability, no one but you cares about the reason you let someone down.
Are you loyal to others in their absence? Do you refuse to be part of the gossip crowd? Are you known as a person who represents people well when they aren’t in the room?

Do you do what you espouse and what you expect from others? Do you “walk the talk?” Are you committed to living the values you tell others to live?

Above all, are you open for feedback when you are not perceived as doing what is listed above? Accountability doesn’t mean you have to be perfect. It does mean that you have to be seen by others as being willing to grow in these areas.

If you want to assess how accountable you are, or how accountable people see you, there is a more thorough test you can take on my web site: www.davidirvine.com

Step 2: Build trust

Trust is a belief in and reliance upon someone or something. It is the experience of being comfortable and unguarded around another person or situation. While being accountable builds trust, before you can expect to hold someone accountable, there has to be a degree of trust in the relationship.

To learn more about building trust with people, you will find a complimentary white paper on my web site devoted to the topic: http://www.davidirvine.ca/resources
In the meantime, here is a short inventory to ensure that you are doing all you can to earn the trust of people – before you start to work at holding them accountable. Accountability without trust is compliance. Accountability is about ownership, not mere compliance.

- Do people see you as invested in your relationship with them? Are you seen as being committed to more than “merely getting the job done?” Do they also experience your commitment to helping them grow and develop?
- Are you open and honest with people?
- Do you honestly care about the people you are helping hold accountable? What is your motive? Are you out to control and punish people or are you committed to helping them be the best they can be?

Before you start trying to hold people accountable, you need to take a close look at why you want to hold people accountable.

- Is this about your ego?
- Does getting results mean that you look better as a boss?
- Are you using people for your own gain?
- Or do you honestly care?
- Are you here to serve people or are you here to use people?

These are vital questions to ask and wrestle with before proceeding further. You can't fake caring. People will see right through you. Of course you have to care about the organization and about the results your team is achieving. But if you want to get there you also have to care about the people who are entrusted to you.
Step 3: Get Engagement

Accountability without passion is drudgery. You will have a much easier time holding someone accountable when you know they have their heart in the game. People need to find a reason to be accountable. While not every aspect of a job might be inspiring to an employee, they have to know that you are committed to help them find a fit, rather than just trying to get them to do a job. *Fit people; don’t fix people.*

To learn more about engaging employees, you will find an complimentary white paper on my web site devoted to the topic: www.davidirvine.com/resources

Here are a few ways to get started:

- Ask people what they love about their job or what aspect of the organization they are passionate about, and do the best you can to create an opportunity to do more of what gives them energy.

- Help your employees discover their strengths. Everyone is good at something. You discover your strengths when you know what comes easily to you. When you can help your employees align their job with their strengths, you are far more likely to get accountability from them. For a good process to discover your strengths, see: www.gallupstrengthscenter.com

- Help people know they make a difference. People will be far more likely to step-up when they know they are needed and make an impact. Every employee needs a clear, direct line of sight to the operational priorities so that they know how their function supports the strategy and culture. When people are
inspired they will be accountable. You can inspire people by believing and communicating that everyone is needed and everyone makes a difference. “We need everyone on board with this. We can’t do this alone. Together we can turn this situation around. And I need your help.” When people are fully engaged in a purpose that is both compelling and personally rewarding, they demand much more of themselves and each other.

Step 4: Hire For Character.

One of the most difficult areas when it comes to accountability is dealing with a “poor attitude,” or an attitude that is not conducive to the kind of culture you want to create in your workplace. If you want a particular attitude from the people in your organization, you will find it’s a whole lot easier if you hire for it in the first place. It’s easier to foster a person’s attitude than it is to change a person’s attitude. Not long ago I was in a Marriott Hotel in San Francisco where we had great customer service for the entire weekend. When I was checking out I asked the clerk what training she was given to give such good service. After thinking about it for a few moments she replied, “You can’t train someone to be nice. What we do here is hire nice people and train them how to use the computer.”
You will get the right attitude if you:

- Know, very clearly, what the expected values are in your culture.
- Know, very clearly, what the expected behaviors are that need to accompany these values.
- You hire, very carefully, only people who live these values. As the management guru, Peter Drucker, once said, “Hire slowly; fire quickly.”

If you “inherited” employees with the wrong attitude, or if you didn’t do an adequate job to ensure the right attitude in the hiring process, it makes leadership more difficult, but there is still hope! It means working through the rest of the steps with them.

**Step 5: Get a Clear Agreement.**

A request is not an agreement. Without an agreement, there can be no accountability. Before you can hold anyone accountable they have to be clear about what is expected and have made an agreement to do something.

Clarifying your agreement means clarifying your expectations of each other. Mutually understood expectations are necessary to live accountably and with less strain.

- **Operational Accountabilities** are brief, clear statements of the results you are expected to deliver; they describe what gets accomplished.
- **Leadership Accountabilities** are a description, expressed in specific behavioral terms, of the work environment – the culture – that you will create to make exceptional performance possible. 
  
  This is accountability to living your organization’s values.
• Clarify the specific behaviors attached to the espoused values of your organization, and what is expected from both of you in demonstrating these values. If your organization does not have clearly defined values, along with behaviors attached to the values, then start there.
• Get an agreement that they are willing to demonstrate these behaviors. After all, you can’t hold someone accountable for an “attitude.” You can only hold them accountable for behaving in specific ways.

To obtain an agreement, remember to watch carefully for “vague” responses, such as:

• “I’ll get at it as soon as possible.”
• “I don’t know why they didn’t get it. I sent them all an email with clear instructions.”
• “I’ll try…”
• “I’m pretty swamped right now, but I’ll get to as soon as I can.”

These responses are not enough of an agreement to hold someone accountable. You have to be very clear when you are asking people for an agreement:

• “My request is… by [state time].
• “What I want from you is… by [state time].
• “What I am asking you to do is… by [state time].
• “The action I want from you is… by [state time].
• Be clear and direct: “Sink the nail” by saying clearly: “Can I count on you to do this?”
Step 6: Ensure Support Requirements are in place.

An agreement without clearly defined support requirements to help fulfill that agreement will soon lead to a gap in accountability. A reciprocated agreement to provide the support required to deliver on the promise is essential.

Far too often we put an overload of demands on people and then wonder why they aren’t accountable. Of course the mindset of ownership is paramount to accountability, as has been discussed. But if people are too afraid to push back, or if there isn’t a safe, open, respectful environment to negotiate priorities, then don’t expect accountability. To be accountable, people need to have the ability, the resources, and the willingness to deliver on their promises. Accountable individuals will assess this carefully before making a promise. When you are helping people learn to be accountable it is important to help them assess these three areas before expecting an agreement.

You can also discuss, if appropriate, positive consequences (motivators to deliver on promises).

To ensure a highest degree of motivation, you will also want to ensure that the agreement is based upon promises perceived as aligned with both personal and organizational values and making a difference to the overall objectives of the organization.

Note: If you can’t get an agreement on any of the requests above, if the willingness isn’t there, then you need to go to Step 8. Before you go further, discuss the consequences of this choice they are making. If these agreements are fundamental to their jobs, a lack of agreement may be career limiting.
Step 7: Acknowledge the breakdown.

Life happens. We are, after all, human, and as such, we are going to fall short. Accountable people, as soon as they realize that an agreement is in jeopardy, either because of circumstances beyond their control or because of poor choices that prevent them from keeping the agreement, have a recovery process. Accountable people will let their creditor – the person they have made a promise to - know as soon as they know if the commitment is jeopardized. They will negotiate with their creditor to minimize damages and re-commit to a new promise. And they will learn from the experience so it doesn’t happen again.

Just as an individual needs this kind of recovery process to be accountable when their own agreements are in jeopardy, a relationship also needs a process when one of the parties do not honor a perceived promise. It starts with acknowledging that there is a breakdown.

Acknowledging the breakdown is a simple statement with an initial assessment as to whether it was a communication breakdown or an agreement breakdown. Here are a couple of examples of what “acknowledging the breakdown” would look like:

- “I understood that we had an agreement that you would have this project delivered to me by Friday morning. Was that your understanding?”
- “I understood that we had an agreement that you were going to start giving positive responses to the customer on the point of first contact. Was this your understanding?”
Step 8: Accept Accountability.

It’s always good to start with an acknowledgement of your own possible contribution to the breakdown:

• How did your own behavior contribute to the breakdown (e.g. poor communication)?
• What did you do, or not do, that impacted the situation?
• How did the behavior of others contribute to the breakdown (without blame)?

“Apparently, I didn’t communicate clearly enough what the deadline was.”

“I wasn’t clear enough about what behaviors I needed when we made that agreement last week…”

“Evidently I didn’t give you adequate support. I need help in understanding where I wasn’t clear enough…”

After a maximum three breaches (usually it takes only two), you begin to realize that you have an accountability problem. Now you have to address the problem: a lack of accountability on their part. Moving toward corrective action means you will have to identify the consequences and then apply them – with the support of your organization. If there are no consequences, there can be no accountability.

Privately raise the issue with the employee. Be honest and direct about your observation of a lack of accountability. Talk about the consequences, both to the employee and to the organization. At this stage, present it as a lack of “fit,” and re-express your commitment to work with them to find some degree of alignment between the interests and values of the employee and those of the organization.

- What happened? Talk about how the agreement was broken – for the second or third time.
- What needs to be done now to correct the situation?
- Who is accountable for making this happen?
- What other people need to be included and/or advised?
- How quickly can the correction happen? What is the due date?
- What are the revised promises?
- Express faith in the person and your belief that they can do this and that they are needed.
- What will be the consequences if this continues to happen? (A lack of willingness can be a career limiting decision: a lack of advancement in the organization, increased pressure from you as the boss, etc.)
• How will the consequences be applied?

Note: Never deal with an unaccountable employee alone. Seek support and guidance from your boss, a trusted advisor, and/or the Human Resource division in your organization – allies - to ensure that your assessment of this employee is warranted. Be certain that there are none of your own hang-ups in how you perceive this employee.

Step 10. Build the Relationship (if agreements begin to be honored)

Always assume the best – that people will step up and learn to deliver on their agreements. Expect that people want to succeed. You aren’t, after all, out to nail them. You are out to build them. If they don’t succeed, there must be willingness, with the support of your organization, to follow through on the consequences. Without consequences, there can be no accountability.

Take time, after they have been supported to learn to be accountable, to ask some of the following questions to help build the relationship:

• What have we learned?
• What are we going to do differently?
• What positive impact will this have on our relationship?

How We Can Help?

We can help you set a path towards strengthened accountability in your leadership role and in your organization’s culture. Cultures with strong accountability support healthy organizations—they are good for the people in the organization, and they are a terrific aid to producing exceptional results. For information on the services we offer, contact me at: www.davidirvine.com
If you need any support on the journey, regardless of your title, we’d love to hear from you. Please visit:

davidirvine.com

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