

Maximize your leadership potential:

GENERATE ALIGNMENT

Accountability

Many people hear the term “accountability” and immediately feel threatened or fearful. The negativity associated with this word has, unfortunately, been earned due to its mis-use as a punitive consequence. But, what most people don’t recognize is that accountability is the “secret sauce” in high performing organizations. Developing a culture where people at all levels can be counted on increases shared accountability between teams and departments.

What is it?

Accountability literally means you can be **counted on** to keep your agreements and commitments. In a work environment it is the driver for execution of objectives. When there is high accountability, there is consistent delivery on goals and getting the results you want. Accountable organizations quickly move from good to great, and great to high impact. Increasing organizational accountability improves morale, trust, and productivity. It involves connecting activities to meaningful actions, making decisions that move organizations forward, streamlining processes to achieve improved execution, and having the courage to address nonperformers who incapacitate the success of teams.

Performance execution is best accomplished when linking the people doing the work to the desired outcomes. This means all other business processes can be intact, but if employees aren’t executing effectively, goals will not be achieved.

People are the key to getting the results you want. Leaders who deeply understand this create environments focused on giving the employees what they need to have shared accountability in organizational outcomes. Characteristics that create cultures of accountability are:

- Sharing of information as needed
- People asking for support before a crisis arises
- Making decisions when action is required
- Providing guidance and support when faced with obstacles
- Ensuring communication is a constant priority
- Recognizing success
- Creating a safe environment where conflicts and differences can surface and be resolved

Why it matters?

In our discussions with leaders, the following are the most common complications for why accountability matters in leadership:

- *Employees who blame others because they haven’t performed effectively: “I was waiting on Paul to get me that data...”*
- *Bosses who allow bad behavior and poor performance to sabotage the success of a team: “How can I start holding Beth accountable now when I haven’t done it for years?”*
- *Leaders who fail to set clear expectations at the beginning of a project, leaving employees to play the “guessing game” on what they should do to accomplish the goal: “I tried reading Vance’s mind about what he needed in that report, but when I gave it to him, he said it was not what he wanted and he would just do it himself.”*

So what does accountability look like in action for a leader? Here are ten ways leaders can cultivate accountability in the workplace:

- Set clear vision and mutually agreed upon priorities
 - Be specific and concrete, generate buy-in by discussing the priorities as a team
 - “We will be successful when we complete the design of the software according to the specifications, communicate monthly on our progress to the full team, train all employees on how to use the system prior to launch, and launch the software on time”
- Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.
 - Share information in a transparent manner as often as possible
 - Avoid surprises that undermine trust
- Surface and resolve conflicts and problems quickly
 - Don’t focus on “whose fault it is” but on what the solution will be to resolve the issue
 - Avoid triangulation and address issues directly with the people involved
 - Have a clear process for reaching resolution
- Measure performance and recognize success
 - Identify the key indicators for success early on, both the “hard” measures like meeting a timeline and “soft” metrics such as how well the team collaborates
 - People need to feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in getting results
- Create a sense of safety, not comfort in the status quo
 - To develop effective behaviors, employees need to feel “safe” to take risks associated with the new habits
 - Support and encourage people through their discomfort to break away from their existing circumstances
- Focus on recovery, not perfection
 - There is no perfect solution, so create a learning environment that allows imperfection
 - Create recovery systems for when the unexpected incidents occur
- Have the courage to address poor performance or bad behavior
 - Commit to being clear with poor performers that their behavior is unacceptable
 - Be specific about how it needs to improve
- Avoid hiding behind “empowerment” language
 - Provide the necessary guidance and action steps for others to be successful; don’t passively “empower” employees to make it on their own
- Follow up on commitments; do what you say you will do
 - Ask others, “How am I doing?”
- Show your appreciation and caring
 - People respond to honoring their humanity, not just the completion of a job
 - Paying attention to positive and negative consequences shows employees that they matter
- Ask yourself, what result does the other person (or group) want and in what ways can I help them? This is a great question to help you see from the other’s perspective.

References

Evans, Henry J. 2008. *Winning with Accountability: The Secret Language of High-Performing Organizations*. Dallas, TX: CornerStone Leadership Institute.

Samuel, Mark. 2006. *Creating the Accountable Organization: A Practical Guide to Improve Performance Execution*. Katonah, NY: Xephor Press.