

How to Create a Culture of Accountability

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It's not enough to simply demand accountability. Instead, focus the corporate culture on growth and accomplishment.

Accountability. Some shudder at just the word. Why? By the time an organization needs to start talking about accountability, things are usually pretty bad. Projects stall, deadlines are missed, quality is poor, people are complacent, and everybody is thinking it's someone else's fault.

If team members were just accountable for their actions, for their deliverables, and for the quality of their work, everything would be fine. Unfortunately, just declaring, "We need to be more accountable," doesn't work. In fact, it can even make things worse.

Healthy organizations don't talk about accountability; it just happens. Healthy organizations get things done. They grow and accomplish things. In healthy organizations, people naturally do the things associated with accountability. They take ownership of their actions and reactions. They make and meet commitments. They acknowledge failures and mistakes — and they learn from them.

So how do organizations move from a culture of complacency to a culture of accountability? At a recent joint meeting of Jabian's Change Management Executive Roundtable and the Atlanta Process Executives Roundtable, participants discussed what it takes to move an organization from an unhealthy, unaccountable culture to a culture that gets things done and is naturally accountable.

GET THE MESSAGING RIGHT

Start the dialogue on the right foot. Again, simply declaring a singular "focus on accountability" within an organization will likely stoke fear, anxiety, and blame. Rather than focus only on accountability, broaden the focus to be on growth and accomplishment. The goal is an organization that has a culture of growth and accomplishment, where accountability just happens.

Remember that messaging is more than communication. Leadership must exhibit the foundations of accountability by setting expectations, enabling ownership, measuring outcomes, and providing

feedback to drive results. Without this, individuals within the organization will view accountability as a hollow sentiment and one that is not truly valued.

Leaders paint a vision for employees that communicates how they will feel when they are growing in their careers and achieving aggressive goals with their teammates.

PUT THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT ROLES

Teams will be most successful if everyone is willing and able to achieve the expected results. Sometimes, however, a person isn't in the right role for their skill set. Whether the result of a lack of ability or a lack of drive, a poor performer can decrease motivation and morale for the entire team.

In some cases, the effects of a poor performer can be amplified to harm the culture of accountability, accomplishment, and growth the organization aspires to. Leaders must see performance results in order to optimize team staffing and structure.

While some poor performers can be coached to improve, others may need to be coached out. In a culture of accountability, these conversations should be fact-based, supported by clearly defined expectations, and visibility to results.

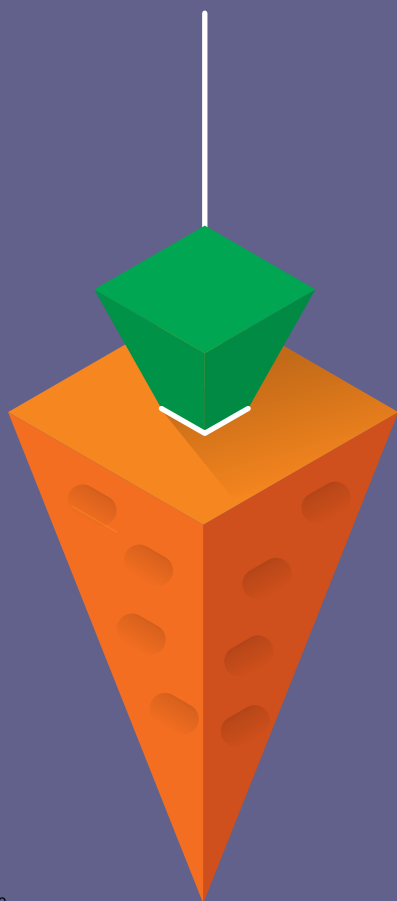
REWARD INNOVATION, BUT EXPECT FAILURE

Accountability doesn't have to be scary. Accountability can be the difference between a good organization and a great one. It is often used as "the stick," and employees are afraid of the consequences if new methods or ideas end in failure.

Good leaders will change that, encouraging an organizational culture where responsibility and accountability for performance, productivity, and innovation are rewarded. Responsible risk-taking and experimentation are an important part of any healthy culture and are often necessary for growth. Sometimes failure is the result.

How do you make accountability "the carrot?" Acknowledge failure, learn from it, and reward those

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who take responsible risks. Shielding innovators from a fear of failure will encourage employees to take ownership of driving change.

Instead of looking to point the finger when problems arise, employees will accept they have a part in it, and, in turn, see they are part of the solution. This will lead to better performance, productivity, and innovation across your teams.

INVOLVE TEAM MEMBERS IN SETTING PERFORMANCE GOALS

Involving employees in the development of performance expectations can decrease the negative, or fearful, side of accountability as it creates buy-in and shared goals. This practice helps employees understand the results expected of them and gives them clear performance targets.

Instead of focusing on tasks and activities, setting performance expectations around results and accomplishments drives momentum, forward thinking, and prevents a “that’s not my job” mentality. It also improves predictability. You know what you’re going to get and when you’re going to get it.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS

One component of building positive accountability is celebrating employees’ accomplishments. Rewarding success requires well-defined business processes and metrics, ensuring each role is empowered to be successful.

For individuals to feel accountable for their performance, they must feel as though they are in charge of their own destiny and that they know what needs to be done to achieve success. This results-oriented mindset also maintains a positive focus on solutions to problems, rather than the causes. Much of this is determined by the company’s culture and how leaders within the company reward and redirect employees.

Employee satisfaction is related to the degree of positive accountability within an organization. Positive accountability stems from the regular

recognition of accomplishments, continued support from leadership, and frequent constructive feedback about performance and goals.

PROVIDE ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK ON POOR PERFORMANCE

A culture of positive accountability includes performance assessments that provide individual and team feedback. This feedback can be qualitative — top-down reviews where performance is openly discussed — or quantitative — actual performance scores and metrics compared to targets.

Employee reactions to such feedback will vary with each personality and situation. Some individuals may gain a sense of empowerment and confidence in “knowing where they stand,” while others may be uncomfortable with frequent, direct feedback.

This is part of what makes accountability seem scary. Human beings will not always succeed and are prone to error. As part of the change in culture, corporate leaders may need to teach how to give and how to receive feedback.

In some cases, key performance indicators measure a team or organization’s output, rather than the work of an individual. Establish a schedule of regular measurement and communication in order to share results with direct-line employees and boundary partners alike. This creates open dialogue and collaboration. Team members can suggest improvements and help reduce failure points that often arise during hand-offs.

This is where we can clearly see the link between accountability and having clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Every metric should have an owner and an action plan to get back on target. Each team and each employee should know how their daily work contributes to and drives success in the big picture.

MORE CARROT, LESS STICK

Moving from an organization that lacks accountability to a culture of growth and accomplishment requires hard decisions and ongoing vigilance from leadership. Drive real change with a bottom-up approach that addresses organizational characteristics that previously resulted in poor performance and complacency.

Motivating the organization with “the carrot” of growth and accomplishment, rather than “the stick” of accountability, will provide the impetus to adopt a new way of working. Satisfied and engaged employees are more likely to spend their discretionary effort raising accountability standards and expectations — as well as holding each other accountable.



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