Accountability and Trust
By Robert T. Whipple: MBA, CPLP

Holding people accountable is a fundamental premise of good management. Establishing solid goals and providing feedback along the way helps employees recognize the importance of performing up to expectations. Unfortunately, some employees do not meet their goals for a variety of reasons. When this happens, managers need to hold people accountable, but there are often problems in executing this closure step.

If goals were not met due to employee laziness, lack of initiative, poor attitudes, or any other negative personal trait, then the accountability step is appropriate and should be done along with the appropriate documentation. When employees fail to meet expectations due to things that are truly out of their control, then holding them accountable seems punitive beyond reason.

I believe there is a direct link between holding people accountable in an appropriate way and the level of trust in an organization. Extreme cases are easy to understand. For example, if an employee working in the World Trade Center failed to hand in an expected report on September 12, 2001, trying to hold that individual accountable for the failure would be ludicrous. For one thing, it would not matter at all to the dead employee. On the other extreme, if an employee has made no effort whatsoever to even start an activity that was promised, holding that person accountable for the lapse is logical and necessary.

Unfortunately, many situations are in a gray area in between extremes. An employee usually will have some sort of excuse that justifies not being able to perform up to expectations. That is, he or she has rationalized the lapse based on some mental process that exonerates the employee from toeing the line. When a manager attempts to hold the individual accountable for the missed goal, it seems unfairly harsh to the individual employee and trust plummets.

The conundrum is that employees who witness their peers not performing up to expectations, yet not being held fully accountable, leads to a lowering of trust in the organization as well. For the manager, it is a kind of “darned if you do, darned if you don't” situation. It becomes important for the manager to explain that we hold people accountable for their actions, and we do not condone a string of excuses or reasons why the goals were missed. Yet we still need to all allow some latitude for truly uncontrolled situations where it was impossible for the employee to perform up to expectations.

There is a direct relationship between how a supervisor handles the issue of accountability and the level of trust achieved at any point in time. Skilled managers recognize this sensitive area and navigate the choppy waters with great care. Using the golden rule is a great way to apply the right amount of personal sensitivity to a situation, but still get the message across that people are expected to meet commitments. Properly reinforced, this attitude will maintain trust within the organization even though some difficult or unhappy discussions need to happen with certain individuals.

How the accountability is communicated to the employee has everything to do with how it is perceived and received. If managers are consistent with follow through on commitments, then employees expect to be called out if goals are not met. Having a firm but kind conversation with the employee, in private, about a performance lapse is far superior to catching the employee off guard and rubbing his or her nose in the problem. If the manager berates the employee publicly and with a mean spirit, significant damage to the relationship will result. If managers can reinforce the effort while still insisting on the deliverables, then employees will respect that and modify their behavior.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com 585-392-7763. Website www.leadergrow.com BLOG www.thetrustambassador.com

The TRUST Ambassador