

Building Higher Trust 22 Accountability

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



“Accountability” is a very popular word these days. In my consulting practice, the word comes up on a daily basis. I have written articles on various aspects of accountability, from the attitudes that make it less punitive (not always negative) to how leaders should feel more accountable for their own actions before blaming others.

This article outlines five principles of accountability that all begin with the letter “C.” These principles can help any leader do a better job in this critical area of performance management.

The five principles are:

- 1) Comprehensive and Balanced
- 2) Contribution
- 3) Care
- 4) Clarify Expectations
- 5) Collective Responsibility

Putting these five practices in play on a daily basis will improve the performance of any organization. Let's see why it works:

Comprehensive and Balanced

This principle means that the leader must take the big picture of what is going on into account when deciding if an individual meets expectations. There may be a specific reason for not living up to the agreed performance that is totally out of the control of the employee. If you lock a dog in the house all day, it is entirely possible that you will find a mess on the floor, even if the dog would have loved to have been let out.

Make sure that your feedback is balanced. Account for the good things they do as well as for times they fall short. Since most people do things right far more than they fail, your holding people accountable should normally be a positive discussion. You destroy

trust and rapport when you hold people accountable only when they fall short. Don't allow your accountability discussions feel punitive to the employee.

Contribution

Sometimes the supervisor will attempt to hold an employee or group accountable when the reason for the shortfall was a blockage caused by the supervisor rather than the workers. Most people will do a good job if the culture and environment set up by management are conducive to working well. When supervisors micromanage or otherwise destroy positive attitudes of the workers, they are contributing substantially to the shortfall they see within the workforce. They are quite often the root cause of the problem, yet they find it convenient to blame the workers for not toeing the line.

I recall one VP who lamented that "all my people are lazy." As I dug into the situation, it was evident that the bully attitudes of the VP had caused people to become apathetic and perform only when beaten. The VP blamed the workers, but he was clearly the source of the problem. He could not understand this connection of cause and effect. If this VP was replaced by an empowering leader, those "lazy" workers would quickly become productive and show high initiative.

Care

When giving feedback on performance, especially if performance is not at the level expected, be sure to treat the employee the way you would want to be treated if the situation was reversed. The Golden Rule provides excellent guidance in most cases. There are some exceptions where the Golden Rule breaks down (suppose I enjoy being yelled at and confronted), but they are rare. If the manager demonstrates real care for the individual, even when the feedback is not positive, the employee will usually respond well to the input.

You might say something like this: "The reason we are having this discussion is not to put you down or beat on you. I sincerely want you to do well and enjoy success. I care about you and want to enhance your reputation as much as possible."

Clarify Expectations

People must understand expectations to have any shot at meeting them. In some complex situations, you should write down what is to be done. Most of the time it is a matter of spelling out what the requirements are and gaining a verification that the employee has truly internalized them. Often a failure to perform at the prescribed level can be traced to a misunderstanding between the supervisor and employee.

Supervisors sometimes make the mistake of assuming the employee understands what is required because he or she has heard the instructions. To verify understanding it is critical to have the employee state in his or her own words the specific requirement. It needs to be framed up in terms of the specific action to be done by a specific time and with certain level of quality. The employee can decide how to accomplish the task, but the deliverable must be crystal clear to avoid ambiguity.

Having the employee parrot back the expectation has the additional benefit in the event the deliverable is fuzzy. The supervisor can take the time to reiterate the specific deliverable before the employee attempts to do it. This saves time, money and reduces frustration.

Collective Responsibility

If the accountability discussion has the flavor of everyone, including the manager, being responsible, then that feeling of a family working together will permeate the discussions, and they will be more fruitful. When the manager points the finger at a specific worker and fails to involve the other people who also make up the system, the employee feels picked on. This results in hard feelings and creates more problems than it solves.

These five C's will help you create an environment where holding people accountable is more productive and effective. Try to remember these principles when you are dealing with the people in your life.

Bonus video

Here is [a brief video on how to hold people accountable in a principle-centered way.](#)

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals (2003), 2. Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online (2006), 3. Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind (2009), and 4. Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change (2014). In addition, he has authored over 1000 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

