

Building Higher Trust 42 Trust and Accountability

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There is a strong link between trust and accountability. In my professional work, I have a survey that measures the trust level in an organization. The instrument is designed to calculate a numerical scale for trust on a scale of 1-10 with 10 representing maximum trust.

After calculating the overall level of trust, I ask several questions to identify what specific actions or conditions are compromising the trust level. I have used this instrument for over 20 years in hundreds of organizations.

It turns out that a consistent problem area is accountability. Most leaders and organizations do a poor job when having accountability discussions with employees. There are several reasons for this common problem. Here are some of the causes for the low scores.

Unbalanced Feedback

In most groups, people experience accountability discussions after some kind of failure. The feedback appears to be a “gotcha” where the leader holds the employee accountable for some mistake. The actual discussion is like having a conversation with the grim reaper.

Punitive Discussion

The feedback feels punitive to the employee, so the interface has a negative flavor. The manager often makes things worse when referring to the discussion as “holding the employee accountable.” The negative connotation amplifies a failure on the part of the employee.

The cure for this problem is to have accountability discussions in a balanced way, not just when the employee has messed up. If 90 percent of the time the employee is doing

good work, then 90 percent of the feedback from the manager should be positive. Then the 10 percent that needs to be corrected can be shared without it feeling unduly punitive. I invented a word to describe this flavoring. I call this activity holding the employees “procountable.”

Adversarial

Many accountability discussions take on an adversarial flavor. The power person (manager) appears to be beating up on the helpless employee. What is forgotten in this type of exchange is that the manager and employee are really on the same team.

A more helpful conversation would take on the feel of a coaching session rather than a bawling out of the employee.

Care

The words and especially the body language of the conversation should take on the feeling of a caring and nurturing relationship. Contrast the two openings of a manager having an accountability discussion with an employee who failed to get a report delivered to the vice president on time:

- A) You messed up big-time on this one, George. The report was supposed to be on the VP’s desk on Monday. Here it is Thursday, and I just got a call from the VP asking where the report is. I am holding you accountable for this failure to deliver or even communicate that you would be unable to deliver.
- B) The report was not submitted to the VP on time. We are having this conversation not to beat on you but to investigate what happened and find a better path for the future. I care about you. I want people to view you as totally reliable so you have a future opportunity to advance.

Conclusion

We typically do a poor job of having accountability discussions. I have shared four ways we can do a better job to have principle-centered rather than punitive accountability discussions with employees. The benefits are obvious in terms of the quality of work life for employees.

It is important to have accountability in any organization, but the way it is done will determine the level of trust that is generated in the culture.

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He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*,
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