



Five C's of Accountability

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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 more constructive (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 can help any leader do a better job in this critical area of performance management.

The five principles are 1) Clarify Expectations, 2) My Contribution, 3) Care, 4) Comprehensive and Balanced, and 5) Collective Responsibility. Putting these five practices in play on a daily basis will improve the performance of any organization. Let's see why that is:

Clarify Expectations

People must understand expectations to have any shot at meeting them. In some complex situations, a written document is required, but 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 level. 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.

My Contribution

Often 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.

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 is meeting what is expected. 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 a dog is left locked up in the house all day, it is entirely possible you will find a mess on the floor, even if the dog would have loved to have been let out.

Make sure that the feedback is balanced such that you 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. Rapport and trust are destroyed when employees only hear from management when they are having problems.

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.

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