

Holding Employees Procountable

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

No, that is not a typo in the title. This article is a twist on the concept of "holding people accountable." Those three words seem to be the mantra in management circles over the past few years. When used, these words almost always mean that someone has fallen short versus expectations, and the supervisor needs to point out that lapse and have a discussion about improving performance. If you listen carefully, nearly 100% of the time managers use "hold them accountable," it is coming from a failure point of view.

One source of the problem is the word "hold." It conjures up an image of holding a person's feet to the fire. The transitive verb to hold means, "to make liable or accountable or bound to an obligation" (Mirriam Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary). In other words, when we hold something in this sense, a force is acting to restrain it, and make it liable to a prior obligation. That is clearly negative spin rather than the alternate concept of helping people do the right thing for the betterment of the organization.

Imagine how the world would be different if we eliminated the negative concept of accountability and replaced it with a positive concept called "procountability." In this case, the action would be to reflect on the many ways an individual is doing well and measuring up to, or exceeding, expectations.

For most people, being held procountable would be a positive experience that would encourage more of those actions rather than cause a person to cower in fear of the next chewing out from the boss. Sure, there would be times when a person did not measure up to expectations, so the procountable discussion would point out that the intentions of the individual did not produce the expected result in this instance. Some coaching may be needed, and occasionally a kick in the butt may be helpful, but most of the procountable discussions would be supportive and lead to higher productivity on the part of the individual.

The logic here is that most people come to work on most days with the intention of doing the right things. Very few people actually try to mess up at work, and if you tolerate any of these people on your team, shame on you. Get rid of them as fast as you can. So, if most people are doing the right things most of the time, we could have numerous procountable discussions relative to their successes. When a occasional lapse does happen, for whatever reason, it would be the exception rather than the rule on feedback. That difference alone would change the equation greatly. If 95% of the feedback is coming in the form of supportive comments, and only 5% coming in the form of potential improvements, the working environment would be a much better place for most employees.

Unfortunately, in most organizations that obsess on holding people accountable, the feedback employees hear from managers and supervisors is 95% negative and only 5% supportive. After a while, the culture gets beaten down, and the need for more corrective and punitive discussions becomes more frequent. The common phrase uttered by thousands of workers over the decades is "the only time I ever hear from my boss is when I screw up."

Try reversing the logic and encourage managers to hold employees procountable rather than accountable. It will change the entire environment at work. Soon there will be a lower propensity for problems because the overwhelming volume of feedback produces a positive feeling that comes from being recognized for doing the right things.

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