



## Trust and Accountability

### by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Accountability is one of the most frequently used words used in business today. It is often teamed with the verb “to hold.” When managers “hold people accountable” at work, it often causes a hit to trust as demonstrated in this example.

I was called in to do some consulting work on trust by the principal of a large high school. The school had combined with another high school and was having some challenges integrating the cultures. As I interviewed the principal he kept using the phrase “hold our people accountable.”

I noticed that he fell into the same trap that I find most executives in the corporate world do. Leaders typically refer to holding people accountable as catching people doing things wrong and then pointing it out in a punitive way. The ironic thing here is that most people on most days are doing good work and should be praised. Therefore holding people accountable should be a positive thing much of the time. Most leaders forget about the positive things and only hold people accountable when they have done something wrong. I believe that is a big mistake because it destroys trust.

Employees in organizations of all kinds often complain that the only time they hear from management is when they’ve done something wrong. Therefore the issue of accountability becomes a negative statement in the vast majority of cases, and accountability becomes a punitive action. What if we held people accountable in a proactive way and basically gave feedback in proportion to the good work as well as the areas for improvement. I even invented a word for the concept. I call it holding people “procountable.” That practice would allow for a much more positive environment to permeate the organization.

**Exercise for you:** Today, be aware of when you seek to “hold people accountable” in a negative or punitive way. Recognize that there is an alternative. You could easily hold people accountable in a proactive way and give feedback on their good work as well as their areas of opportunity.

My model for helping leaders do a better job with accountability uses five words that all start with the letter “C.”

**Clarify Expectations** – When delegating tasks, the expected deliverables should be crystal clear. Do not rely on your interpretation of the understanding, always verify that the employee knows specifically what is expected by when. If there is a track record of missing expectations, write the specific details down and make two copies.

**Comprehensive** – Feedback the positive things as well as the opportunities for improvement. Make sure the ratio of positive to negative feedback reflects the actual holistic performance.

**Contribution** – Leaders should consider that there are two people involved in the conversation. In most cases, the leader might have prevented the shortfall in performance by taking action sooner. This does not absolve the employee of responsibility, but it does acknowledge that the leader is always a part of the equation.

**Care** – Corrective feedback should be done from a framework of care and respect for the individual. Even negative information should be given in a way that shows that you truly care about the other person.

**Collective Responsibility** – This is the knowledge that you and the employee being coached are really on the same team. You cannot succeed unless both of you succeed together.

Think about being more proactive with your accountability feedback. You can do so in a more principle centered way. When we hold people accountable in a punitive way it works against a culture of trust every time. By being more balanced in our feedback, we can improve the environment in any organization.

*The preceding was derived from an episode in “Building Trust,” a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.” To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>*

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