

MONTHLY THEME INITIATIVE

Accountability

Undoubtedly, accountability plays an important role in the workplace to ensure that set goals are being achieved in a timely manner. So, why is it that leaders have trouble holding others' accountable. The state of accountability today is ambiguous to say the least. More often than not the lines between individuals' responsibilities are blurred, making it difficult to discern what each person is designated to contribute. And, the rewards and consequences contingent upon performance are frequently ill-defined or misapplied, creating a disjunction between results and recognition. <sup>1</sup> Thus, individuals lack motivation to keep themselves and others accountable for tasks.

Why is accountability such a challenge? Is it lack of role clarity, poor communication, fear of failure? It's all of those reasons and more. The complexity of organizational structures, such as a matrix structures, poses a particular challenge for accountability. For example, often each department operates somewhat autonomously in relation to the others, making communication and interdependence difficult when working towards mutual goals. <sup>1</sup> To add to this, the work environment itself is in a constant state of flux, making the impact of individuals' actions less discernible from that of others. <sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the biggest hurdle impinging upon accountability is that often times it carries a negative connotation. We know from behavioral science that people will make every attempt to evade negative consequences such as the threat of punishment for failure. To alleviate this fear, managers should discuss what accountability is and is not with their employees and work to create a culture of accountability.

What It Is <sup>2</sup>	What It's Not <sup>2</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admitting mistakes</li> <li>• Taking responsibility for one's actions</li> <li>• Stepping up to take action</li> <li>• Recognition for a job well-done</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blaming others</li> <li>• Making excuses for one's actions</li> <li>• Social loafing</li> <li>• Punishment for poor performance</li> </ul>

Instilling a culture of accountability is no easy task, but there are steps you can take to improve it:

1. **Understand the reasons for lack of accountability.**<sup>1</sup> It may be that fear of failure is causing team members to steer out of the spotlight. Discuss the roadblocks that are getting in the way of accountability and brainstorm ways to dispel everyone's concerns.
2. **Avoid punishment by creating a sense of team ownership of results.**<sup>3</sup> The concerns most people have about being held accountable stem from a fear of punishment. Instill a sense of joint ownership in team processes so that everyone understands that success is a team effort.
3. **Explicitly discuss each person's responsibilities and how progress and results will be measured.**<sup>1</sup> Begin by defining everyone's unique role, and determine which functions fall into each person's

category. At the end of each team meeting, go around the room and ask each person to reiterate the tasks they are responsible for by the next meeting.

4. **Evaluate progress along the way.**<sup>3</sup> This will help to identify areas that need improvement early in the process and ensure that everyone is pulling their weight.

A culture of accountability is beneficial to employees and the company, especially when it is established from the standpoint of support and collaboration as opposed to competition and finger-pointing. Positive accountability at all levels of an organization will improve employee satisfaction by reducing tension and burnout, which in turn enhances the company's productivity and efficiency.<sup>4</sup>

### References

<sup>1</sup> Ashkenas, R. (2012, November). Why Accountability Is So Muddled, and How to Un-Muddle It. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2012/11/why-accountability-is-so-muddled>

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, D. (2010, May). How to be Accountable and Hold Others Accountable. *Great Leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.greatleadershipbydan.com/2010/05/how-to-be-accountable-and-hold-others.html>

<sup>3</sup> Browning, H. (2012, February). 7 Ways to Build Accountable Organizations. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ccl/2012/02/28/7-ways-to-build-accountable-organizations/>

<sup>4</sup> Dowden, C. (2013, January). Increasing Employee Accountability: The Critical Role of Leadership. *HR Voice*. Retrieved from <http://www.hrvoice.org/increasing-employee-accountability-the-critical-role-of-leadership/>