Be accountable.

You'll probably get the blame anyway.

Wayne Turk

isten to the news: Someone or some entity is always getting the blame for something that has gone wrong. Sometimes people step up and accept the blame. That is accountability. Accountability (or the lack of it) has been a hot topic lately, whether related to politics, sports, banks, the deficit, the Euro, or just management in general. We'll limit this to accountability in business and projects.

When it comes to accountability, there are three levels to consider. The first is organizational accountability; the second is management (or manager) accountability; and the third is worker accountability. There are similarities in all three.

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The previous two points involve external accountability. Now we get more into internal accountability. This starts with the vision and mission of the organization. If everyone in the organization does not know and understand what the vision and mission are, how can they be accountable for supporting it and making it happen? This just reinforces the need for open and full communication that has appeared in many previous articles.

Accountability continues with the setting and monitoring of goals and objectives. A key component to accountability is expectations. There have to be corporate goals, departmental goals, team goals and personal goals. They need to be SMART goals. That means that the goals are: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-constrained. (Just a little mnemonic to help you remember.) A goal that meets the SMART criteria will be one that all parties involved can feel good about, and includes all information needed to foster success and allow adequate measuring. As you can see, this is one of the requirements for accountability that affects every level.

Important in creating a culture where accountability is the norm is rewarding those who are achieving their goals and correcting those who are not. This is something that is very often overlooked. People tend to notice when some are falling short, but take it for granted when others are accomplishing their goals. Corporate, Service, departmental, and team goals need to be publicized and the status/results freely available to all. Having individuals report to and be accountable to their workmates can help create a truly high-performance team, but that is a matter of your management style. But always recognize and reward those who meet their goals.

The culture of accountability begins at the top and encompasses all levels of the organization. It involves everyone, but especially managers, so let's move on to the management level.

Organizational Accountability

Let's begin at the top, with the organization, and work down. In 2002 Congress got into the act and passed the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, also known as the Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002. It sets specific mandates and requirements for financial reporting and was the result of a number of scandals that cost investors billions of dollars. The Act is administered by the Securities and Exchange Commission, which sets deadlines for compliance and publishes rules on requirements. While it doesn't apply to DoD or other parts of government, it does to the myriad of contractors who support our government. Sarbanes-Oxley is not a set of business practices and does not specify how a business should store records, but does define which records must be stored and for how long. I won't get into the particulars of the Act. If you are interested, there is a veritable plenitude of information available.

Integrity in the accounting standards is a start. This applies to government and projects, as well as businesses. It is part of organizational accountability. However, it is only a part. Another part is the willingness to be open and forthright, accepting blame for mistakes or problems. That is difficult for companies because it can and does affect their bottom line. Recalls and lawsuits are expensive. Investors and owners are looking for profits. But accusations of cover ups and the subsequent bad publicity can be just as expensive or even more so. While it doesn't affect the bottom line for government, it does affect credibility and can directly affect subsequent funding, among other things. Since few of us are at the level of decision making that sets the standards for openness in the organization, we can leave it at this: Organizations need to take responsibility for their actions and mistakes.

Management Accountability

As was said earlier, there are many similarities for accountability at all levels of the organization. Most of accountability falls under common sense and blends with how to be a good manager. Here are some descriptions of manager actions and attitudes that show whether he is accountable or not:

- Managers say what they are going to do. They communicate their plans and decisions, keeping people under (and over) them informed.
- They do what they said they would do. They follow through, linking their actions to their words. They "walk the talk."
- When they are not able to do what they said they would do, they explain why promptly. They let their employees and others know what happened to prevent them from following through on their word. Not excuses—explanations. Then they go back to bullet 1.

- They try not to have to do the bullet 3 very often. Credibility comes with consistency and follow-through.
- They share information. This is more than bullet 1. They keep those who need to know, including their employees and their bosses, informed of what is going on.
- They set goals for themselves, their people, and their team. They also explain how those goals will be measured. Then they monitor those goals, providing feedback.
- They consider the results of their actions in advance. That is future accountability. By considering the potential outcomes of actions and decisions, they think about the consequences of what they do. This prevents or lowers the need for the next bullet.
- They take responsibility for their actions and mistakes, as well as those of the people under them. They hold their own people accountable, but the buck stops with the manager. It takes courage to admit mistakes, but it has to be done.
- They learn from their mistakes and help others learn from theirs. Just admitting mistakes is not enough. Managers have to learn from their errors so that they don't make the same or similar mistakes. If it is the mistake of folks under their supervision, they help them learn from the mistakes, too.
- They ensure just consequences when appropriate. Sometimes the mistakes of the employees require actions other than just learning. Those actions have to be both fair and equitable.
- They expect others to behave the same way. This includes everyone in the organization, but especially people who work for them. They must train their employees to be accountable, too.

Here are some of the things that can get in the way of manager accountability. Don't let them get in your way:

- **The wrong corporate culture.** If the organization is not accountable and doesn't reward accountability in its people, it can be hard for a single manager to be accountable and require his people to be the same.
- **Pressure from above.** Sometimes that pressure is for a cover up. Sometimes it is to place the blame for a mistake. Sometimes it is pressure to conform to the culture, if the culture doesn't reward accountability. Finally, it could be time pressure or just pressure to get things done.
- **Unclear or undefined goals and objectives.** Ensure that the goals that you set with your employees are clear. The same with the goals that are set for you by those above you. Everyone has to understand what the goals are.
- **Unrealistic goals.** Stretch goals are fine, but all goals have to be realistic or people won't even try to attain them. If you have unrealistic goals, how can you be accountable if they are not reached?
- **No metrics to measure success.** Everyone also must understand how to measure whether they are meeting their goals. Keep in mind the SMART theory—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time constrained.
- **Favoritism.** Showing favoritism prevents you from treating everyone fair and equitably. You then won't expect the same accountability from all of your employees.
- **Shifting priorities.** When every day brings a new "number one" priority, it becomes impossible to make steady progress towards goals. Priorities will change and crises will

arise. That is when good communication helps. You can even change the goals if you have to.

- **Fear of confrontation (whether it is up or down).** Fear of confrontation with your boss can make you accept goals that are not realistic. Fear of confrontation with those under your supervision will not make them accountable. Confrontation doesn't have to be negative. It can be done in a mature, unemotional way.
- **Being overwhelmed with work or crises.** When you are working 12 or 16 hours a day just to stay even, it is hard to think about accountability or squeeze in the actions that you need to take to be accountable.
- **Incompetence.** If you or your people lack the skills to meet commitments, it makes the idea of accountability tough. That is where training can be beneficial.
- **Poor communication.** If the communication channels are not used or if communication is unclear, it is an obstacle to accountability. It is also a detriment to good management period.

Remember that although it is okay for a manager to make mistakes, an accountable manager won't make excuses, point fingers, or play the blame game. Even if it is not your fault but falls under your purview, you are accountable for your actions and your team's actions—for everyone and everything in the area you supervise. When you stand up to accept the responsibility, that's when you are seen as an accountable manager.

Respect for any manager has to be earned. It comes from people seeing your integrity with every decision that you make and every action that you take. So it's up to you to use your people-management skills on yourself as well as with others and accept that success is up to you—assisted, of course, by those working for you. Accountability means there are no excuses.

Worker Accountability

Worker accountability is almost the same as manager accountability, but taken down one level. It is a matter of expectations and level of responsibility.

We want our employees to fulfill our expectations and believe they should be held accountable for meeting or not meeting these expectations. The biggest problem here is setting those expectations and communicating them so that everyone understands what the expectations are. A part of the expectations are the goals for the individual and what we will use to measure success. Other parts of the expectations include attitude, work ethic, skills, work habits, and so on. All of this has to be understood so that supervisor and employee have the same understanding.

When the expectations that we have of our employees are met, we have to recognize and reward them. If they are not, we need to point out the problems and work with the employee to resolve them. There may have to be consequences or "punishment," but make sure that it is just. That concept has been discussed in many articles, so I won't beat it to death.

Managers need to be having feedback sessions with their people on some kind of a regular basis. Let them know how they are doing. If they are doing something outstanding or have met a goal, recognize them in front of their peers.

We want our people to take responsibility for their work and their actions. The concept is the same as for a manager, only the level of responsibility is much lower. Workers are usually only responsible for their own actions. That may not always be true in a team environment, though. There the worker has a shared responsibility for the actions and results of the team.

The concept is also the same that we want our employees to admit their mistakes and learn from them. They can learn that from watching the manager. Remember that you are a role model for them. However, you may also have to encourage them to admit errors.

Final Thoughts

Here are some questions to ask. They are an edited version of an ad for a seminar on accountability, but I think they are apropos for consideration at any time. The answers determine whether you have a culture of accountability:

- Are poor performers ignored, transferred, or promoted?
- Are there goals at every level, and are they "publicized"?
- Is performance execution measured or only business results?
- Are individuals and teams recognized and acknowledged?
- Do people hide from responsibility?
- Are problems and conflicts avoided?
- Do priorities compete?
- Are values ignored or taken for granted?
- Is there an atmosphere of change resistance?
- Are people punished for their mistakes?

The answers will point out problem areas or areas for improvement in the organization or in yourself. Make the changes. If you are trying to change the whole culture of the organization, you may have to take it in increments and it may be slow, but it will be worth it in the end.

Remember:

- Accountability must begin at the top and run through the entire organization.
- Good communication is paramount.
- Clearly defined goals are essential at every level.
- Good, usable (SMART) metrics are critical.
- A strong monitoring and feedback system helps create success.
- Consequences are part of the process.
- Everyone learns from mistakes.

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