

# Coaching for Accountability



Accountability challenges stem from a number of causes. Organizations with accountability issues generally have pockets in their workplace culture that are lacking the components of success. In these pockets, the managers, typically, accept poor performance too easily and set low expectations. They usually compound the problem by not tracking and following up on the assignments they have delegated to employees. Many managers do not know the correct coaching methodology or other techniques

to reverse accountability issues. The most challenged companies have some managers who have been promoted to significant positions even though they have not demonstrated personal accountability. Not only do these managers have issues delivering results, they are poor role models and their shortcomings seep into their team, suppressing excellence.

Individuals who lack accountability lack some combination of the skills and behaviors needed to deliver consistently exceptional results. Many do not have the organization and problem-solving skills necessary to tackle unique and challenging assignments. Others suffer from low ambition or disengagement. Regardless of the underlying causes, people with low accountability usually become well-versed in playing the blame game or feeling like the victim. When teammates and managers accept their excuses, a pattern of mediocrity sets in.

Notably, although accountability and performance challenges may appear to be similar, they are not the same thing. Accountability challenges tend to be chronic issues with unmet commitments across several job responsibilities. Such employees may be disorganized, procrastinate, avoid risk, avoid conflict, or fear failure. Performance issues typically result from unaddressed skill gaps that impede the employee's ability to deliver the expected outcomes for a specific



project or task. When diagnosing a problem, it is necessary to determine whether the issue is chronic or limited in scope before beginning the coaching process.

To reverse the course of an individual with accountability challenges, three conditions must be satisfied:

- First, the employee must be motivated, willing to expend significant effort, and determined to succeed.
- Second, an employee must understand what is expected, have access to proper training, be highly motivated, receive effective coaching, and be assigned stretch tasks.
- Third, the organization the employee works in must be organized and refuse to tolerate poor results and excuses as a substitute for success.

The role of coaching cannot be minimized. For individual accountability issues, coaching needs to take place in both a formal setting and “in the moment” to provide “real-time”

feedback and reinforcement. When the problem extends beyond individuals to a group or team, the manager must coach the team as a whole. Later, this article will elaborate in more detail on team coaching.

## ■ Formal GROW Coaching for Accountability

Formal **GROW Coaching for Accountability** teaches employees and teams to accomplish their assignments with minimal tracking and prodding from their managers. The methodology defines the desired endstate (accountability), creates the necessary commitment, and identifies the tools and methods needed to address the employee’s underlying behaviors that result in the incomplete assignment and poor results. The program leads employees to think beyond expending only the effort needed to achieve the expected results, encouraging them to adopt the mindset that asks, “What more can I do?”

### Goal

The first step in a **GROW Coaching for Accountability** discussion is called **GOAL**. It’s a dialogue that begins with questions that tie the employee’s career goals and job security to becoming accountable. The **GOAL** step generates clear expectations for deadlines, quality, communications, customer needs, responses to setbacks, and related behaviors necessary for obtaining excellent results the right way.

If this is your initial discussion with the employee, aim for clarity during the **GOAL** segment of the discussion. Make sure the employee understands what is expected by you, the team, and the company across all of their assignments.

Finally, during the **GOAL** stage, use questions to establish expectations for full commitment and how you and the employee will evaluate and assess the employee’s performance and results:

- What would your full commitment look like in terms of quality, deadlines, communications, and interactions with coworkers?
- Why is completing assignments on time and delivering what is expected important to you, the company, and the team? What do each of those groups need from you?
- What expectations do you place on yourself when you are assigned a task or project—specifically relating to completion dates, results, and budget?
- What's the best time to communicate delays, major challenges, and resource requirements?
- How are your long-term career and personal goals affected by your success in carrying out the duties of your job?
- What gift or talent do you feel you are you not leveraging to the fullest potential?
- Who in the organization do you consider to be totally dependable? What do they do to earn that reputation?

## Reality

While the **GOAL** step leads participants to determine ideal accountability practices, the **REALITY** step defines what is actually occurring in the workplace. Preparation for **REALITY** is key. Participants record their own observations and gather feedback from others, including colleagues who have worked closely with the employee. This documentation incorporates positive and negative occurrences, including successes and shortfalls in quality, overspending, missed deadlines, and substandard results during the entire performance period. Typical questions for the **REALITY** discussions are:

- I hear your good intentions behind reaching your goals. Can you share with me the evidence of activity that demonstrates your commitment to getting all your assignments done on time?
- How have you taken ownership of your assignments?
- In your role as \_\_\_\_\_, what do you feel you are responsible for? What do you feel is outside of your control?



- What tasks or situations have you faced that are similar to this one? How would you rate your performance on those tasks in terms of excellence?
- On a scale of one to ten how severe/serious/urgent is the situation?



- According to the Golden Rule of Accountability, employees should *Deliver the expected result on time and within budget. Proactively communicate delays, major challenges, and resource requirements. Remember, no surprises. While it's bad to not deliver the intended result, it's far worse if the right people don't know you're going to fall short ahead of time.* How do you rate your performance as it relates to each element of this standard?
- What challenges have you had staying the course when you faced obstacles and setbacks?
- Let's probe and reflect on those challenges. What is behind that thinking?

- The future of our company requires ownership from everyone: A commitment of the head, heart, and hands to fix the problem and never again affix the blame. What does that mean to you?
- If you are rationalizing or blaming others, what is the basis for that point of view? Are there other alternative perspectives or interpretations?
- If you do not improve your ability to execute at the level expected for your role, what will be the consequence to the team, yourself, and the company?
- Who do you admire for their commitment in the face of obstacles? What behaviors do they exhibit?

## Obstacles & Options

**OBSTACLES** – The objective for this step is to identify **OBSTACLES** that contribute to the **REALITY**. The coach's role is to stimulate the participant to self-evaluate and to identify the **OBSTACLES** holding the participant back. True self-awareness and then self-regulation of one's behaviors is best accomplished by tracing a given action or behavior to its root causes. The root cause may be related to a hidden assumption or experience that the individual wishes to avoid or repeat. **OBSTACLES** can factor in the external environment that has contributed to the participant's delayed growth or incomplete success. However, the coach should maintain a healthy skepticism about these external challenges and remain mindful that these **OBSTACLES** are often not the most pressing issues faced by the participant. The questions below can be used to prepare for the discussion:

- When you are asked to do something, and it isn't done well or on time, what are the root causes?
- What obstacles do you need to overcome to be successful?



- What prior commitments might get in the way of meeting this deadline?
- What three things are you working on that have the lowest value to the team?
- What stands in the way of you being 100 percent committed?
- Why haven't you reached that goal by now?
- What is the hardest or most challenging part of reaching the goal?
- How can you ensure that no one is surprised by the challenges, setbacks, and status of your assignments?
- What would you like to eliminate to have more available time?

Probe deeper by using the AWE question from *The Coaching Habit* by Michael Bungay Stanier. AWE stands for "And what else?" This simple question is often the key to unlocking a deeper understanding of the underlying issue.

## Obstacles & Options

**OPTIONS** – The objective of this step is to generate ideas for **OPTIONS** [actions] on the part of the participant that could contribute to solving the problem. The coach initiates a creative dialog where solutions and ideas are created during the brainstorming process without censure or conditionality. The participants should determine options that address each of the **OBSTACLES** identified in the previous step. Use the questions below to create the dialogue and develop **OPTIONS**. If the person you are coaching is struggling to develop ideas, try to avoid offering your own suggestions. If nothing else works, offer a suggestion in the format of a question.

- What techniques can you use to make sure you always deliver the expected results on time?
- How do you like to be managed? What type of management style do you respond to best?
- What do you need from me or others to help you achieve this?
- If we move past recognizing the problem and imagining possible solutions, how does this change things?

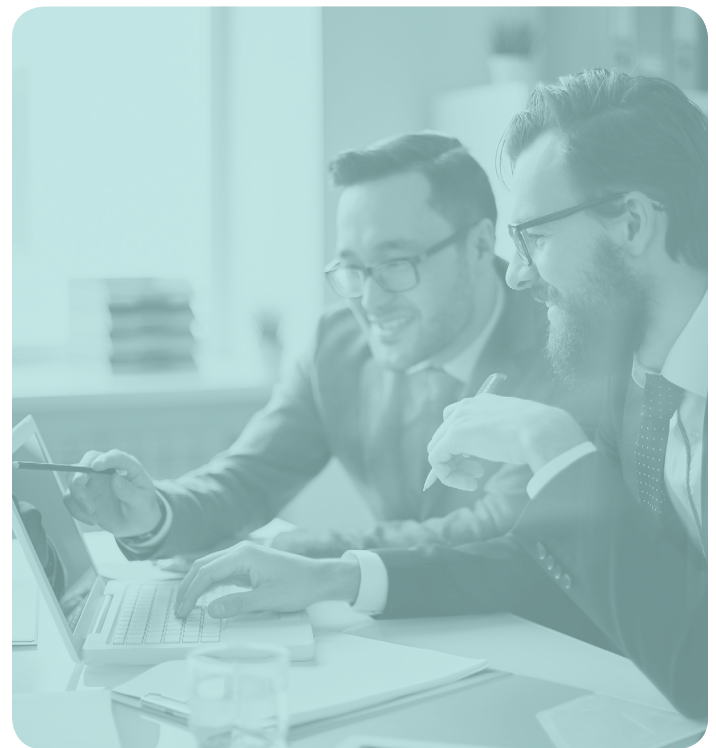
- What will you do to ensure that no one is surprised by the challenges, setbacks, and status of your assignments?
- You mentioned \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_ as your biggest obstacles. How will you overcome each one?
- To become more dependable, what habits do you need to stop, start, or increase?
- How can you provide more value?
- What possibilities do you see? At this stage, don't worry about whether they are realistic.
- What are three actions you can take that would make sense this week?
- How can you develop into a role model or cultivate a reputation for always meeting your commitments?
- What three things can you do to get the information you need?
- When you are getting poor **OPTIONS**, tell the employee, "Ask 30 people before the next meeting for their best tip to ensure they complete their most important task. Bring the list back to me and choose three or four ideas that will work for you."

## Way Forward

The last step of the **GROW** coaching model is to create actions from the **OPTIONS** created in the previous step. The best **OPTIONS** should be chosen by considering the potential to achieve superior results and the ease of implementation. The **OPTIONS** are converted into a concrete plan of action or a **WAY FORWARD** with completion dates, educational needs, and required resources. By committing the plan to writing, the coach and participant have a yardstick to measure actual progress against the

**GOAL.** Use these questions to guide participants as they develop their **WAY FORWARD**:

- When obstacles come up, what questions will you ask yourself to overcome them? Examples:
  - Where can I get that information?
  - How can I help \_\_\_\_ perform better?
  - What more can I do?
  - What do need to know?



- What concrete steps will you take to make sure you accomplish your assignments on time?
- In the future, what will you do to get the information you need to help you learn how to accomplish the task?
- How would you like me to hold you accountable around your goals in a way that will sound supportive rather than negative?
- How do you want me to approach you if you don't follow through with the commitments you make? What would be a good way to bring this up?

- Looking at your schedule and your current commitments, when can you realistically devote the time you need to complete all your assignments?
- If you've only made little progress with your plan by our next meeting, how will you evaluate your commitment to improvement?

Give advice sparingly when the situation is critical or urgent and you recognize that the employee has exhausted all possibilities for a reasonable **WAY FORWARD**.

When giving advice, use the LCS technique, which stands for likes, concerns, and suggestions. Here is how it works:

1. **LIKES:** First, begin by saying something positive about the person's prior idea [**OPTION**].
2. **CONCERNS:** Second, state the concerns or worries you have about the **OPTION**.
3. **SUGGESTIONS:** Third, offer a suggestion to alleviate your concerns.

As managers become more skilled at **GROW Coaching for Performance**, they will begin to formulate their own open-ended questions. Skilled managers ask "what," "how," "when," and "why," rather than demanding that employees "are," "will," "do," and "can."

## ■ Coaching in the Moment

Don't fall into the trap of waiting for the next scheduled meeting to deal swiftly and decisively with significant accountability problems or to recognize improvement. Time erodes the impact and relevance of feedback and betrays poor commitment to executing the agreed-upon action steps. In **GROW** coaching terms, be vigilant to reinforce the new **REALITY**.

- Provide positive reinforcement for people who are delivering on their accountabilities and going above and beyond, or staying "above the line."
- Be specific when giving positive feedback about accountability. "Good job" is not as effective as providing the details. Tell your employee specifically what he or she did that deserves your praise. For example: "Bill, I really liked the way you handled \_\_\_\_ assignment. You took the initiative, got the missing information, and delivered the results ahead of time. The customer was satisfied because your work will help them to increase sales!"
- Share with the employee why accountability is important to you and/or the team. Linking improved accountability to those real people who benefit from it can help sustain the improved behaviors.





- Encourage the employee to continue the same level of commitment and dependability.

Coaching in the moment is also essential for people with chronic execution issues. They need a significant

support system to avoid blaming other people for the problem, taking on the victim role, and making excuses rather than delivering results. These types of unproductive behaviors are termed “below the line” thinking. Coaching in the moment helps people get back “above the line” so they are presenting facts, taking personal responsibility, being accountable, supporting peers, focusing on success, and looking for solutions.

“Below the line” behavior or thinking is often an automatic response. It’s a default behavior that occurs when someone speaks or acts without thinking consciously about what they say, the nonverbal cues they project, and the potential impact of those actions.

If a person has operated “below the line” for some time, it has likely become a habit because they have not been—nor do they expect to be—confronted about it. If you challenge “below the line” behavior and thinking, your employees will soon learn it won’t work and be obliged to become more accountable.

The best technique for challenging “below the line” thinking is to respond in real time to the complaint, poor attitude, or victim mentality by asking the question in “above the line” terms. For instance:

The Employee Says	The Manager’s Response
“No one tells us what’s going on.”	“What are you going to do to ensure that you are well-informed?”
“I didn’t think it would matter that the project was slightly delayed.”	“How will you guarantee that everyone is aware of a pending delay or setbacks in the future?”
“Why can’t the customer order the correct item?”	“How will you make sure that we always know what the customer really wants?”
“It’s hard to do a good job when no one helps.”	“How will you get the help you need in the future?”
“Steve in procurement really let us down.”	“What are you doing to help Steve?”





## ■ Coaching Teams for Accountability

Team coaching for performance creates collaboration and effectiveness and lessens the possibility of failure. Managers help clarify the purpose or **GOALS** of the team, the roles and interdependencies of the team members, behavioral expectancies, and the needs of the wider organization and external customers.

Coach a team on accountability if you recognize that the team's effectiveness and poor results are a chronic challenge that needs to be improved.

As with coaching individuals, coaching groups is most effective if the manager can inspire self-reflection and draw on the group's collective experiences. The first step is to introduce the team to the concept of "above the line" and "below the line" reactions and thinking.

### GOAL Questions

Ask the team to collectively recall situations in which they've worked in a group and everything just seemed to be perfect: great results, good morale, a fun environ-

ment, and team members working hard with a lot of discretionary effort. Appoint someone to record their input as you ask questions from the following list:

- How did the people involved behave?
- Was there a sense of respect for each other?
- Did people talk over each other or did they listen actively?
- Did each person take responsibility for their own role and executing their responsibilities?
- Did individuals in the group express differing opinions respectfully?
- Did members think before they responded?
- Were each of you doing all these things yourself?

Explain that these are the typical behaviors associated with operating "above the line."

Then ask the team to recall a situation in which they've worked in a group that did not function well. Specifically, guide them to discuss a situation in which defensiveness, blame, denial, and/or rationalization were the norm. Ask them to think about the dynamics. Then use questions from the list below:

- How did people respond to each other? Did they think first or was it automatic?
- Were people quick to judge, snap at each other, or act without thought?
- Did the group individuals try to blame others for their failures or setbacks?
- Were non-factors offered up as excuses?
- Was passive-aggressive behavior on display?

Then explain that these are typical "below the line" behaviors or thinking.

The second step is to inform the team that they are responsible for eliminating both their own and each other's "below the line" behaviors. This process will help them to learn how to hold themselves and each other accountable:

- Be aware of your emotions as issues unfold in the team.
- Always be vigilant, present, and in the moment.
- Try to catch yourself before reacting—think and make a choice to respond in a way that is appropriate and "above the line."

The third step is to introduce this simple expectation to get major results: no one should ever leave a meeting without knowing what they are personally responsible for

achieving and when it due. Instruct the project or group leader to summarize and record the actions required during the meeting and assign a specific date to each item. Choose specific dates—imprecise dates such as next week or next month are unacceptable.



Finally, coach the team on the cornerstones of team effectiveness:

1. Clearly defined roles
2. Effective and consistent "above the line" communications
3. Teamwork
4. Enthusiastic effort
5. Meeting your commitments
6. Keeping egos in check
7. Dedication to flawless execution
8. Diligent follow-up



### Are your employees accountable?

- ✓ Does every employee on your team feel a sense of ownership for superior results?
- ✓ Will they do whatever it takes to achieve those results?
- ✓ Do you have a team in which expectations are communicated and understood by everybody? When mistakes are made, do teammates offer productive responses rather than finger-pointing and excuses?
- ✓ Do your employees focus on problem-solving and learning from mistakes?

If you answered “no” for any of these questions, building your **Coaching for Accountability** skills is a big part of the solution.

Need help with a particularly difficult accountability issue? Contact [info@performex.com](mailto:info@performex.com) for assistance. We'll gladly provide coaching expertise free of charge.



### Resources

Rosen, Keith *12 Coaching Questions That Build Accountability* by Keith Rosen <http://keithrosen.com/2010/02/coaching-questions-part-4-questions-that-build-accountability/>

McCarthy, Dan *How to Build a Culture of Accountability* <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-build-a-culture-of-accountability-2275828>

Miller, Jo *9 Accountability Questions to Ask Your Team* <https://beleaderly.com/9-accountability-questions-to-ask-your-team/>

Stachowiak, Dave *Discover How to Hold People Accountable* <https://coachingforleaders.com/how-to-hold-people-accountable/>

Miller, John *The Question Behind the Question* [https://www.amazon.com/QBQ-Question-Behind-Practicing-Accountability/dp/B00F3Y4YIW/ref=pd\\_lpo\\_sbs\\_14\\_img\\_1?\\_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=E7FSW1XSN6Y2YP46DH8A](https://www.amazon.com/QBQ-Question-Behind-Practicing-Accountability/dp/B00F3Y4YIW/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_14_img_1?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=E7FSW1XSN6Y2YP46DH8A)

855-PFX-LEAD  
[www.performex.com](http://www.performex.com)  
[info@performex.com](mailto:info@performex.com)