Leading for Organizational and Personal Accountability

Performex

■ Executive Summary

When managers are promoted to a new position, it is often because the unit was under-performing, and the new manager is expected to dramatically improve performance. Complicating the challenge is these organizations have difficulty delivering results, and they invariably suffer from poor morale. At the heart of many turnaround situations lie accountability problems.

Contrary to some managers' beliefs, addressing accountability issues does not require micromanaging or a dictatorial approach. On the contrary, passion, compassion, and high standards, coupled with a comprehensive approach, foster a culture of accountability and better work environments.

■ Diagnosing the Extent of the Problem

An individual lacks personal accountability when they chronically fail to accept and discharge the responsibilities that are delegated and entrusted to them. Their endpoints and deliverables are not met, and critical deadlines are missed. Having just a few people who have significant personal accountability issues can cause major problems. When the lack of accountability is widespread and widely accepted as OK within an organization, the culture is deficient. This type of culture is evidenced by people protecting their turf, passing blame, and being overly critical of others.

In contrast, a culture of accountability exists when employees demonstrate personal commitment and high levels of proactivity to achieve superior results. People respond to problems and opportunities correctly in any given situation. They ask what more can be done.

The Performex approach to developing a culture of accountability leverages five managerial pillars. The pillars are define expectations, foster a better culture, upgrade employee abilities, be a role model, and lead your team. It is imperative that these five pillars be implemented in a setting that is fair and just and accepts mistakes as learning opportunities.

■ Define results and expectations

1. Set clear behavior and performance expectations with measurable goals.
2. Make sure the consequences for consistently poor and exceptional behavior and performance are known and enforced.
3. Ask for, expect, and gain the commitment of your staff.

■ Foster a better culture

1. Introduce the concept of below- and above-the-line behaviors.
2. Operate on the truth and facts. Encourage your employees to bring you bad news early, and when they do, reward and thank them.

3. Create a culture that encourages feedback, so people know how they are performing against your expectations.
4. Encourage your employees to hold each other accountable.
5. Recognize and celebrate progress.

■ Upgrade the abilities of employees

1. Coach employees using the GROW Coaching for Accountability method.
2. Hire accountable employees. Use behavioral-based interviewing and assessments to flush out candidates who have a record of accomplishment and high commitment and for taking responsibility.
3. Align your training, development, learning, and growth efforts with obtaining the desired skills and behaviors needed for success.

■ Be a role model

1. Walk the talk. Be a role model of dependability and model the accountable traits you desire in your employees.
2. Actively seek feedback and act upon it.

■ Lead your team

1. Reinforce and reward positive results.
2. Delegate authority and not just the work.
3. Measure, track, and review results periodically.
4. Develop a repertoire of key questions:
   a. What is our purpose, and how do we create a competitive advantage for the company?
   b. Who are our internal and external customers?
   c. What do our customers value, and what are the results we need?
   d. What are our results?
   e. What is our plan?
   f. What should we stop doing, start doing, or do more of?

The Performex Process for Creating Organizational and Personal Accountability

How to Use This Guide

This article contains many elements that, when properly implemented, create a world-class can-do organization. Because managers can implement only two or three improvements at a time, managers should use this guide in conjunction with the Leading for Personal and Organizational Accountability Workbook, which will help them determine which elements to work on first and the ones to defer.

The article is arranged like a cake recipe. Creating such an organization is analogous to baking a cake from scratch. As in any recipe, there are key ingredients, and there are things that enhance the flavor and appearance. The recipe for accountability includes key ingredients or foundational elements that must be in place to support minimal levels of accountability. Other elements are required for the icing of the accountability cake or to create a culture of accountability.

Diagnosing the extent of the problem

The process a manager should follow to install accountability on a team is dependent upon the extent of the issue. The critical question—is the accountability problem limited to a few employees, or is the issue widespread?

A clear indication of whether the problem is personal or whether organizational accountability is evident is in how the team reacts to failure. Are people actively blaming others or providing excuses and justification for the failure? If so, the culture and individual lack of accountability and the solution must be addressed.

Define results and expectations

1. Define results and expectations. Set clear performance expectations and establish measurable goals. Communicate the desired deliverables on individual projects and assignments and on performance in general.

In most organizations, behavioral expectations are not expressly conveyed; instead, they exist by default. People discern what is acceptable and preferred by observing their peers and how other employees and managers react to their actions. It is obvious why this method for setting behavior expectations within a group with poor accountability fails. In contrast, proactively establishing exacting definitions offsets this shortcoming.

The best method to set expectations is to use open-ended questions to flush out accurate descriptions of exceptional conduct. Then, cascade the organizational goals and expectations by translating goals from one level of the organization to the next to ensure alignment between the organization's strategy and individual employees' activities and goals. The goal is to have all employees understand what the results the organization are trying to achieve. When this occurs, employees align their actions and decisions with the organization's objectives.

2. Make sure the consequences for consistently poor and exceptional behavior and performance are known and enforced. Draw out the implications and ramifications for both success and failure. Many managers are uncomfortable with this discussion. Consequences for success and failure always exist. Therefore, it is a critical conversation and should not be conducted in a threatening tone. Use questions to help the employee discover the consequences on their own. By getting the consequences out in the open, you will see a more committed and more accountable employee.

3. Ask for, expect, and gain the commitment of your employee or staff. Reduce the probability of mis-alignment or passive-aggressive behavior by openly asking, Do I have your commitment? Attend to any issues that surface from the responses to this question. To develop a collaborative and robust network, provide opportunities for colleagues to build closer bonds with one another. Foster a culture of open and transparent communication. Be diligent and ensure every employee has the information they need to

succeed at work. Overcommunicate using multiple channels, such as management by walking around, email, phone calls, and more.

■ Fostering a high-performance culture

A culture of accountability exists when employees demonstrate personal commitment and high levels of proactivity to achieve superior results. People's behaviors are aligned with responding to problems and challenges correctly and usefully in any given situation. They ask what more can be done and then they do it.

1. Introduce the concept of below- and above-the-line behaviors. Above-the-line behaviors are positive and committed. They embrace ownership for results and taking responsibility. Below-the-line thinking is negative and is about denial, excuses, and shifting blame to others. This model is powerful because employees can begin to see when they are operating above and below the line. By helping employees understand this REALITY, the manager can help more people operate above the line to deliver better outcomes and a more rewarding workplace.

2. Operate on the truth and facts. Encourage your employees to bring you bad news early, and when they do, reward and thank them. Avoid "shooting the messenger" by managing your disappointment or potential anger. Make cherishing the truth a cornerstone of your organization where everyone is empowered and expected to bring any problem to their peers without fear of repercussion. Have an open-door policy and operate by it.

3. Create a culture that encourages reinforcing and redirecting feedback. When feedback is common, employees can easily differentiate between unacceptable, poor, good, and excellent behavior and performance. Reinforcing is positive feedback that seeks to encourage more behaviors that are highly appropriate and desired. Redirecting feedback is communicating behaviors you have observed or experienced that are ineffective or not appropriate. Managers often believe their employees inherently know what's good, bad, and better, but they do not.

4. Encourage your employees to hold each other accountable and assist one and another. Share compelling stories of people displaying exceptional accountability. Communicate the link between collaboration, accountability, and individual goals. Distinguish the difference between compliant and committed behavior.

5. Recognize and celebrate progress. Team progress instead of individual praise or recognition is by far the most significant motivating tool that managers have. This highlights the need for managers to acknowledge significant accomplishments in a public way, and where appropriate, to celebrate wins and create a sense of winning on the team.

Upgrade the abilities of employees

1. Coach Employees to become more accountable, see GROW Coaching for Accountability.

   Additionally, coaching in the moment is essential to addressing chronic accountability issues. Some individuals need significant support to avoid blaming other people for problems, taking on the victim role, and making excuses instead of delivering results. 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.

   The best technique for challenging below-the-line thinking is, in real time, to respond to the complaint, poor attitude, or victim mentality by asking the question in "above-the-line terms." Here are some examples:

The Employee Says	The Manager's Response
"No one tells us what's going on."	"What are you going to do to ensure you are well informed?"
"I didn't think it would matter that the project was slightly delayed."	"How will you guarantee 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 we know what the customer 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?"

2. Hire responsible employees. Attract a pool of diverse candidates who have a passion for delivering great results. Use behavioral-based interviewing and assessments to flush out finalists who have a record of accomplishment and of high commitment and for taking responsibility.

3. Align your training effort, development, learning, and growth effort with obtaining the desired skills and behaviors you need for success. Behavioral change requires proficient coaching and skillful delegation. By introducing well-defined and validated competencies, an organization can clarify expectations and distinguish between good and great behavior and skilled and highly skilled employees.

■ Be a role model

1. Walk the talk. Be a role model of dependability and model the accountable traits you desire in your employees. First, "own" your mistakes. Second, avoid the blame game, and stop modeling passive-

aggressive behavior. Third, project a "can-do" and "whatever-it-takes" attitude. Finally, keep, and do not forget, your promises.

2. Actively seek feedback on your performance. Requesting feedback from your team sets an example of openness and demonstrates that you value insights. Furthermore, getting data from your direct reports helps eliminate blind spots. Finally, by asking for critical feedback, you develop empathy for how feedback feels to your team members.

■ Lead your team

1. Reinforce and reward positive results and people who model exceptional behaviors. Specifically, reward people who are role models for highly accountable behaviors. Ask them how they do it.

2. Delegate authority and not just the work. Managers delegate work to enhance operating efficiencies. Delegate decisions to speed your organization's

agility and, more important, to create ownership of outcomes. To hold people more accountable for results, empower them to make key decisions that affect the results.

3. Measure and review results. Conduct periodic reviews to track, measure, and review results. Without a vigorous review process, even well-developed metrics fail to keep employees on track. What you measure and pay attention to is what you will get. Focus on the most important goals and make them a priority, and your employees will follow your lead.

Develop a repertoire of key questions. Managers who have a library of great questions foster critical thinking that lead to insights. Some questions lead to learning agility and creativity, while others can create empathy or provide knowledge. Here are a few that, with some minor modifications, can help managers drive accountability.

    a. What is our purpose, and how do we create a competitive advantage for the company?
    b. Who are our internal and external customers?
    c. What do our customers value, and what are the results we need to value?
    d. What are our results?
    e. What is our plan?
    f. What should we stop doing and start doing or do more of?
    g. What do you think are the key skills and behaviors for your role?

■ Summary

The manger has many tools and techniques to improve accountability. Be honest and accurately evaluate yourself and your organization, so you can develop a plan to make rapid gains.

■ Resources

Peter Bregman, "The Right Way to Hold People Accountable," Harvard Business Review, January 11, 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/01/the-right-way-to-hold-people-accountable

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Doug and Polly White, "Build a Culture of Accountability in 5 Steps," Entrepreneur, August 8, 2017, https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/298342

Dan McCarthy, "How to Build a Culture of Accountability," The Balance Careers, Updated June 25, 2019, https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-build-a-culture-of-accountability-2275828

"One on One Meeting Questions Great Managers Ask Their Teams," Lighthouse Blog, https://getlighthouse.com/blog/one-on-one-meeting-questions-great-managers-ask/