

The Accountability Factor

Team Engagement, Alignment, and Achievement Through Leadership.

Presented By Tosan, Inc.

Overview

In today's fast-paced environment, many organizations are looking to use Accountability as a technique to increase productivity and leverage human capital. Organizations that foster environments where high levels of accountability emerge do outperform those that do not have these types of work environments. Unfortunately, accountability is often misunderstood and, in many cases, certainly misapplied. Many leaders with an "old school" mindset equate accountability with affixing blame and punishment—the very factors that destroy personal accountability. To escape this perception, we must first accept the assumption that most people are driven to contribute and achieve; therefore, high or low accountability is a by-product of the quality of leadership and culture.

Second, accountability is not something that can be forced or coerced out of an employee. Attempting to do so will at best only achieve compliance and likely it will be a grudging compliance. True accountability is an act of an individual driven by personal integrity to deliver on commitments and by personal desire to contribute to some meaningful goal. Finally, accountability is rooted in trust; accordingly, micromanagement by leaders is the antithesis of trust. Employees who find themselves being micromanaged often build resentment, which significantly lowers their ability to be accountable for outcomes that they have no control over.

The key to increasing accountability comes from understanding the dynamic between leaders and employees. If your employees are not being successfully *managed*, then their levels of accountability are inherently lower; ultimately, employees can only be accountable when their leaders support them. High accountability can be achieved when employees are given clear direction and support to succeed. The ability to manage employees in this way is often the major challenge for new and evolving leaders. Many leaders hang onto the comfortable *doer* behaviors of an individual contributor and fail to shift to the systems thinking, delegating, and developing employee roles required from successful managers. Simply stated, achieving high levels of accountability requires leaders to make a significant shift in perception, mindset, and behavior.

Accountability as a Function of Leadership

Is the role of a leader basically to, "Get things done"? Many would agree, believing that the primary role of a leader is to set and accomplish goals. Yet, many in leadership positions take on the role of the *doer* of tasks, rather than actively engaging others in order to accomplish the goals and tasks at hand. Worse yet, they closely direct or micromanage subordinates to the point that there is very little value that can be added by the employee. This results in low ownership and a decrease in personal accountability on the part of those employees impacted by this approach.

As leaders move up the organizational hierarchy, they are typically given more responsibility than could possibly be accomplished by any one individual. The true challenge faced by many managers is that despite the spectrum of increased responsibilities, they still operate from the mindset of doing the work, rather than that of engaging others to accomplish the work. This shift in leadership role requires managers to develop skills and competencies in delegating and gaining employees' commitment to apply their skills and knowledge towards achieving agreed

upon goals and standards. When leaders make this shift studies show that organizational achievement can significantly improve, as will accountability.

Our research validates the impact of leaders on accountability and achievement and indicates that leaders need to adopt behaviors where they delegate, support, coach, monitor, ask employees to account for results, and apply consequences—positive or negative—in accordance with the result. These actions are the primary activities to be performed by leaders, not doing the actual work. Tosan has gathered data from over 1500 employee interviews regarding the leadership behaviors that motivate high levels of personal accountability. This data strongly supports the leadership role (actions defined above) and provide insights into the repeatable behaviors that leaders can use in the course of fulfilling their role.

It is the role of a leader to build synergy within a group so as to achieve more together than they could as individual contributors. This synergy is gained through involving and engaging the employees. In fact, our research has revealed that meaningful involvement of employees is a key factor in gaining ownership, achieving strong accountability, and consistently achieving excellent results. Throughout the course of our interviews, employees define meaningful involvement as having the opportunity to give input about the goals that are to be pursued, the means in which to achieve these goals, and then to see how their input had been used.

Meaningful involvement is also about having the opportunity to contribute and work together with others as part of a team. Stronger and more effective teamwork contributes to higher levels of satisfaction and commitment from individual team members, and therefore higher levels of accountability throughout the entire group. Our research across a large number of organizations demonstrates that a leader, who creates good teamwork and an environment where employees have meaningful involvement, produces higher levels of accountability and performance.

Delegation of work is the first opportunity a leader has to gain the level of commitment from employees that will result in high levels of accountability; however, this opportunity is lost to many leaders who use ineffective methods to delegate work. The results of our studies indicate that many leaders use what can be best described as drive-by delegation. These leaders delegate tasks in passing, using one-way conversations that include little specific detail of the desired outcome or standards. They provide some direction, albeit vague at best, and then take one of two actions: micromanage or fail to stay engaged and provide the necessary support for the employee to succeed. This method of delegation produces little or no opportunity for meaningful involvement and destroys accountability.

“As a managerial technique, holding people accountable after casually tossing a goal or task to them—without setting the context, securing the necessary resources, and providing the proper structure—is destructive. It generates negative emotions and behaviors. It has also generated the widespread negative response to the proper and requisite notion of accountability.”¹

Our research shows that leaders, who motivate employees to be accountable, delegate work by engaging employees in two-way, open conversations that produce clear understanding of outcome requirements and standards. The nature of these conversations to delegate work provide the opportunity for employees to give input that helps shape the desired results and methods used to achieve the outcome. In the end, this type of conversation when delegating produced strong ownership and commitment from the employees, which are necessary factors for accountability.

“If commitments aren’t made, then no accountability is required. If management doesn’t clarify its expectations, then employees can’t be held accountable for their performance.”¹

Delegation and gaining commitment to achieve outcomes in accordance with expected standards is the first step in motivating high levels of accountability. Providing ongoing support to employees as they pursue their objectives emerged from our research as another leadership behavior that motivates high levels of accountability. The quality of required support desired by employees from our interviews can be described as **Shared Accountability**. Employees agreed that they have the *primary* responsibility for accountability; they must deliver on the agreed upon outcomes according to the agreed upon quality and process standards. They also described a supportive role for leaders; we define this as a *secondary* responsibility within accountability. The leaders must deliver on the agreed upon level of support required for the employee to succeed, which may include knowledge, resources, authority, joint problem solving, and other factors. Open, two-way, delegation conversations often produce the type of support an employee will likely need. When both leader and employee deliver on the shared accountability roles, employees consistently demonstrate high levels of personal accountability and deliver high quality results in accordance with standards; therefore, leaders must realize that accountability is a two-way street. To increase accountability, leaders must understand their role in supporting employees to achieve their objectives.

Our research data revealed another key behavior in the accountability equation. The leader(s) who monitored and followed up with employees as they progressed toward completing their routine tasks and assigned projects produced high levels of employee accountability. It is important to note that, as with the other leadership roles, the data pointed out that there is a specific quality of behavior to be used during monitoring employee progress. First and foremost, effective leaders used the monitoring activities to demonstrate shared accountability. They placed themselves in the success equation and looked at how they are contributing to the employee’s progress or lack thereof. On the contrary, when leaders use monitoring as a tool to catch their employees doing something wrong, accountability is undermined and employee productivity is greatly limited.

In addition to looking at their own contribution to an employee’s performance, leaders from our study engaged in monitoring employee performance using an approach that demonstrates inquiry and a desire to understand before making judgments. This behavior demonstrates respect for the employee and makes it safe for them to fully engage. It also provides the leader with specific data about what to reinforce or in which areas to coach. Using an inquiry and problem solving approach in monitoring progress appeals to people’s innate desire to learn and contribute to meaningful outcomes and ultimately high levels of accountability and learning.

Once the leader has a more in-depth understanding of the situation, the monitoring exchanges include positive and corrective feedback, coaching, and joint problem solving. In most cases, the employee felt encouraged and had gained greater insights, knowledge, and capabilities as a result of these conversations. Effective leaders use the delegation conversations to set up regular monitoring and progress check points with their employees, which in turn allowed them to use monitoring exchanges to maintain alignment around objectives and to course correct, if necessary. Staying engaged with employees, monitoring their progress, reinforcing progress, and providing ongoing coaching are behaviors that enhance performance and accountability.

The final action that produces an environment of high accountability is to ask employees to account for the outcomes they achieve and the process used to achieve them; surprisingly, many of the employees we interviewed expressed a desire for this action. As one employee

stated, “Without asking me to account for my results, my supervisor is unaware of what I am doing and incapable of providing me with positive recognition or coaching. I find the lack of asking me to account for my results de-motivating and it decreases my commitment.”

Unfortunately, many managers often ignore the achievement of their employees. A favorite response when questioned about this behavior is, “That is what we pay them to do, so why do I need to constantly acknowledge their performance?” Studies clearly show that ignoring behaviors or performance achievement extinguish positive efforts. In addition to ignoring employees’ achievements, many leaders use poor behaviors when attempting to ask employees to account for results. These negative behaviors are most often shrouded in blame and punishment and give way to the unproductive notion of *Holding Employees Accountable*. In reality, it is the employee that is accountable or not. The leader’s responsibility is to review performance outcomes, ask the employee(s) to account for results, and then apply consequences—positive or negative.

Again, our research helps define productive behaviors that can be used when asking employees to account for results. As with the positive behaviors used in monitoring progress, leaders need to approach the process of asking employees to account for results from a mindset of inquiry and then apply consequences that match the outcome achieved. Effective leaders provide specific positive reinforcement for good performance where they describe in detail the contribution the employee has made, and give descriptive examples of behaviors that demonstrate alignment to standards. Absent specificity, the reinforcement is shallow and mostly meaningless. Providing specific examples of behaviors and contribution are motivating to the employee and reinforce accountability. Applying recognition and positive reinforcement is proven to increase organizational Return on Equity and Return on Assets by more than three times over firms that do not do so, and those that use recognition achieve average operating margins of 6 percent as opposed to 1 percent for those who do not.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our research shows that employees fully expect consequences for outcomes they produce. When employees achieve or exceed the expected outcomes they expect recognition and positive consequences. They also expect coaching or negative consequences when they miss the mark on the desired outcomes and standards. These same employees report that specificity in the feedback regarding their subpar performance is required before they are able to effectively use the information to make changes and improve performance. The employees from our interviews indicated that they want the consequences to be fair, equitable, and commensurate with the level of performance. For first time subpar performance they prefer coaching done with intent to help them learn, not to punish. The interviewees unanimously agreed that repetitive poor performers should face some sort of punitive response, including termination if it is warranted.

Coaching employees is essential when monitoring progress and asking them to account for results, when done correctly, it produces higher levels of accountability. Unfortunately, many leaders simply do not know how to coach employees in ways that enhances learning, ownership, and accountability. We have observed hundreds of coaching conversations and have seen firsthand how leaders use an approach to coaching that results in increased dependency and decreased accountability. There are three behaviors that seem to contribute to this outcome. First, leaders equate coaching to just providing corrective feedback. These interactions may correct a behavior in the moment, but they do not produce learning or an increase in accountability.

Second, leaders see coaching as their responsibility and opportunity to solve the problem. They believe it is their role to fix the employee or fix the situation. These leaders enter the coaching exchange having already assessed the issue and developed specific steps for the employee to take to improve. They end up in a telling mode, often miss the real contributing factors, create dependency, and do little to promote learning and accountability. In real time they do all of the problem solving and deny the employee the opportunity to take responsibility for corrective actions.

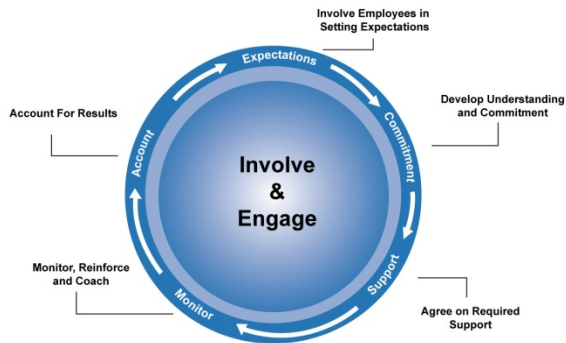
Finally, time after time, we have seen leaders walk away from coaching encounters with more actions than the employee. There seems to be two contributing factors to this outcome. As discussed above, leaders take on the role of problem solver, or *fixer*, resulting in them taking responsibility for the necessary improvement actions. The other factor appears to be the leader's discomfort in asking employees to account for results and engaging in a coaching conversation focused on the employee making improvements. The leader will quickly come up with improvement ideas and take responsibility for them so as to quickly end an uncomfortable situation.

Leaders who coach from a perspective of inquiry and facilitate employees to take responsibility for improvement actions produce greater levels of performance and higher accountability; they decrease dependency and increase employee responsibility. Of course, they step in to help employees develop improvement plans when the employee is genuinely stuck or lacks the experience to develop workable solutions. However, even in these cases the leaders refrain from taking the responsibility for the actions that belong to the employee. This approach creates the greatest opportunity for the employee to demonstrate accountability and grow.

In addition to improving performance, coaching provides an opportunity to achieve greater engagement of employees. Amazingly, many leaders quickly pigeonhole employees based on judgments about their capabilities and level of trust for delivering results. As a result, they only rely on a few "go to" employees and under utilize many within the workforce. We discovered in the course of our research that coaching and the use of stretching feedback can be used to encourage the employee to take on more responsibility and demonstrate greater accountability. Follow-up analysis after building the skills of leaders in delegating, setting clear expectations, and coaching demonstrate time and again how leaders can engage many of the employees that have been in some way written off. For these employees coaching, reinforcing, and stretching feedback is essential. It engages the employees and motivates them to take on greater responsibility; productivity soars as will accountability.

Up to this point we have discussed the positive and negative behaviors resulting from our research. We cannot leave the subject of accountability without addressing the negative consequences of micromanagement. A manager that micromanages can cause employees to feel distrusted and to have their expertise and skills devalued. These leaders motivate employees to put forth the bare minimum of effort and encourage employees to shift responsibility and blame others when results are subpar. It should be noted that a micromanager could adopt many of the positive behaviors described in this paper, but they would likely be used in a way that would destroy trust and accountability.

In the course of this paper we have described the behaviors that produce high levels of accountability. After conducting the initial round of interviews of our research into accountability, we were able to sort the leadership behaviors into affinity groups. As a part of our development programs we continue to have leaders interview employees, inquiring into the behaviors that produce high levels of accountability.



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No matter what industry, geographic region, or country, employees from our studies describe similar leadership behaviors that produce accountability. These behaviors continue to easily fall into the initial affinity groups. For the sake of creating development programs to teach these skills and behaviors, we have labeled these affinity groups and created a model. The Engagement and Accountability Model above demonstrates the behaviors and approach that leaders can use to motivate employees to produce excellent results and to demonstrate high levels of accountability.

Summary

Having a workforce that is motivated to achieve excellent results and demonstrate the accountability to do so is one of the factors that separate excellent companies from the rest. Fostering accountability is a core competency that all successful leaders must master. Those that do will make a successful transition from a doer or micromanager to that of a productive leader who is capable of consistently gaining commitment, high achievement, loyalty, and innovation from the employees they are entrusted to lead.

Can the behaviors and approaches that produce high accountability and excellent performance be taught? Of course they can, but not through traditional training courses. Traditional training courses approach learning through lecture and minimal practice using sterile work scenarios—this is insufficient. The leadership approach we have discussed in this paper generally requires a shift in mindset, skill building, coaching, and immediate application to real work issues. A highly interactive and immersive training that focuses on practical application and learning through real play is a far more effective way for leaders to acquire the skills and behaviors required to produce accountability. In addition, these newly acquired skills need to be immediately applied in the workplace and then reinforced through peer and leader coaching.

Developing the core competency to engender accountability and motivate excellent performance is a necessary undertaking for today's organizations. Regardless of the title or level, effective leaders will need this competency if the organization is to achieve long-term excellence in the market place. Without it, the organization and the employee's performance will tail off and an environment of blame will set in, ultimately resulting in a decline in organizational success.

ⁱ *Accountability Leadership* - Kraines, Gerald, pg. 15

ⁱⁱ *The Accountability Revolution* - Mark Samuel, pg 107

ⁱⁱⁱ As reported in *"The Carrot Principle,"* Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton. Free Press 2010