Accountability Demands Clarity!

Article appeared in Corridor Business Journal*, June 4, 2007*

Over the past 18 months, one of my most requested seminars has been on the topic of accountability. Increasingly, managers and team members desire a work place where people take ownership, accept responsibility, do the work, and eliminate blame and excuses when things do not work out as planned. Sounds ideal, doesn't it?

Why do so many people, at all levels, in an organization crave accountability? It is a critical factor in employee retention. The best performers do not want to carry the load of non-performers forever! When team members and leaders hold themselves accountable, it builds trust and open communication. Productivity and customer service benefit most when people are able to take ownership for doing the right thing in the right way at the right time. Bottom line, positive results happen and employee morale and commitment soars!

To build a culture of accountability, managers and employees must do three things:

1) Communicate with honesty and clarity

2) Empower themselves to meet and/or exceed obligations and commitments

3) Accept ownership for the results of actions and behaviors, good and bad.

First, communicating with clarity requires time and courage. Ask the tough questions! If you are sitting in a meeting, thinking to yourself, "I have no idea what we are supposed to do here" then you must ask the tough question, "I'm confused. What are we suggesting to be the next steps?" If you are unsure of actions to be taken, ask. If you are not clear about what the expectation or deliverable is, ask! If you are not sure who has responsibility for what, ask! In his book, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, Patrick Lencioni encourages each of us to take the last five minutes of critical conversations and ask the question, "*What did we agree to here?*" Be cautious and stay away from "we" statements where "we need to this" and "we should do that" because there is no clear accountability about who will do anything. In CRM Film's best selling video, Accountability That Works, the narrator suggests that a "we" unowned is a "we" undone. Ensure that all action items have a clear owner. If everyone is accountable, then no one is accountable. The most important point is to drive discussions to closure and agreement.

Next, I believe it is important to repeat back the commitment: "So, I agree that I will gather the sales figures in an Excel format by Friday, June 8 and you agree that…" Normally, I do not finish the sentence for my team member. I let her finish what she committed she would do. This helps to clarify understanding and ensure that everyone is on the same page. Where possible, document the agreement in writing so team members can use it for reference.

As a manager, if you have trouble getting people to accept responsibility and participate, try sharing the benefits of solving the problem or accomplishing the goal. It might also be helpful to outline the consequences if no change happens, the problem is not resolved, or the goal is not achieved. Be sure to communicate why you believe this team member is the best person to take on this responsibility and express confidence in his or her ability to be successful.

Once responsibility has been assigned and accepted, the team member must empower herself to do whatever it takes, within the rules and values of the organization, to get the task completed in a quality and timely manner. Plan the work and work the plan! Say "no" to distractions, renegotiate priorities when necessary, and don't quit when obstacles are encountered. "But I don't have control of the budget." "No, you're right and you know who does the budget. Have you talked with them?" Self-empowerment is about taking initiative, overcoming roadblocks and keeping the task moving forward. It requires proactive communication, before a deadline or commitment is missed, and not being afraid to ask for help when needed.

Lastly, personal accountability means accepting ownership for the results of our behaviors and actions, good and bad. If things turn out well, we celebrate! When things don't work out the way we would like, we go back to the original agreement. "We both agreed that you would be responsible for developing the sales forecast for that product by June 30. Help me to understand what happened. What can I learn from this experience? How can I prevent future occurrences?" It's not about blame, fault finding, or making excuses. It's about going back to what the team agreed to, looking over the plan, admitting mistakes, and moving on. Don't dwell on failure. That's why we have eyes in the front of our heads!

Accountability is not impossible to achieve. Be committed to clarity, do what it takes and give your best, and hold yourself accountable for all outcomes without blame. Sounds ideal? It's your choice!

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