

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2022 Edition

Ask the Expert

How do we get people to be accountable?

Eight key steps to demystifying accountability**Gail Boone**
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It is commonly cited as one of the most frustrating aspects of managing people. Accountability within an organization is more complex than just asking for it. At the individual level, it is holding people accountable to do what is expected in alignment with their role. At the team/department/committee and organizational levels, it's ensuring everyone is rowing in the same direction to ensure collective success.

Accountability needs to be more than just a concept. If you expect people to demonstrate accountability, then you have to take the mystery out of what is required.

Start with creating a culture of accountability. Accountability starts at the top. Define and communicate it. Establish accountability as a part of the culture with systems and processes that enable measurement and feedback. Also, provide significant positive feedback when deliverables are met.

Begin with the end in mind. In addition to having a really clear sense of your own accountability, ensure employees understand exactly what is expected of them. Don't assume they get it because you have said it once or twice. Be clear about the deliverables – the what, by when and how it will impact others. Provide an opportunity for employees to ask questions or negotiate timelines depending on their other priorities. Renegotiate priorities if necessary.

Ensure employees have the knowledge, skills and ability to do the job. If they don't, then work with them to determine how to close the gap. Set them up for success by ensuring they can actually deliver what is required.

Discuss the how if necessary. It's not helpful to micromanage or tell employees how to do their job. You don't want to create learned helplessness by always 'telling' them the answer. If it is something new, be open for a conversation on the 'how.' Ask for and listen to employee suggestions. Be their coach and mentor and ask how you can support their success.

Determine the reporting methods and metrics. Establish the milestones and check-in parameters. Don't assume the employee will come to you if there are problems. Make it easy for people to admit they don't know how or to ask for help.

Show interest and periodically ask how it's going. When managers check in and genuinely express an interest in the way the work is going, employees get the feeling that their work matters. Do this in such a way to communicate trust in them and respect for their work.

Acknowledge progress. It's not necessary to wait until the job is finished to comment on its progress and interim success. Make sure to note progress and celebrate the small wins along the way.

Redirect missteps with care and compassion. Everyone makes mistakes. Often it is due to a misunderstanding and can be cleared up with a simple conversation. Revisit the end goal and be open to alternatives in case there is a better way.

And finally, something else to consider.

Do away with the year-end performance review as a means to establish accountability. The annual review is required in many organizations as a formal way to check in, review accomplishments, set new targets, identify learning goals and determine merit increases or salary adjustments. It should not be

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the tool to enable accountability. The majority of employees care about their work and want to do a great job. Having a conversation with them at annual review time is not enough to build their commitment, keep them engaged or ensure that they know what is expected as things change throughout the year.

Accountability is fostered when what is expected is clear, real and kept alive. This means regular conversations about what's working and what needs to be shifted slightly so as to ensure individual, team and organizational success.

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