Ten Ways to Create Strong Accountabilities

Accountability Defined

Accountability is an agreement between two people about the accomplishment of an outcome or result. One person agrees to be accountable for achieving the outcome/result and is willing to be held accountable for it. The other person is committed to the first person's success and is willing to hold him/her accountable for it.

When both sides of accountability are strong, the likelihood of success increases dramatically. When the parties to an accountability are not strongly committed to success, it usually is not accomplished and fades away with little effective action.

Ten Ways to Create Strong Accountabilities

1. Make accountability management the number one priority.

Too often managers act as if the people reporting to them should know what they are accountable for because "they are professionals." As a result, managing accountability is not a top priority and too much time is spent correcting poor performance instead of creating great performance. Managing accountabilities takes time and dedication. It must be first on the priority list if strong accountabilities and performance are to be created.

2. Clearly state accountabilities in terms of measurable results and observable outcomes.

It has been said that you can only manage what you can measure. This is not the full story. Actually, you can only manage what you can measure and what you can see. Accountability should be stated in a way that can be measured — with numbers and data if this is realistic and rational. Otherwise, accountabilities should be defined in terms of tangible outcomes (e.g. written report delivered, plan approved, position filled) or observable action/behavior.

3. Answer the question "Why?"

It is difficult for people to be accountable if they don't know why something is important. As a manager and leader, it is your accountability to paint the picture of how your staffs' efforts contribute to the bigger picture. This greatly increases the likelihood that there will be true ownership of accountabilities.

4. Create specific targets.

Too often accountabilities are stated in vague terms that are not anchored in results or time. "Increase customer satisfaction," "manage costs," and "continue to focus on employee satisfaction" are not accountabilities that can be well managed. Here are some that are:

- "45% of all customers will rate our department's services excellent on this year's fourth quarter customer satisfaction survey."
- "Labor expense will be reduced to $23.00 per/unit for fiscal year 2014."
- "Employee turnover will be held to 20% for calendar year 2015."

5. Connect performance with consequences.

The failure to have consequences for performance kills strong accountability, kills it dead.

Good performance should never go unrecognized. Any and every opportunity should be taken to recognize good performance with a mix of public and private recognition appropriate to the situation. Remember that personal acknowledgement is more powerful than emails and gifts; use email and gifts to complement, not replace, personal expressions of thanks.

Likewise, poor performance should be addressed as soon as it shows up. Avoid the tendency to assume that discipline is the first response to poor performance. The first response to poor performance should always be an inquiry to what is creating the situation and what it will take to get back on track. Avoid paying a lot of attention to justifications for variances and explanations about why things are the way they are.

6. Be clear about deadlines and due dates.

Accountabilities that are not anchored with deadlines and due dates tend to float off and get lost in the crush of day-to-day management. Make sure that every accountability has a deadline for final accomplishment and due dates for major milestones and reporting.

Simply agreeing to a deadline is not enough, however. Sometimes deadlines legitimately cannot be met. Part of taking on an accountability is a promise to come back and renegotiate a deadline as soon as it is known that it cannot be met. Make sure this is part of every agreement around accountability.

7. Assure that resources and support are available.

Accountability falls apart when someone agrees to produce an outcome/result but does not have the ability, resources and/or authority to produce it. Make sure that people have what they need to succeed before finalizing accountability.

8. Be responsible for priorities.

Someone who has agreed to an accountability but has too many other accountabilities and responsibilities is bound to perform poorly or fail. Your willingness to assist in setting priorities and adjusting outcomes and deadlines accordingly, can help to establish accountabilities that succeed.

9. Create a system to monitor performance regularly and consistently.

Accountabilities that are not monitored with adequate frequency will fade into the background. A rule of thumb is to monitor performance at least three times between the beginning and completion. Important and complex accountabilities often require greater frequency. Doing this requires that you establish a simple system for keeping track of deadlines and receiving in-person and/or written reports on progress.

10. Master the art of hard conversations.

Having well defined and executed accountabilities helps to insure positive performance and outcomes. But it does not guarantee it. Sooner or later you will need to have a difficult conversation about a problem or failure in accountability. When these conversations are delayed or do not happen, accountability is weakened. Develop your skill in having the hard conversations about performance so that they happen in a timely and constructive manner.