



Creating a Responsible Workplace

Stop holding people accountable. Use these tools to let them choose to be accountable.

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Imagine a work environment where all employees are fully engaged in what they do and go to extreme lengths to fulfill their responsibilities each day. They feel connected to the mission and vision of the organization because they see a clear connection between what they do and the success of the organization. As a result, they see their work as meaningful, they look forward to coming to work, and they have a sense of pride in what they do and the organization they work for.

This is a place where people want to work—a workplace based on trust and personal responsibility. When employees are engaged, the outcome is obvious. Customer satisfaction improves, staff turnover reduces, and productivity and profitability increase.

So how do you as a manager increase engagement and boost productivity and profitability? The answer is through employees taking personal responsibility for their work. Responsible employees are more engaged and productive. They willingly accept accountability for producing results and continually look for ways in which they can improve their performance.

But you already know that because your best employees are the responsible ones. The challenge for most managers is figuring out how to get the rest of their employees to be accountable, too.

Many business leaders do the exact opposite of what they need to do to get people to be responsible, productive employees—they attempt to hold them accountable. Have you noticed that it does not work? Instead of holding people accountable, there are a few simple steps you can take to transform your organization into a responsibility-based workplace.

Create the Right Environment

People cannot be held accountable; they can only choose to be accountable. Accountability is the natural outcome of a person deciding to take responsibility for something.

Self-directed people—those who see themselves as responsible for their behavior and performance—want to be held accountable. They want to have a sense of ownership in their job, to have some input into how things should be done and to have a say in how their performance will be measured.

Employees who feel like they have no say will tend to react in an “other-directed” way. Other-directed people tend to be either compliant or rebellious—doing what they feel they have to do or doing the opposite of what you want them to do.

Other-directed employees have switched off; they become disengaged and resist accountability. And they usually blame someone or something else when they don't perform well. The natural outcome of using an authoritarian or control-based approach to enforcing accountability is exactly what you don't want—self-directed people leave, and other-directed people stay.

Instead, you need to hand over some of the control. However, many managers fear entrusting employees with the responsibility of defining their own success and determining how to reach it through their performance. As a result of this fear, managers attempt to hold people accountable by insisting on compliance with policies and procedures, establishing goals and performance standards for employees, or offering incentives in an attempt to motivate people to comply.

The research does not support this fear; in fact, the opposite is true. Employees who are trusted and given more say over how they do their jobs are more engaged, more committed and more productive. They achieve more. People who know they are being trusted to be responsible do not want to let their

manager down.

The primary fear employees have about being held accountable is that there will be negative consequences if they don't succeed, maybe even the loss of their job. It is safer for them to avoid risk and to do just what they are told and stay out of trouble. Employees who will not accept responsibility do not trust management enough to take the risk.

Build Relationships Based on Trust

The foundation of a responsibility-based culture is a high level of trust throughout the organization. When trust between management and employees is high, the following situations occur:

- Information is exchanged freely, feelings and opinions are openly discussed, and people do not harbor hidden agendas.
- Expectations are clear, disagreements are discussed and resolved, and individual performance is discussed and agreed on without the need for a formal process.
- Differences are valued, employees feel respected for their contribution, and they have input into how the organization can be more successful.
- People keep their commitments, strive for excellence in everything they do and can count on each other for support.

Managers cannot get accountability without trusting employees to take ownership of their jobs and believing that they will do the right thing by the organization. Employees will not choose to be accountable unless they trust management; they need to know that they will get the support they need to do their best and that mistakes will be treated as learning experiences rather than as opportunities for blame and punishment.

The most important factor in building trust with employees is to understand that being trustworthy does not mean your employees will trust you. Building trust is a skill that must be learned.

There are four behaviors—called the “elements of trust”—that must be present for trust to develop:

Congruence. People see you as congruent when they know that what you say is on track with what you believe and what you know to be true and is aligned with what you do. Congruence means “I walk my talk.” It means saying and doing what you believe, being honest and saying what is true, even if it is bad news or not exactly what the other person wants to hear.

Sometimes people will sugarcoat the pill they want someone else to swallow, or will be so gentle that the real message is not fully communicated. It is not done to be deceitful; it is done out of consideration for the other person.

But in the long run it doesn't work. Even if you are temporarily able to smooth over a rough situation or take the pain out of an unpleasant encounter, sooner or later it will catch up and trust will be diminished or destroyed.

Openness. People tend to cooperate with people who will “level” with them and give them the whole story, even though some of the details may be a bit unpleasant.

The president of a large successful company keeps this saying in printed form on his desk: “I can take good news or bad news, but I can't handle surprises.” If you discover there has been a change of plans that affects other people, or you are displeased with their work results, they should be the first to know.

If you are open with people, they will perceive you as a straight shooter and will want to perform for you.

Acceptance. All people want to be accepted for who they are—not judged, criticized or made to feel inferior.

It isn't always easy for a manager to do that. Managers are in their position because they are competent, know the company and know what can and can't be done. It is easy to give the impression to others that they are slightly stupid or inadequate for not understanding as much about the company, department or project as the manager understands.

Another way some managers display a lack of acceptance for employees is making them feel “less than” by using technical jargon or an obscure reference that they are not familiar with.

This doesn't mean you have to accept poor performance or unacceptable behavior, but there is a difference between judging a person for who they are and judging what they do.

Reliability. People you relate to want to know if you do what you say you will do. Don't make promises you can't keep, even if you think it will get the job done for you now, or appease an angry situation. In the long run it will hurt you. All four "elements of trust" must be present for trust to develop and be sustained. If any one of them is missing, trust is diminished, and, along with it, personal responsibility and accountability.

Responsibility-Based Leadership

A lot of leadership development is focused on the leader—the qualities or characteristics required to be a great leader. All this does is focus leaders on themselves, often resulting in an egocentric approach. The emphasis should not be on leaders but on the environment they create.

Building a responsibility-based culture can only happen if leaders at all levels of the organization understand that they are responsible for the work environment they create, and that the work environment has a significant impact on whether people will choose to be responsible and accountable.

There is a mountain of evidence that indicates that the more control leaders exert over employees, the less creativity, productivity and profitability they will put out. Consider this same principle in the context of countries—dictatorships are usually the most underdeveloped and poorest countries, whereas the most successful democracies are the richest, most productive countries in the world.

For managers, it is tough to relinquish control. But, on the other hand, managers should not let go of control completely; that could result in chaos. The challenge is to learn how to work in partnership with employees and to encourage their input into how they can do their jobs better and help create a great organization.

So how do you build leadership that can support and maintain a responsibility-based culture? The first step is to believe in people. If your leaders don't believe in people, they won't trust them or let them have any input—two things employees need to feel valued and become engaged.

The most successful leaders understand that without the best talent on their staff, the company won't achieve its full potential. Leaders have to believe that people really do want to make a contribution, and then create opportunities for them to do so.

In his best seller *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins says: "First, get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats."

If you have the right people, then trust them, believe in them and partner with them to create a great company. If you have people who aren't performing, make sure that you have created an environment where they can perform, or that they are not just in the wrong seats—before you get them off the bus.

You really won't know whether you have the right people until you have given them the opportunity to show what they are capable of in a responsibility-based culture.

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