synopsis

manageris

Foster a **sense of accountability**

One of the greatest frustrations of managers is the sense that their employees do not feel like true stakeholders in their team or company. Of course, most do their job just fine, and complete every task they are asked to undertake. In this regard, they have done nothing wrong. However, they do not share a sense of responsibility for the success of the team or the company.

> Accountability means more than just "doing a good job."

Commonly, only a handful of employees demonstrate a true sense of accountability, and this has very little to do with their level in the hierarchy. Indeed, a customer rep may be ready to do whatever is needed to ensure the satisfaction of his customers, while the regional director blames headquarters for the drop in the level of satisfaction… Such a lack of a sense of responsibility is particularly harmful. First, it is detrimental to the labor climate and motivation, to the extent that those involved feel that they are being treated unfairly. Second, it saps performance, which depends on the ability of every member of the organization to stay attuned to what is needed, propose innovative solutions and take initiative. In short, they must feel accountable for the overall mission, and not focus exclusively on properly completing specific tasks.

However, inspiring a sense of accountability is a particularly difficult job. Indeed, managers and executives often find themselves confronted with employees who, with the best of intentions, simply cannot seem to take responsibility. There are three main reasons for this:

They do not understand what is expected of them

Responsibility is an abstract concept, which different people interpret in different ways. An employee may well be dumbfounded to hear that his manager doesn't think he is taking enough responsibility, because he thought he was doing everything in his power to do a good job! However, his efforts concern areas that are not particularly critical in the eyes of his boss. So, **how can you communicate your expectations concerning accountability?**

They find it easier to hold back

Assuming responsibility means taking risks. People feel more at ease performing clearly defined tasks perfectly than taking the initiative to do more than what is explicitly laid out for them. They may thus consciously or subconsciously avoid taking initiatives that could get them in hot water. So, **how can you reassure people and convince them to take broader responsibility for their jobs?**

Passivity does not have consequences

Lastly, the lack of a sense of accountability can be largely explained by the fact that the business doesn't really reward it. Why make an effort only to be rewarded essentially by an increased workload? Indeed, leaders logically tend to entrust the most important and stimulating assignments to those who show their commitment, while those who hold back have things easier. So, **how can you align your reward systems with your expectations?**

Act in four ways to foster the sense of accountability in your organization.

1. **Express** clear and credible **expectations**
2. Specify **role allocation**
3. **Openly discuss** accountability issues
4. **Truly reward** accountability

1st tip

Express clear and credible **expectations**

Tip

To clearly communicate what you want an employee to do or not do:

- Ask the person to imagine he or she has a 36-hour day and an unlimited budget:
  - What would the person do that they're not doing today? What important subjects would the person start tackling? Where would the person spend more of his or her time?
    - Within the scope of his or her time and budget constraints, what could the person change to bring the situation closer to the imagined ideal? What less important things could he or she eliminate?
- Compare your respective points of view.
  - What do you think should come first in the person's job?
    - What aspects are undesirable or could be eliminated?

Based on ***No More Excuses***, Sam Silverstein, Wiley, 2010.

"The price of greatness is responsibility."
Sir Winston Churchill.

Ignorance is one of the greatest causes of the lack of accountability. Because they don't understand what is expected of them, employees simply execute the tasks that have been explicitly assigned to them, or take initiatives that do not meet the expectations of their superiors. This gap creates the perception that they lack a sense of accountability.

How to verbalize what you expect of your employees may seem obvious. Most managers communicate operational objectives and list the principal tasks to be carried out. However, accountability involves expectations of a different nature altogether. How should incidents be handled? How much initiative should an employee take? What types of interaction should one have outside official channels? How should conflicting priorities be managed? Etc.

> To be accountable, you have to understand your responsibilities.

Hence, **clearly establishing some basic principles** is just as important as clarifying your concrete expectations. Rather than giving a long explanation, you do better to lay out some clear and simple principles covering a sufficiently broad scope to make everyone feel affected by their implementation. Gus Levy, managing director of Goldman Sachs in the Seventies, asserted: *"At Goldman Sachs, we want profits, but we want long-term profits."* This no-nonsense phrase gave employees a framework to tackle dilemmas with a sense of responsibility, and encouraged them to ask themselves *"Is my decision consistent long-term profitability?"*

And just as important as asserting your expectations, you must also **set limits** and specify what you don't want people to do. Take the example of Jack Brennan, chairman of the Vanguard management company, who likes to repeat, *"At Vanguard, mistakes are allowed. But one ethical misstep and you're out. A gift accepted from a client and you're out. Etc."*

Lastly, **prioritizing your expectations** is also essential. Your list of expectations won't be credible if they aren't mutually compatible. The owner of PetroVietnam refineries, Nguyen Toan, defined three priorities in this manner: safety, quality and productivity. However, he states, safety comes first. Thanks to this attitude, he can boast one of the lowest accident records in the industry, with one broken leg per ten million hours worked over seven years.

State your expectations explicitly

Being clear about what you expect is the best way to get those around you to behave responsibly.

5 KEY COMPONENTS OF A REQUEST	ADVICE
Who is making the request?	Use the first person if you are making the request, or specify if you are making the request on someone else's behalf.
Who is receiving the request?	*"You need to do such and such"* is not sufficient. Specify whether you are expecting direct involvement from the person or from a member of his/her team.
What **specific actions** do you expect?	Don't just "hope" that the job will get done according to your expectations; if a particular approach is important to you, say so!
What **criteria** must be met to satisfy you?	Try to establish concrete criteria to enable the person to evaluate whether or not you are likely to be satisfied.
When do you expect results from this request?	Specify the date when you want to see your request fulfilled, and possibly a progress report schedule.

Based on ***Leadership Without Excuses***, Jeff Grimshaw, Gregg Baron, McGraw-Hill, 2010.

2nd tip
Specify **role allocation**

As people work increasingly across organizational lines, they also frequently run into grey areas, where each party thinks that the other will take care of a particular task or problem. Who should reserve the conference room? The person who called the meeting or the person based in the office where the meeting will take place? If this is not clarified, there is a big chance the room won't be reserved at all! This phenomenon occurs regularly on much more critical issues, and reflects a **lack of clarity concerning roles, which in turn causes people to fail to take responsibility.**

The author of *Leadership Without Excuses* recommends that managers assume that roles are not well understood until they have proof to the contrary. They must therefore **devote a significant amount of time** to agreeing precisely "who does what." Jim Crawford, IT director of a leading U.S. healthcare firm, testifies to the virtues of patience in this regard. Transferred to France when he spoke practically no French, he was not able to give his usual clear directives because of the language barrier. His employees consequently had free and open discussions on how to execute their assignments, taking what seemed like an eternity to come to an agreement. To his great surprise, these in-depth discussions on role allocation had a spectacular benefit – everyone was fully on board!

Clarifying roles prevents people from dodging their responsibility and passing the buck.

Clarifying roles and the chain of responsibilities is a good way to prevent those involved from using system flaws as an excuse when things go wrong.

The RACI matrix

The mnemonic acronym RACI provides a structure to specify each participant's type of involvement for each listed project task.

Responsible
Who is operationally in charge of executing the task?

Accountable
Who must approve choices made and the proper execution of the task? (1 person)

Consulted
Who must be consulted on choices made or the proper way to execute the task?

Informed
Who must simply be kept up to date on progress or choices made?

3rd tip
Openly discuss accountability issues

Lack of accountability is an insidious problem. Rarely discussed openly, or even considered seriously, irresponsibility is generally reflected in many small daily details, rather than in spectacular observations. Most often, a manager regrets that an employee didn't do something he could have done. However, it is more difficult to criticize someone for not doing something than for doing something wrong. First, the concerned individual could easily interpret this as an accusation of bad faith. Second, the person might ask for even more specific instructions, e.g.: *"So tell me exactly what I'm supposed to do then!"* Yet, the whole point is to put the employee in a position where he or she feels accountable for deciding what he or she must do, within the scope of a well-understood overall mission.

Tackling accountability issues takes courage. These discussions are essential, but difficult and risky. To avoid these sensitive conversations, executives often close their eyes, and let things slide, at the risk that they will slide downhill! In a contrary example, one leader cited in *Leadership Without Excuses* formed a habit of reading all the 360° evaluations completed by employees. If the results did not seem crystal clear, he sent them back. In this way, he habituated people to saying things openly. The objective is to encourage open discussion without giving employees the perception they are being personally accused or unfairly judged.

Accountability issues cannot be left unaddressed.

Practical Tips

If one of your employees appears to lack a sense of accountability, you must lose no time in speaking openly about this issue with the individual concerned.

- **Support your message with facts.** Differentiate between fact and opinion. Beware of accusing the other person of bad faith.
- **Focus the discussion on the consequences of observed behavior.** Try to help the person understand the gaps and improvement needs, rather than debating the causes. Don't let the discussion turn into a self-justification session.
- **Speak in the first person.** Explain what you feel about the situation, as this will bolster your credibility.
- **Admit your own share of responsibility in the situation.** Recognize mistakes that you may have committed, for example, by not being sufficiently clear about your expectations.

"Delusions are much sweeter, but they make you vulnerable."
Jeff Grimshaw, Gregg Baron, ***Leadership Without Excuses***, McGraw-Hill, 2010.

4th tip

Truly reward accountability

Examples

Chris Franklin, CEO of the Aqua America water distribution company, noted upon his arrival that the productivity of meter readers varied widely on a scale from 1 to 5, a state of affairs that his processor had tolerated for years.

Franklin went out into the field to study the situation firsthand. He discovered that the reason for the situation was the perception of inequitable treatment. Two employees had been behaving in a completely unacceptable manner, taking time off during working hours to run personal errands. Seeing that this behavior was not penalized, many of their colleagues gradually lost their motivation and began to take it easy themselves.

Franklin took rapid measures, firing the two "black sheep," who had refused to change their behavior. He explained to the others that their past behavior would not be held against them, but that he expected them to show more commitment henceforth.

In just a few weeks, the team got back to work and the labor climate improved considerably.

Based on ***Leadership Without Excuses***, Jeff Grimshaw, Gregg Baron, McGraw-Hill, 2010.

Many leaders adopt an attitude that is not aligned with their accountability expectations. First, because defining concrete indicators for such an abstract concept is difficult, they often manage accountability as a "plus" which is not explicitly integrated as a compensation criterion. As a result, **managers often end up rewarding counter-productive behavior, but continue to hope that other people will "do the right thing."** This happens, for example, when call centers are run based on productivity, but managers still hope that operators really listen to their customers. Another frequent problem is that **those who act responsibly often see themselves recognized with "rewards" that aren't very rewarding**, as they are typically given jobs that no one else is responsible enough to do! Even thanks may be perceived as insulting in such a context, points out one executive: *What I hear between the lines is, "I don't have the courage to solve the problem of people who lack a sense of responsibility, so thank you for being stupid enough to do the job for them!"*

To avoid this phenomenon, leaders must **stop making accountability an implicit expectation, and instead take visible and concrete measures to encourage it**. Sometimes, this simply requires adjusting performance criteria. For example, the Vanguard management company initially believed that managers would naturally try to develop their employees. This mindset was long considered to be a matter of personal goodwill. Managers who did this were recognized by their superiors, but the concrete impact on compensation and promotion practices was far from clear. Senior leaders decided to change this state of affairs and instill performance indicators in this domain – with spectacular results!

Behaviors must have consequences.

However, "acting responsibly" is extremely difficult to translate into an indicator. Rather, this topic must be openly discussed during performance reviews, just like other skills. The whole point is thus to address the topic of accountability on an objective and factual basis; otherwise, if the concerned employee feels unfairly judged, the message is likely to be rejected. Managers are thus advised to **focus on the consequences of observed behavior**. For example, what would happen if the entire team began to act the same way? More importantly, how does this behavior affect the person's performance and career development perspectives?

Adapt your rewards to your expectations

REWARD THE SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY	PENALIZE IRRESPONSIBILITY
There are many ways to reward employees who demonstrate a great sense of responsibility: • Variable compensation, pay raises • Increased involvement in decision making, access to confidential information, consultation on cross-company issues • Sincere thanks supported by facts, public recognition depending on the person's personality • Flexible schedule, more vacation time • Special attention to the person's specific needs • Status, title • Additional resources (budget, bigger team, administrative support) • Development opportunities, mentoring, time spent coaching the person	When people fail to assume their responsibilities, there are measures that can be taken to underline the fact that passive behavior has negative consequences: • Stress that the person is losing the trust of other team members • Post comparative performance • Present the issue as an internal competition that the person is losing • Describe the person's behavior in explicit terms, to open the person's eyes if he or she is lying to himself/herself. • Refuse to entrust the person with an assignment, and tell him or her why • Explicitly take account of the person's behavior when determining variable compensation