



Creating a culture of accountability

Follow these five steps and watch your organization get things done.

By Tim Smith, Principal

“Bob says he’ll get these reports done on time, but he never does.”

“The boss talks to Sally all the time about the quality of her work, but nothing ever changes.”

Do you have a Bob or Sally in your company? You probably recognize the examples above, though your folks may have different names.

In all my years of helping companies simplify and stabilize their business operations, I’ve never once conducted an operational assessment without hearing employees say something along the lines of, “Well, we always say we’re going to do stuff, but nothing happens. We don’t hold anyone accountable.”

Holding people accountable is one of the most fundamental, but often ignored, activities in any organization. As a manager, if you don’t hold people accountable (including yourself), you are like the king who abdicates his throne – walking away with no concern for what happens next.

Without saying a word, you send a strong message to everyone in your organization: You really don’t care whether you get the results you say you want.

Company motto: “Whatever happens, happens.”

Accountability Starts With You

Of course, that’s not how most of us want to run our business. We pride ourselves on planning, on being responsive to customers, on running a tight ship. But in the day-to-day rush, we give instructions to employees, walk away – and then never take any steps to make sure the work gets done as expected.

But it isn’t only managers who fail to hold people accountable. Project teams often drop the ball, too. In an effort to keep the peace, team members let other team members get away with not doing their part. The group doesn’t last long because it can’t get anything done.

Management teams have the same issues.

I once participated in a five-day offsite planning retreat. We invested an enormous amount of time, money and emotional energy clarifying objectives, setting goals, identifying critical strategic projects and developing basic plans to execute those projects. But we didn’t have a mechanism to hold ourselves accountable for making those changes happen.

One by one people shifted their focus away from the big picture and back to their daily routine. Before too long,



Don’t let employees hide from assigned responsibilities ... make accountability part of your organization’s culture by clearly stating expectations and following up.

all of us had returned to business as usual and the plans we made were relegated to a binder on a shelf that that did nothing but collect dust.

Of course, it's easy to talk about the importance of holding people accountable. But how do you actually go about doing so? How do successful organizations properly manage accountability?

The first step is the most difficult, at least for some of us.

Holding others accountable starts with you holding yourself accountable. You have to make certain – on a daily basis – that you are not abdicating your responsibility.

Once you've made that commitment, accountability really boils down to stating your expectations, following up, and taking action when you don't get the results you expect. Here are the basic steps for what I call the accountability cycle:

1. **State your expectations and have the employee repeat them back.** The more new or complex the tasks, the more important it is for the employee to tell you, in their own words, what they understand to be your expectations.
2. **State the consequences for both success and failure.** In some cases, you might ask the person or team what they think the consequences should be for success or failure. Be sure to agree on the steps they'll take to raise a red flag if they are having problems getting the job done and need help.
3. **Let them know that you will follow up and how you are going to do it.** Do you expect a written report? Will you be attending future meetings? That way there are no surprises.
4. **Follow up to check progress and/or final results.** Compare what's actually happened to what was supposed to happen.
5. **Take action when what you expected isn't happening.** If nothing else, let the employee or team know that you are aware that expectations aren't being met.

Avoiding Conflict Isn't The Answer

Over the years, I've learned that Steps 4 and 5 are what really trip up even the most effective managers. When days and weeks pass by, it's difficult to remember to monitor results, and taking action in response to missed targets can be painful.

Few of us relish the thought of conflict with staff members. But the cycle above helps establish and communicate the steps you will use to hold people

accountable. Often, the understanding that management is paying attention is enough to inspire individuals and teams to handle their business.

When you follow up – and the work has been done as expected – thank the employee or work team for their efforts.

But what do you do when the Bobs and Sallys in your company don't do what they've agreed to do?

When you are at Step 4, and are following up on progress or results, these folks often get defensive and push back. They tell you why they didn't produce results. They always seem to have an excuse – real or imagined.

When that happens, talk through the accountability cycle with them again. Be clear about your expectations, and about the consequences. Though you'll likely have few surprises the second time – since employees know now that you're serious about accountability – you must take action if expectations aren't met.

Consequences can range from being removed from the project or being "written up" to more serious results, such as losing a bonus, being put on probation or even terminated. Whether you follow zero tolerance guidelines or a more lenient approach depends on the situation, but the bottom line is that you must follow through with the agreed-upon consequences. The entire process depends on it.

Cycle Accountability Into Your Culture

Perhaps you can think of a situation where you aren't getting the results you want. Is it because you aren't holding someone accountable? Use the steps above as a check list. Have you missed a step? What keeps you from completing the entire accountability cycle?

There's no doubt that managing for accountability takes discipline. But following the steps in the accountability cycle lays the groundwork that makes accountability a key part of your company's culture.

More Information? If you'd like to learn more about instilling a culture of accountability throughout your organization, please send an E-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our web site at www.plaidgroup.com, or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp.

Author's Note: Tim Smith is a Principal with The Plaid Group. The Plaid Group helps companies simplify and stabilize their business operations to improve financial performance and gain a competitive edge.