

Developing Employees

Does Your Team Have an Accountability Problem?

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Summary. A lack of accountability is rarely intentional. More often, it's the result of an underlying issue, such as unclear roles and responsibilities, limited resources, poor strategy, or unrealistic goals. This is why leaders who default to a plea for accountability often end... [more](#)

“We need to hold people more accountable.” How many times have you said this in the past year? When things aren't going well — maybe your numbers are down, you haven't met your goals, or

your pipeline is dry — it's easy to turn to this familiar mantra. But when you say it, what your team members actually hear is: “You are letting me down,” or, “We are failing.” Instead of lighting an inspired fire under people, you can end up deflating them.

While there will undoubtedly be times when your team could put in a more focused effort, in my experience, a “lack of accountability” is rarely intentional. More often, it's the result of an underlying issue, such as unclear roles and responsibilities, limited resources, a poor strategy, or unrealistic goals. This is why leaders who default to a plea for accountability often end up hitting a wall and feeling even more frustrated.

Further, verbalizing that there is “a lack of accountability” on your team can easily come off as threatening or condescending to people on the receiving end. This is hardly productive when you are trying to inspire change, and more importantly, it doesn't help you get to the root of the problem.

When you need to push those around you to get better results (that's really what you are looking for, right?), a better approach is to tackle the issue with a leadership mindset. Use the following steps to guide yourself on how to start the conversation, identify the real issue at hand, and execute a plan that will help you solve it.

Check in with yourself first.

When a work issue is causing you stress, pointing “outward” and blaming others is a normal first instinct. But if you want to have a productive conversation with someone who appears to “just not be getting it,” first consider if you may be contributing to the problem (even unintentionally). Instead of asking, “Why aren't they doing their part?” ask “Is there anything I can do differently to help?”

While you should avoid feeling compelled to complete someone else's work, it is beneficial to consider whether gaps in communication, process, or other areas, are setting you both

back.

Before even approaching the other person, consider:

- Have I been clear about my expectations?
- Have I asked what I can do to help?
- Have I taken time to brainstorm and review processes?
- Have I built a plan of action with my team member?

Self-awareness is a leadership super power, and reflecting in this way may help you recognize any unhelpful patterns that you can fall into.

Another tip for increasing your self-awareness is to pay attention to what's happening in your body. When you think about having this discussion with your team member, do you feel tense? Do you clench your jaw, fidget, pace, bounce your leg, change your facial affect, talk more or shut down? For example, if you find yourself defaulting to an intense glare, see if you can pause and shift to a lighter or softer gaze. Awareness of your physical reactions can help you identify feelings of anger, frustration, or discomfort you may be burying. It will also help you to be more attune to how your body language may negatively impact others. Work to shift your mindset from a place of hostility to a place of curiosity with respect to how you can help.

Create a safe environment for the other person.

After you have checked in with yourself, and you feel ready to approach the conversation from a place of curiosity, remember to be mindful of your tone, whether you initiate a meeting in person or through an email. A great place to start is by asking the person if you can schedule some time or make a date with them to discuss a business challenge. Making an appointment shows your commitment to taking the time to listen. In addition, when you frame the topic around a business challenge, you eliminate the risk of finger pointing and indicate that you have enough respect to collaborate.

Once you've set up time to talk, begin the conversation by asking questions. For example, if your team member is constantly missing deadlines, you could begin by saying, "I've noticed that you seem to need a little more time to get the work done lately." Provide specific examples, then ask, "What can we do to help you get back on track?" If a team member has failed to reach their quarterly goals, you could say something as simple as, "How do you feel your work has been going this quarter?" and gauge their initial reaction.

Avoid jumping directly into critical feedback or using judgmental language such as, "Why would you...", "You should have...", or "That's wrong." It helps to assume positive intent in the other person. The goal here is to listen and to remain genuinely open to their "take" on things.

Listening, paying attention, and understanding the needs and motivations of the other person will help you put aside any assumptions you may be making about their character. You may discover that they are not "lazy," "incapable," or "unreliable," but rather, that they are unclear on organizational goals, and therefore, are not properly prioritizing projects. You may discover that they need more feedback to do their best work, or that other obstacles are holding them back. While none of these things entirely excuse a lack of initiative or follow through, understanding the underlying issues can give you a clear idea about how to move forward.

When you are only aware of what you are trying to achieve, without considering the experience of others, you can easily slip into the habit of shaming or blaming. If your team member feels they are truly being heard, they are more likely to feel emotionally safe and work with you to solve the problem. Whether you are in a leadership position or seeking to be a better peer, listening with positive intent is a skill that will help you reach your goal.

Ensure that there is clarity and a mutual agreement on how to move forward.

Now that you have identified any underlying issues, it's time to clarify that your intention in starting this conversation is to address the core of the issue and agree upon path forward (taking into consideration any new information you have just been given). Whether your goal is to help a direct report meet deadlines or to collaborate more effectively with a team member on a project, it's vital to make sure that you both understand what the issue is, how to address it, what success looks like, what needs to be done, by who, and by when to achieve it.

You might begin by recapping what you have heard from them so far to be sure that you understand where they are coming from. Once they confirm that "you get it," acknowledge that what they have shared makes sense. It's important to note that "making sense" doesn't necessarily mean you agree, it just means that you are clear on their point of view.

Next, directly own and express your personal frustration with what you see to be the problem. For example, you might say, "I know you are not intentionally missing deadlines, and now I have a clearer understanding of everything on your plate. But when you do miss deadlines, the result is that I have to take on your unfinished work, which causes me to get behind on my own projects. I often feel frustrated by this."

Finally, ask if the other person would be open to trying some new strategies to address the issue. Your approach to this last step may vary depending on who you are having the conversation with. If you are talking to a direct report, for instance, you might then say, "I want to set you up for success here. To make sure we are on the same page, can you repeat back to me what you understand the problem is and we can work together on a plan to move forward?" If you are confronting a peer, a better approach may be, "Based on our conversation, let's try to agree to a mutual set of objectives and then brainstorm on how we might develop an approach to achieving those goals. "

In all cases, seek to demonstrate empathy, and work towards a mutual commitment around a goal. From there, you can brainstorm and agree to some concrete next steps.

Commit to setting those you work with up for success.

As you begin to devise your plan, work with your colleague to set up realistic expectations. This is the only way to make sure you are both set up to win. Whether you are working with a peer, a direct report, or even somebody above you, before agreeing on next steps, ask them (and yourself): Does this all feel doable, given everything else on our plates? If the answer is no for either of you, go back to the drawing board.

For example, imagine your team member appears unaccountable because they have failed to meet their quarterly sales goals. After discussing the issue with them, you might discover that the real problem is that they lack confidence in their knowledge about the product. Maybe pushing them to make more pitches isn't the right next step. Instead, with a mindset of "success breeds success," focus on getting them what they need to be able to better position the product. If the goal is to close 20 deals in the next quarter, you may choose to lower the goal temporarily and provide them with more training so they are better prepared for the following quarter and can get back on quota.

No matter what the situation is, you need to be prudent — cut back, reframe, offer support, or delegate work to others where necessary. Your revised plan might be smaller in scope than what you had originally anticipated, but often baby steps lead to walking then to running.

Regularly track and measure progress.

You've heard of the importance of leaving a paper trail. While we don't use paper much these days, the lesson is the same. Make sure you get the agreed upon plan in writing so it can be revisited going forward if there are ever any questions on what was

originally decided. Don't just set it and forget it. Determine what communication tools you will use to check in on progress.

Some helpful tools include:

- Roles and responsibilities write-ups (to use as references)
- Scorecards (to measure outcomes)
- Regular progress check-ins (to give feedback)
- Metric dashboards (to track performance)
- Weekly meetings (to stay aligned)
- Process write-ups (to gauge what is working and what is not)
- Checklists (to stay organized)
- Project plans (to outline future goals)

The above documents will help you identify what's working and what's not over a period of time, as well as course correct as needed.

Pleading for more accountability isn't the answer to your problem. Anyone can express frustration around an issue, but those who harness self-awareness and empathy not only find effective solutions but also build winning teams and colleagues for life. If you want to be a next-level leader or peer, one that people actually want to work with, shift your mindset, and practice these five steps. You'll end up driving better results, more impactful change, and reducing your own frustration to boot.

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