EXPANDING ACCOUNTABILITY IN YOUR ORGANIZATION: Things You Need to Know and Do

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Lack of accountability. If there is one thing that drives us up a wall-it is lack of accountability. It doesn't matter who does it or what position they hold. If they don't do what they say they will do and, if they don't "own it," we quickly lose respect for that person. In fact, we may end up not trusting them.

In my view, the two key components of accountability are:

1) Doing what you say you will do (on-time) and,
2) Owning it when you don't get it done.

It seems pretty simple. Yet, every one of us has been frustrated by people who consistently don't meet those two simple tests. Sometimes we respond to their lack of accountability by:

- **Ignoring it** or pretending not to notice. After all, we don't want to upset anyone.
- **Gossiping** with others about it. "Did you see that Lew didn't get it done again."
- **Enabling it** by picking up the slack and doing the job, the other person should have done in the first place. Of course, this creates growing resentments that eventually come to a head and explode.
- **Openly complaining** about it, which causes other members of the team to feel uncomfortable and to label you as a trouble maker.

Some teams are more effective in embracing individual and team accountability than others. In my forty-five years of working with public sector teams, I have found certain consistencies in organizations that have a culture of accountability and those that do not.

In the following, we will discuss the things that supervisors do to **Undermine Accountability** and the things that supervisors do to **Support Accountability.**

1. Undermining Accountability: "I want to be your friend."

It seems that for many supervisors, the view is that they must either be a friend or an enemy of the people they lead. The friend or enemy view becomes particularly problematic in small organizations where people know each other from "way back." "I hate to tell Lew, my bowling buddy, that he is consistently not doing the job. Boy, that will make it tough when we bowl on Tuesday night." You can find this perspective at all levels in large and small organizations. The impacts are too numerous to mention. However, some of the impacts include:

- **Empowerment of problem employees**. Problem employees quickly turn real and perceived friendship between the supervisor and an employee into a divisive weapon. Their message to other members of the team is clear: "Do you see how Lew gets away with everything? Moreover, we get written up for the same things. Yes, go ahead and trust the supervisor." Assignments by the supervisor also become a source of the question and behind-the-back criticism. "Lew gets all of the great jobs while we get stuck doing crap work."

- **The sense of fairness becomes a casualty.** Members of the team may come to believe that their hard work does not matter. Instead, it is **who** you know not **what** you know or **what you do** that matters to leaders making the decisions. This perception is lethal to consistent standards of accountability.
- **Personalities become more important than principles.** Indeed, internal politics become the central reality of the team. Groups and cliques get form quickly, and the work of the team becomes less important than "who gets what" and "who's side you are on."

1.A. Support Accountability: "I want to be fair-not your friend or your enemy."

When a person becomes a supervisor/leader, she now belongs to everyone on the team, not just one or two people. This means that principles and expectations must be clearly stated. It doesn't mean that longtime friendships must be dissolved. Preferably, it means establishing new rules and understandings with the members of the team and friends within the team. It is a simple thing. Be open, honest, and principled.

"Team, I am pleased to be your new (or long-time) supervisor. Everyone knows that Lew and I are long-time bowling buddies and friends. Let's spend some time talking about that. What should you expect of me? What should I expect of you? And what rules are we all to follow to ensure that everyone is treated fairly?" Indeed, the central question is what rules we will follow to ensure that everyone is held accountable (including the leader) fairly and consistently.

2. Undermine Accountability "Fear of Inter-Personal Conflict."

"Can't we all just get along?" The fear of interpersonal conflict is often related to the previous factor-the desire to be liked. No sane person wants interpersonal conflict in their work or personal life. Avoiding small conflicts only grow more significant controversies. It is like the old Fram oil filter commercial where the mechanic standing under the car holding an oil filter says: "You can pay me now with an oil filter or later with an engine." The inevitable results of not addressing conflict in a team include:

- **Strengthening low performers and undermining hard working team members.** The inability or lack of willingness to address the lack of/or minimal levels of performance creates more of the same. Some team members will inevitably push to the edge. If the supervisor lets me get away with one thing, perhaps I can get away with another. Whether it is job performance levels or problematic behavior, ignoring the problem and hoping that "it will go away" leads to more of the same types of performance or behavior.
- **Bullies win-team members lose.** Nature hates a void. When the team leader consistently fails to step up and honestly, evenly and directly address behavioral and job performance issues, informal leaders inevitably fill the void. Regrettably, in many instances, these informal leaders are contrarians, negatively oriented people, and often bullies.
- **End-around games get played.** The authority of the team leader quickly dissolves when this game is played. When good and poor team members go to the boss's boss for answers, the support of the team leader becomes unimportant. In some cases, the boss's boss encourages this behavior. In any case, discipline, diligence, and respect are quickly lost within the team.

2.A. Support Accountability: "I will be honest, direct, and even-handed in addressing performance and behavioral issues within the team."

Often, team leaders and many people feel that they must be angry or upset before they address conflict. This inevitably leads to avoiding the issue or situation and allows the conflict to grow and intensify. Then when the issues are finally addressed emotions quickly get out of control, and the initial desire for accountability gets lost in a sea of emotional statements and allegations. And since these episodes are so ugly, they lead to future instances when conflict is avoided. A vicious cycle is created.

So, what can you do to break this cycle?

- **Don't get mad-stay even with your tone.** It is a huge mistake to get mad at someone who hasn't performed well or who has misbehaved. When you get mad-it becomes about YOU! Stop making it about you. Even fact-based tones improve the odds for honest conversation. They also make it easier to address the situation.
- **Lead by question-not answers or accusations.** "Lew is it true that you didn't get this done?" "Why?" "What do you need to do to improve this?" When you ask the question as opposed to giving a statement-it puts the onus on the person that needs to be held accountable.
- **Don't wait-address the small stuff.** We have all been there. I'm busy; I don't want to deal with this petty crap. I have a deadline, etc. Little problems tend to grow into larger, more time-consuming issues. Addressing things earlier rather than later tend to produce a couple of positive outcomes: 1) the fix is usually easier and less time consuming, 2) the minimal boundaries of unacceptable performance or behavior are more clearly defined, 3) long term relationships are less likely to be negatively impacted, and finally 4) it is easier to do and thus more likely for you to actually do it!

3. Undermining Accountability: Easy Rider and My Way-Highway Supervisors

Supervisor easy rider never holds anyone accountable. As previously discussed, they may wish to be liked, or they are conflict-averse or, they may just not want to make decisions. Many times, supervisor easy rider is an "analyzer." They suffer from 'analysis-paralysis" and rarely make timely decisions. Or worst they don't hold people accountable for their lack of job performance or errant and disruptive behavior. Frequently, this leads to mayhem within the team. No one feels supported. Reasonable risk-taking on the part of team members quickly falls to the wayside. No one feels backed, and thus they reasonably perform at minimal-totally defensible levels.

Supervisor My Way-Highway suffers from the same low accountability, low-risk taking outcome but gets there following a different path. Their lack of flexibility in what needs to be done or how things should be done stifles the job ownership of members of the team. Mr. Highway "owns" everything. Creativity and efforts to go further are met with disdain, ridicule, or even discipline by the boss. This old school approach leads to minimal productivity, and behind the back-secret society games. The supervisor's controlling-micromanaging style also leaves them very frustrated.

3.A. Supervisor Accountability Factor for Easy Rider: Don't become a Supervisor

In forty-five years, I have never found an acceptable fix for this problematic supervisor. In most cases, they should be moved out of any supervisory position. In larger teams, it can partially work if they appoint a second in command which has the strength and capabilities to actually-in a healthy way-lead

the team. In this case, easy rider must fully support and back the second in command. Many times, easy riders can be useful to the team, just not in a leadership role.

3.B. Supervisor Accountability Factor for Supervisor My Way Highway

Unlike supervisor easy rider, supervisor My Way-Highway has, in this team builder's eyes, some hope for positive change. This is especially true if they are frustrated with what they see as the lack of accountability within the team. This combined with their personal frustration that they "must do everything" can serve as a motivational base for moving toward a healthier leadership style. There are, of course, no guarantees. However, depending on these and other factors, including the desire by Mr. Highway to improve team results may be effective in bringing about change.

Factors that facilitate this positive change include:

- **Creating a set of clear and honest expectations.** As noted previously, clarity of expectations of job performance and behavior serve as the base for all levels of personal and team accountability. Honest and direct follow up reviews are essential to this process. Often this is best accomplished in a series of facilitated workshops.
- **Build inter-personal trust.** Clear expectations, honesty, and directness over time are the building blocks for inter-personal trust within a team. For teams that have had problems and issues, this frequently means some element of forgiveness or at least a willingness to "draw a line" between past issues and current and future behavior. This willingness must always start with the supervisor.

Some final thoughts about organizational accountability.

All organizations have built-in processes, procedures, and cultures that either support or undermine individual and team accountability

In order to identify, and perhaps address, organizational factors that undermine fairness and accountability, it is recommended that the senior leadership team consider doing the following:

- **Have a series of discussions about accountability.** Starting with the senior leadership team, ask the questions: a) What are the factors in our organization that support and undermine personal and team accountability? b) What can we do to support the supports and remove or mitigate the undermines?
- **Clarify organizational expectations.** Clarifying expectations can be done before and after behavior occurs.
- **Catch 'em doing something right/good.** One of the reasons walk around, managers tend to be effective is because when they are out and about, they get a chance to see excellent work.

There probably isn't a more significant or more critical challenge for any leader at any level than supporting accountability and fairness. In the final analysis there will always be people who reject accountability if it doesn't immediately support their cause or situation. And sometimes doing the right thing can come at a high price. Nonetheless, it is evident that most people thrive in an environment in which accountability and fairness define the organization's culture.