



Why is it that some staff are afraid of accountability and reluctant to take full responsibility for their area, their output, their results and their mistakes?

Comments such as "That's not my job", "I would have it done but...", "It's the other departments fault" typify the comeback lines of staff and managers shirking responsibility.

So often executive leaders within organisations approach Proteus and ask us to help their middle managers and team leaders to take greater levels of responsibility and to become more accountable. Boards and executives want a higher level of accountability across all levels of their organisation in areas such as; nipping poor behaviour in the bud before it escalates to HR; or sales teams taking decisive action sooner to boost revenue in a month that has started slowly; or project leaders proactively managing under

performing contractors that are holding back progress.

Whatever the situation, it seems executives believe that if they can improve accountability they will improve results, and in many ways they are right.

Added to this is the fact that many teams with high accountability are also able to maintain a positive, harmonious culture.

So why then is boosting

Building Accountability

by Tim Browne

accountability so hard and why do leaders always want more accountability from those working for and with them.

Part of the explanation lies in how we understand and communicate what accountability and responsibility represent in our workspace.

Too often we interpret accountability to mean; “Who is going to be held to account?” or put more simply when things go wrong; “who is to blame?” or “who’s fault is this?”. Sure, accountability does suggest that mistakes need to be owned, but it is more than this. The ‘ability’ in *accountability* is just as important as “who is held to be to account”. If as leaders we are to ask someone to be *accountable* for an outcome or task we must also ensure they are indeed *able* to achieve that outcome or perform that task. And we must communicate this - clearly. We must take the time to speak belief into the lives of our staff and also to demonstrate trust.

Another key reason is because often accountability is imposed and this simply does not work.

I recently bought my first house (or rather I bought my first mortgage as the bank owns most of the house!). Prior to this, over the last 10 years, I have been renting and one of the significant changes I am now experiencing is that I am 100% totally accountable for the upkeep and maintenance of the house. Up until this point, a broken flyscreen or a blocked toilet simply required a phone call to the landlord and it would be fixed promptly and at no expense to me. Now if anything needs fixing or improving it is wholly my responsibility, and this is

going to cost me money and time. Yet, I am not complaining, in fact I am eagerly preparing shopping and to-do lists and quite enjoying the habitual Saturday morning excursions to Bunnings.

For whilst this increased level of accountability has drained my resources, I made the choice to embrace the responsibility – and because I can see the benefits, it is an easy choice.

Referring to my earlier point – I also believe I am *able* to take responsibility and accountability of the house – and so too were the bank – otherwise they may not have been so keen to risk lending me money.

How do we replicate this 'easy to choose accountability' approach within our teams at work then? Firstly we need to stop imposing it on staff. No one forced me to buy a house whereas typically in the work environment accountability is forced or imposed upon us. This annoys us, and is ineffective.

Have you ever sat in a toilet cubicle where the toilet paper dispenser only allows you to take one or two thin sheets of paper at a time? This is done for a good reason, to reduce the amount we use and therefore help save the environment. This reluctant toilet paper dispenser is encouraging (or rather mandating) that we take great responsibility for our toilet paper consumption. However, instead what it often means is that we still end up using just as much, but taking longer to extract the required amount, getting frustrated and uttering abusive sledges at the inanimate apparatus attached to the wall of the cubicle. Imposed

accountability likewise often produces similar reactions.

To ask or tell a staff member to be more accountable for an area can only send a message that you are looking for someone to blame, or that you are expecting them to work harder.

So we return to asking then; how do organisations increase levels of accountability?

1. **EDUCATE:** Equip, train and prepare staff to be *accountable*.
2. **BELIEVE:** Speak belief into staff and demonstrate that trust by walking away and letting them take full responsibility.
3. **SET THE STANDARD:** Determine salary increases not after they have achieved results but before – this sends a clear message 'You are able, you are accountable, you will be operating at a higher level and therefore deserve to be rewarded'.
4. **LET GO:** Do not impose higher levels of accountability but instead work to demonstrate the obvious benefits of higher levels of accountability – these will often include flexibility, greater control and freedom in decision making.

Finally it is crucial that as leaders we model the way. We must ensure that our own language and attitude to our jobs is one that reflects total responsibility and accountability. If we find ourselves making excuses, pointing the finger at things out of our control, or blaming others, it may be time to take check of how much accountability we are personally taking before asking others to do the same.

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