Workplace Accountability

How Effective Managers Create a Culture of Ownership
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Every company would love for its employees to demonstrate accountability; to take ownership of their work. However, despite their best efforts, few companies understand what it takes to create and sustain a culture of accountability. To develop a team of individuals that take ownership of their work requires, 1) a skilled leader, 2) a proven accountability process, and 3) the discipline to develop and practice the habits that will lead to a culture of ownership.

In the current economy, faced with the constant prospect of doing more with less – fewer people, limited resources, and smaller budgets – there is an increased emphasis on the ability to create high-performance work teams that solve problems, pursue innovation, super-serve customers, and communicate effectively. All of these objectives can be achieved, but, ultimately, each is dependent upon talented employees who are willing to be responsible for their results.

To create these teams, leaders must learn the skills and the processes that lead to workplace accountability. This paper outlines a proven methodology for creating a culture of ownership: the importance of employee engagement, the prerequisites that must be in place, the significance of defined expectations, the critical need for real-time performance review, and the role of one-on-one communication with employees.

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In September 2012, a terrorist attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya resulted in the loss of four American lives, including U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens. In investigating this tragic event, the State Department convened an Accountability Review Board which reported, in part:

The Board found that certain senior State Department officials within two bureaus demonstrated a lack of proactive leadership and management ability in their responses to security concerns posed by Special Mission Benghazi, given the deteriorating threat environment and the lack of reliable host government protection. However, the Board did not find reasonable cause to determine that any individual U.S. government employee breached his or her duty.

The report identified a lack of proactive leadership and a lack of management ability. In other words, people failed. However, no one was really responsible.
Unfortunately, we live and work in a society where few people are willing to take direct responsibility for their actions.


Predictably, problems with accountability are quite common in the workplace. Both managers and employees routinely and consistently fail to take responsibility for their performance results, their actions, or their attitudes. Instead, they blame the boss, the company, other employees, or anything else that will readily suffice as an excuse – including customers.

When accountability is absent, the inevitable result is a significant gap between a company’s performance and the performance it is capable of producing.
To make things worse, as we will see, this problem is compounded exponentially when managers fail to address employee performance issues, which is, in and of itself, a lack of accountability.

Despite the evidence that workplace accountability is, generally speaking, quite rare, managers and business owners cling to the notion that employees should willingly “take ownership” of their work; that employees should readily welcome accountability for their workplace performance...
The challenge is that leaders consistently fail to create a culture of ownership.

Employee engagement – a measurement of how involved and enthusiastic employees are in the workplace – continues to decline. Towers Watson, a worldwide professional services company, puts fully engaged employees at 35 percent. Blessing White, a global consulting firm, reports that fewer than one out of every three employees is engaged. Survey data from Gallup reports that only 29 percent of employees are fully engaged in their work.

If only one out of every three employees is engaged, then two out of every three employees are disengaged, meaning that, for one or more reasons, they have lost the motivation to perform at the highest level. The idea that these same employees will “take ownership” of their work; i.e., take initiative, double-check critical details, and assume responsibility for their own performance, is without merit.
The question is, who or what creates employee engagement? In 2007, research conducted by Leigh Branham, in conjunction with the Saratoga Institute, revealed that 70 percent of employees leave their jobs due specifically to the actions of a manager or supervisor [1]. In other words, in better than two out of three occurrences, it is ineffective leadership that leads to employee dissatisfaction in the workplace.

Leadership is critical to workplace accountability because the actions of a leader determine the environment in which employees will either thrive or languish. When leaders fail to create a culture that encourages and rewards accountability, it cannot and will not exist.

On the other hand, leaders who understand the principles of employee engagement can implement a process that creates a culture of ownership and an expectation of accountability.


19,700 employees were interviewed and asked why they left their companies. The seven reasons are: 1) the job or workplace was not as expected, 2) mismatch between the job and the employee, 3) too little coaching and feedback, 4) too few growth and advancement opportunities, 5) feeling devalued and unrecognized, 6) stress from overwork and work-life balance, and 7) loss of trust and confidence in senior leaders.
For workplace accountability to exist, leadership must create a culture of accountability. If company leadership does not establish that culture, it is highly unlikely that employees will do so themselves. In fact, in the absence of a clear set of cultural norms, accountability, if it exists at all, will be random, inconsistent, and most likely coerced. Unfortunately, “coercive micro-management” and “willing accountability” are mutually exclusive terms.

The initial steps in creating a culture of ownership may appear obvious, but are often overlooked. First, every employee should have a very clear understanding of his/her work processes and the performance results they are tasked to produce. Second, they should receive sufficient training to ensure those processes are well executed.

Surprisingly, it is not all that unusual for work processes to be vague, undefined, or inconsistent. If that is the case, note that it is impossible to create accountability to workplace performance.

**Without clear standards, to what is the employee accountable exactly?**

**Without adequate training, how can the employee achieve the desired standards?**

“An empowered organization is one in which individuals have the knowledge, skill, desire, and opportunity to personally succeed in a way that leads to collective organizational success.”

Stephen Covey
Prerequisites to Accountability

Establishing a standard process to achieve a performance result does not exclude the employee’s personal choices for achieving a particular objective. It is not micro-management to define the result and the process to achieve the result; it is to create clarity regarding work results.

For example, consider an administrative employee who is required to prepare a sales report at the end of the month for a sales executive. If the employee lacks specific skills or knowledge regarding the process necessary to create the report – how to use the appropriate software, how to generate the report, what report fields to include or exclude, and so forth – the employee may be accused of a lack of accountability when the real problem is a lack of clarity.

The failure to clearly define the work process or to provide the training to execute the work process provides an employee with the perfect excuse to escape accountability. When an employee can claim they don’t know, or don’t know how, it eliminates the opportunity for the manager to reasonably hold the employee accountable for the performance result.

“One of the most important tasks of a manager is to eliminate his people’s excuses for failure.”

Robert Townsend

“I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t know how.”
Once an employee has received sufficient training and clearly understands the processes needed to create the desired result, you have only begun to create a culture of ownership. The next step is to clearly communicate your expectations regarding performance.

Taking the example from above, an employee might know exactly how to produce the correct sales report, but could easily be unclear as to the manager’s expectations for delivery: is it due on the first day of the following month, or within five working days, or within thirty days? Should the report be formatted in a particular way? Does the report need to be copied to any other individuals in the company? Should it be delivered digitally? As a PDF or as a Word document?

These details, and potentially several others, are important because creating a result is just one aspect of performance. The expectations regarding the delivery of the result is quite another. The process to produce an accurate sales report might be clearly defined, but the employee might be labeled irresponsible if the report is considered late or not formatted according to the manager’s expectations.

This lack of communication becomes magnified if the employee is tasked with producing the same sales report for not one, but three different Sales Managers, and each has a different expectation for the document.
When an employee knows exactly how to produce the desired performance; knows exactly when the work should be completed; and, understands both the standard of performance and how it will be measured, then expectations are clearly set and the employee’s performance can be fairly assessed.

In the example above - producing a sales report - the simplest measurements for this employee are most likely timeliness and accuracy. For example, if the standard is established that the report is due on the Sales Manager’s desk within five working days of the end of each month, that is easily measured. Accuracy can also be easily assessed against a list of benchmarks: information to be included, formatting, etc.

Clear expectations will include these key elements:

1) What, exactly, does the correct final result look like?
2) When should the result be completed?
3) What metric will be used to measure the performance?
4) What is the standard of performance?
The final aspect of communicating expectations is to help each employee understand why his or her work is important; to create the expectation that each employee will make an important contribution to the overall success of both the team and the company.

**Accountability is always strongest when an individual has a sense of mission, and real value is attached to the work.**

This is an integral part of creating a culture of ownership, because the word ‘culture’ implies a shared vision. It implies a commonality among those in the organization. To create a culture of accountability, each individual must be invested in the performance of the whole. In other words, if you want someone to act like an owner, you must treat them like an owner.

**Being invested in the result creates an entirely different perspective for the employee.** Being invested leads to ownership.

The only way to create an attitude of ownership is to ensure that employees understand their value to the organization. Employees who understand the “Big Picture,” and clearly understand why their contributions are important to the team and the company as a whole, are far more inclined to take ownership of their work.
In a 2012 article from Harvard Business Review, authors Gretchen Spreitzer and Christine Porath reported on data compiled from seven years of workplace research. The research was designed to determine the type of culture that creates ‘sustainable performance’ in the workplace.

They discovered that sustainable performance was directly related to releasing and sustaining enthusiasm in employees; to creating a company of ‘thriving’ employees. The data revealed four consistent practices that led to sustainable performance:

1. **Consistent sharing of information**
2. **Decision-making discretion**
3. **Consistent performance feedback**
4. **A workplace that minimizes incivility** [2]

The performance advantage in those companies that demonstrated these four cultural norms was significant. [3]

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[3] Ibid. “16% better overall performance (as reported by their managers) and 125% less burnout (self-reported) than their peers. They were 32% more committed to the organization and 46% more satisfied with their jobs. They also missed much less work and reported significantly fewer doctor visits, which meant health care savings and less lost time for the company.”
Work processes, training, and clear expectations are critical to workplace accountability. However, there will never be a culture of ownership in the workplace without consistent, real-time performance review.

**Most organizations fail to create a culture of ownership simply because they fail to address performance issues, or, when they do, it is critical and/or demeaning (a component of incivility).**

In fact, this is the universal reason why the vast majority of organizations have no chance to create a culture of accountability. Even if the necessary prerequisites are in place and clear expectations have been communicated, accountability cannot be established if, 1) if there are no consequences for sub-par performance, and, 2) there is no positive reinforcement and recognition for excellent performance.
For performance review to be effective, it must occur in real-time. Real-time means “current”, not the typical once-at-the-end-of-the-year annual performance appraisal. Annual performance appraisals – as currently practiced – are not only ineffective, they are counterproductive. [4]

First, common sense would dictate that a manager cannot effectively review fifty weeks of workplace performance in a couple of hours at the end of the year. Second, employees often have no concrete or consistent definition of those “core competencies” in which they are required to excel. And, third, managers’ observations are often highly subjective and strongly influenced by personal whim. For example, what does “exceeds expectations” mean exactly? Some managers will never award a “5”, reasoning that the highest assessment assumes perfect performance and everyone can improve.

The real problem, however, is that annual performance appraisals are rarely used as a tool to create a path to actual performance improvement and career development. In most cases, the appraisal is simply used as a tool to determine end-of-the-year bonuses or compensation adjustments. Rarely, if ever, is there a detailed assessment of productivity or performance gains, or are plans established that actually lead to tangible improvements in performance.

[4] “Many managers see performance appraisals as nothing more than an empty, bureaucratic exercise forced on them by HR. And simply search the Internet on the words, performance appraisal, and you’ll find various polls revealing the high percentage of employees who feel appraisals are pointless.” Excerpted from “How to Make Performance Reviews Relevant” by Lisa Quast. Forbes. January 21, 2013.
To make reviews effective, there must be a productive one-on-one relationship in place in which both manager and employee are working together to improve performance.

Managers can talk until they are blue in the face about the importance of positive team play at every level of the organization, but the team play that's most critical to ensuring that an organization runs effectively is the one-on-one relationship between a boss and each of his or her subordinates.

The performance review undermines that relationship. [5]

The performance review undermines that relationship because the process is adversarial by design. It is designed as a one-sided scorecard appraisal rather than an attempt to help an employee reach his or her potential and become the greatest possible contributor towards the team’s objectives.

And, worst of all, it only happens once a year.

A consistent one-on-one meeting designed to simultaneously facilitate communication and enhance performance review is the ideal scenario for creating a productive relationship between a manager and an employee. To this end, we utilize and teach a simple, easy-to-follow meeting concept called the 1-on-1 Meeting™. This meeting is specifically designed for the benefit of the employee, creating a vehicle for consistent communication and employee interaction, while also providing the perfect mechanism for real-time performance review. [6]

In this weekly (or bi-weekly) meeting, the employee reviews key activities from the previous work period, highlighting the important accomplishments and issues encountered. In addition, the employee provides a preview of his/her plans and priorities for the upcoming time period. (Note: the meeting has a specific template to follow and is much more than just a “one-on-one” conversation.)

In this meeting, the manager is afforded the opportunity to evaluate performance and assess the employee’s ability to plan and prioritize work objectives. This weekly (or bi-weekly) review provides an intimate snapshot of the employee’s progress against goals and objectives, and allows for real-time manager feedback.

[6] For detailed information regarding the 1-on-1 Meeting™, see 1-on-1 Management™: What Every Great Manager Knows That You Don’t (available at www.vmaxpg.com).
To be clear, both positive AND critical feedback are necessary to performance growth. In most organizations, however, positive feedback is infrequent at best, and nonexistent at worst. If your company’s objective is to create a culture of ownership, this is a mistake of enormous magnitude. Recognition and reward are directly linked to employee engagement and improved workplace performance.

In “The Carrot Principle”, authors Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton analyzed employee research data accumulated over a period of ten years. Surveys collected from over 200,000 employees revealed that 79 percent of employees who changed jobs cited a lack of appreciation as a key reason for leaving the company.

The most significant finding in the research, however, was that companies that excelled in recognizing employee talents and contributions demonstrated, 1) better financial results and, 2) lower employee turnover than their lower-scoring counterparts. [7]

“The central characteristic of truly effective management – the element that shows up time and again in every great workplace – is a manager’s ability to recognize employees’ talents and contributions in a purposeful manner.”

Feedback and the 1-on-1 Meeting™

On the other hand, there are always those times when critical feedback is necessary; when behavior or performance is not up to standards and must be addressed. The value of a positive work environment and a positive working relationship with each employee is that this necessary feedback is welcomed rather than being perceived as criticism.

When critical feedback is necessary, the most important step in addressing the issue is to reset your objectives and expectations.

If corrective action is needed, what is the time line for those changes? Are there intermediate standards to achieve? If so, when? In the case of critical feedback – those times when performance fails to meet expectations and/or pre-set performance standards – the manager and employee must reset and agree to a new set of expectations and re-establish a time frame for meeting those expectations.
Being accountable – acting responsibly and taking ownership – means more than simply completing a given task. It means acting with initiative, going the extra mile, attending to details, proactively communicating with others, and much more. These are all cultural standards that must be established, communicated, and reinforced on a regular basis.

To create a culture of ownership requires, first and foremost, effective leadership. Managers must intentionally develop a culture that rewards and reinforces accountability. They cannot expect employees to act like owners unless, and until, they are first positioned as owners.

To assess your corporate culture, or to train your leaders to develop a culture of ownership, or to learn more about workplace accountability, contact Vmax Performance Group (www.vmaxpg.com).

Employee Engagement Data Sources:
- Gallup (http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/en-us/employeeengagement.aspx)
- Blessing White (http://blessingwhite.com/EEE__report.asp)
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