Accountability In the Workplace: A Matter of Perception



Workplace accountability comes from all directions but if it does not reside at the top it is unlikely to take hold.

Accountability is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as ‘the quality or state of being accountable; especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for ones actions’. These are clearly desirable characteristics of leaders and employees in today’s workplace.

Over the past few years we have heard more and more about efforts to develop accountability. Many organizations are promoting accountability throughout their workplaces. But accountability is not a clear-cut issue. Being accountable does not mean competent or trustworthy it means being accountable. You can be accountable for something and not do it well or with integrity. With in an organization leadership and management will need to display all three traits, competency, trustworthiness and accountability to create a culture of accountability.

3 Things Leaders Must Do To Lay Accountability Ground Work

1) **Demonstrate Accountability:** This may seem obvious but this demonstration must be visible and clear. Accountability must be communicated at the beginning and reported back to employees throughout the process of working towards organizational goals. Setting clear goals for accountability and responsibility from leadership and communicating these with employees will help set the tone for the process.

2) **Be Transparent:** This includes sharing a vision of the direction and vision of the organization so employees have a marker to measure future progress against. With the goals you set you also need to clearly identify how they are measured, when corrections are made, what they are and why they were made. This does not need to include the minutia but big picture and tied to the ongoing success of the organization.

3) **Hold Others Accountable**: Leadership must be able to demonstrate that all members of the organization, including themselves, managers and employees have accountability expectations. This does not imply breaching confidentially when individuals fail to achieve accountability goals. But acknowledgements of successes and missed expectations are important. To hold others accountable you responsibility and expectations need to be established.

Communications about accountability must not only focus on failures of accountability. In fact, communicating positives can be more motivating to most employees compared to hearing about people who fail to be accountability. Rewarding success, even with only acknowledgements helps build a culture of accountability.

Accountability Preparations

Organizations cannot expect their employees to spontaneously understand what is required to be accountable. Accountability can range from showing up on time to not stealing and everything in between and all around. An organization should consider what accountability means to them and train employees on these accountability expectations.

Accountability is an attitude or belief in being responsible and accountable. Helping employees understand what they are accountable for and how to account for it is important. Sometimes employee's beliefs do not match the organizations. Sometimes priorities are different and very often perceptions are different. Communicating to employees the priorities of the organization and the specific requirements of their role as an employee is necessary. Involving the employee in this process will help you and them set realistic expectations that balance your perceived needs with their experienced reality and also help them take ownership.

8 Employee Accountability Elements that Must be in Place

Employees will need to:

1) Clearly identify what they are accountable for

2) Indicate they are taking responsibility for it

3) Know the measurements and reporting process for the expectations

4) A time line to resolve the item/task/problem they have taken responsibility for

5) Have a way to measure or evaluate their progress towards accountability

6) Have the opportunity for feedback throughout the process

7) Feel supported and know/have a process for mutual reconsideration or evaluation

8) Know when they have been successful

If you cannot get an employee to identify and take ownership the accountability is not in the cards. If you do not have a leadership who exhibits transparent accountability on a regular basis then it will be difficult to build a culture of accountability.

Is Accountability All or Nothing?

Conceptually it is easy to say that accountability is all or nothing, one is either responsible and acts with accountability or not. However, people are nuanced and perceptions vary. Even when people believe they are on the same page they may be differences of understanding. As a simple example – an expectation of arriving at work on time may be perceived differently. The supervisor may believe this means arriving early, getting situated and in work mode fully at the exact moment of time. Another person may believe that arriving on time – at say 8:30 means arriving at 8:30

and then putting away personal items, getting coffee, greeting co-workers and so on. And, in some organizations it does. Accountability still requires a little give and take while perceptions have the opportunity to better align.

In a healthy organization most employees want to see accountability and want be accountable but they do not always know what that looks like. If you are introducing this process introduce it over time by selecting a few important elements. One of the nice things about accountability as a behaviour is that once it begins it often flourishes when people understand the expectations and know that accountability will be supported throughout the organization.