

Expectations, Empowerment, And Accountability¹

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(January 29, 2010)



A popular management buzzword today is “accountability.” How do we get employees to be more accountable for what they do? This is a simple question with a not-so-simple answer.

Based on my years of experience working with a variety of both public and private organizations, I propose that the strength of an employee’s accountability is related to his or her answers to the following questions:

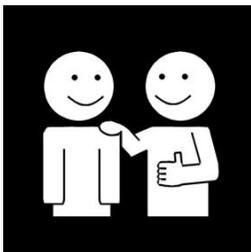
- ◆ How strongly do I feel that my job is important to the success of my organization?
- ◆ Do I both trust and feel trusted by my manager (or supervisor)?
- ◆ Do I know what is expected of me?
- ◆ Do I have reasonable authority to make decisions and take actions?

These four questions imply four strategies for promoting the accountability of people in any organization.

1. Emphasize The Importance Of Every Job

To begin with, people are more motivated and productive at work when they feel they are making an important contribution to the organization. I’ve been successful in increasing the feelings employees have about their job importance by using three techniques.

The first is what I call *operationalizing a mission statement*—in other words, converting the mission statement into specific employee commitments. This means, for each job, listing behaviors that will help support the mission statement and getting people to commit to those behaviors. Every job is important to the organizational mission.



The second technique is to *actively deliver positive feedback* to people for good work. A salesman applauded by his manager for the glowing feedback and new customer referrals he received from his last few sales will bask in a glow of success and feel the importance in what he is doing. A filing clerk who is admired by her manager for being “more organized than I could ever hope to be” will beam with pride and feel the importance of what she does. Unfortunately, all too often in our fast-paced business world, managers don’t take the time to praise someone for a job well done, even though they never hesitate to come down on people when they do something wrong.

The third technique for increasing the feelings employees have about their job importance is really getting to know them, to *acknowledge their uniqueness*, their individuality, the personal qualities they bring to work. That personal touch with your people will make a big difference in their morale and productivity. Employees want their managers and supervisors to pay attention to them as individual people. People want to be acknowledged for who they are.



¹ From: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie’s site: www.arniedahlke.com

2. Remove Barriers to Trust

Widespread excellent performance in an organization is based on a foundation of trusting relationships, especially employee relationships with managers and supervisors. Employees can have all of the best equipment, all of the latest technology, and all of the other resources they need. But, if they don't trust or feel trusted by their managers and supervisors, they will communicate defensively, cover mistakes, and not take chances. They will not perform at their best—they will not be very accountable.



Managers must promote trusting relationships. As a manager, keep communication channels open by keeping people informed and keeping your door open. Don't promise what you cannot deliver. Follow through on your commitments. If you don't know as much about your employees' jobs, acknowledge it to them—don't fake it—and then learn from them about their jobs.

3. Establish Expectations And Empower Through Mutual Agreement

At the heart of promoting accountability is setting expectations. However, spelling out a job description or dictating what managers expect of their employees doesn't go far enough. Instead, managers should involve each employee in a process of mutually defining and clarifying expectations.



Meet with employees individually. Help them see where they fit into the bigger organizational picture. *Together*, clarify their job descriptions and job goals. The more they participate in this process, the more they will take ownership of what they do. They will feel empowered. They then will concentrate on tasks that are more important to the overall company and spend less time on less important things.

4. Empower By Giving Employees Decision-Making Freedom

Accountability is reinforced when managers manage people by results, not job descriptions. Given mutually clear expectations of desired results, it means giving employees the freedom (within bounds) to figure out how to produce those results. To do this, managers must give them the autonomy to make decisions and take actions on their own.



This requires that the manager provide employees with all of the information needed for the employees to make appropriate decisions on a daily basis. For example: defining the latitude an employee has in making financial decisions or other decisions in response to customer requests.

Note that there is one potential pitfall to this strategy. If the employee makes a costly mistake and the manager is very critical and punitive about it, they may end up back at square one. A much more constructive alternative for the manager is to use mistakes as opportunities to learn. This promotes a learning environment in which every mistake is seen by the manager as a *coaching* opportunity, an opportunity to teach. When people are coached rather than dictated to, they will *learn to continuously learn*. This will ultimately drive them to perform at higher levels. They will end up becoming more self-motivated and self-directed.



Follow these four strategies and your employees will end up being more accountable.

