

Holding People Accountable

Holding people accountable can be one of the most terrifying tasks of management. In our society, we tend to take responsibility for the feelings of others. Since holding people accountable involves the potential of hurting feelings, we tend to shy away from it and procrastinate. There can be a lot of anger and frustration in this area. As managers, we tend to do what we have committed to do. When a team member shows little or no responsibility, it's frustrating:

I have witnessed many companies come close to destroying themselves by not holding their people accountable. In certain cases, their owners have known an employee was stealing from the company but were so afraid of confronting the employee that they let it go on for months. If an employee is hurting a company and its reputation, other team members' attitudes can take a nose-dive. Not holding an employee accountable can lead to a quick disintegration of your authority and respect in the eyes of your team members.

Here are a number of key points concerning holding people accountable:

1. Employees will assume that their behavior is correct unless it is corrected.
2. Holding people accountable is 90% communication and problem solving and 10% discipline.
3. You will never feel comfortable holding people accountable. There will always be a point of hesitation right before you hold someone accountable when a voice inside you says, "Maybe I really don't have to do this..." Your job as a leader is to forge ahead.

Our main fear in holding people accountable is that our interaction with the employee will be emotional. To get over this fear we must understand that there *has* to be emotion, or no change can take place.

Carl Jung – the great psychologist, addressed this issue. I found this statement so profound I have carried it in my wallet ever since. He said:

“Emotion is the moment when steel meets flint and a spark is struck forth, for emotion is the chief source of consciousness. There is no change from darkness to light or from inertia to movement without emotion. Consciousness can only exist through a continual recognition of unconsciousness just as everything that lives must pass through many deaths.”

What we fear in working with our people on areas that they need to improve is the emotion “when steel meets flint and a spark is struck forth.” Yet without emotion – this exchange of feelings (a spark) we cannot understand the problem and find a solution because “emotion is the chief source of consciousness.”

When someone is not performing correctly they are either unconscious of what they are supposed to be doing or they are choosing not to perform as required. It is either a training problem or an attitude problem. When we hold someone accountable we are simply bringing to the for-front the desired behavior and making it know that this is what is required. We are allowing them to become conscious of the requirements. They can now choose whether or not to comply.

To make this happen, there must be some form of emotion. Nothing will happen without it. As managers, we are the spark that raises this consciousness.

As you do this more and more, it will get somewhat less painful, yet the uncomfortableness you feel will never totally go away. There tends to not be any gain without some pain.

There is a statement that I find very true “Successful people do the things that failures dislike and refuse to do.” A manager cannot manage without holding people accountable. It is our role to master this skill.

The best way to hold someone accountable is state the problem behavior that’s occurring and then say “Tell me about it.” For example:

“Clara, I’ve noticed you have a number of papers on your desk that should have been completed and turned in two months ago. Tell me about it.”

“Bob, I was looking at your sales report and noticed you have not sold anything in the past three weeks. Tell me about it.”

“Pam, I have been noticing that you and Sara have been having harsh words. Tell me about it.”

After stating this, be quiet and listen. What you are doing is going right to the core. You are taking the problem behavior and putting it on the person’s shoulders *without saying they are to blame or it is all their fault*. You are simply stating what you have observed.

By saying “Tell me about it”, you are opening the door to all possibilities. In some cases, the person may be showing up to work late because his wife has cancer and is sick from radiation therapy but has not told anyone of her condition. By approaching the problem with no assumptions, you won’t look bad if they do have a legitimate concern or need some training.

In 90% of the cases just using the ‘tell me about it’ method will solve the behavior. You have brought it to a conscious level and there has been some emotion. The person now better knows what is required. You can now work towards solving the problem.

The thing, that is so interesting about holding people accountable, is that 99% of the time you and the employee feel better after holding a person accountable. This is even true if the person refused to do what you needed him or her to do. At least now you know where the person stands.

The Five Step Disciplinary Procedure.

Follow up.

Recognizing good behavior – catching people doing something right – reinforce new behavior changes.

Approach people within 48 hours of problem behavior.

Let’s role-play this process.

