

A Strategy for Rebuilding Accountability

Part 5 of a Five-Part Series

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A host of factors have conspired to deliver a reeling blow to personal accountability, leaving it notably weaker than it was not so long ago. And people are noticing. With increasing frequency, I'm drawn into conversations with people who believe that declining accountability is on track to become a national crisis. That led me to embark on this five-part series of podcasts on accountability.

I spent the first three programs in the series examining factors contributing to the decline. Then last week, in the fourth episode, I turned to what leaders can do to offset diminished accountability in the workplace. Now, more than ever, I said, leaders need to be stellar role models, exemplifying the kind of accountability which they want in their people. People rarely rise above the standard of accountability which they see in leadership.

Nor is it common for them to rise above what leaders expect of them. So today, in this fifth and final episode in the series, I'm providing a three-part strategy for communicating expectations in a way that elevates workplace motivation and the level of personal accountability. In fact, this strategy serves leaders well in any organization, whether it has accountability issues or not.

Master the three elements of this strategy, practice them diligently, and you are sure to upsize your leadership.

When organizations are beset with accountability issues, challenges for leadership multiply like rabbits. Production shortfalls are common. Throughput suffers routine setbacks. Team collaboration breaks down. Leaders question the competence of their people. Trust is in disarray.

Increasingly, my clients are grappling with accountability concerns in their organization. As a result, they regularly ask me questions like these: What can I realistically expect of my people? What can I do to increase their motivation? Why are they so reluctant to shoulder responsibility?

While I'm always happy to offer these clients counsel, I can't offer them a panacea. Which means that I can't promise you one either. The causation behind the accountability crisis is too complex for simple answers to suffice.

But one thing we can do. As leaders, we can resolve ourselves to stand our ground against further erosion of workplace accountability. We can fight back by vowing to bring out the very best in our people. At the same time, we can patiently work to deepen accountability in small increments. What I propose momentarily serves both of these purposes.

To bring out the best in people, we need to capitalize on every motivational technique at our disposal – especially communication techniques. The first thing we need to communicate is what accountability looks like in action. We accomplish this by thoroughly embodying accountability ourselves, so that our people can model their own accountability on our example. We delved into that topic at length in last week's program.

Yet, people do not imitate a role model simply because it's stellar. They emulate it because it exemplifies something which they value. Values are the impetus, the energizing force behind motivation.

Therefore, people will imitate our model of accountability only to the extent that they see value in being more accountable. What I'm suggesting today is a series of techniques – three altogether – to collectively generate that desire. These techniques are powerful motivational tools for any leader to use, even if their organization has no accountability issues. But for leaders whose goal is to build broader and deeper accountability, the three techniques are golden.

Be forewarned, however. I'm not offering a quick-fix solution. The approach I'm suggesting aims at building accountability incrementally, over an extended period of time. Here's my rationale for what I recommend.

From what I've observed, when people become highly motivated to accomplish something, they almost instinctively hold themselves accountable for achieving it. My strategy is thus to intensify a worker's level of motivation until this natural process kicks in. I'm not speaking of motivation in general, but motivation to fulfill certain assigned duties or responsibilities. My goal is for workers to get a taste of accountability in one assignment, then another, and then another, until accountability becomes an embedded habit. It's this repetitious cycle which makes the strategy long-term.

And what if the strategy fails and they never come to value accountability? The process was still valuable. As a minimum, it elevated their level of motivation, perhaps significantly.

The first of the three techniques is to state expectations in specifics. To a certain extent, "expectation" is a synonym for "desired outcome," and it's generally appropriate to think of it that way. But things other than outcomes may be included in an expectation. For example, a manager's expectation might include particular methods to employ, what timetables to honor, what resources to tap, etc.

Every expectation has two facets. One is the outcome which we want. The other is the criteria by which we will evaluate the outcome.

When we lay out expectations, we should avoid generalities or needless abstract terms. State both the outcome and the criteria in concrete terms. That leaves less room for confusion or disagreement later on. And provide enough detail to give those being tasked a distinct mental image of what they are to achieve. And they should have equal clarity on how success will be measured. Or as a friend of mine often puts it, "What will done-right look like?"

Perhaps my most frustrating professional experience came from working for a man who violated both of these principles. He would assign me a complex task, but with only a vague description of his desired outcome. And he never touched on what done-right should look like. Nor was there any point in pressing him for specifics. They simply were not forthcoming.

Out of my sense of duty, I would pour my heart and soul into generating what I thought he wanted, only to have my effort thoroughly rejected. Naturally, I would ask, "What needs to be done differently? How do I need to modify this to meet your expectations?" His typical response was, "I don't know. But this isn't it."

To the degree that we levy expectations, but without providing adequate specifics, we play his game. We squelch motivation. And we discourage a sense of accountability. In these circumstances, if we try to hold people accountable for inadequate outcomes, the effort is sure to backfire. They will dismiss our feedback. "I could have done it far better," they will say to themselves, "if he had been more specific in advance about exactly what he wanted."

Not only should we be specific in how we state our expectations, we need to verify that we did not fail to include something vital. Don't wrap up the conversation without asking, "Have I covered all the specifics you need?" Notice that I didn't word this question as, "Is everything clear?" Or, "Do you understand what I'm asking you to do?" Questions like those most frequently draw the response, "I think so" or "I believe so." Neither answer confirms that the one being tasked feels informed enough to do exactly what you've requested. And most likely, little serious reflection went into either reply.

But if you ask, "Have I covered all the specifics you need?", the wording forces at least a modicum of thought before offering a response. It therefore provides assurance that you have indeed spelled out the specifics of your expectation adequately.

The second technique for effective motivational communication is to explain WHY the expectation is important. Leaders have a natural knack for laying out WHAT they want done and WHEN it needs to be accomplished. They may even spell out certain considerations as to HOW it is to be pursued.

Quite commonly, however, they say little or nothing about the WHY behind the expectation. This is a costly oversight. In terms of motivation, WHY is the most important question to answer when levying an expectation. When there is no apparent WHY behind what we're tasked to do, we soon see it as pointless make-work. And make-work promotes neither motivation, initiative, nor accountability.

But there's a far more compelling reason for folding expectations inside a WHY. You see, we humans are by nature meaning-making creatures. We need things to make sense. It's one of our most primal, instinctive pursuits.

And it gains expression early in life. Toddlers drive their parents crazy by incessantly asking, "Why? Why? Why?" They are already looking for deeper meaning in what they experience. (Of course, payback is coming for these toddlers. One day they will have children of their own who will repay them in kind.)

When children start pressing to know "Why?", it's not because the question has suddenly popped to mind. The WHY behind things has puzzled them for some time. Now, at long last, they finally have the facility of language to put their question to the world.

And they will never outgrow this urgent need to know “Why?” As adults, when something makes no sense to us, we feel driven to find some explanation for it, some meaning behind it. Moreover, we will find that meaning, even if we have to fabricate it.

Another name for fabricating explanations is speculation. Speculation does not rest on fact. It merely expresses what we believe *must* be true. And have you ever noticed that speculation usually tends toward unfavorable or adverse meanings? It’s notorious for imputing sinister motives and unkind intentions to people. Or putting unflattering interpretations on someone’s behavior. Or stirring up misgivings about others.

That’s why you will never hear anyone say, “You know, the executive team has been meeting behind closed doors all morning every day this week. I bet something really good is about to happen around here!”

It’s always in a leader’s interest to keep speculation to a minimum, especially on things which impact morale and motivation. The surest way to disarm speculation is to give people as little as possible to speculate about. Always convey the WHY behind new procedures, modified standards, or revised production routines. And be especially diligent to explain the WHY when levying expectations. Couching expectations within their WHY defuses unfruitful speculation.

Moreover, “because I said so” is not an adequate WHY. The WHY should show the connection between what is expected and the higher goals, ideals, and aspirations of the organization.

No one ever grasped this concept more fully than Walt Disney. He justified a staggering price tag to construct Disneyland on the basis of building “the happiest place on Earth.” He repeated that slogan until it was etched in the public mind as a synonym for Disneyland, so that today, nearly 70 years later, it’s still the company motto.

As the park began rising from the ground, the overarching WHY behind every critical decision was this: “We’re creating the happiest place on Earth.” For example, Disney’s project engineers wanted to develop the outer ring of the park first, then move inward. This would be the least expensive way to sequence the construction. Disney vetoed the idea. He chose to start in the center with Cinderella’s Castle. Cinderella’s Castle, towering high over the park and visible from anywhere in it.

In Disney’s mind, the Castle symbolized what he was building, a unique experience where fairy tales came to life, making it the happiest place on Earth. As construction workers walked to their jobs every morning, he wanted them to see the Castle and be reminded of the WHY behind what they would do that day. They were building a place unlike any other on the planet.

Disney made no apology for demanding that every detail in the park be just exactly right. And he wrapped his zeal for details within a definitive WHY. If Disneyland was to be the happiest place on Earth, nothing should be amiss.

And once the park opened, he continued to draw on the motivational power of his magical WHY. Even the most menial jobs in the park – sweeping streets, emptying trash containers, cleaning restrooms – took on a larger meaning. Such tasks were essential to preserve the unspoiled appearance of the happiest place on Earth.

You can see how creatively Disney connected his expectations to the higher ideals and aspirations behind his dream. As leaders, we should be no less zealous about always keeping

the WHY before our people. And this principle is especially urgent whenever we assign them-demanding responsibilities, change a long-standing policy, reallocate funds, or restructure the organization. Always lay out the WHY.

The third technique is to commend behavior within a framework defined by two things: the specific expectations which you laid out and the WHY which you provided. Just as you should not task in generalities, neither should you praise in generalities. You rob your commendation of motivational clout if you settle for saying, "You really did a good job."

Instead, refer back to the specific expectations which you articulated at the outset or which have been articulated in corporate policies, guidelines, and governing documents. Cite the specific behavior or performance which the individual demonstrated which exemplified the essence of the expectation. The general rule of thumb is that you get more of what you praise. Let the person know precisely what he or she did to merit commendation. Praise specifics. Praise for specifics is motivational, even inspirational.

But don't restrict your praise only to specific expectations which you levied. Also look for opportunities to praise the individual for showing initiative over and beyond those expectations. After all, you want to encourage initiative, since initiative is a form of accepting responsibility and accountability.

As in the wording of expectations, your commendations need to be specific. Instead of saying, "Let me tell you how much I appreciate your attitude on this project," relate precisely what you have seen or heard which demonstrates that attitude. You might say something like, "I really appreciate how you maintained a can-do outlook when this project ran into unexpected setbacks. Your attitude spilled over onto others and helped us meet our deadlines."

Take special note of this last sentence. It points to a highly desirable consequence of the commended behavior: "Your attitude spilled over onto others and helped us meet our deadlines." This statement can be thought of as a covert WHY. I say "covert," because it does not grammatically look like a WHY statement. Yet, it underscores why the person's behavior is commendable. Always seize on opportunities to use covert WHY's because they are just as motivational as conventional WHY's.

In praising efforts over and beyond expectations, call special attention to actions which demonstrate accountability. Refer to them explicitly as examples of accountability. Especially in today's world, don't assume that people have a clear notion about what constitutes accountability. Help them flesh out their understanding by highlighting concrete examples of accountability in their performance. Your phrasing might be, "Let me compliment you for showing such accountability last week when you voluntarily picked up the slack when so many team members were out sick."

And to make your commendation even more motivational, tie it to a WHY which gives it special meaning. The most inspirational leader I ever worked with was the late Dr. Norvel Young, chancellor of Pepperdine University when I worked there. Periodically, as I headed to my car at day's end, he would call to me from across the parking lot and ask me to come over. Not uncommonly, he wanted to commend me for something that I had done.

Two things amazed me about his commendations. For one, he often praised me for things which I had done so inconspicuously that I had no idea how he was even aware of them. I

eventually discovered that he was proactively ferreting out what people were doing, solely for the purpose of commending them.

The second amazing thing is how he couched his commendations. His words were always to the effect of, “I want to compliment you on what a good job you did of . . .” and he would describe a specific action or activity. Then he would add, “That’s the sort of thing we need to do more and more if we are to . . .” and he would quote a line from the school’s mission statement or its vision or its strategic plan. He always tied commendations to the ultimate concerns of the University. He never let you forget the overarching WHY which made your actions commendable.

Like Norvel intercepting me on the parking lot, it’s usually fairly simple to have commendation conversations in the course of routine daily activities. In my judgment, informal commendation conversations like this are preferable to scheduling a meeting for that purpose, because they feel more spontaneous, more genuine.

To the degree its feasible, keep adverse comments or criticism out of commendation conversations. Remember, you want to maximize the potential for your commendations to build motivation. Intermixing commendation with criticism diminishes the positive weight of the commendation. In fact, experts on motivation would probably tell you that the criticism completely wipes out the benefit of the commendation.

Save criticism for accountability sessions, which you should rigorously maintain. This is not to say that accountability sessions should necessarily have a negative tone. I’m simply arguing that accountability conversations are a better occasion for corrective comments.

To summarize, our objective in using these three techniques is to maximize the motivation to excel in a specific sphere of responsibility. The goal is to keep cycling through these techniques, stoking motivation time and again. The aim is to maintain this process until enthusiasm for that responsibility fires off a sense of ownership and accountability.

Well, there’s so much more that I could say –and needs to be said – about these three techniques. But I’m already flirting with running too long. I’ve focused on these three techniques because they are easy to understand, simple to implement, and not taxing to maintain. And they can be used in any organization of any size or structure.

As you practice these techniques in concert, I believe you will eventually see the sense of accountability growing in your organization. I also believe that over time, by consistently and routinely praising acts of accountability, such acts will become habitual for those you praise. And as these habits take root, a greater sense of personal accountability will start to bloom.

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