Accountability is NOT a Dirty Word
What happened to accountability?

Do you remember when it happened? Can you pinpoint the moment when accountability changed from an expectation to a dirty word? While it may never have been common place, it certainly seems like we have less personal accountability within our organizations today than ever before. Finger-pointing, “blame games’” and entitlement are eroding performance even as you read these words. And too many of us are standing by idly, observing the drama as if it were a train wreck happening in slow motion.

Drama and chaos aren’t a necessary part of work. These destructive elements sneak in the cracks left in our culture by the absence of accountability. Leaders don’t hold employees accountable. Employees aren’t holding their leaders accountable. Instead, we blame the economy or changing demographics or even the weather for our challenges and failures.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Restoring sanity and unleashing productivity in your organization is not only possible, but it’s within your reach. Learning to cultivate personal accountability in yourself and others is a powerful means of transforming your organization and its results.
Drama vs. Accountability

Instead of drama, imagine a workforce where employees . . .

- are willing to answer for their own outcomes without assigning fault, blame or guilt.
- seek to change themselves and their contribution to a situation instead of focusing on what others need to do.
- take responsibility for their own development.
- don’t let the first barrier stop them, or the second or third.
- are self-motivated.
- are not easily influenced by the negative attitudes of others.
- quickly turn failures into lessons learned.
- are open to feedback and development experiences without ego or defense.
- strive for excellence rather than perfection.

How would your company results change if you eliminated all of the drama?
Where has all of the Accountability gone?

Personal accountability is the individual mindset that results occur because of one’s own actions, not in spite of them. People who are personally accountable see themselves as the do-ers of the world, not the “done to.” They know that their results are the product of their own actions. They are so proactive that, even when things go wrong for them, they refuse to see themselves as victims. They engage fully and willingly in whatever they do. Accountable people believe that they create their own destiny. Personal accountability is the gap between those who create opportunity and those who feel entitled to it.

Perhaps it’s easier to recognize the absence of personal accountability—just look for drama and entitlement. These employees are hard to miss because they are consuming much of our time as managers and they keep our Human Resources departments in business. They gossip, they waste time, they complain. And if you are actually managing them, they resent you. They rarely deliver expected results. When they do, they expect you to throw them a party. Despite consistently under-performing and creating chaos around them, they raise a ruckus and attempt to emotionally blackmail you each year into giving them a better than average performance rating and merit increase.

Lack of personal accountability equals management headaches. And that’s just the beginning of the drag it puts on your organization. While your best, most accountable employees are working their tails off to build and grow your company, you are probably spending your days dealing with the headaches generated by employees that shouldn’t even work for you anymore. It’s insane.

The first step to improving the situation and enhancing performance in your team is to realize that you are part of the problem. The second step is to get back to the basics of managing with and for accountability.

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Finding Sanity through Accountability

As individuals and leaders, the path to creating healthier, more productive cultures within our organizations is paved with accountability. Accountability turns talent and potential into productivity and value. We need to replace the “flavor of the day” management philosophy with a return to the basics. Personal accountability is where performance starts.

Not only have we turned accountability into a dirty word, we’ve minimized its very definition. When most of us think of accountability, we imagine those times when we have to take responsibility for some kind of failure of lack of performance. We describe accountability as a person who will stand up, after the excrement has hit the fan and say “That’s on me. I accept full responsibility for this mess.” That’s a part of accountability, but it’s not nearly enough.

True personal accountability is so much bigger than just taking a bullet when things go wrong. A mindset of personal accountability is made up of four factors:

1. commitment
2. resilience
3. ownership
4. continuous learning.

It is the combination of these four factors that manifests in people who are actively driving their organizations, and their lives, forward.
While we most often recognize accountability when performance happens (or doesn’t), accountable behavior starts long before that. Accountability begins with a commitment to do whatever it takes to get results. This commitment occurs before an individual starts on a task, or project, or journey. Those who are committed don’t spend a lot of time on a plan B because they are mentally “all in” to achieve success. Because they believe that they are totally responsible for their own results, they assume that they will be able to adapt and overcome anything that might get in their way.

Commitment drives preparation and focus. Committed employees are “leaning into their work” as if to use the weight of their determination to propel them forward. Committed individuals say “yes” frequently, they join-up and support new directions readily. They don’t resist change and they know that suffering is optional. Commitment means willingly buying in to their work and their situation without any bargaining or emotional blackmail with their manager. Commitment is where accountability starts.
Things happen. Plans change. Obstacles get in the way. That’s life. An accountable person has the resilience to bounce back, no matter what happens around them. Just like the now famous saying for the Weeble toys of years gone by, “Weeble’s wobble, but they won’t fall down.” The resilient individual can survive any blow. A setback might cause a little wobbling, but it won’t stop a resilient individual from bouncing right back and staying the course.

Resilient people are great problem solvers. They conserve the energy that most put into drama and complaining when things don’t go as planned and instead use their energy to refocus on finding a different way to impact results. Resilience keeps people future-focused, asking “what can I do to help?” and “how can I add value” instead of unproductive questions like “why is this happening to me?” Resilience is the fuel that powers accountability.
The word accountability when broken down is a literal word that means “the ability to account for” results, outcomes, impacts, etc. The ownership factor of accountability is the piece we all understand the best: do we own up, fully and unconditionally, to the role we played in the results we achieved? Ownership, simply put, means willingly accepting the positive or negative consequences of our actions.

Individuals who own it don’t take ownership to stop the conversation or end the discussion. They are willing to go deep into exploring specifics to truly understand their role in the outcomes. They take the time to account for how they got to where they are so that they can respond differently in the future. There is a huge “I” in team when strong individual ownership is present: “I chose, I assumed, I denied.” People high in ownership can account for their actions in simple, powerful terms without the dramatics of stories about how “they didn’t see it coming” or got stuck holding the bag. Ownership is the foundation of accountability.
The fourth factor of a personal accountability mindset is the one most often overlooked. We have all worked with the individual who takes responsibility for mistakes or failures when they happen, but who seems to make the same mistakes over and over again. Ownership without continuous learning can lead to a cycle of poor performance. Individuals who are high in continuous learning not only own their results, but as they account for their role in the results, they extract lessons and new “rules of thumb” to follow in the future. This empowers them to either repeat their great results or prevent similar mistakes in the future.

People who excel in continuous learning make specific plans with specific instructions after fully processing their experiences. Strong continuous learners are so clear on their part in achieving the outcome that they can whole-heartedly commit to vastly different results in the future. They are that confident that they can leverage their learning to create better results. This completes the circle of accountability. Continuous learners can not only commit to what is being asked of them by the organization in the future, they can commit with confidence because they have the benefit of what was learned from past experience to fuel their future success.
Can you learn Accountability?

Any time the topic of human development is discussed, the “nature versus nurture” argument begins. It’s no different when we talk about personal accountability. Some argue that accountability is something you learn as a child from your parents, teachers and environment. Others will argue that it is learned through self-reflection and experience throughout our lives. Both are correct.

Accountability can be learned, but it is not easy to develop. Cultivating an accountable mindset takes time and intentional effort. It requires a relentless focus on self-development and a reality-based mentor who doesn’t let you off the hook when it comes to accounting for results. Like all talents or abilities, some people are more naturally predisposed towards personal accountability thanks to their inherent personality traits or behavioral styles. Others have an advantage based on their upbringing. When developing accountability, each person starts from a different place.

The bad news is that while developing an accountable mindset is possible, changing a person who has a firmly developed victim mindset or who has succumbed to entitlement thinking is nearly impossible. Just as a personally accountable mindset takes years of effort to fully create, so too does the destructive victim mindset.

Rather than trying to change individuals who suffer from a victim mindset, it’s better to make these employees someone else’s problem. Instead of giving too much thought to this group of employees, invest all of your precious time and resources in supporting, encouraging, engaging and developing those who are and have the potential to be highly accountable. If done correctly, your victims will catch on soon enough that they either need to sign up or sign out of the organization.
Creating the Culture

How to Develop Personal Accountability in Others

Developing accountability in others requires focused and diligent action on the part of a leader. To develop accountable employees requires accountable leaders. Here are the most powerful ways that personal accountability is developed:

- Challenge
- Experienced Accountability
- Feedback
- Self-Reflection
What it is

Experiencing projects, assignments and tasks that have a significant risk of failure and that call upon an individual to stretch out of their comfort zone enhances learning and development of new and less developed competencies. This process forces the individual to quickly find what worked and what didn’t, then to adapt and move forward.

How it’s done

- Delegate tasks and projects with an eye towards development. Don’t protect people from their reality, large workloads or highly urgent tasks. Stop working to change or perfect people’s circumstances and work instead to bulletproof them—making them capable of succeeding in any circumstance.

- Force a bit of discomfort and resist the urge to rescue. If you are losing sleep over one of your people and they are not, transfer and share the stress with the individual. It is probably time to impose some risk, up the ante, and test them under pressure. Introduce a bit of baptism through fire and stop trying to engage people by ensuring they are comfortable. As a leader, help people get comfortable with being uncomfortable so that they keep producing results regardless of their circumstances.
What it is

Being held accountable consistently by people and systems forms the mindset of internal accountability. Over a period of time, the concept that one’s results are a product of our own actions is reinforced and solidified as a belief.

How it’s done

- Don’t use hope as a strategy and don’t accept hope as a strategy. Ask people directly for their commitment. “Can I count on you to make it happen?” Force people to verbalize their commitment and set an expectation up front of “no excuses, no matter what.”

- Process each individual’s work with them to account for their results. Drive hard to penetrate excuses and stories to find the things that the employee could do differently in the future to produce better results.
What it is

Regular developmental and performance feedback from a credible source helps the individual to understand and internalize how their specific behaviors and choices are contributing to their results. The feedback must be rigorous, consistent and ongoing to be effective.

How it’s done

- Give feedback as a matter of course. Great feedback has two parts: here is what you are doing that is helping and here is what you are doing that is hindering. Give feedback without varnish or softening while still being humane and respectful. The goal of feedback is development, not demoralization.

- Powerful feedback comes from leaders who have done and are doing their own work. Accountable feedback comes from accountable leaders. There is no room for collusion in feedback and coaching.
What it is

Engaging in regular self-reflection and introspection about one’s progress is essential. The focus of self-reflection is to account for one’s role in the results of his or her life and extract the lessons that will empower a different response in the future. Effective methods of self-reflection include meditation and journaling.

How it’s done

- After giving short and consistent feedback, leave employees with time to reflect. Give the employee specific questions to reflect upon like: What could you have done differently to change the results? What choices did you make in the process that were helpful? What choices were harmful?

- After allowing for reflection, ask the employee more questions. Prompt them to produce their learnings and to present a plan for moving forward differently. Ask them to verbalize a commitment to their plan and hold them to it.
As leaders, we are all feeling the pressure to deliver results faster, better and cheaper than in the past. We can’t afford wasted energy, lost talent, and the drama that has become all too common within our organizations.

This paper has attempted to lay out the one thing that we know for sure in this crazy, changing world of business: the level of accountability in your organization today will dictate the level of your results in the future. Today’s accountability is tomorrow’s results. It is really that straight forward. You can pretend that you don’t notice that you are lacking accountability in your workplace. If you do, you can expect mediocre, high cost results in the future.

Or, you acknowledge the lack of accountability in your organization today and take ownership for it. And then you can decide to change the game. Accountability is the key to transforming all of that wonderful talent within your organization into the tangible business results you so desperately need. It’s never too late to start building a culture of accountability within your organization. But, it can’t start without you. Do it now.
A Little About Us

Bulletproof Talent is a management and HR solutions company that helps motivated leaders drive results through accountability and Reality-Based Leadership™.

Our Reality-Check™ employee engagement survey is where accountability and engagement connect. Our approach is changing how organizations measure and manage engagement by allowing leaders to focus their efforts on their best and most valuable employees to really drive organizational results. We can help you restore some sanity to your workplace.