

ACCOUNT-ABILITY

TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR EFFECTIVE & SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP

ACCOUNTABILITY IS... THE KEYSTONE OF PERFORMANCE.

Rather than approaching accountability as a means to establish punishment for ill-willed, underperforming employees, leading well recognizes that accountability is the necessary tool for maintaining trust, demonstrating respect, and equipping employees to succeed.

True accountability exists when leaders own the process of expectation-setting, providing feedback, and fulfilling their commitments. It is reflected in these five principles:

- > The **best results** happen when true accountability exists.
- > Accountability begins with **expectations**.
- > Expectations are the foundation for **performance management**.
- > Performance management depends on **measurement**.
- > Measurement is the currency of **accountability**.

AND WHY IT HELPS YOU LEAD WELL

Accountability is not what a leader does at the end of an assignment. This is what the traditional “hold people accountable” attitude gets wrong. No, accountability—accountable leadership—means you play an active role throughout the execution of any job task or responsibility. Moreover, it is a process with distinct moments to address what happens before, during, and after job performance. These are moments that you own, and this means you are constantly engaged in your team’s work. Leading well with accountability looks like this:

BEFORE: Setting clear, actionable, measurable expectations.

DURING: Observing, providing feedback, supporting, and redirecting as needed.

AFTER: Recognizing accomplishments, addressing problems, and completing the process so the cycle can begin again.

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5 LESSONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY UPSTREAM.

#1 Accountability is built before performance begins.

Accountability begins when leaders make the work visible and doable.

The most important change in your practice that you can make is to move accountability “upstream.” When you view accountability as the structure that helps people succeed in the first place, you take the time to establish it before work ever begins. This also means that you abandon the narrow view that accountability is merely the conversation after someone fails to meet expectations.

Create the conditions for accountability upfront with:

- Clear expectations, every time.
- Aligned priorities that you confirm regularly.
- Shared understanding based on frequent, consistent communication.
- Visible, active follow-through that does not depend on prompting.

When you do this, the central question shifts from **Did the employee perform?** to **Did I create clarity?**

CREATE ALIGNMENT BEFORE ACTION.

#2 Accountability depends on alignment, not agreement.

Accountability isn't about making people get in line. It needs you to build alignment.

Accountability does not require that everyone on your team holds the same opinions, preferences, or perspectives. It does mean that you are responsible for creating enough shared understanding that people can move forward together.

Employees need to know from you:

- What precisely **success** looks like.
- What **commitments** they—and you—are making.
- How their **choices** will connect to outcomes.
- Where they have **autonomy** and where they have **responsibility** for compliance or procedure.

Alignment supports accountability because people understand what they are choosing and why it matters. This also preserves agency. People remain responsible for their own choices, actions, communication, and follow-through.

How does this attitude toward accountability differ from what you've encountered before?

MAKE EXPECTATIONS CLEAR.

#3 Clear expectations are the foundation of accountability.

Ambiguous language creates ambiguous results.

Expectations are the practical mechanism that turns accountability from a philosophy into a leadership behavior.

Strong expectations answer:

- **WHAT** results are needed.
- **WHY** the work matters.
- **WHO** is involved and how the work happens.
- **WHEN** action and results are expected.

Clear expectations allow employees to act with more confidence, autonomy, and efficiency.

Leaders often experience frustration because they believe they have delegated responsibility when they have actually only managed to create confusion. You can correct this by being as specific and precise as possible. Remember: specificity when it comes to expectations is not micromanagement; it is support.

SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RESULTS.

#4 Accountability is a shared relationship, not something leaders “hold.”

When treated as a relationship, accountability becomes a way of supporting performance.

Accountability is not something leaders do to employees. It is something they build with employees.

The **leader** contributes:

- Clarity
- Context
- Communication
- Consistency

The **employee** contributes:

- Execution
- Ownership
- Participation
- Communication when clarity is missing

Healthy accountability requires both sides to be engaged. When treated as a method of enforcement, accountability only breeds fear. And fear is not a sustainable leadership tool.

What expectations do you have for your team that might need more clarity or specificity? How confident are you that your employees understand their contributions?

PRACTICE ACCOUNTABILITY AS CARE.

#5 Accountability requires care and courage.

Accountability is care and support in action.

This is where accountability connects most clearly to the ideas of leading well and human leadership.

Yes, avoiding the work of setting expectations, providing feedback, or delivering consequences may feel kinder in the moment. The problem is, avoidance creates confusion, unfairness, and even resentment. Consistent accountability is an act of support because it gives people the information they need to succeed.

Leaders demonstrate care when they:

- Define success clearly.
- Stay engaged in the work.
- Provide feedback along the way.
- Address gaps honestly and kindly.
- Deliver appropriate consequences.

Accountability is, in fact, a direct result of human leadership.

Identify at one opportunity in the next week to practice the full process of accountability.

ACCOUNT- ABILITY IS CLARITY MADE OPERATIONAL.

It is the shared responsibility created when leaders make expectations, responsibilities, purpose, and timelines clear enough that their employees can act independently and with confidence, be able to communicate efficiently, and produce results together.

3 SIMPLE PRACTICES

Consider implementing these to improve your skills and increase your comfort level with accountability.

#1 Make expectations observable.

Communicate work so specifically that another person can picture success. Train yourself to avoid vague language.

#2 Replace assumptions with check-ins.

Verify understanding throughout the accountability process. Ask questions like this one: "How will you approach this assignment?"

#3 Refresh expectations whenever circumstances change.

Accountability is not a one-and-done endeavor. Make it a habit to revisit what is expected when changes occur.