

## Building Personal Accountability in Your Work Team

The conclusion of a two-part article  
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In the last issue of Solutions, we explored the positive results that can be achieved for the team when managers and supervisors adopt a mind-set of personal accountability.

Of course, being personally accountable for the success of the team doesn't just rest with the team leader. Personal accountability is something that every team member must shoulder. Defining what this means for each team member is often a critical part of the supervisor's job.

As this article suggests, implementing the concept of personal accountability in the work team can have the following results:

1. When employees are held accountable, they cannot just go through the motions and mark time doing the wrong things.
2. The leader's willingness to promote personal accountability helps to create a positive focus in which great things can be achieved.

Supervisors and managers who recognize what this can mean for the organization and the professional development of each employee can make their team's transition to personal accountability a little easier by keeping the following points in mind:

### Clearly define job expectations and performance standards

Dave Anderson, author of *Up Your Business: 7 Steps to Fix Build or Stretch Your Organization* (August 2003), believes that "ambiguity is the enemy of accountability." Consequently, job expectations must be clear and easy to measure. Anderson contends that most employees will try exceptionally hard to hit the target if they know exactly what the target looks like. However, if the target hasn't really been identified, all the employee can do is guess and hope for the best. As Anderson puts it, "when you create a vague performance standard like, 'we expect you to work hard,' you can guarantee cloudy and sometimes convenient interpretations."

By establishing specific standards for accountability you are setting a benchmark for

performance and taking the guesswork out of what is, or isn't acceptable. Here's an example of how this can work:

A supervisor tells an employee that it is his responsibility to make sure a particular task sent to another section is returned by the seventeenth of the month.

The seventeenth comes and goes – but no sign of the task, or update from the employee. On the eighteenth, the supervisor checks with the employee, who says, "I told them weeks ago that we had to have it back by now."

The first impulse of the supervisor could be to become angry at the other section for not completing their work on time. However, the supervisor also realizes that the employee's assignment to ensure the task was returned by the deadline is just as important. Consequently, the

supervisor says, "I'm sure you did tell them. But didn't we also agree that it was your responsibility to make sure the task was completed on time? Did you follow-up with the other section to remind them of the importance of the deadline, or let me know that there would be an obvious delay in the completion of the task?"

That is a different message from the one the employee may have expected to hear, which was, "O.K., you've done all you could."

The supervisor's response makes it clear to the employee that when he or she is asked to do something, or have something done, the employee will be held accountable for the successful completion of the job, no matter who else is involved. Of course, it is possible that even if the employee had diligently followed-up with the other section the work still may not have been completed on time. However, the supervisor's response still reinforces the employee's understanding of what it *really* means to say "I did all I could."

### Use bifocal lenses for each job assignment

Many people need bifocal glasses. They can take some getting use to, but the results can be extraordinary. Bifocals allow you to look through one half of the lenses to clearly see things that are

far away and the other half to clearly see things closer to you. Many people who use bifocal glasses claim that they can see better than they have in years. In a manner of speaking, supervisors need to provide bifocals for their employees too.

If employees are to be personally accountable for specific assignments, they need to (1) see how their work fits into the sometimes-distant “big picture” of the organization; and (2) understand the consequences of not completing the smaller day-to-day details of their assignments correctly and on time.

### **Provide the right tools for the job**

In this day of downsizing and budget constraints, it has become common practice to expect more of everyone. However, if you are going to expect more from employees, you must also be willing to give them more. As Anderson explains, “If all your team has ever done is ‘run around the block’ and now you’re going to ask them to run a marathon, you’re obliged to do your part to get them ready.”

Anderson believes that “for the employee who wants to do a good job and knows what needs to be done, it’s extremely frustrating to be deprived of the tools, training and support needed to execute.”

Consequently, if you want to encourage accountability in your employees and keep them focused on consistent results, you must be willing to supply the resources and support they need to complete their specific tasks and assignments. This includes proper equipment, training, personal coaching and frequent and direct feedback to reinforce good performance and correct undesirable performance.

### **Don’t micromanage**

After you have clearly defined responsibilities, expected outcomes and consequences, established timelines, ensured the employee has the right tool for the job and discussed with the employee how and when feedback will occur, it is time to let the employee get to work. If you and the employee have worked together from the start to secure all these things, there is really no reason to look over the employee’s shoulder now. You have effectively enabled the employee to be personally accountable for their work decisions and their results. Let the employee do it.

Personal accountability isn’t easy to develop and maintain; it takes time, commitment and patience. However, once it exists among each team member, the strength of the team does indeed become the sum of the parts. Your willingness to encourage the acceptance and growth of personal accountability for every team member can, as Anderson puts it, “move your employees out of the gray performance area and into the realm of absolutes.”

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#### Resources

Anderson, Dave. (August, 2003). *Up Your Business: 7 Steps to Fix Build or Stretch Your Organization*, Wiley Publishing.

Pollock, Ted. (October, 1974). *Managing Others Creatively*, E.P. Dutton Publishing.