MID-IOWA BUSINESS

The basics of accountability

We've been hearing a lot of calls for accountability over the past couple of years, connected with everything from the use of federal stimulus funds to local school board budgets. While some demands are no doubt political grandstanding, it's undeniable that accountability must exist in any healthy organization where people depend on each other.

Accountability (or the lack thereof) is therefore a key ingredient defining the culture of your organization. In fact, perhaps only unethical practices by some of an organization's members undermines its morale faster and more surely than the absence of accountability.

Healthy accountability prompts middle performers to strive to be high performers and encourages low performers to either shape up or ship out. Poor accountability, on the other hand, results in middle performers catching the contagious habits of low performers and high performers headed elsewhere, where their efforts will be appreciated and they won't have to carry the entire load on their backs.

Which so much riding on accountability, it's important to get it right.

The first thing to realize is that people come to your organization with all different levels of personal accountability. Although not as easy to measure as height, verbal skills or other personal differences, I'm guessing you're able to confidently discern between your employees with high personal accountability and those with low personal accountability. The former will go to almost any extreme to meet their commitments, while the latter are either masters of excuses or just don't seem to care.

RICK BRIMEYER

It's therefore important to customize assignment agreements to align with the employee's level of personal accountability. With an employee with extremely high personal accountability, more flexibility should be provided in terms of the project's scope, methods and feedback mechanisms. If the employee has demonstrated a tendency to disappoint, a more direct and structured agreement with frequent report-ins makes sense. A signed agreement is also a good idea if the employee has demonstrated low personal accountability in the past.

The agreement is critical, because it serves as the foundation for accountability. As I look back on the accountability discussions that caused me the most stomach-churning, a common lingering question existed: Did the employee understand as clearly as I did the expectations which they had failed to meet?

A solid agreement makes the follow-up conversation relatively simple, but not necessarily easy. The leader should repeat the agreement that was not satisfied and sum up his or her feelings in one carefully selected word.

"Jim, we agreed that you would complete the sales forecast by Tuesday. It's Thursday afternoon, and I still haven't seen it. I'm frustrated!"

That's it. Saying anything else can and will be used against you. It's now time to simply be quiet, observe, and listen carefully to what Jim has to say about the situation. At this point, we're simply trying to determine whether or not Jim owns the problem. The answer will determine our course of action.

If Jim owns the problem or provides new and legitimate information, a second (and final) chance may be warranted. If so, restructure the agreement assuming less personal accountability than the original agreement. Make sure the consequences are clear.

If Jim doesn't own the problem, it's time to deliver the appropriate consequences. Regardless of how well we establish agreements and follow-up, ultimately there must be impact if there is to be accountability.

The good news is that, properly addressed, the number of tough conversations will be relatively small, because accountability will become part of your culture. On the other hand, ignoring shortcomings will not only limit performance, it will create an environment of entitlement and apathy, which can ultimately paralyze your organization.

Rick Brimeyer *is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development. Further information is available at www.brimeyer-llc.com or by calling (515) 450-8855.*