



Accountability starts at the top

By Sam Reese,
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Accountability — that quality of personal responsibility and ownership — can be difficult to establish and easy to lose.

It's also more elusive than you might think in today's business world. A Harvard Business Review survey shows almost [50 percent of managers are terrible at accountability](#). That's not surprising, because accountability isn't something you can do halfway. No executive or business can be "sort of accountable." It requires a commitment from the top and adoption throughout the organization.

The term "accountability" often carries the negative connotation of the person who is to blame when something goes wrong. I see it differently: It's the ability of a person to provide focus on an initiative, make the necessary decisions and garner support from their organization to achieve success.

Accountability must be built into a corporate culture. It's in the operating rhythm of how high-performing companies work. Everyone must trust that their colleagues will complete projects and to a high degree of quality for everyone to be successful.

Let's look at some ways to make accountability part of your business world:

- 1. Be reliable and consistent.** Do what you say you're going to do and expect the same of others. The path to accountability is through consistency, predictability and follow-up. As leaders, we need to be accountable in terms of providing interim guidance throughout the project and not just at the end.
- 2. Communicate your expectations clearly.** Don't assume someone can fill in the gaps. For people to succeed, they need to know what the successful completion of a project looks like. This includes key metrics, dates, costs, etc. Give team members the opportunity to ask questions to get a full understanding before starting their projects. It's then that they can take full ownership.
- 3. Empower employees.** Once everyone understands the expected results, they should be empowered to get the job done. They should have adequate resources and structure to allow them to succeed. They shouldn't have to circumvent process or continuously fight upstream as a means to achieve successful outcomes.
- 4. Foster collaboration and mutual accountability.** Ensure everyone knows what major initiatives are on each other's plates. It's amazing how effective a business can be when people talk to each other and hold each other accountable.
- 5. Create a learning environment.** It would be nice if everyone completed everything right on the first attempt. That's just not realistic. Rather than overreact when someone drops the ball, try to create an environment where people learn from mistakes. Likewise, take responsibility for your own decisions, good or bad, to model the behavior.

In the end, accountability can't feel forced. It must be authentic, consistent and organic. It's not something that you can just mandate and it happens. While holding others accountable, you as a leader have to be accountable as well. Accountability comes when a workplace operates as a high-functioning team, where colleagues understand their expectations and help and depend on each other. In these environments, you can see constant progress taking place in a positive, predictable way that your followers can get behind (e.g., get healthy, be happier, become more productive, travel more, live better).



About Sam Reese

Sam Reese is CEO of Vistage Worldwide. Prior, Reese served as CEO and board member for the Miller Heiman business consulting organization. He has held senior positions at Corporate Express, Kinko's Inc. and British Telecom.

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