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ACCOUNTABILITY
E S S E N T I A L S

By J.B. Hunt

"Accountability should be the strongest thread that runs through the complex fabric of any organization. It is the single biggest issue confronting organizations today, particularly those engaged in enterprise-wide change efforts."

~ CEOs Roger Connors and Tom Smith, Change the Culture, Change the Game:
The Breakthrough Strategy for Energizing Your Organization and Creating Accountability for Results

REDEFINING ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability refers to your answerability, blameworthiness and liability. Leaders must acknowledge and assume responsibility for their actions, products, decisions and policies, including administration, governance and implementation. They're obligated to report, explain and be answerable for any and all consequences.

In governance, accountability's definition has expanded beyond "being called to account for one's actions." Proper accounting practices must be in place. Without them, accountability is effectively absent.

Business leaders must also insist on accountability at all levels of the workplace hierarchy. Employees should be expected to operate within a culture of personal responsibility and be held accountable to their peers, teams and the organization.

TRANSPARENCY AND ENGAGEMENT

Ask any manager about 'accountability,' and he or she will tell you that it's a great thing to have. Ask them how to get it, however, and the long answers begin.

Before you decide that accountability is "nothing new" and that you already have systems in place, take this opportunity to determine whether they work or have ceased to be effective. Recent research can guide you on what works—and what doesn't. Are you, perhaps, too slow to adapt or irrationally clinging to outmoded approaches?

In 21st-century business, the public vocally demands rigorous attention to moral and ethical accountability, and leaders' actions must be more transparent. Accountability starts at the top, with an executive team that fully commits to worthy goals and objectives. With transparency, you engage your workforce to implement, support and be accountable for corporate actions.

Employee accountability is required for engagement, and vice versa. The highest motivator is intrinsic: tapping into people's strengths and interests, while allowing a certain degree of autonomy. Rewards needn't always be monetary; often, simple recognition stimulates engagement. Most people work better when they know someone cares and is interested in them, so never underestimate the power of a good conversation and active listening.

Motivate employees to be accountable by learning what they value most. Revisit this issue at least once a year to determine whether what worked in the past works now.

3 LEVELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Three levels of responsibility and accountability come into play each day: personal, interpersonal and organizational.

Leadership consultants John Blakey and Ian Day offer the following pyramid in *Challenging Coaching: Going Beyond Traditional Coaching to Face the FACTS*

LEVEL 1 accountability focuses on personal actions, learning and engagement. How do you hold yourself accountable? Which values, ambitions and goals drive you toward action?

In **LEVEL 2** accountability, more than one person is involved: a partnership, coaching or managerial relationship, business unit or team. Participants set common goals and agree to complete them together through shared responsibility, work and accountability.

LEVEL 3 accountability includes stakeholders within a wider system: the business organization, department or division, other staff, customers, suppliers, shareholders and the public at large.

3 Levels of Accountability

Accountability measures may include written and unwritten mission statements, ethical standards and cultural norms.

Level 3 is where responsibility and accountability often break down, with a lack of clarity or blurred lines of reportability. Responsibility may be passed around and neglected within the wider system.

As for Level 2, some managerial and coaching relationships overemphasize personal behaviors without sufficiently linking them to the big picture and business results. Personal accountability (Level 1) must work in concert with Level 2 for sustainable success. Leaders require skill at all three levels to steer their corporate ships.

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

If you overlook the misbehavior of the few, you will lose the respect of the many. And if you avoid the truth about poor performance in order to keep your employees from being hurt, you end up hurting them even more.

True accountability cannot exist without feedback and rewards—areas in which most organizations have weaknesses.
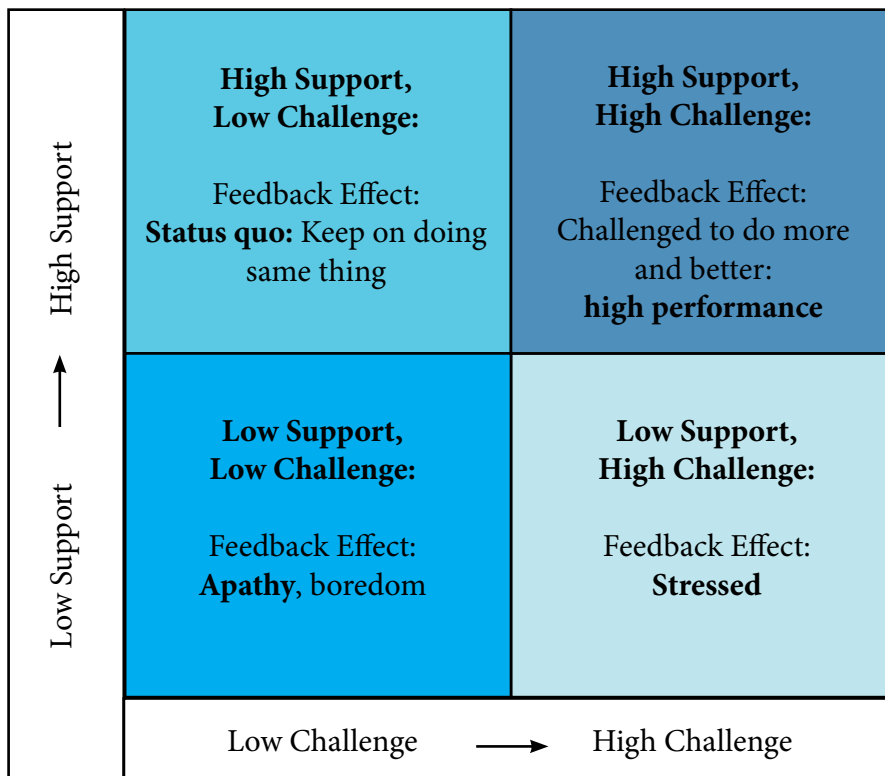
Unfortunately, most managers dread providing feedback, which seems to have such a negative connotation in our society. No matter how many negative comments are offset with positive ones, recipients always seem to obsess over perceived slights. This tendency is actually physiological: Our brains are wired to be biased toward negativity—a phenomenon that can undermine trust and rapport.

Needless to say, if your feedback is strictly positive, there's no way for you to provide constructive input. On the other end of the feedback continuum, overly critical feedback will discourage employees' efforts. Leaders need to strike the right balance.

THE FEEDBACK SUPPORT/CHALLENGE MATRIX

Here's a more helpful way to view the feedback continuum:

	Low Challenge → High Challenge
High Support	**High Support, Low Challenge:** Feedback Effect: **Status quo:** Keep on doing same thing	**High Support, High Challenge:** Feedback Effect: Challenged to do more and better: **high performance**
Low Support	**Low Support, Low Challenge:** Feedback Effect: **Apathy**, boredom	**Low Support, High Challenge:** Feedback Effect: **Stressed**

When you deliver feedback, you can offer high or low levels of support and challenge, with relatively predictable results.

If you, for example, provide supportive, yet unchallenging, feedback, your employee has no reason to change. Without any challenges, the employee may become complacent, bored or disengaged.

Conversely, if you give employees a challenge, but provide low support, they will probably perceive a stressful command-and-control environment. Why should they give their best without supervisory support or positive reinforcement?

HIGH-SUPPORT/ HIGH-CHALLENGE FEEDBACK

Most feedback falls into two quadrants of the matrix:

1. There's too much support, without enough challenge (enforcing the status quo).
2. Overly critical feedback creates too much stress (low support/high challenge).

The most effective managers, leaders and coaches provide high-support/high-challenge feedback, which increases employee awareness while pushing for enhanced performance.

"Feedback should have 'bite,' create insight, deliver a new perspective and cause a step change," write Challenging Coaching authors Blakey and Day. When feedback is highly supportive and challenging, employees experience recognition and are encouraged to improve.

You can say, for example: "Your recent report was stellar. You covered all the basics and backed them up with research. Here's an idea to consider: How can this report be better? I'd like to see you come up with one or two ways to make it airtight. How would you do that?"

The high-support/high-challenge quadrant is contingent upon a secure relationship. The higher the trust level, the greater the potential impact of challenging feedback.

Successful feedback interventions require several key elements:

- They are honest, yet nonjudgmental.
- They risk taking the conversation into uncharted areas of discussion.
- They challenge without being confrontational.
- They often arise intuitively, inspiring creative input from both parties.
- They are risky, yet motivated by genuine curiosity and a desire to evoke stretch goals.

"Feedback should have 'bite,' create insight, deliver a new perspective and cause a step change"

There is obviously a lot of room for improvisation. Skilled managers take the time to deliver feedback that inspires great work. Unfortunately, many managers soften the message in an effort to preserve rapport and trust.

TEAM ACCOUNTABILITY AND FEEDBACK

Most management systems are so focused on individual performance that they undermine the very teamwork they hope to encourage. As a team manager, you can support desired behaviors by ensuring that everyone understands and agrees on what success looks like. Bring team members together to discuss goals and metrics. Have them answer this question: "What would it take for us to give ourselves an 'A'?"

Once the team knows and understands its mission and how work will be evaluated, be sure to check in regularly. Pose questions that help the group assess its progress: How are we performing as a team? What obstacles can we remove?

Harvard Business Review Contributing Editor Amy Gallo offers worthwhile suggestions in *"How to Reward Your Stellar Team"* (August 1, 2013, blog post):

DO:
•Agree on what success looks like.
•Bring the group together to discuss progress against goals and how to improve.
•Consider doing a formal team evaluation.

DON'T:
•Think of money as the only reward. (People appreciate numerous types of nonmonetary perks.)
•Focus on individual performance. (Instead, emphasize the team's accomplishments.)
•Reward your team with something they don't collectively value.

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ACCOUNTABILITY ESSENTIALS

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