



Truths about safety accountability: From elusive to cultural

When you hear or see the word “accountability,” what comes to mind? To many, they imagine an authority figure banging their fist on a table, yelling, “We didn’t get the results we wanted. Who are we going to hold accountable?” If this is the experience of being held accountable, no wonder the term has a negative connotation and becomes elusive within an organization.

Accountability can be both reactive and proactive. The consequences of being accountable or not can also be positive — desirable behaviors or results — and negative — undesirable results or behaviors — depending on how it is received. Accountability can also focus on results and be proactive, focusing on behaviors or performance.

Results accountability: We accomplished the objectives, and the goal was met. The leader shakes the employee’s hand and says, “Because you did this, we are celebrating this win. Great job!” Positive-results accountability. Con-

versely, “Because this didn’t happen, we didn’t meet our goal. What happened?” A better approach than banging a fist on a table. Negative-results accountability.

Proactive accountability: “We are halfway through the month, and I’ve noticed you are doing precisely what we agreed to. I’m confident we will hit the target at the end of the month.” Positive, proactive accountability. Conversely, “We are halfway through the month, and I noticed your commitments to help us reach our target are not being met. What can I do to help you be successful

here?” Negative proactive accountability. The focus here is on behaviors.

To better understand accountability, let’s first face some important truths. Truth number one: Real accountability is performance-related, not just results based. Truth number two: Humans do a much better job aligning others with results expectations than behavioral expectations. Truth number three: All disappointment is based on a set level of expectations. Truth number four: Humans are hardwired to manage by exception, looking for what is out of place, not the norm, or incongruent with expectations. Truth number five: Positive reinforcement is largely absent in conversations about behavior and results in many workplaces.

If you want a culture of accountability, there must be effective and confident answers to four important questions:

1. What do you want the person to do, and what are the desired outcomes? There needs to be clear ex-

pectations for both behaviors and results.
2. How do you communicate expectations to the individual? How do you get it out of your head and into theirs, and verify the message was received and understood?
3. What happens if they meet behavioral expectations, and what happens if the objectives are met or desired results received?
4. What happens if they do not meet behavioral expectations, the objectives are not met or the desired results are not received?

Accountability in safety doesn’t have to be a dirty word or a burden to implement. If done correctly, accountability can be a tool to achieve excellence in the workplace and in overall safety results.

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