



Accountability: A Dirty Word in Safety

Is management ultimately responsible for safety, or is it the responsibility of the individuals performing the work? When an injury occurs, does the employee blame the employer or does the employer blame the employee? Blame should not be a part of the equation, but it often is.

Baseball legend and philosopher Yogi Berra once highlighted the madness of blaming others when he quipped, "I never blame myself when I'm not hitting. I just blame the bat and if it keeps up, I change bats. After all, if I know it isn't my fault that I'm not hitting, how can I get mad at myself?" Work environment, processes, organizational systems, tools, and behaviors all combine to produce unique outcomes. So who is accountable for all of this?

Like safety, there are proactive and reactive sides to accountability. True accountability is ensuring you and others do what is necessary to accomplish certain results, before checking to see whether the results are received or not. This means you are just as responsible for your own safety as those responsible for the environment you work within; and accountability needs to evolve to focus on safety performance, not safety results.

To highlight this needed change, while advising many executives during the past couple of years among some of the best safety-performing companies, we often asked, "Are the expectations clear in safety?" Most respond with a resounding, "Of course!" then proceeded to clarify by outlining the expected results (i.e., zero injuries, no hurts, etc.).

Following these responses, a subsequent question is presented: "If the results expectations are clear, what percent of your direct reports know precisely what performance is necessary to achieve and repeat the desirable results? And if goals were reached, how many could articulate exactly why?" Answers that followed were far less confident than those to the preceding question.

Leaders must develop and master accountability to drive excellence in safety performance and culture. A methodological approach must exist to ensure, proactively and reactively, that individuals are held accountable for the vital performance necessary to succeed.

Develop Safety Roles, Responsibilities and Results™

The first step of this methodology is to collaboratively outline the top three to five Roles, Responsibilities and Results (RRRs) expected of someone in safety. Collaboration is important for ownership; let this be their discovery, not yours. This typically begins with involvement of the different levels to outline what excellence would look like in the observed performance of individuals of the many major levels in an organization.

Develop Proactive Safety Excellence Reinforcement System™

Wishing and asking for results are not effective approaches to safety, and annual performance reviews are a waste of time and resources if your feedback frequency is only once a year. There must be a strategy to hold someone accountable for key responsibilities. A balance of consequences for desirable and undesirable performance must be included. This balance of consequence has a role in both the aforementioned proactive and reactive sides of accountability. How will you hold them accountable, when, and where? What is your plan? Who will carry it out, both proactively and reactively?

Obtain Commitment from Individuals

While it is important to first develop your accountability reinforcement system, consider not deploying it until you obtain individual, private commitment to focus on the necessary RRRs. Generally, these discussions happen best between a leader and an individual direct report. Holding employees or supervisors accountable first without them witnessing their boss participating will perpetuate the blame perception. Most organizations rightfully begin this exercise by starting at the top and working down through one-on-one meetings to document the individual commitment necessary to begin the accountability discussions.

Communicate Expectations to Population (of levels, not individuals)

To help increase the effectiveness of your approach, positive peer and group pressure can be leveraged to strengthen the sense of self-accountability. While we rarely communicate individual roles and responsibilities to a group, we do encourage the communication of what others should experience (Results) if the individual is being the type of leader (Roles) we need him or her to be. One of the mechanisms to determine improvement is the feedback of those who should be experiencing the performance (Responsibilities) that was agreed upon. Are they having more, less, or the same types of experiences when working with these individuals?

Enable What Is Expected

Identifying what someone needs to do to contribute to desirable results will have an impact only if the individual has the willingness and capabilities. If a key responsibility is the individual's leading more participative safety meetings or talks, can he? Does he have necessary speaking platform skills? Does he know where to get topics or how to develop materials? If you expect your leaders to become better performance coaches, rather than limited compliance cops, can they demonstrate competency in coaching for performance?

Execute Customized Accountability and Reinforcement Plan™

While there is more detail to this approach, in practice this methodology has been surprisingly simple to deploy with leaders eager to find breakthrough performance opportunities. The biggest challenge will be staying the course once an improvement in performance is recognized.

In safety, we learn the more proactive our efforts, the less we need to rely on reacting perfectly to events. There is no difference in accountability. The more we develop, coach, and focus on performance, the less attention you need to place on reacting to negative results. This shouldn't be surprising; this is just good leadership. **OKS**

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