



# Accountability: Positive and proactive or negative and reactive?

During a recent client workshop to self-assess the current state of safety culture, a participant with a frown and a nervous look on his face cautiously stated, "Accountability is a bad word around here ..." This is a concern that is expressed far too often when the element of proactive accountability is discussed within The Chemistry of Safety Culture Excellence Maturity Model™.

Safety should be defined by what we individually or collectively *do* to create a risk-free outcome rather than the outcome or goals themselves. Moreover, being safe should be defined as risk-free, rather than the lack of incidents or injuries. If we desire people to think and behave safely, it is imperative organizations outline precisely what being safe means and what needs to happen to create this desirable risk-free outcome.

Leadership must provide a clear understanding of what people need to do to create desirable results and maintain a positive influence system to ensure these "things" are being routinely accomplished. This is accountability. However,

many well-intending organizations manage accountability incorrectly. When negative results are obtained, there is often a negative reaction that occurs, resulting in the prompted question, "Who needs to be held accountable?" If this is how the average employee experiences accountability, it will become a feared term and will be looked at as something you do to another person, not something you feel responsible for.

Individuals can try to hold others accountable for results, which often leads to either lucky performance or manipulation to achieve the numbers or goals. High-performing organizations recognize the necessity to positively and proactively hold people accountable for performance, but even the best struggle with how to do this successfully.

I divide accountability into two very clear categories to help recognize the difference: proactive and reactive. Proactive is determined by what we are doing pre-results. Reactive is defined by what happens after the results. Within both of these, proactive and reactive, there needs

to be a balance of consequences to give weight to the sense of accountability, reinforcing the positive and addressing the negative.

When results are obtained, it is important individuals identify what performance contributed to the results, desirable or undesirable, to develop a sense of confidence in their ability to replicate the outcomes. Albeit reinforcing the positive is positive, this approach is reactive, and positive reinforcement is typically missing in many safety cultures and programs.

I define proactive accountability as making sure people are behaving in alignment with specific performance expectations, recognizing individuals' performance when they are, and positively adjusting them when they aren't, prior to checking the results.

In "Foundation Design: Principles and Practices," author Donald P. Coduto wisely wrote, "The most important thing is to keep the most important thing the most important thing." True accountability, proactive or reactive, is doing just that: ensuring others are keeping the most important

thing, the most important thing.

If excellence is defined by what individuals need to do to continuously improve and affect the results, observation and feedback are possible. If obstacles or barriers to desirable performance (physical, organizational or psychological) can be identified and neutralized before negative results are recognized, the performance can be facilitated. Once this becomes the driving change and improvement methodology, the organization is, in fact, coaching for performance. Coaching is focused on helping people practice more effectively so they will obtain better results. Accountability is no different.

*Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety. As an international consultant, professional keynote speaker and seminar leader, he has helped hundreds of organizations achieve and sustain excellence in performance and culture. Galloway is also the host of the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series, Safety Culture Excellence®.*

**For more information, contact Galloway at (800) 395-1347 or email [info@ProActSafety.com](mailto:info@ProActSafety.com).** ●

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