

// Coaching For Accountability!

One of the major frustrations with leaders and managers the world over is listening to the latest explanation for why something has not been accomplished or why promises have not been kept. Far too many of us simply accept this without effectively challenging them for a variety of reasons. So how do we change people's behaviors, improve their attitudes, and/or increase their motivation? Our ability to effect sustainable change in an organization is strongly correlated with our ability to influence people and hold them accountable for implementing the new process and changes. When we begin to see a pattern in one or more team members not-meeting timelines or goals, we need to proactively address this sooner rather than later.

Our first step is to differentiate the legitimate from the chronic. There are, on occasion, very legitimate reasons for why they were unable to meet the expectation. However, we've all been in what I call "Groundhog Day Meetings" (with attribution to Bill Murray and the movie). This is where the same people give variations of the same reasons week after week for why something they are responsible for simply is not getting closed. It's costly on a professional level and disappointing on a personal level. Plus, it wastes everybody's time in the meeting!

If there is indeed a chronic pattern, then our next step is to evaluate the individuals' workload and/or responsibilities. Are they tasked into saturation? Are they capable of performing the task itself? Are they new to the assignment? Are there similar trends or patterns in other areas of their performance? Are there any outside influences or personal reasons for their lack of performance? You have to go through these checks to make certain that there is truly a performance problem so that you don't "hammer" somebody with a legitimate issue that is interfering with their ability to get their tasks completed.

So...we now know there is really is a problem and they are not living up to our expectations. We've had the talk, plus the follow up talk, and they still have nothing but excuses! For far too many people, the first response is to explain (often at high decibel levels) that they "Better Comply". This conversation can take many forms but it is really the same conversation. And it is routinely non-effective. Threats are very short-term and do not solve the root cause of the performance issue. We need to dig deeper. Now is the time to establish the fact that you consider them part of an "A Team", (or that you are developing an "A Team") and that carries with it high standards and high expectations. This type of team demands each member meet and exceed commitments made. A lot of people talk about "A Team's" but what does that mean... *REALLY?*

I use the following definitions for an "A Team" to ensure each member knows precisely what is expected of him or her:

- **Focus**

The hallmark of an "A Team" is a clear focus on specific goals and objectives and understanding what the team is doing at all times. The fastest way to fail is to try to be everything to everybody. By learning how to establish clear, unambiguous goals and objectives, you can increase your ability to achieve your milestones and significantly improve your chances of success.

- **Accountability**

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A major aspect of an “A Team” is developing the understanding that objectives must be achieved and actions completed when promised! A key lesson is that people will live up to your expectations... they also will live down to your expectations as well. So set the bar high. Strongly emphasize the positive aspects of success but also establish that failure to meet these expectations will have negative consequences for the individual and the organization. Raising the level of understanding and “buy-in” to this concept is critical in order for any team to truly perform to its highest potential.

- **Discipline**

The leader must develop within the individual/team the expectation that they will be asked to work harder, change faster, learn different approaches, and be persistent. A great example is an Olympic athlete. While we may run for fun or for our health, we accept many excuses for why we skip a day. An Olympic athlete maintains the discipline to train no matter the weather, no matter the situation, or no matter that doing something else would be more fun. They have the discipline to be committed to their decision to be the best-of-the-best. That is also the hallmark of an “A Team”: the discipline to meet goals and objectives without excuse or delay.

- **A Precise Understanding of What Constitutes Success**

A major failure mode for most organizations is having a poor (or even no) definition of what constitutes success. Almost anything can be submitted to meet a goal or objective and be called successful if there are no clear definitions of what constitutes acceptable success. Trust me, your team members know immediately when this happens! Few things are more frustrating than working extremely hard and not knowing whether you actually succeeded. Making the effort to clearly define success before one even begins is critical in order to know how you are doing, whether you are ahead or behind schedule, and what is required to achieve your goal. It is often very difficult to get a clear definition of a successful outcome. However, failure to achieve this in the beginning guarantees a mediocre outcome that may or may not be acceptable to the organization or its customers.

Another failure mode for managers is to allow the individual to spend time explaining why something will not work. To increase accountability, do not allow them to discuss anything other than what they are going to do to make it work! Focus on the positive and always insist on making progress at every step. Even when we have to take steps backwards, you should have a plan to overcome the obstacles and communicate that to your team. Never forget! Their attitude and their actions soon become a mirror of those above them. Aristotle said it best...“We are what we repeatedly do!” Model the behavior you want from your team, hold yourself to the highest standards of accountability, and watch their behavior begin to model your own over time!

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