

What Does It Mean to be a Person Who is Accountable?

By Richard Randall, President, New Level Advisors, LLC

I've been involved recently in a number of discussions revolving around accountability. I've seen many managers and management teams chronically fail to carry out commitments or achieve promised results, yet be convinced they work in a culture of high accountability. How is that possible? What does it mean to be a person who is accountable?



First, it is important to understand that being accountable comes from within, not without. Yes, people can be held accountable and they can be disciplined or terminated, but that is not the same thing as *being* accountable. I don't want a team that needs to be threatened in order to keep its promises. I want people who are intrinsically accountable, who understand what a commitment is and who will not rest until their commitments are fulfilled.

People who are accountable make commitments and they stretch. I've lost track of the number of managers who have told me about employees who can't or won't make commitments. When they are asked how long it will take to do a job that is within their area of expertise they either can't or won't give an answer. Equally troubling are people, who will never stretch when giving a commitment, but instead pad schedules and sandbag. Those are not signs of accountability.

People who are accountable understand that when they agree to get something done by a certain date they are making a promise. Usually it is a promise to their boss, coworkers or a customer. These people don't say, "Hopefully, I'll get it done," or "I'll give it my best shot." They don't lay the groundwork for failure and excuses in the very moment when they are making the promise.

People who are accountable have a plan. When they are asked to commit to something or to give a date when they can complete an assignment, they think it through. They have a pretty good idea of how they might get the job done before they commit. If they think the allotted time is too short, or don't know how to do the job, they say so and give a rational explanation. They don't quickly and thoughtlessly throw out dates, miss them, and then rationalize that it is acceptable because, "I didn't know what it was going to take."

People who are accountable raise a red flag as soon as they see that their commitment is at risk. They care about keeping the promise and they know that the sooner they communicate a problem the more time the boss or their coworkers have to help keep the commitment or to adjust to a new promise date. They don't give their boss, coworkers or customers ugly

surprises. When the first time you learn a promise won't be kept is on or after the day it is due, you are not dealing with accountability.

People who are accountable propose ways to recover when a plan goes off track. They don't sit back and wait for someone else to tell them what to do. Their ideas for countermeasures may not always be the best, but they always propose something.

People who are accountable don't point fingers at coworkers or other departments when a commitment is missed. If coworkers or other department heads don't support keeping an important commitment, people who are accountable take the immediate initiative to schedule joint meetings with them and the highest level of management necessary to cut through the resistance, get people moving and get the job done.

People who are accountable don't whine to their boss or coworkers about how hard they have to work to keep their promises and they don't make excuses. They know how hard they are going to have to work when they make the promise and they accept the task. They don't make excuses and try to duck their accountability because their accountability is intrinsic – there is no escape.

People who are accountable don't need a boss to expedite them, or monitor them in order to ensure a commitment is kept. They are their own taskmasters and their own expeditors. They don't want to let anyone down, they don't want to break a promise and they will do what it takes to make sure that doesn't happen.

People who are accountable don't need to be lavished with praise and celebrations when they keep a promise. They expect to keep their promises. They want to be thanked and they want to be paid more than their non-accountable peers, as well they should be. Sadly, that isn't always the case.

That is what it means to me to be a person who is accountable. An individual like that will run rings around his or her less accountable coworkers. A team like that will move Heaven and Earth and then seek a bigger challenge.