Mind the Gap

The Essential Guide to Workplace Accountability

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The Call of Accountability

You had your career mapped out. You had plans for all the great things you would learn, say, and do to achieve your goals, until something got in the way—**OTHER PEOPLE!**

As it turns out, working effectively with others is one of the most critical components of individual success. So, what happens when others don't communicate clearly, keep their commitments, and pull their weight? It impacts the organization, and it impacts **YOU**.

But when you try to address these problems, they often get worse. People ignore you, argue, gossip. And when you don't address them, well, they persist.
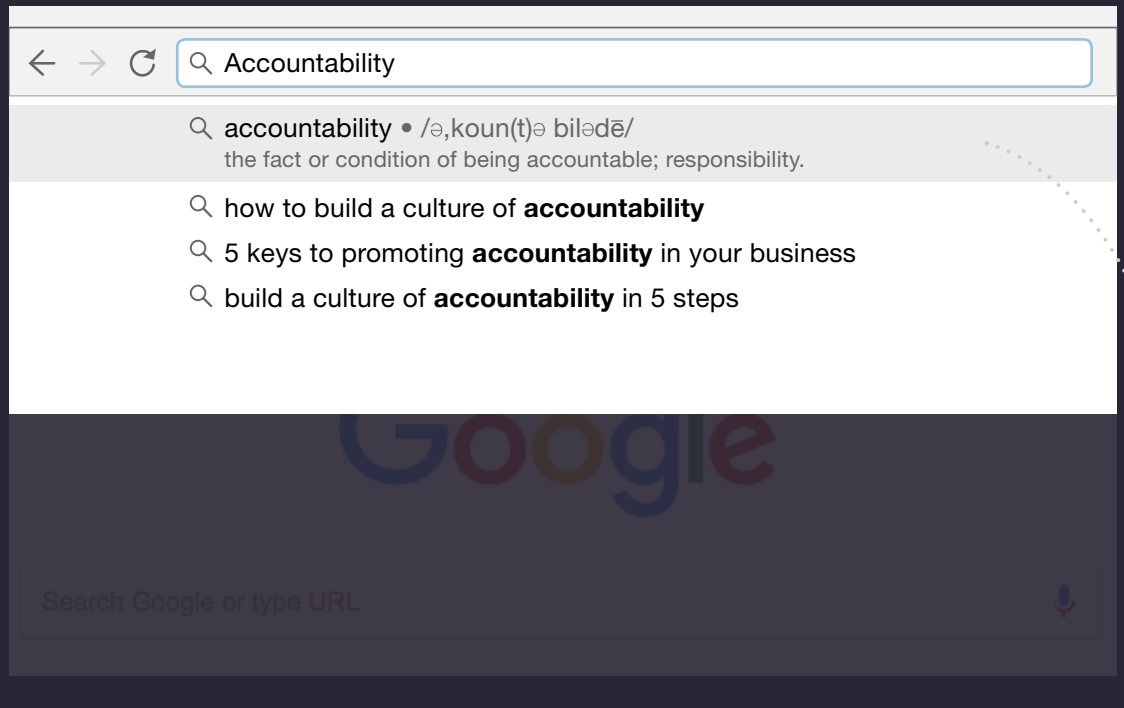
So how exactly do you address behavioral and performance problems with peers, direct reports, *and* leaders without driving a wedge into the relationship, without risking a project or even your career? How do you hold others accountable? Answer this question and you'll better make the contributions you know you're capable of, *and* help others do the same.

Accountability is hot.

Scour the Web and you'll find innumerable articles that speak of cultural accountability—what it looks like, how important it is, and how to hire accountable people. "How to Build a Culture of Accountability," "5 Keys to Promoting Accountability in Your Business," and "Build a Culture of Accountability in 5 Steps" represent just a fleck of headlines on the matter.

But there are a couple of problems. First, when an idea becomes popular, it tends to produce only a smattering of comprehension. Said another way, when nearly everyone is peripherally aware of an idea, the illusion of knowledge abounds. And when people have the illusion of knowledge, they've little drive to acquire real knowledge.

Our recent survey—which we'll expound below—demonstrates that *un*accountability persists in the workplace, despite the spotlight accountability has enjoyed for 50 years on the stage of organizational culture. Thus, while *all* organizations value accountability, expressing as much in handbooks and mission statements, achieving an accountability culture remains, for most, a fantasy. **An awareness of concepts does not behavior change.**

Q Accountability

Q accountability • /ə,koun(t)ə bilədē/
the fact or condition of being accountable; responsibility.

Q how to build a culture of **accountability**

Q 5 keys to promoting **accountability** in your business

Q build a culture of **accountability** in 5 steps

Google

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Accountability: An obligation for which one can be held to account for one's results and one's actions by a specified other.

200%

Accountability

Most family breakups, team disasters, and organizational failures are the natural result of chronic problems people have either failed to confront or confronted poorly.

"To be accountable means that we are willing to be responsible to another person for our behavior and it implies a level of submission to another's opinions and viewpoints."

—Wayde Goodall

Interdependent **Accountability**

Second, much of the material related to the topic focuses on unilateral accountability. That is, writers and experts instruct managers on how to hold direct reports accountable, or they educate entry-level workers in matters of personal responsibility. Each approach assumes and reinforces the primacy of hierarchy, where accountability flows from the top down, and responsibility is embraced in order to move up. While both practices are good, they miss the mark.

To create a culture with *true* accountability, where innovation, engagement, and adaptability prevail, there must be 200 percent accountability. This means individuals must hold themselves accountable to cultural norms, expectations, and promises, but also hold others accountable, *regardless of rank or position*. This is true whether that culture be within a family home, a football team, a Fortune 500 company, or a federal agency. And here's the kicker: **individuals best hold others accountable when others actively hold them to account.** The behaviors are interdependent. What's needed, in short, is a cross-lateral standard. We're talking about parallel, transverse, oblique, kitty-corner and crisscross accountability.

| parallel | transverse | oblique | kitty-corner | crisscross |
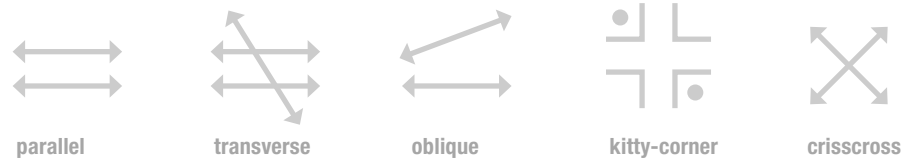
Sounds amazing, right?
Everyone calling each other out.

It's precisely this "calling others out" perspective that prevents individuals and organizations from realizing the benefits of widespread accountability. The phrase connotes unpleasantries, to say the least. And given our cultural conditioning—"don't rock the boat," "pick your battles," or "if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"—it's understandable why few are skilled at speaking up.

» **What's needed is a new perspective and useful skills. We assert that this guide provides both.**

In what follows, we'll highlight why people often cower from speaking up, and we'll outline three skills you can implement immediately for increased confidence and tact in holding difficult accountability discussions.

But it doesn't end there. We'll also invite you to take further action. This is, after all, only a guide. And to prevent this little guide from becoming another blip in the din, another notion in the corporate periphery, we'll encourage you to *do* more. **We're confident that as you do, you'll experience dramatic personal, relational, and organizational transformations.**

The Value of Accountability

"The health of any relationship, team, or organization can be measured by the lag time between identifying and discussing problems," declared Joseph Grenny, leading social scientist for business performance and coauthor of *Crucial Accountability.* A bold claim.

When we determined to identify the skills that set apart the world's top performers, we found that in most situations they behaved like anyone else. It wasn't until conflicts, disagreements, and problems arose that their distinguished skillset became apparent. Top performers shined when faced with conflict—allowing us to distill the behaviors they exhibited in crucial moments. Now, after more than ten thousand hours of observation and thirty years of research, we can confidently say: **at the heart of nearly every personal or organizational problem is a conversation that either went poorly or didn't happen at all.**

To realize the truthfulness and impact of this statement, simply pause and reflect. Consider the mountains and molehills in your personal or professional life, whether behind or before you, and trace them to their core. How many of those problems might've been (or could yet be) alleviated or resolved had you the confidence to speak up to the right person effectively?

The health of your relationships and teams, then, does not rest on each member's ability to be kind, honest, and hardworking. Intelligence and talent are not the secret ingredients. Though these behaviors and traits contribute to success, **it is the willingness and ability to effectively address problems and challenges that separate healthy and unhealthy relationships, vital and dull organizations.** Time and time again, we've seen that as people improve in speaking up, cost, quality, safety, engagement, and productivity also improve.

In short, when a disappointment, broken promise, violated expectation or bad behavior stands between you and some result you're trying to achieve, it's time to speak up, to hold someone accountable. How well you do so—and how *quickly* you do so—spells the difference between peace and turmoil, profit and loss, success and failure.

The solution is simple: learn to effectively confront broken promises, violated expectations, and bad behavior and you'll rapidly improve results and relationships.

Bridging the Gap

Accountability conversations center on addressing a behavioral gap: the gap between expectation and performance, between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Each of us has at one time or another been treated poorly or disappointed by others, and perhaps nowhere does this occur so frequently than in the workplace. In a recent poll, ninety-three percent of workers reported working with at least one difficult person—a person not meeting behavioral or performance standards—whose behavior went unaddressed. Why did the bad behavior go unaddressed? **In a word, fear.**

We fear bad results. We fear retaliation, a blowup, jeopardizing a project or position, or calling into question people we respect. When faced with crucial moments, most of us tend to say nothing, which only perpetuates the problem. Or if we somehow muster the courage to speak up, we often do so critically, rudely, sharply, or in some other ineffective manner, which exacerbates the problem or creates a new one altogether. Consequently, we feel trapped between two bad alternatives. And when we feel trapped, we hesitate, which results in another gap: the gap between seeing something and saying something. **For all the troubles that result from broken promises, bad behavior, and violated norms, we only compound them by failing to speak up quickly.** Just look at the data from our recent study. »

93%
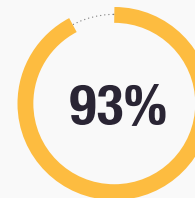
work with at least one difficult person.

FEAR

Poor Reputation

Retaliation

Blowup

Failed Projects
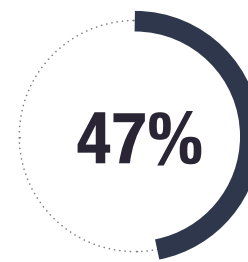
Offending Others
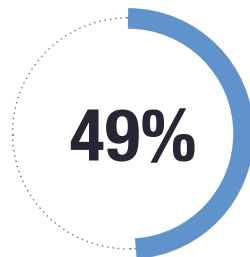
Expectation — **Behavioral Gap** — Performance

## We surveyed 792 professionals and found that:

52% hesitate to discuss peer performance problems, like improper shortcuts, poor attention to detail, and incomplete work.

47% say they wait to share concerns or ideas that might improve an element of the business because it encroaches on somebody else's turf.

49% take more than a week to speak up when policy decisions are beginning to create unintended negative consequences.
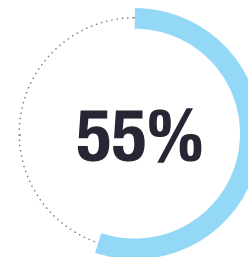
55% are reluctant to discuss when they believe someone (or a group) has made a bad strategic choice.

And the longer people wait, the dearer the consequences. Those surveyed estimated that when three days or fewer pass between the identification of a problem and a frank, honest, and respectful conversation about it, roughly $5,000 is wasted. **But when the lag time extends to five days and beyond, the cost exceeds $25,000.**

At first glance, these results may seem exaggerated. But consider this: if a person can suppress a problem for five days, and is in a culture where doing so has been normalized, what are the chances he or she will speak up in seven, ten, or twelve days? To be clear, the longer we wait to speak up, the less likely we ever will. And if we do get around to saying something, we are far more likely to *blow* up than speak up.

So, what do people do during that lag time? **Sixty-four percent of respondents said they internalize frustrations, and 43 percent said they avoid the person with whom they have an issue or concern altogether.** When people resort to silence, collaboration and engagement dwindle.

Conversely, respondents who reported minimal lag between identifying and discussing problems were more likely to report that their organizations innovate, execute on plans, engage employees, and retain top talent.
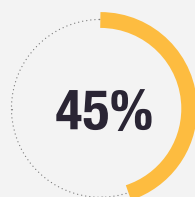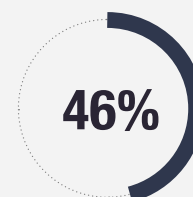
Internalize Frustrations 64%
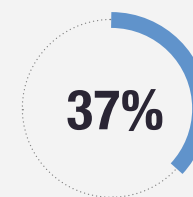
Avoid a Confrontation 43%

But perhaps most interesting is the reasons people give for not speaking up. According to the survey, people refrain from holding others accountable because they:

45%

don't believe others will back them up, leaving them socially stranded.

46%

expect retaliation from impacted parties, regardless of laws or regulations prohibiting such.

37%

fear being labeled a persistent complainer, which could jeopardize their career.

Underlying each reason cited for *not* speaking up is a concern for social backing. **In other words, people hesitate to speak up because they lack—or believe they lack—social support.**

It makes sense. You don't want to rat out a coworker, and you certainly don't want to go directly to a peer about violating a rule or norm. Nobody wants to look sanctimonious, and nobody wants to be the Lone Ranger.

But if there's a correlation between lack of social support and staying silent, then the inverse is also true: when people feel socially supported, they are more likely to speak up.

Social Support vs. Speaking Up
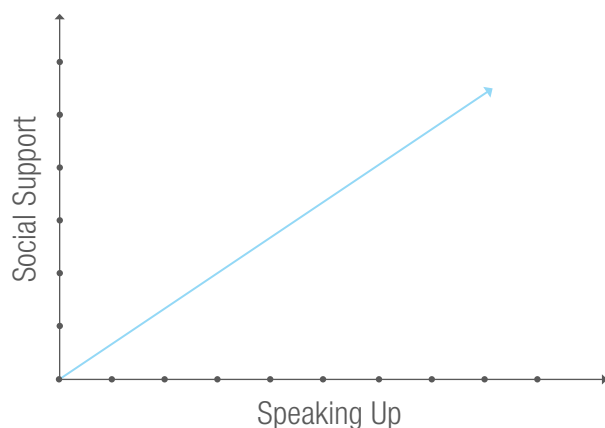
What does social support look like?
Accountability.

A Dangerous Cycle.

When others break a promise, violate an expectation, or behave badly, we tend to enter a dangerous cycle. We become upset and move to either silence or violence. If we think addressing the problem will cause us trouble, we go to silence—we clam up. We might drop hints, use harsh humor, or become sarcastic, but we don't directly deal with the problem. With time, our anger grows and we end up slipping into violence. We may not become abusive, but we treat the other person with disrespect, act disgusted or upset, or even hurl verbal insults. We try to force our ideas on others. Violence rarely works, so we vow to never make the same mistake again and we return to silence— starting the cycle all over again. **And it costs us.**

Accountability in Action
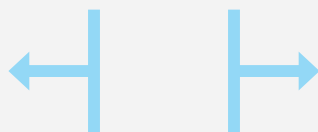
Three Skills to Close the Gap

Master My Stories

Convey Positive Intent

Describe the Gap

Opportunities to hold accountability discussions occur daily—if not multiple times a day.
They run the gamut from not adhering to office kitchen guidelines to confronting major ethical violations with serious legal implications. **Consider the following common scenarios:**

Kitchen Crime:

Members of the second floor unanimously agreed to keep the kitchen clean and free of smelly lunch dishes. And yet your coworker, Aaron, repeatedly leaves his dirty Tupperware in the sink. Not even the "Please don't leave your dishes in the sink" sign taped strategically above the faucet seems to influence his behavior. At first it was annoying, but it's starting to feel disrespectful to the rest of you who kindly adhere to the rules. Should you say something? It's just a dirty dish, after all.

Tardy Teammates:

Members of product development are required to work closely with the marketing team. They've noticed a pattern of marketing falling behind deliverable deadlines by several days. Not only is this frustrating, it impacts production schedules and costs the company money. And yet it's awkward to call out a whole team that operates under different requirements and parameters. How can you shed light on lost dollars without offending those who might be pulling their weight?

Misaligned Manager:

The employee handbook clearly outlines office hours for each employee and your manager seems to think these rules apply to everyone but her. During meetings, she iterates that lunch breaks should last no longer than one hour, yet you consistently observe her taking much longer breaks. Others have noticed too, and her hypocritical behavior is bringing down the team. But she *is* the boss. Can anything be done?

How would you handle these situations?

Would you sulk in a silo, conspire at the water cooler, lament to any listening ear? Maybe you'd speak up effectively but get derailed when the other turns defensive.

Whatever your strategy has been (or lack thereof), the following three skills will help you address poor performance or bad behavior quickly and effectively: **Master My Stories, Convey Positive Intent, and Describe the Gap.**

Skill 1: Master My Stories

Remember how we said above that in order to foster accountability we need a new perspective and useful skills? Well, here's the new perspective:

Holding others accountable isn't about calling them out; it's about supporting them socially.

When it comes to cases of broken promises, violated expectations, and bad behavior, most of us tell ourselves one of two stories: the person with whom we have a grievance either doesn't care or is incapable of meeting our expectations. Each story informs a feeling—usually one of offense or contempt—and then we respond poorly or not at all. The subsequent course of action (or inaction) leads to dismal results, like resentment, disintegrating team morale, disrespect of leadership, and wasted time and revenue—to name a few.

Responsible for these dismal results is not the misbehaver, but ourselves and the stories we tell ourselves. **Here's how it happens:**

- **See and Hear:** Something happens. You learn of it through your eyes and ears, and your brain begins processing the information.

- **Tell a Story:** You try to make sense of what's happening. Your prefrontal cortex analyzes the data and creates a story to make sense of it all.

- **Feel:** If the story involves some kind of risk or offense, your amygdala is signaled, which fires up your emotions.

- **Act:** Your strong emotions propel you towards fight or flight—angry outbursts or escape and avoidance.

"If you are building a culture where honest expectations are communicated and peer accountability is the norm, then the group will address poor performance and attitudes."

—Henry Cloud

In addition to the stories we tell ourselves about others' behavior, we tell ourselves stories about accountability. For example, some think that holding others accountable is something only power-hungry type-A sadists are willing to do. Others subscribe to the natural-born-leader theory, which suggests that airing a person's shortcomings and missteps before him while inspiring change is an innate ability that can't be taught. And others subscribe to the goody-two-shoes theory: only teachers' pets—and nobody likes a teacher's pet—take it upon themselves to enforce the rules.

Do you see how this all can turn disastrous? Unspoken norms and beliefs (stories) about accountability and poor performance and bad behavior cause us to respond in ways that produce ruinous results. It's no wonder people hesitate to speak up.

Your ability to effectively hold others accountable begins with your paradigm. Shift how you see matters of accountability, and you'll shift how you discuss them.

This isn't about devising some Pollyanna positive affirmation. Accountability is about social support. Think about it: an accountability discussion is warranted when someone has failed to meet a performance or behavioral standard. The point of confronting that person is to *help* them meet the standard.

So how do you master your stories? Start with 'me' first. Separate your stories from the facts and reflect on what you want from the conversation.

Before confronting someone, ask yourself:

- **How have I contributed to this challenge?**
- **What might the other person be facing that is contributing to this challenge?**
- **Are there variables I'm not seeing?**
- **How would I like to be approached if I were him/her?**
- **What would a successful outcome from this conversation look like?**

Resist the urge to tell yourself stories about the other's behavior—that they don't care or they're incapable—and banish any desires to reprove him or her. Approach the conversation as one offering social support, and see what happens. **Master your stories and you'll broaden your influence.**

+ Skill 2: Convey Positive Intent

FRAME CONVERSATIONS FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT

Imagine you've mustered the courage to confront your manager about her extended lunch breaks. You've purged yourself of stories that arouse anger and you want to approach her to gain understanding and restore waning respect. You've scheduled a fifteen-minute meeting and enter her office on time.

You begin, "Some of the team members and I have concerns about your three-hour lunch breaks, and I was wondering…"

Before you can finish, your manager's face flushes red. Uh-oh, you think to yourself.

"Excuse me?" she says. "I don't think it's any of your business what I do with my personal time. I put in 80 hours a week, most of which you don't see, and I don't need…"

The meeting is adjourned as quickly as it started. You now have new insight—that your boss works double time—but your relationship hasn't improved, and neither has trust.

When holding accountability discussions, start by conveying your positive intent.

People don't get defensive because of *what* you're saying; they get defensive because of *why* they think you're saying it. So state your positive intentions immediately. Avoid offering insincere compliments or flattery, such as "You're great" or "We sure do love having you here," and don't skirt the topic you want to address. Be frank and sincere.

Here's how: Establish Mutual Purpose and Mutual Respect.

Mutual Purpose—You share a common understanding of what is important to the other person. You care about his/her problems, goals, struggles, and successes.

Mutual Respect—You care and have respect for the person.

Skills in Action:
How to Convey Positive Intent

When holding an accountability discussion, begin by conveying your positive intent. You might try:

"I know this is important to you and I want you to know I care about it as well…"

"I'd like to talk about (fill in the blank here), and my intent is to understand this from all sides, so…"

You can even use these approaches to recover a conversation, when others become defensive or start to shut down:

"My intent is not to blame anyone. I want to provide support, which is why I was asking questions about the project status…"

Misunderstandings ⟵————⟶ **Positive Intent** ⟵————⟶ Good Words & Actions

> "I want to discuss the event and see if we can both get what we want. If one of us isn't happy, nobody wins . . ."

> "I know this is important to you and I want you to know I care about it as well . . ."

> "I have a ton of respect for the position you're in and how tough this can be, so I wanted to . . ."

> "I want to share some feedback with you because I want to see you grow. If I didn't care, I wouldn't be honest . . ."

At the outset of every accountability conversation, make clear your positive intentions. **When you frame your message with positive intent, you do two things: you reduce the potential for misunderstanding, and you set yourself a guidepost by which to align your words and actions.** Make it explicit that you support and respect the person, and you'll get off to a much better start.

One more thing. If you can't begin an accountability discussion by sincerely stating your good intentions, wait until you can.

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⊣⊢ Skill 3: Describe the Gap

FOCUS ON FACTS RATHER THAN THE PERSON

"When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated. This is why we sometimes attack who they are, which is far more hurtful than addressing a behavior or a choice." **– Brené Brown**

When holding others accountable, most of us lead with our feelings, assumptions, and ugly conclusions. This quickly puts the other person on the defensive. But if you've mastered your stories and conveyed positive intent, you should get off to a good start with a receptive teammate. Now it's time to describe the gap—to point out the discrepancy between expectation and performance. *How* you do so will make all the difference in whether the conversation continues effectively.

So stick with the FACTS ▶

Facts are things you can see, hear, observe, and measure. When you stick to the facts, your stories, assumptions, and interpretations of the behavior in question stay out of the picture. Consequently, any sense of accusation or shaming stays out of the picture, too.

Facts

Receptive
Teammate

16
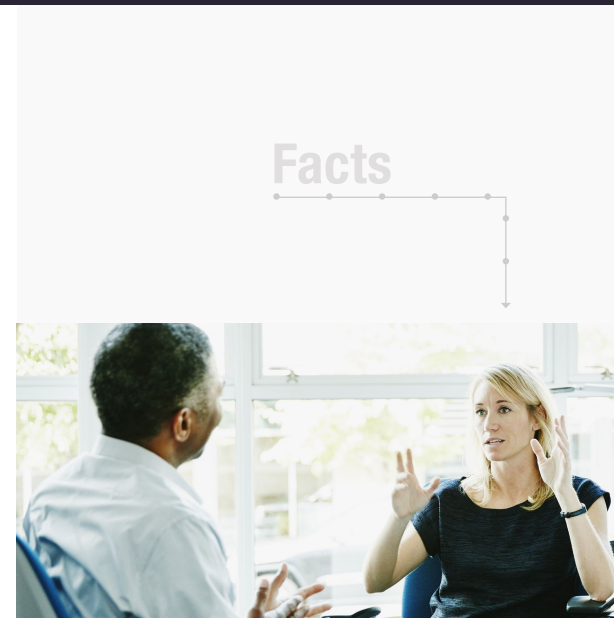
How to Stick to the Facts:

Stay External. Describe what's happening outside your head, not your conclusions or feelings going on inside.

Explain What, Not Why. Facts tell us what's going on; conclusions tell us why you think it's important.

Gather Facts. Don't rely on hearsay conclusions. Do your homework and gather the facts before holding an accountability discussion.

Avoid "Hot" Words. Be sure to avoid emotionally loaded descriptions. ("You're using a *hostile* tone of voice," or "You *carelessly* left out three slides.") When you share a possibly inflammatory story, you're betting that the person will understand the behavior you're trying to address and won't become defensive. That's a bad bet. Describe the observable details of the behavioral gap. Cut out the guesswork.

For Example:

"Hey, do you remember how you agreed to email me the draft by Monday at 2pm?" Then share the facts related to the actual or observed behavior. "I didn't receive the draft until Wednesday afternoon, and that was too late for me to present the data in the Tuesday meeting. Can you tell me what happened? I want to better understand your process and workload so in the future we can plan accordingly and ensure you have sufficient time to complete similar assignments."

Leading with facts is an essential best practice because it starts with the agreement or expectations. Facts are emotionless. Sticking to facts is an objective and straightforward way to establish context for the person you are holding accountable.

WHY

HOT

17

Conclusion

Organizations, teams, and relationships are healthy to the degree that they identify and discuss problems quickly, and we all want to belong to and contribute to healthy relationships and organizations. Yet most of us hesitate to speak up from a desire to preserve relationships and social support. And in doing so, we undermine both.

This is a paradox, for in speaking up, we foster social ties and relationships. When people are held accountable, they know they are valued. And when people feel valued, they contribute, engage, and speak up themselves. The behavior builds on itself. The vital factor is in *how* we speak up.

The skills and insights we've outlined here come from the bestselling book *Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior.* But the skills don't stop here. Holding accountability discussions is only half the battle. What you do post-conversation matters as much as, or more than, what you do leading up to those crucial conversations. Further skills, insights, case studies, and exercises are outlined in the book and training course of the same name.

crucial
accountability®

We invite you to take the next step.

Why? Because in addition to all we've learned about organizational behavior and performance in our decades of research and service, we've continually rediscovered this beacon of insight: While everyone understands new thinking can shift behavior, few consider the converse: new behavior shifts thinking. We learn by *doing.* An awareness of concepts does not behavior change.

You can begin by visiting
www.vitalsmarts.com/crucial-accountability-training/

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