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The Accountability Agreement

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A question we often hear from our clients is: how do I keep my team accountable? At first glance, it seems simple – their role involves a task or a goal, and they should take responsibility for completing it. But often it doesn't seem to work out that way.

When it comes to crunch time, leaders can find they are faced with excuses, ballooning timelines or budgets and even obfuscation. And while it may indeed be the case that the task was legitimately frustrated by an external factor, the difficult part is when people don't **own** it.

We wonder: why can't they take responsibility, even if it didn't

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go exactly to plan?
This frustration is not uncommon. Up to 82% of managers "admitted they have 'limited to no' ability to hold others accountable successfully…" And 25% of leaders felt that 10%-20% of their team members avoid accountability. Apart from some sort of nuclear option of performance management or even dismissal, it seems that it can be difficult to map the path to accountability.

Start with the Relationship

Accountability is fundamentally an agreement – and one that benefits both parties. As leadership expert Timothy R. Clark describes in an interview, when you think about someone that had a significant impact on your life (whether it be a parent, teacher, coach, friend, or neighbor), your relationship with them is often characterised by two things: **high intimacy** and **high accountability**. And the two enable each other to have a profound impact on you.
Solid relationships can withstand accountability. If you are hesitant to hold someone accountable or give them honest feedback for fear of damaging the relationship, then it's the relationship that needs work. And by holding people accountable, you are helping them succeed in their role. If your relationship with a team member is strong, then it can withstand and, in fact, will flourish by you holding them accountable to high standards.

Creating accountability should occur in an environment of psychological safety, where there can be a robust discussion of expectations and whether they are realistic. Building trust with your team members means that they not only respect your opinion and guidance in what's possible, but they also believe that you are looking out for them in this process. Your role in building accountability in a strong working relationship is not to micromanage their success but enable and empower them so that they can achieve their potential.

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Move to the Agreement

As Peter Bregman writes in the Harvard Business Review, accountability is about delivering on a commitment.It requires *a clear agreement between the leader and the person accountable around what exactly this commitment is*. And importantly, this commitment is to realising an outcome, not just to completing a set of tasks. Fundamentally then, holding someone accountable means reaching **a mutual understanding of the agreement we are entering into**. Bregman proposes that this means getting abundantly clear on five aspects of the agreement:

Clear expectations.
What exactly is the outcome we are agreeing to? What does success look like? And how will the team member go about this? This should be a two-way conversation at the outset, and ideally many of the ideas and strategies will come from the team member. Upon concluding this conversation, ask the team member to summarize and document the key aspects of the agreement: — the outcome they're going for, how they are going to achieve it, and how they'll know whether they're successful — to make sure you're ending up on the same page.

Does the team member know the exact role(s) they'll play in delivering on the outcome and the authority that comes with this? Are they leading a working group? Can they make decisions or act as a tiebreaker if needed? Or are they coordinating others in doing the work? Unless both parties (team member and leader) are clear and aligned on what the commitment entails, the accountability agreement will fall down.

Clear capability.
The person must be capable of achieving the goal or task or it will fall apart. It is always good practice to include in a conversation about accountability the question, "what do you need to be able to achieve this?", and "how can I support?"

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This gives the person an opportunity to voice what resources, information, capability development, or additional support might be required for success.

Clear measurement.
All parties should be clear on how you'll track progress: what you'll measure, what milestones you'll set, and how often you will check in. Ideally, this will be something objective that can be measured and externally verified (i.e., outside the dyad of the team member and their leader). Get clear on when and how you want the team member to report back, ask them to run these meetings, and work quickly to brainstorm solutions to setbacks and remove bottlenecks in the process.

Clear feedback.
Feedback opportunities are absolutely critical to ensuring the plan stays on track and also present an opportunity for course correction and finding alternative strategies. If you have clear and objective measures of success, then this conversation can be open, honest, and fact-based. Take this time to give guidance, constructive criticism, an honest appraisal of how things are tracking, and again offer what support is available to enable success. This is also an opportunity for you to ask for feedback as the leader: is there more you can do to better support the team member?

Clear consequences.
Finally, as much as we might not want to talk about what will happen if things go wrong, it is important to also have complete clarity on the consequences. If the person does not deliver, they need to know what's at stake. Depending on the circumstances, you may need to try again, offer more support, or relieve them of the responsibility (or remove them from the role entirely). The flip side of this also applies – if the team member succeeds, then their efforts should be acknowledged and rewarded appropriately.

As challenging as the conversations can sometimes be, don't assume that people understand or 'agree' to the commitment

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you are holding them accountable for – have the discussion, so that you know they do. You'll be thanking yourself on the other side.

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