Accountability

Do leaders sabotage it?

by John Stoker

YES, LEADERS SOMEtimes behave in ways that undermine the accountability they are trying to instill in others, thus sabotaging their efforts to increase accountability throughout the organization.

Authentic leadership requires both *talk* and *walk*. A leader who is unaware may walk in a way that undermines his or her *talk*. Sometimes leaders will take on a specific role for reasons known only to them. The role of a specific behavior may diminish or undermine an individual's desire to be accountable. Over time, I've identified **six specific roles**—there may very well be others—that impact accountability.

1. The Entitler. These leaders believe they have to reward employees for *everything* they do. This behavior causes employees to develop a sense of entitlement, and they become *coin-operated* employees. They come to expect, even demand, reward for specific performance—especially for performance that requires them to take extra initiative. This leader's behavior not only creates the expectation of reward, but tends to destroy individual initiative and responsibility.

Rather than be an *Entitler*, an *effective leader* should become a **Motivator**. Motivators get to know their employees. They look to identify personal values that inspire and motivate people to expand their capacity to perform at a higher level.

2. The Justifier. This leader accepts the stories or excuses that people offer to explain their lack of accountability. The *Justifier* might say, "Oh, I can see how that might happen. It's okay. Let's talk about what we should do now." Please note: surprises do happen, priorities can change, and expectations and requirements often need to accommodate those situations. But a leader who continually validates stories or excuses for non-performance sends the message that as long as you have a great story, your lack of accountability is acceptable. In essence, the *Justifier* enables his or her people to not keep their commitments.

Rather than be a *Justifier*, the leader should take steps to be an excellent **Strategizer** or planner who explores in detail what is required to complete a task on time while meeting the required parameters for *excellence*. Poor planning usually leads to poor results.

3. The Rescuer. This leader actually does the employee's work. This often happens with newly-promoted leaders who are more comfortable doing their old job than learning how to lead. Or perhaps the Rescuer doubts that the individual can even do the job, so they run to the rescue and do the task for them. This behavior leads to a *learned helplessness* on the part of the employee. The leader's behavior sends the message that you do not have to be competent to do your job. Employees learn that they don't have to be accountable because someone will bail them out.

Instead of being *Rescuers*, leaders need to learn how to be **Facilitators** who know how to move things along. They know how to use questions to discover where the employee may lack the ability to do the job, and they know how to use that information to deter-

mine a course of action that will help employees acquire necessary skills and responsibilities for their job functions.

4. The Perfector. This leader is never satisfied because nothing is ever quite *good enough*. These leaders are perfectionists. This behavior can often be accompanied by constant criticism of the individuals whose performance is subpar, and it turns employees into pleasers, or *yes people*, who spend their time trying to guess what the leader really wants. The *Perfector* also creates a sense of learned hopelessness in those who come to expect their best efforts to be rejected. *Accountability* is replaced by *apathy* when hard work is consistently misdirected or deemed unacceptable.

Leaders who engage in *Perfector* behavior should look seriously at becoming **Clarifiers**. Clarifiers think about their own thoughts. They are very clear about what "perfect" and "acceptable" look like, and they make a great effort to determine whether their people have understood these conditions clearly. When people have a clear picture of what "perfect" or "right" looks like, they are far more likely to perform to that level and meet the leader's expectations.

5. The Blamer. I once had a manager who was a Blamer. If I *did* what he asked and things didn't turn out well, he blamed me. If I *did* not do what he asked, no matter how things turned out, he blamed me. He was definitely a "no-fault" leader; his behavior created major defensiveness in everyone who worked for and around him. People became far more interested in *self-preservation* than in expending their discretionary effort. In my experience, his behavior was far more effective in creating a lack of accountability than in creating a desire to do the work right.

Such *Blamers* need to learn to be **Praisers**. Praisers notice behaviors that contribute to superior performance, and they acknowledge individual contribution. When a task doesn't yield the desired results, Praisers will sit down with the employee and review processes and procedures to identify where things fell apart. Then they make suggestions or implement changes that will improve performance and results. They celebrate success and develop skills in others to overcome deficiencies. Praisers focus on *process* and avoid punishing *people*.

6. The Micromanager. This leadership role is about controlling exactly what an employee does and controlling *accountability* for the work. *Micromanagement* usually leaves an employee feeling angry, frustrated, demoralized, and searching for another job. Micromanaging behavior sends the message, "I don't trust you to do your job!"

Rather than being a *Micromanager*, adopt the role of a **Truster**. A *Truster* is someone who allows an employee the autonomy to do the job and to learn and grow from his or her efforts. Leaders who demonstrate trust go out of their way to support and assist individuals to do their jobs and allow them to be accountable for their results.

Helping individuals, teams, and work groups to be responsible and accountable for their results is the key to productive and profitable work. To improve accountability, effective leaders evaluate how their *talk* matches their *walk* and understand how *their behavior* contributes to or detracts from the results they are trying to achieve. LE

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ACTION: Master the six positive roles.