

Achieve accountability

What is your company's fear temperature?

First, a confession. You know that one of my pet phrases is "Speak your truth." Speaking mine, I must admit that this article with a focus on accountability is going to be one day late arriving in my editor's email. Ahem.

Most leaders I talk to want to create a culture in which people consistently demonstrate personal accountability, where the norm in the organization is a desire to take responsibility for results. Enlightened leaders don't want to see a lot of finger-pointing. They don't want to hear endless excuses about why something didn't get done. They don't want to continually see employees adopting a defensive attitude and they don't enjoy spending time and energy doling out consequences for unmet deadlines, missed goals and flat performance.

Yet that is the role that the leader feels she must assume in many business environments. A pervasive attitude of personal accountability is so desired yet seemingly elusive.

If you suspect that a lot of people in your organization are demonstrating a lack of accountability, and you're frustrated from people making excuses and playing "hot potato" with responsibility, here are some guidelines for turning the culture around.

Some of the best training that I know about for business leaders is Susan Scott's program "Fierce Accountability." I've mentioned her book and training programs on "Fierce Conversations" many times. The accountability program offered by Fierce Inc. helps leaders create an environment with a bias toward action rather than resentful compliance.

A recent newsletter from Fierce Inc. included excerpts from an interview with Mardig Sheridan, known for facilitating his Leadership and Communications Effectiveness seminars.

The interview was centered on Sheridan's thoughts about accountability – all of these points and more are covered in the Fierce Accountability workshops.

Sheridan suggests that the first step is to look at ourselves as leaders when we have problems with employees, and ask, "What is it about what I did or how I handled that situation that I need to learn from? What is it about my leadership that this person didn't achieve the goal or didn't come to me to get support in order to get it done?"

I know it is easier to look at the employee and make judgments about his lack of giving a hoot. It is easier to go to your CEO roundtable group and share grievances about how people in your organization fail to step up or keep commitments. In fact, it may have become a habit for you yourself to get stuck in blaming, protecting and defending – the very behaviors that frustrate you when you observe them within your business. This might get you some sympathy, but it will definitely undermine the results you want and need.

If there seems to be a lot of shirking of responsibility in your firm, the reason is very likely fear. As part of looking in the mirror, you can take the "fear temperature" in your environment. Observe. Ask. Are people afraid to fail? What happens when they do fail? Are they willing or reluctant to commit to innovative projects? Would they rather hide behind excuses and tradition? At the Fierce Accountability training, they use the metaphor of "a cave" for safety. Is the lack of accountability in your company about safety? Are people in or out of the cave? What can you do to relate with your employees so that they are willing to take a stance of accountability? What can you do so that they agree to – and feel inspired about – their own commitment to excellence? How can you move them from thinking scared to thinking big? How can you stay so in touch with each

person on your team that you have no need to issue consequences because you're coaching them to grow accountable?

If you want to truly be engaged in leadership, it's your job to inspire people into excellence. I believe anyone prefers to play at the top of his game, not waste his creativity thinking up excuses for messing up. And what boss wants to hear another story about a computer that mysteriously went bonkers right at the crucial point in preparing a key report. When the culture supports an attitude of accountability, the quality of work and the atmosphere in the place is relieved of all that behavior that reminds us of a kid saying the dog ate her homework.

Whatever it takes, I hope you are going to work every day in a culture where it is the norm to take personal responsibility, where there is no need for placing blame on each other or on quirky computers, where people feel safe trying new things and asking for help along the way. In such an environment, you will enjoy spending much more time celebrating excellent results than in figuring out who to blame for disappointing ones.

Much more fun, don't you think?



Jo Hawkins

Donovan is a certified transition coach. She can be reached at jo@hawkinsdonovan.com or (414) 305-3459. Her web site is: www.hawkinsdonovan.com.