

Five pillars of teamwork (Part V)

Accountability, or avoiding it

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Last month I have talked about commitment, and this article is on the critical issue of accountability. According to Swami Sukhabodhananda, commitment is the language of the wise; complaint is that of fools. Human weaknesses often result in disappointment and to overcome it one must boost ones strengths. The Swamiji says, "the greatest strength comes from the energy of commitment that brings excellence in all walks of life". Hardly, anybody walks the road to success without failures, but it is their commitment to excellence that takes them to their destination. Commitment is also a responsibility and in a way includes accountability, and we will talk about it as the last part to the five pillars of teamwork

In the words of the Swamiji, "to be committed is not being 'stuck'; it is an integration of ones being. If you are committed to honour your word the base self in you will discourage you. If your energies are low, you will succumb. If you follow the higher self, the lower self will serve you, slowly getting integrated with the higher. In such a state there will be integrity. Without integrity life is shallow". "You are both an actor and a thinker. Every time you lie, the thinker warns you that you are lying and the actor asks you to shut up and continue telling lies. It is like riding a chariot with two horses going in two different directions. With commitment, however, you are a person of integrity, and excellence is attainable". One must



have the commitment to operate from the higher self. Excellence happens when there is love that helps you to grow and contribute. "Commitment also involves dropping illusions. We see the world projected through our verbose minds and not as it is. Minds are filled with thoughts and words. Words represent experiences and are



Credit: Lenchioni

also influenced by memory. From the past we see the present hence creating illusions created by the words. One must filter them wisely. One must be creative to balance all walks of life through commitment – family, work, spiritual, and social.” Creativity can bring excellence into life or work.

When teams achieve clarity and buy-in, they have to then hold each other accountable for what they have agreed to do and maintain high standards of performance and behaviour. It sounds simple, but most executives hate to do it, especially when it concerns a peer to avoid interpersonal discomfort. Some people find it less discomforting to hold their direct superior accountable as compared to their peers.

Accountability in the context of teamwork, however, refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviours or that, which might hurt the team. Accountability is a buzzword that has lost much of its meaning as it has been overused with terms such as empowerment and quality. The essence of lack of accountability as a dysfunction is the unwillingness of the team members to tolerate interpersonal discomfort that accompanies discussions with a peer on his or her behavior and the more general tendency to avoid difficult conversations.

Members of great teams overcome these natural inclinations

by opting to ‘enter the danger zone’ with one another. Of course, this is easier said than done, even among cohesive teams with strong interpersonal relationships. Team members close to one another sometimes hesitate to hold one another accountable, precisely because they fear jeopardising a valuable personal relationship. Ironically, this only causes the relationship to deteriorate as team members begin to resent one another for not living up to expectations and for allowing the standards of the group to erode. Members of great teams improve their relationships by holding one another accountable, thus demonstrating that they respect each other and have high expectations



of one another’s performance. The most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance in a team is peer pressure. This reduces the need for excessive bureaucracy around performance management and corrective action. More than any policy or system, there is nothing like the fear of letting down respected teammates that motivates people to improve their performance.

So how does a team ensure its



members’ accountability? The key to overcoming avoidance of accountability is adhering to some management tools that are simple and effective.

1) Publish your goals and standards:

By writing down exactly what the team needs to achieve, who needs to deliver what, and how everyone must behave in order to succeed, ambiguity can be removed. The enemy of accountability is ambiguity, and even when a team has initially committed to a plan or a set of behavioural standards, it is important to keep those agreements in the open so that no one can ignore them.

2) Periodic progress reviews:

Periodic reviews goes a long way towards helping people take action that they may not otherwise be inclined to do. This is also useful in giving feedback to people either on their behaviour or performance. Team members should regularly communicate with one another verbally or in written form, about compliance of their team against stated objectives. If you rely on them to do so on their own, with no clear expectations or structure, you may be inviting the potential for avoidance of accountability.

One of the most difficult challenges for a leader who wants to instill accountability in a team is to encourage and allow the team to serve as the first and primary accountability mechanism. Sometimes, strong leaders naturally create an accountability vacuum within the team, leaving themselves as the only source



| A team that avoids accountability | Team that holds one another accountable |
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| Creates resentment among team members who have different standards of performance | Ensures that poor performers feel pressure to improve |
| Encourages mediocrity | Identifies potential problems quickly by questioning one another's approach without hesitation |
| Misses deadlines and key deliverables | Establishes respect among team members who are held to the same high standards |
| Places an undue burden on the team leader as the sole source of discipline | Avoids excessive bureaucracy around performance management and corrective action |

Credit: Lenchioni



of discipline. This creates an environment where team members assume that the leader is holding others accountable, and so they hold back even when they see something that is not right. Once, a leader has created a culture of accountability on a team, he or she must be willing to serve as ultimate arbiter of discipline when the team itself fails. This should be a rare occurrence. Nevertheless, it must be clear to all team members that the accountability has not

been relegated to a consensus approach, but merely to a shared team responsibility, and the leader of the team must not hesitate to step in when it is necessary.

Success is not a matter of mastering subtle sophisticated theory but rather embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence. Teams succeed because they are human. By acknowledging the imperfections of their humanity, members of

a functional team overcome the natural tendencies that make trust, conflict, commitment, accountability and results so elusive. ♦



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