



## 8 "Be-Attitudes" of Holding People Accountable

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

A frequent refrain of top managers is that "we need to do a better job of holding people accountable." Accountability seems to be the mantra for organizational get well programs these days. I can agree with this in part, and yet there is an aspect of accountability that feels to me like a cop out.

The key to leadership is to create an environment whereby people do the best they can because they want to do it. When employees know it is clearly in their best interest to give their maximum discretionary effort to the organization, managers don't have to crack the whip as often. Imagine working in an environment where people do the right things not because they are expected, but because it is in their best interest. In that atmosphere, holding people accountable would nearly always be a positive occurrence rather than negative. How refreshing!

It is the actions, attitudes, and intentions of leaders, not the rank and file, that make the environment of either reinforcement or punishment the habitual medication for individual performance issues. Let's examine 8 attitudes or behaviors of leaders that can foster a culture where holding people accountable is a precursor to a feeling of celebration instead of a sentence to the dungeon.

**Be clear about your expectations** - It happens every day. The boss says, "You did not file the documents correctly by client; you totally messed up." Then, the assistant says, "You never told me to file them by client, so I used my initiative and filed them by date because that is what they taught us in Record Retention." Holding people accountable when the instructions are vague is like beating an untethered horse for wandering off the path to eat grass.

**Be sure of your facts** - I learned a painful lesson about this early in my career. I gave my administrative assistant a letter to type for a customer. When I got it back, the letter was full of obvious errors. I immediately held her accountable for the sloppy work and called her into a small conference room to let her know of my disappointment. When I told her about the errors, she said, "Well if you had taken the time to notice the initials on the bottom of the letter, you would have seen that I farmed that work out to Alice

because I was busy with other things. I did not type that letter." Gulp. I tried to cover with, "I am glad, because your work is usually higher quality than that," but the irrevocable damage had been done. If you are going to accuse someone of sloppy work, make sure it was done by that person.

**Be timely** - If there is an issue with performance versus stated expectations, bring the matter up immediately. If you wait for a couple days before trying to bring up the issue, it just tends to cloud and confuse the person who did not meet expectations. If a boss says, "You did not answer the phone in the proper way last week," how is the employee supposed to even remember the incident?

**Be Kind** - Always apply the Golden Rule liberally. If you had a lapse in performance, justified or not, how would you want to get the information? Keep in mind that some people are more defensive than others, so if you like your feedback "straight from the shoulder," tone it down when dealing with a particularly sensitive individual.

**Be Consistent** - If you are a stickler for certain behaviors, make sure you apply the discipline consistently. Coming down hard on Mike for being late for work can seem unfair if you habitually let Mary waltz in 45 minutes after the start of the shift. Always avoid the appearance of playing favorites. Recognize that, as a human being, you do have differences in your attitudes toward people, but when holding people accountable, you must apply the same standards across the board.

**Be Discrete** - Embarrassing a person in public will create a black mark that will live for a long time. If there is an issue of performance, share the matter with the individual privately and in a way that upholds the dignity of the person. This issue also refers to the Golden Rule.

**Be Gracious** - Forgiving a person who has failed to deliver on expectations is sometimes a way to set up better performance in the future. Get help for individuals who need training or behavior modification. A leader needs to be mindful of his or her personal contribution to the problem through past actions, like not dealing with a problem when it is small. If the current infraction is a habitual problem or one born out of laziness, greed, or revenge, then stronger measures are needed. People cannot be allowed to continually fail to meet expectations. The corrective measures will be based on the severity and longevity of the problem. One caveat: gracious behavior cannot be faked, so be sure you are calm and have dealt with your own emotions before speaking to the employee.

**Be Balanced** - This is an incredibly important concept. There is nothing written on a stone tablet that says all forms of accountability must be negative. In fact, I love it when someone holds me accountable for all the wonderful things I have done along the way. If we view accountability as both a positive and a corrective concept, then we can

remove much of the stigma associated with the word. When I hear a top manager say, "We need to hold our people accountable," I assure you that it means negative feedback in most cases. This is an easy thing to change by simply modifying our pattern of feedback.

Holding people accountable is a great concept if it is used in a consistent, kind, and thoughtful way. Try changing the notion of accountability in your work area to incorporate the 8 "Be-Attitudes" above, and you will have a significant improvement in your culture.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) 585-392-7763. Website [www.leadergrow.com](http://www.leadergrow.com) BLOG [www.thetrustambassador.com](http://www.thetrustambassador.com) He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*

