



Promoting Greater Accountability in Your Organization

A number of our clients ask us to conduct periodic organizational assessments, or “employee / culture surveys”, as an additional way of learning what their employees think about key aspects of their work experience, including pay, benefits, policies and processes, workplace environment and leadership practices and effectiveness.

In recent years, a number of narrative comments by employees have stated a desire for “greater accountability in the organization”. Some representative comments include:

- “There should be less favoritism in my department. Everyone should be expected to follow the same policies and rules.”
- “Some people don’t pull their weight and nothing is done about it.”
- “Some of my co-workers are experts at ‘working the system”. Why should the rest of us get to work on time and bust our humps and it is OK for them to skate by in their work?”
- “Joe has been allowed to transfer from two other departments and has never pulled his weight, and now we have him. How do I get into a program like he has?”

What struck us, along with the management of these client companies, as most interesting about the above feedback is that the desire for more consistency and accountability came from non-supervisory employees. The desire for a higher level of accountability was being directed at their co-workers with poor performance and work habits and the people in leadership roles for allowing the behaviors and conditions to occur.

What can you do?

What can you do about promoting greater accountability in your organization? If you Google this topic, roughly 2.6 million results appear, so it is a well-researched issue! Based upon a review of some of the research and our own experience with our client organizations, following are a few ideas.

1. **Accept the premise that people working in organizations generally want greater accountability.** Pretty consistently across all employee demographics, people prefer clarity of purpose, roles and performance expectations. Clarity in these areas will minimize ambiguity, confusion and misunderstandings and should result in greater consistency of results.

2. **Assess your culture.** As Owners or senior leaders of the organization, devote some serious discussion time to answering questions related to your own culture. How would you describe your culture in terms of a) overall performance and 2) expectations and treatment of your employees? On a 1-10 scale of performance, where does your organization score? Are your practices, programs and leadership behaviors best described as more paternalistic, accommodating and top driven with centralized decision-making, or are they more entrepreneurial and tolerant of reasonable risk, with increased

freedom of action and decision-making deeper within the organization? Regardless of where you assess the “current state” of your organization, is it where you want it to be? If not, are you willing to commit to making shifts and changes in behavior to a different level and condition?

3. Leaders must model desired organizational values in a consistent manner.

Leaders provide the direction, define expectations and set the pace for the organization. In addition, they need to model whatever values, whether written or informal, have been established for the organization. Supervisors and managers need to be held accountable by senior leadership for demonstrating positive leadership behaviors in a consistent manner to the people for whom – and to whom – they are responsible.

4. Develop and keep current job descriptions. Developing or updating job descriptions is not at the top of any supervisor’s list of “Things That Get Me Up in the Morning” that I know of, but they serve a number of important purposes. They define job responsibilities, knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA’s) for purposes of hiring, orientation and performance evaluation. They are important for internal job evaluation and grading purposes. They can assist with career development discussions, and are important for compliance with statutory requirements. They also can help in communicating “key accountabilities” that tie in directly with performance evaluation systems. Whether they are made an internal priority or outsourced, get them developed and review them annually or when there are relevant changes in job responsibilities or qualifications. Reviewing them concurrent with an annual performance review is one idea worth considering.

5. Hold accountable the players with poor performance and work habits. Require your supervisors to take a fresh look at individuals who have had a history of poor performance and/or work habits and use your disciplinary process to begin holding them to expected standards. Don’t create the perception of any “protected employees.”

6. Talk about becoming more accountable. In employee meetings, newsletter articles, department meetings, or online blogs, talk about and reinforce the importance of everyone working to be more individually accountable, including:

- **Encouraging people to be “President” or “Owner” of their area**. Describe and brainstorm specific behaviors that everyone, at all levels, can use to feel and convey to others a sense of ownership in their work, such as coming to supervisors with an intended plan vs. asking what they should do next, developing department mission statements that people can buy into, spending “company money” as if it is their own, etc.
- **Make objectives and deadlines a priority and commitment.** Set realistic timeframes on projects (downwards and upwards) and if a project or assignment is running late, discuss the reasons and negotiate a new deadline. Minimize moving targets with reported performance ratings, such as “Ongoing” or “Working On”. Eliminate the fuzziness.
- **Establish a culture of offering and asking for help.** Successful teams have members who freely ask for and offer and provide help to their teammates. Leaders need to promote the idea that both are expected.
- **Celebrate your successes!** Reward and celebrate your progress at becoming a more accountable organization.

Dan Stahl
8/7/09