



Real Accountability

As a business consultant, I have noticed over the years there is a lot of misunderstanding around Real Accountability. Most people think about it one way then have to deal with the consequences of that thinking, and never connect the dots on the fact that their interpretation of accountability is creating the problems they don't want in the first place. The point here is, most people adopt one of two ways of thinking about how to manage people. One way is from a more careful and controlling context and the other is from a context of empowerment, challenge, and accountability. Traditionally and historically, we have placed all accountability at the top with senior managers and owners. That system of management worked great for hundreds of years. The problem that we are now having with this is our economic and social environment is changing rapidly, that management style as a practice can't keep up, in fact it's exhausting and stressful. We need a very responsive work force. We need a way that delivers power and accountability to the performers actually doing the work. We need simple practices that fit right into daily operations that inspire employees with Real Accountability.

What every business owner really wants is a highly productive work force. A work force that thinks, takes action, solves problems, and takes care of the customers....in short, real accountability. Real accountability is where employees take ownership of everything around them and behave like an owner. Well....what if I said that the big secret to having this is in actually treating employees like owners. Start trusting and giving employees the opportunity to behave like an owner. Give them everything they need in the form of information, training, support, coaching, empowerment, responsibility, and expect them to step up to the opportunity. Having done this with hundreds of companies, I have seen this over and over... give employees the opportunity to step up and be accountable and they do - *every* time. When you give employees everything they need to thrive at work, they do so. And, productivity goes up, and profits follow.

This is especially relevant today as Millennials will comprise 75% of our workforce by 2020. It is really important to note that many of the values we are speaking about here are exactly the same values requested by Millennials in their ideal work environment. Values like responsibility and accountability, collaboration and team work, a challenging and empowering work environment, and the opportunity for continuous learning. As it turns out, these are the very values that if practiced in business lead to substantial and dynamic increases in productivity. And when productivity goes up, profits always follow.

In Dan Pink's best seller "Drive", Dan points to the mismatch of what four decades of research by leading universities like MIT says regarding what really motivates people and what many businesses are still practicing today. Dan says all the research points to the following three things that hold the keys to the kingdom for all motivation, and real accountability;

Autonomy — The desire to be self directed. Self direction increases engagement and discretionary effort over compliance.

Mastery — The urge to improve skills, learn, and increase your value.

Purpose — The desire to do something that has meaning, is important, and makes a difference in the world.

We are seeing the evidence of this in businesses where employees thrive in environments offering greater freedom and responsibility. The company's success and profitability are a product of the high levels of productivity and creativity arising from practices founded in more effective ways to manage employees from an outcome rather than process perspective. I recently asked a gate agent what she loved about working for Southwest, and she said "employees are given very high levels of responsibility and accountability to solve problems, without having corporate or upper management interference". She said "she loved the fact that she felt trusted to get the job done". I could hear that the satisfaction she got from being able to solve difficult customer challenges she faced almost every day was very important to her, and resulted in a more satisfied customer. We're seeing this more and more with companies like Zappos, Best Buy, Netflix, Google, 3M, WD-40, and many others that adopt these principles. This isn't a brand new concept of management, it has evolved over the last few decades with companies like Hewlett Packard and Lockheed, from what was called Skelton Management and Barely Managed Chaos to what is now understood as "Freedom Based Management".

Freedom Based Management is replacing the traditional top down management style of "I will hold you to account." The problem with that style is that it's a lot of work, has a short shelf life, which requires you to stay on top of people and their priorities, and is eventually exhausting. It also starts from a premise that an employee can't be completely trusted, nor are they able to do something by themselves. What follows is the manager finding more and more evidence to support their original supposition. There is substantially less motivation when a co-worker, manager, or owner maintains the superior "parent/child relationship" in holding another to account. Most people experience that kind of management as domination. That's nowhere near as motivating as the equal relationship that happens with real accountability.

So when you think about it, and you have all the facts in front of you...what hits you right between the eyes is everyone wants the same thing. What business owners really want, and what is actually best for the productivity and profitability of the business, and what employees really want, all just happen to be the same thing. Real Accountability in all its forms and practices is the access to success. It's a win, win, win.