

A Leader's Challenge: Demonstrating Empathy While Establishing Clear Accountability

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Apr 27, 2021, 11:01am EDT

Effective leadership requires understanding other's needs without sacrificing the ability to hold employees accountable. As the workforce continues to transition from the impacts of the global pandemic, this balance can be quite a daunting task for even the most seasoned leaders.

I see a lot of articles and quotes that focus solely on the importance of leaders expressing empathy. Leadership empathy is important but it is only part of the story. The truth is that one of the most empathic things a leader can do for their employees is to create a culture of accountability. These two concepts might sound like they are at odds with one another. However, have you worked on a team that lacked accountability? If the answer is yes, you probably experienced some of the following repercussions:

- Low-performance levels
- Missed deadlines
- Lack of team trust
- Ongoing team conflict

Leaders that demonstrate healthy empathy understand that accountability is necessary for team members to have high levels of motivation, mutual trust, and performance. The best leaders strive to demonstrate both empathy and accountability because both are required to build a culture where employees can thrive.

3 Ways Accountability Demonstrates Leadership Empathy

1. Accountability Builds Team Trust

It is hard to overstate the importance of establishing a pattern of accountability to build trust in our professional relationships. Accountability and trust are spoken of in the same breath because they are interrelated. This becomes even more pronounced as teams work virtually to complete their goals. In his HBR article, *The Neuroscience of Trust*, Paul Zak shared the following research on the importance of trust within organizations.

“Compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives and 40% less burnout.”

It is the leader’s role to establish processes and behaviors that ensure accountability because trust develops once team members realize that their teammates are reliable. When team members deliver on commitments, trust is built. Accountability allows people to count on each other, whether that means meeting deadlines or fulfilling duties.

2. Accountability Creates Clear Expectations

With the increase in virtual work and matrixed reporting relationships, creating clear expectations for employees has become a growing challenge for managers. Gallup’s research shows that setting clear expectations is the most foundational element for employee engagement. All employees want to know what’s expected of them in the workplace. Having clear expectations provides employees the benefits of clarity, focus, and increased performance.

Leaders must constantly focus their time and effort on getting everyone in the organization 100% focused on accomplishing the most important activities for success. Establishing clear expectations about what we are doing, how we get are going to get there, who is responsible for key tasks, and when these tasks need to be completed creates an environment that enables team members to have laser-like focus and accountability in the team’s day-to-day pursuits.

3. Accountability Enables Accomplishment

For an employee to truly put their trust in a leader they must believe the leader can help them and their team get the job done, while also maintaining positive trusting relationships. Employees receive a sense of accomplishment when they have worked towards and reached their goals. In their book, *The*

Progress Principle, Harvard's Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer describe the findings of their research on what makes people happy, motivated, creative, and productive at work. The authors describe the results of their research in the following statement: "Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work."

Every employee needs to feel a sense of accomplishment in their work. When employees experience a sense of accomplishment, they naturally become more engaged in their work and are more motivated to continually improve. This is why leaders need to support behaviors and instill processes that enable employees to feel a sense of accomplishment and success from completing tasks and achieving goals.

Leaders who demonstrate healthy empathy are able to show awareness of and concern for the needs of their employees while also establishing a culture where employees are held accountable to deliver on their agreed-upon commitments. This is one of the many paradoxes of successful leadership.