How To Strike A Balance Between Accountability And Empathy In The Workplace

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Empathy and accountability go hand-in-hand, and striking a balance between the two is crucial for creating a work environment where employees can thrive. In order to maintain accountability, clear boundaries need to be set. The only way to set clear boundaries that everyone agrees on is to understand where your employees are coming from and making sure they can work well together.

Whether you're looking for advice on being more empathetic, holding others accountable for their actions or combining the two, you're not alone. Here, 13 members of Forbes Nonprofit Council share their expert tips on maintaining accountability and empathy in the workplace.

1. Set Clear Expectations

Accountability with empathy begins with clarity of expectations. All employees deserve to know what they will be held accountable for from the beginning. We all deserve an opportunity to ask questions, learn skills and follow up. The key to this process is ongoing feedback. Leaders should constantly foster dialogue about what is working and what is not, from all perspectives. - Kait Peters, The People Concern

2. Take Care Of Your People And The Mission

I have to go back to what I learned as a leader of the U.S. Marines. One of the Corps' maxims is "Mission First, Marines Always." What this means is that mission accomplishment is the reason the organization exists, but taking care of your people—their needs, their growth, their desires—is an inherent part of accomplishing the mission. Over the long term, you can't do one without the other. - Brian Gilman, Warriors & Quiet Waters Foundation, Inc.

3. Focus On Why Accountability Is Critical To Clients

Focus on the "why." If you focus on why the metric, the compliance and the accountability are critical to your clients, the mission, and the work, it's much easier to not only get buy-in but also get accountability. When performance management conversations come up, then the focus is placed on why it's important and makes it easier to get people back on track. - Kim Jefferies, Brighton Center

4. Bind Empathy And Accountability By Establishing Trust

Trust is what binds accountability and empathy. Establishing empathy through individual, authentic and repeated conversations with our teams crystallizes expectations and establishes true role clarity. Accountability then becomes an outcome when those expectations aren't met and support isn't fully utilized. Starting with accountability obliterates the high-performance culture we desire. - Arthur Mills, New Teacher Center

5. Create Effective Two-Way Communication Systems

At Elevate, our people are our greatest asset. People thrive when they are heard and feel like they are part of a community. As leadership, when we set a clear vision and create effective two-way communication systems, we don't have to choose between empathy and accountability. We've created the conditions that promote them both. - Anne Evens, Elevate

6. Offer Significant Flexibility With Measurable Goals

We offer employees significant flexibility to do their job when and how it works for them. We're mostly remote, providing flexible hours, giving employees two extra days of summer PTO this year, as well as prioritizing mental and physical health and well-being support. At the same time, we stay laser-focused on clear, measurable goals and accountability for individual and organizational results. - Thomas Bognanno, CHC: Creating Healthier Communities

7. Be Intentional

The balance between accountability and empathy starts with being intentional. Are you being kind and clear in letting team members know where the edges are? What parts are nonnegotiable? Where do they have control over their resources, creativity and method? - KellyAnn Romanych, Veterans Legal Institute

8. Nurture A Culture Of Accountability And Mindfulness

The nonprofit executive has an obligation to nurture a culture that includes stewardship, transparency and accountability, along with the emerging productive principle of "mindfulness," which includes empathy. Therefore, the true opportunity is about advancing "strategic optimization" by fully realizing mission, values and a culture that nurtures both accountability and empathy. - Jesse Bethke Gomez, Metropolitan Center for Independent Living

9. Understand Your Team's Motivations And Collaborate

Understand what motivates your team, both personally and professionally. Collaborate with your team to set targeted goals based on those motivations and the strategic direction of the organization. - Cortney Nicolato, United Way of Rhode Island

10. Establish And Define Consistent Accountability

Accountability must be established clearly from the beginning. Accountability must be consistent because accountability is tied to productivity and productivity to success. As long as accountability is clearly highlighted and understood by all, empathy should not be a challenge. It is when accountability is not defined or consistent that balancing the two becomes muddled and off-balance. - Capri Bell, I Will Survive, Inc.

11. Find Balance Between Firmness And Employee Support

Leaders need to model a balance between firmness and employee support so their managers see it, embrace it and follow it. Leaders can only directly touch so many employees, but through consistent, long-term focus on the business, they can inform employees of the need to stay true to the organization's mission without running roughshod over individual employees. - Karen Horting, Society of Women Engineers

12. Focus On Developing Employee Relationships

My mother always said, if you have a relationship with your children, you don't need to set a lot of rules. Setting boundaries and expectations is important. However, if you have a relationship with your employees, you will have empathy for their circumstances and situations because you care about them. They will also have respect for you and a sense of responsibility for their actions. - Kristen Jaarda, American Council on Gift Annuities

13. Use Personality Assessments For The Whole Team

I really love the idea of using personality assessments so that leaders understand not only themselves, but the people they work with. We utilize Culture Index, which actually measures things like heart and head orientation. We also utilize StrengthsFinder. As we use these assessments, it helps to know where people will struggle and where they will excel. - Bill High, The Signatry