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Employee Performance Management

How to Actually Encourage Employee Accountability

by Ron Carucci

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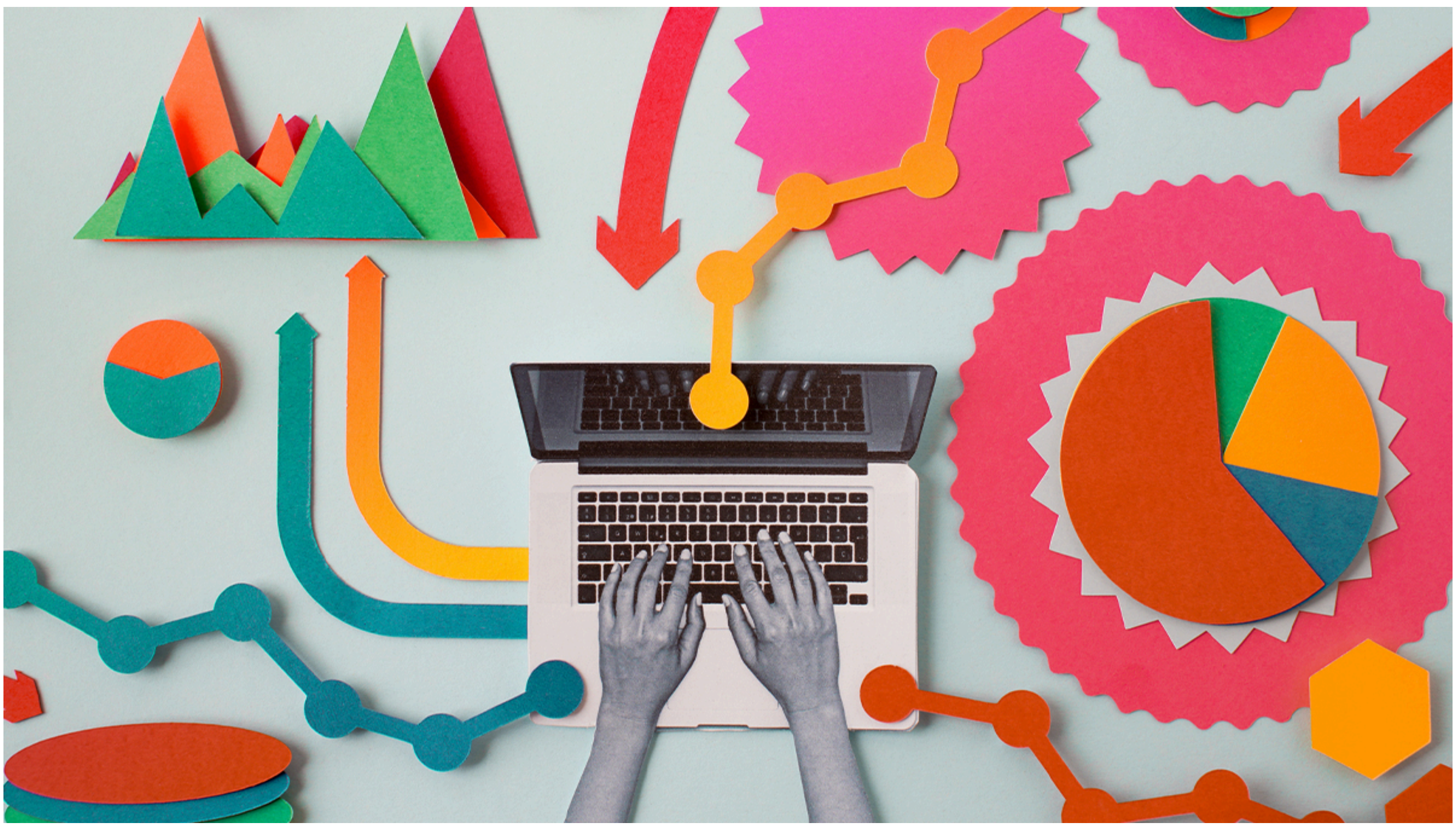

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Summary. Companies have been struggling to define and improve accountability processes —from annual performance appraisals to routine check-ins with the boss — for decades, and most employees still dread the conversations. Most of these processes usually result in forced categorizations in the form of numbers or labels, which can make employees feel threatened, demeaned, and insignificant. Even leaders who are beholden to flawed formal accountability processes can ensure that their employees feel their work is honored while simultaneously embracing opportunities to improve. In order to do so, dignity, fairness, and restoration must form the backbone of ongoing performance-related conversations. **close**

Fewer words in corporate vernacular induce a tighter wince than "accountability," and for good reason. Companies and leaders have grappled with what it is and how to achieve it effectively for decades. Ask anyone if they look forward to their performance evaluation or periodic check-in with their boss, and most will give an emphatic "no."

Data shows that 82% of managers acknowledge they have "limited to no" ability to hold others accountable successfully, and 91% of employees would say that "effectively holding others accountable" is one of their company's top leadership-development needs. Research also confirms how insignificant today's accountability systems make employees feel. Gallup found that only 14% of employees feel their performance is managed in a way that motives them, 26% get feedback less than once per year, 21% feel their performance metrics are within their control, and 40% feel as if their manager holds them accountable for goals they set. Add to that the fact that 70% of employees feel their managers aren't objective in how they evaluate their performance, and it comes as no surprise that 69% of employees don't feel they're living up to their potential at work.

The fundamental problem with accountability is that it now involves little more than the process of accounting. The scorekeeping nature of this process yields a built-in negativity bias, where leaders reflexively hunt for shortfalls, and the tallying usually ends with a forced categorization — a rating system of numbers or labels, sometimes stack-ranking employees against their peers. I recently spoke with a leader at a client organization just after his performance review, and he was infuriated. "How could he rate me a 3? I've always been a 4. My whole career, I've been rated at the top! Now, suddenly I'm a 3, just because he's only allowed to give out a certain number of 4s?" Listen to the painful conclusions this leader is drawing about himself and his boss. What should have been a productive conversation left him obsessed with a number and resentful of the person who consigned him to it. And he's not alone. A recent neuroscientific study revealed that we respond to being categorically rated with a sense of being threatened — we literally feel unsafe when someone puts us in a box in this way.

Accountability processes are the formal and informal ways that leaders talk about, assess, and affirm the contributions of those they lead and the improvements they can make to strengthen those contributions. They include everything from annual performance appraisals to routine check-ins with your boss. Even in the face of deeply flawed formal processes, leaders can ensure that their employees feel their work is honored while simultaneously embracing opportunities to improve. To make that experience commonplace, mere tweaks to the tallying processes of accountability won't move the needle. Companies must dramatically redefine what it means for leaders to create a culture of accountability. Based on my 30 years of observing leaders who do this well and through my research on accountability, I've identified three major shifts leaders need to make to ensure that the accountability experience dignifies employees' work and challenges them to make greater achievements — without making them feel demeaned or insignificant.

Make Dignity the Foundation

Managers must understand the weight of their own judgments. A recent study of the brain shows how other people's opinions of us influence our sense of self-efficacy. When leaders believe their role is to create conditions in which people make their best contributions — and genuinely enjoy doing so — the following core foundations of accountability improve:

Connections between leaders and direct reports deepen. Instead of obligatory monthly or quarterly check-ins during which employees provide rote updates, conversations should be undergirded by a sense of purpose. Questions like, “What did you learn this month?” or “What do you feel most proud of?” stir employees’ eagerness to tell their stories of achievement and struggle.

The quality of feedback and learning increases. When dignity, not surveillance, is the goal of accountability, the quality of evaluative feedback improves. When employees believe their bosses are genuinely interested in their success, they feel less guarded and less inclined to hide their underperformance. When bosses are committed to their employees’ success and are less focused on documentation, they feel comfortable offering feedback and coaching about underperformance.

One of the simplest ways to dignify those you lead is to ask for the story of their work. Instead of offering a perfunctory “good job” after somebody has finished a project, ask for details (“I’m sure it took more to get here than I can see. Can you talk to me about how you did it?”). As they tell their story, watch how animated they become as they tell you where they struggled and what they felt proud of.

Focus on Fairness

As I’ve written about before, when accountability systems are seen as fair, people are *four times* more likely to be honest (especially about their mistakes), act fairly toward others, and serve the organization’s purpose instead of their own interests.

Our accountability systems have painfully confused *sameness* with *fairness* and have been designed largely to avoid litigation and reduce a manager's biases. In practice, they've done more to stunt individuality, and that's exactly what makes them unfair.

Prioritizing fairness in our accountability processes allows two very important things to change. First, it reestablishes the connection between contribution and contributor. For decades, in an attempt at creating fairness, conventional thinking has kept the evaluation of work separate from the evaluation of people. This made sense when people were producing large volumes of the same output. But in a knowledge economy, people's ideas, creativity, and analysis are direct reflections of who they are — the nature of today's work makes accountability personal. It becomes *fair* when managers acknowledge contributions as the fruit of the unique talents of their employees. Efforts to force contribution and contributor apart are experienced as invalidating and unfair.

Second, focusing on fairness exposes biases within accountability systems. Plenty of research shows that organizations privilege certain groups via implicit biases within their accountability systems. Viewing these systems through the lens of fairness prompts honest questions about how to change them. Who has access to prized opportunities? What are the existing expectations about who will or won't excel? Whose voices and ideas get included? Questions like these reveal whether there's equitable opportunity to succeed, regardless of one's level of ability, and enable leaders to open up opportunities for people to shine with whatever talents they have. For example, a leader might broaden who gets to speak and present at meetings, or take a new approach to acknowledging traditionally privileged roles (like engineers at tech companies or marketers at branding companies) that levels the playing field for other types of contributions.

I spoke with Hubert Joly, a former CEO of Best Buy, whose acclaimed turnaround of the retailer is well known. Key to that transformation was a new focus on helping individuals be themselves, to "be human." As Joly told me:

> When I first started as CEO, and they showed me the forms to fill out about my team's performance, and they wanted me to put numbers in boxes, I thought, *Why would anyone do this?* I decided to simply ask people, "How do you feel things went?" — and they would often be harder on themselves than I would have. I would ask, "What do you need from me?" — and they would tell me. It seemed like a much more human approach to holding people accountable.

Joly applied that message to the organization as a whole."What does it look like when we are at our best?," store associates were asked during the process of setting standards for the company's new brand. Allowing employees to help define the standards to which they will be held, Joly recognized, leads to better systems of accountability. When people help set the bar, they are far more motivated to reach it, and often exceed it.

To demonstrate your commitment to fairness, ask those on your team — preferably anonymously — if they feel the playing field in your group is level, if they see some roles or people as privileged, or if they view you as you having "favorites." Even if your intentions are good, people may still feel like they don't have an equitable chance for success.

Make Restoration, Not Blame, the Goal

People dread accountability in their organizations. Why? Because when consequences are levied, they often feel shaming and harsh, despite corporate rhetoric about learning from failures. The reflexive response is to hide mistakes or point fingers elsewhere.

If leaders believed that falling short of a goal still had merit, it could radically alter how people treat their own — and others' — mistakes. As Kathleen Hogan, Microsoft's Chief People Officer, told me:

In a culture where people struggle to admit they don't know something, calculating risk can be tricky. Being open about failure helps us balance a growth mindset with accountability. We are learning to not just reward success, but also reward people who fell short while getting us closer. We want it to be acceptable to say, "I don't know, but I will find out." Learning from our mistakes gets us closer to our desired results — that's a new form of accountability for us.

To treat mistakes restoratively, leaders need humility, grace, and patience. They must see any person's arc of professional success as more than the sum total of any single assignment. Leaders also need the humility to acknowledge their contribution to people's failures. Did the person have the resources, skills, team support, and realistic timelines to be successful?

We have a long way to go before accountability within organizations becomes a welcomed process that yields fair, actionable feedback and encourages employees to embrace the opportunity to improve their performance and expand their contributions. Making dignity, fairness, and restoration foundational components of accountability systems is a powerful place to start.

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at Navalent, working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change. He is the bestselling author of eight books, including *To Be Honest* and *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Linked In at RonCarucci, and download his free “How Honest is My Team?” assessment.

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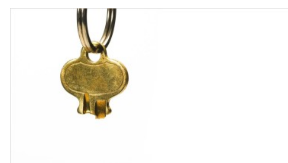

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