
The Lost Art of Accountability

Matt Bloom, Ph.D.
Mendoza College of Business
University of Notre Dame
wellbeing.nd.edu



 2011 Matt Bloom

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Accountable:

- Liable to be called to account, or to answer for responsibilities and conduct; answerable, responsible¹.
- Subject to giving an account: answerable; e.g., held her accountable for the damage².

I often ask my MBA students and the senior managers that participate in our executive education classes to describe what they think are the most important practices required to ensure employees maintain the highest levels of performance. Almost always, the notion of accountability is emphasized. The basic idea seems to be that managers must ensure that employees are meeting expectations, honoring their obligations, owning up to their responsibilities, and following through on their assignments. I also often hear the same concept mentioned in religious circles as a key component of a successful faith life. Here, the idea is that we need people that will “tell us the tough news” about ourselves, revealing to us those areas in our life where we are falling short of the ideals of our faith.

In principle, the ideas surrounding accountability have some merit. To be sure, most of us are blind, at least at times, to the deficiencies in our performance and to the lapses in our faithfulness. We can benefit greatly from the wisdom and insight of other people. The less-biased eyes

¹ Oxford English Dictionary

² Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary

of other people can help us find places where growth is possible and, with their good help, we can make the changes required to be a more effective professional or a more devout believer.

What is often missing from these conversations, however, are the essential foundations that make effective accountability possible. There are quite literally hundreds of research studies that confirm that without these critical relational building blocks, most of us will react negatively to bad news delivered by another person. We will either become defensive, protesting that we have been misunderstood and unfairly judged, or dismissive, discounting both the credibility of the information and the integrity of the messenger.

Effective accountability occurs when we really listen and react positively to tough news delivered to us by another person. Effective accountability happens when we take news about performance deficiencies or moral lapses to heart, and become fully committed to the hard work and difficult changes required to make things better. To be truly effective, accountability requires that our relationship with the messenger be firmly founded on trust. Trust is critically important because effective accountability is built on a willingness to be vulnerable to another person, a readiness to really listen to unpleasant news about what we are doing or how we are living, and the motivation to engage in the sometimes arduous work required to become a better worker or a better person.

Trust occurs when we make ourselves vulnerable to another person. “Trust but verify” is nonsense: if we verify someone’s actions we have not trusted them. With real trust, we depend on the actions of another person despite our inability to monitor or control them. This means that we only know whether the other person honored our trust after the fact, when it is too late to verify. If they were trustworthy, we have received some benefit; if they betrayed our trust, we have already been harmed. Trust is a marvelous resource because it grows with use. We begin by trusting someone in small things and, as they honor our trust, we can rely on them for more important things. At the same time, when others honor our trust, they come to rely on us and in so doing their trust in us grows.

Researchers have discovered that to trust someone, we must have confidence in their integrity, benevolence, and abilities. Integrity is our perception that another person acts consistently on a set of moral principles that we endorse and value. To trust another, we must see them as a person that strives to live with virtue and honor. Benevolence exists when we believe that the other person is deeply motivated by a desire to help us rather than by selfish interests to benefit themselves. We believe someone is acting with benevolence when we have confidence that their objective is to enhance our wellbeing. With respect to trust, ability refers to our confidence in the knowledge and skills of another person. To trust someone, we must feel sure that they have the capacity to make the decisions or perform the actions required of them. You might view me as a person of

integrity and benevolence, but you cannot trust me to do brain surgery because I have no training in (and probably no talent for) neurosurgery.

Effective accountability starts when we foster a trust-based relationship with another person and, over time, that person comes to rely on our wisdom, insight, and help. As trust grows, so does the willingness of the other person to really listen to our perspective and to act on what we say to them. As trust grows, so does the willingness of the other person to become open to our candid advice about changes they should consider making as they strive to reach their full potential as a professional and as a person. If we really want to hold others accountable, we start by holding ourselves accountable to building trust with those people. Beginning there not only creates the possibility for true accountability, it usually invites others to actively seek it with us.

Recently, I experienced a wonderful example of accountability done right. It was an experience that first surprised, then delighted me. I was meeting with the senior country managers for Catholic Relief Services and Caritas International from southeast Asia. This group of about thirty people meets once a year to encourage and learn from each other. On one of the final afternoons we were together, each leader had the opportunity to share details of one highly successful program being undertaken in their host country. Each description was inspiring and eye-opening for me, until the leaders from Bangladesh began to share. The focus of their talk was

on beneficiary accountability – beneficiaries are the people in need, those whom CRS and Caritas seek to help – and I found myself responding immediately with cynicism. I expected the typical business perspective: beneficiary accountability meant ensuring that those who received aid made good on the help provided to them. As the leaders began, I was at first dumbfounded, then thrilled. For CRS and Caritas, beneficiary accountability was the exact opposite of what I expected. It means finding ways to ensure that the assistance they provide is the right help, delivered in the right way, so that beneficiaries truly benefit. These humanitarian organizations turn the traditional view of accountability upside-down. For them, accountability means finding ways to hold *themselves* accountable *to* the beneficiaries. It means spending time and effort to create systems that ensure the program conducted by CRS and Caritas really make a positive difference in the world. Effectiveness for these organizations goes far beyond meeting the physical needs of their beneficiaries; it also includes ensuring that any assistance provided also respects the dignity and honors the cultural values and religious beliefs of each beneficiary. It is an extraordinarily high standard of excellence to demand of yourself, but it is one that the amazing people of CRS and Caritas strive for with diligence, compassion, and joy.

What would it mean if we took this perspective on accountability into the world of work? It would require that organizations and managers create systems to hold *themselves* accountable *to* their employees. Rather than managers holding employees accountable – the

traditional view – it would mean that the manager would create ways for their employees to hold them, the manager, accountable for effective leadership, a clear vision, meaningful goals, proper support, the right resources, and much more. And it would also mean creating systems that ensure the support, leadership, and management provided to employees actually helps those people be more effective and more satisfied in their work.

Building trust with those we lead has myriad benefits, among them is establishing the foundations for effective accountability. Start by working hard to foster trust-based relationships with the people you lead and you will likely find that people actively seek out your wisdom, insights, and help on how they can become a more effective worker and a better person.



enjoy work.
