# 10 BEST METHODS FOR IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

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# 10 BEST METHODS FOR IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

Practical checklist of top accountability tools from the world's most recognised business thought leaders.



**1 Planning**
Who, what, when, where

**2 The right people on the bus**

**3 Context**
'Why this matter'

**4 Communication**
Be clear and transparent

**5 Ownership**
One Person Ultimately Responsible

**6 High Expectations**
'You can do this'

**7 Attention**
'Wow, I'm needed.'

**8 R adical Candor**
Feedback to show you care

**9 Lead by Example**

Be a better you

**10 Supportive culture**
Comfortable and intense

# INTRODUCTION

As businesses settle into hybrid, in-office, or fully remote work, let's tackle one of the biggest challenges for leaders: accountability.
**82% say they either 'try but fail' or 'avoid it altogether.'** [1]

Why, oh why is holding someone to account for their work or behaviour so hard? Put simply, it's because human survival once depended on being liked. To stay fed and protected we learned to fear being disliked and hurting the feelings of those in our tribe.

But here's the thing. Accountability expert Mark Green told us:

- high performers love high accountability environments
- low performers hate high accountability environments (2)

And, with companies slammed left, right, and centre by what KPMG calls "a succession of 'once in a generation issues" (3) we need to retain those high performing A-players.
So, it's vital (and as we'll see it is also kind) to develop accountability skills to get over the fear and retain your best people.
This paper is based on research by global thought leaders we've featured at Growth Faculty.

**'MEMBERS OF GREAT TEAMS IMPROVE THEIR RELATIONSHIPS BY HOLDING ONE ANOTHER ACCOUNTABLE – PROVING THEY RESPECT EACH OTHER.' Patrick Lencioni,** *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.*

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1 What's the best definition of accountability?
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## WHAT IS THE BEST DEFINITION OF ACCOUNTABILITY?

Colin Ellis, author of The Project Book, says accountability simply means:

- **The buck stops with you**

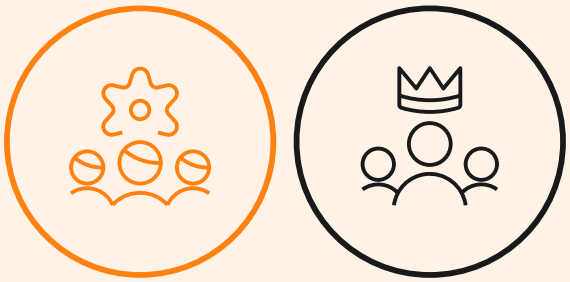
He also likes the Japanese expression setsumei skinin, the literal meaning of which is 'duty to explain'. (4)

"When you are accountable for a project, it is your duty to explain the progress of the project to anyone at any time." The Oxford English Dictionary definition is 'the fact or **condition of being accountable; responsibility' – so let's** look at responsibility too.

**ACCOUNTABILITY MEANS THE BUCK STOPS WITH YOU**

Colin Ellis

## ACCOUNTABILITY vs RESPONSIBILITY



QF32 captain Richard De Crespigny told us how he felt a responsibility to deliver every passenger home safely after his A380 aircraft suffered a catastrophic explosion mid-air in 2010.

Once safely on the tarmac, he felt accountable to them and the Qantas brand, so gave a personal guarantee to each passenger he'd take their calls if they needed him. (5)

**RESPONSIBILITY IS TAKING ON A TASK; ACCOUNTABILITY IS TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE OUTCOME AND RESULTS.**

# 10 EXAMPLES OF ACCOUNTABILITY AT WORK

Apparently, the ancient Romans had a tradition when engineers constructed an arch. As the capstone was hoisted into place, the engineer assumed accountability for his work in the most profound way possible: he stood under the arch. (6)

Accountability shows up in everyday actions and behaviours. Here are 10 examples our speakers have identified:

1. Admitting to mistakes
   Helping the team get better
2. Exceeding expectations
   100% done and then some
3. Putting a time buffer on tasks
   Avoiding 'planning fallacy'
4. Acting with integrity
   Protecting the brand and reputation
5. Getting the job done on time
   No reminders needed
6. Commitment to a belief in a higher purpose
   Giving their best effort
7. Avoiding vagueness
   Being clear and kind
8. Showing leadership
   Taking ownership
9. Helping others in the team
   'Shovelling the walks'
10. Contributing to the culture
    Positive and dependable behaviour



## Admitting to mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes. Owning up is accountability in action. In recent years Etsy introduced 'blameless post-mortems' to encourage learning from mistakes without blaming or shaming. The Innovation Formula author, Dr Amantha Imber says they're held 24 hours after the mistake so emotions die down and people feel safe to come forward. (7)



## Exceeding expectations

It's doing more than asked: 100% done and then some. Liz Wiseman, author of Impact Players, told a Growth Faculty virtual audience that high-impact contributors exceed expectations, like adding an executive summary to a written report. (8)



## Putting a time buffer on tasks

People underestimate how long a task will take, says Greg McKeown, author of Effortless and Essentialism. This is called 'planning fallacy' and it leads us to overcommit to opportunities at the expense of completing them. Greg says this causes us to be late to meetings and to finish tasks. Accountability is ensuring adequate time buffers (Greg recommends a 50%-time buffer) be placed on most tasks. (9)



## Acting with integrity

This is doing the right thing. When there are choices to be made, a team with a culture of accountability will choose the right path. They know that their brand reputation, their team's reputation and their own reputation (and sense of self-worth and meaning) are at stake.

## 10 EXAMPLES OF ACCOUNTABILITY AT WORK

5 

### Getting the job done on time, without reminders.

Managers come to depend on high-impact team members who get the job done without reminders, says Liz Wiseman. As one CEO told Liz, when speaking of a direct report, "It's more often that he'll remind me of a deadline than I have to remind him." (10)

6 

### Commitment to a belief in a higher purpose

Belief in a higher purpose inspires people to give their very best effort. Finding meaning and purpose in their role at work (their 'why') will help team members push through obstacles, according to Charlene Li, author of The Disruption Mindset. (11)

7 

### Avoiding vagueness

Clear is kind. David Allen, author of Getting Things Done, says collaborative cultures may see directness as impolite. What's truly impolite, he says, is allowing people to walk away from discussions unclear. Ask 'So what's the next action on this?' at meetings, and ensure all roles and tasks are clearly understood. (12)

8 

### Showing leadership

James Kerr in his book Legacy tells how the New Zealand All Blacks improve accountability by developing leadership in every player. (13) Training weeks are structured so responsibility for decision-making gradually evolves from management to players; by Saturday the outcome is entirely in the hands of **the players. Takeaway: Have all team members develop leadership skills.**

9 

### Helping others in the team

Jim Collins in BE. 2.0 uses the analogy of a town where it snows in the winter. Yes, each person is responsible for their own patch of the footpath. But it works best when people also willingly step up to 'shovel the walks' of their neighbours as needed. He says this blend gives you high individual/ unit performance and overall group cohesion. (14)

10 

### Contributing to the culture

Accountability is behaviour as much as finishing tasks. Being a positive, honest, reliable, and loyal team member with a can-do attitude and a commitment to the company's goals is what makes a culture of accountability.

**POST-MORTEMS ARE NEVER ABOUT BLAME AND SHAME**

# 10 BEST METHODS FOR IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

Expert Mark Green taught us that accountability is like a warning system for whether we are on track. If your organisation does not allow the sharing of bad news, you're in danger.

To improve accountability, try these proven methods to keep on track and out of trouble.

1 **Planning**

Planning keeps you on track. So, don't leave things to chance. Shannon Byrne Susko turned her company around through her 3HAG Way planning framework. "You forecast CASH first, then WIDGETS, because it's the widgets that are going to make money for us," says Shannon. "We don't wait till the end of the month and say 'oh we lost' – widgets allow us to maintain a simple scoreboard, connect us to the team, and show us how we make money." (15)

2 **The Right People on the Bus**

Make excellent hiring choices. Jim Collins says in Good to Great that if you have 'the right people on the bus', the problem of motivating and managing people largely goes away.

"The right people don't need to be tightly managed or fired up; they will be self-motivated by the inner drive to produce the best results and to be part of creating something great."

**'GREAT VISION WITH MEDIOCRE PEOPLE STILL PRODUCES MEDIOCRE RESULTS'**

**Jim Collins, author of 'Good to Great'**



3 **Context**

State your purpose. As Julia Gillard told us in her interview on Women lin Leadership, "Be clear about the sense of purpose that drives you – it should be written down and carried with you day by day." (16)

But don't stop there. Karen James, author of On Purpose, says purpose without a vision never gets realised. "Simon Sinek talks about knowing your why, but if people can't see where that why is going to take you it's very difficult for them to connect with it." (17) Tell people why the task they've been set is important to the organisation, to the team and to you.



Patrick Lencioni in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* says peer pressure is effective.

*"A good way to make it easier for team members to hold one another accountable is to clarify publicly exactly what the team needs to achieve, who needs to deliver what, and how everyone must behave in order to succeed."*

...

4 **Communication**

Be transparent instead of playing your cards close to your chest, says Mark Green. Make sure everyone is clear about:

- Priorities and working on What is Important Now (W.I.N.).
- **The results expected of them: What are the results you are paid** to deliver through your role? (I'm paid for X net promoter score, X net profit, or X on-time delivery)

MIT Sloan School of Management Professor Bob Pozen says regular check-ins and using team collaboration software are good for hybrid work teams to keep clarifying what objectives really mean to your team or organisation. (19)

# 10 BEST METHODS FOR IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY

5 **Ownership**

For every critical task or objective, there should be One Person Ultimately Responsible (OPUR) says Jim Collins in BE. 2.0. When you ask, "Who's the OPUR on this?" there should be a clear, unambiguous response from someone "I'm the OPUR."

An OPUR mentality is one of ownership. Every individual needs to have an OPUR mentality and clear their OPUR tasks. Team members can step in to help but you need single-point accountability on tasks for an accountability culture.

6 **High Expectations**

Tell people you believe in their ability to get the job done. Then set the bar high. Former New Zealand All Blacks captain Sean Fitzpatrick says in Legacy the team has a saying 'Don't be a good All Black. Be a great All Black. Don't just be satisfied to reach your targets. Go higher."

Legacy author James Kerr says herein lies the power of storytelling "The truth is we don't so much tell stories. Stories tell us."

7 **Attention**

Don't let people think you don't notice or care. Employees whose managers are great at recognising their efforts are more than 40% more engaged than those with managers who are not. Plus, appreciated employees offer more discretionary effort and are less likely to quit. (20)

Former Ford chief Alan Mulally made sure to celebrate every step to show that making progress was an expected behaviour. "People feel 'Wow, I'm needed, I'm supported'," he says in Leading with *Gratitude.* (21)

**DON'T LET PEOPLE THINK YOU DON'T CARE**

8 **Radical Candor**

Develop better skills to give and receive feedback. At our Radical Candor masterclass we learned to make praise and criticism part of normal conversation:

-Care Personally: Give a damn! You're dealing with real human relationships so use common human decency (even love).

**-Challenge directly: Be willing to piss people off! Reject the motto** 'If you don't have anything nice to say don't say anything at all." It's not just your job now, it's your obligation! (22)

"Feeding people half-truths or bulls**t to make them feel better (which is almost always about making ourselves feel more comfortable) is unkind." - Brené Brown (23)

**CARE PERSONALLY: GIVE A DAMN! CHALLENGE DIRECTLY: BE WILLING TO PISS PEOPLE OFF!**

9 **Lead by example**

The skills and behaviours of your leaders set the tone for your culture. For meetings JP Morgan Chase's CEO and chair Jamie Dimon always reads the reports so he is completely engaged. He makes a list of accountability questions: How come we spoke about adding 500 bankers and we've only added 100? Why is our attrition rate 15% and not 8%? He also prompts for feedback: "If you think my question is a complete waste of time, you are required to tell me that, too." (24)

Answer honestly: Do your leaders regularly model accountable behaviours?

10 **Supportive Culture**

Most importantly, accountability these days is unlearning 'command and control' leadership and replacing it with a psychologically safe workplace.

Harvard Business School's Professor Amy Edmondson says if your people don't feel safe to fail or speak up, you may be creating an illusion of success that will turn around and bite you later.

"Early information about shortcomings can nearly always mitigate the size and impact of future, large-scale failure," she writes in The Fearless Organization.(25)

## SUMMARY

Since the pandemic, we've all been focused on getting flexibility sorted, knowing all too well it's right up there with salary as a key retention tool. As part of this, we've had to trust each other to be productive away from the office.

Putting it all together, we are settling into our post-pandemic ways of working, and starting to look more closely at outcomes and behaviours (a culture of accountability):

- Team members feel safe to give feedback, share 'bad news', and their ideas.
- Team members know what their role is, why it's important, and the results they're expected to deliver.
- Team members know who is the One Person Ultimately Responsible (OPUR) for tasks.
- Each team member is dependable and holds their peers to account.

Each year we help tens of thousands of people develop these skills

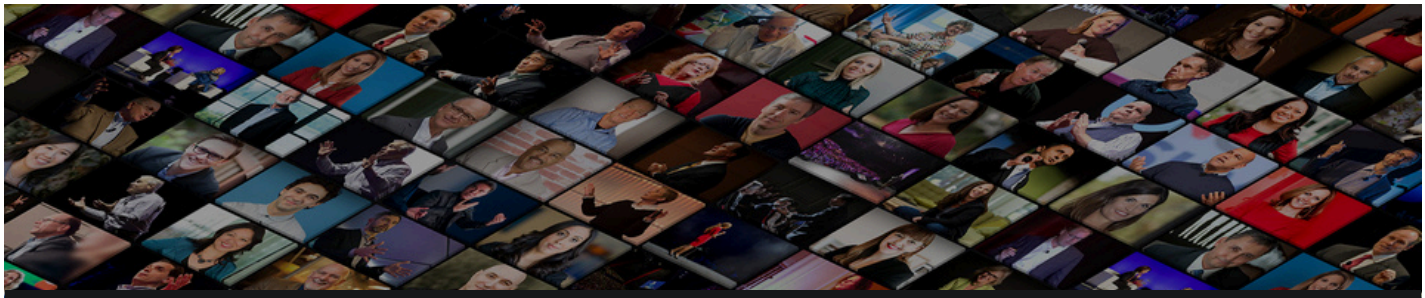
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**Good luck with accountability!**

"WHERE THINGS ARE GOING WELL, I'M NOT REALLY INTERESTED IN INTERFERING. BUT WHERE THINGS AREN'T GOING WELL, THEN I HAVE VERY OPERATIONAL-RELATED REVIEWS WITH THE RELEVANT PEOPLE WHERE WE DIG DOWN WHERE THE PROBLEMS ARE. WE'LL FIGURE OUT A PLAN AND I'LL HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE TO DELIVER IT ON IT."

**Kasper Rorsted, Adidas CEO, in CEO Excellence**





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