

How Do I Hold People Accountable?

MAN'S WISDOM AND WAY

Get in their face with tough talk. Intimidate, threaten, and bully. If they don't like it, they should either step up or opt out!

In the 1,000 leadership presentations I give each decade, I have discovered that this old-school palaver is still the strategy of choice for many misguided leaders. While trying to find the right word to describe this tendency herein, I could not decide whether to use *hopeless*, *futile*, or *stupid*. Thus, I have decided to define this method for accountability as *hopelessly futile stupidity*.

THE BOOK'S WISDOM AND WAY

Keys to holding others accountable include clear feedback on performance and consequences for failing to perform. These topics are covered in future chapters. But before we get ahead of

ourselves, it's important to remember the first nonnegotiable for accountability: You can't first hold others accountable until you're resolutely clear about what you expect from them!

While visiting the Mount of Beatitudes in Israel, I was struck by its prominence in height and stature compared to its surroundings. Thus, it is fitting that Jesus chose this spot to teach on the topic of elevated values and expectations. In Matthew 5–7, Jesus outlined the revolutionary values of the Christian faith with His Sermon on the Mount. He presented clear behavioral standards, along with appropriate rewards or penalties, contingent upon one's obedience. Whereas the Old Testament ended in Malachi 4:6 with a curse, Jesus began His ministry teaching on the Mount with a blessing: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* You are able to bless your employees in a similar manner when you clearly define what you expect from them. You simultaneously strengthen your organization, as doing so provides an essential benchmark for accountability.

Why did Jesus set forth expectations and values so early in His ministry? For the same reason you must do so within your organization: You cannot possibly hold anyone accountable until you define what you expect in the first place! But even more important, it gave Him a chance to model what He expected with His own life. Even when Jesus's mouth was closed, He taught by His life. You must do likewise. After all, you cannot credibly hold others accountable for the behaviors you have defined as nonnegotiable unless you personally live them.

There is no record in Matthew of Jesus offering feedback to anyone, much less holding them accountable, until He had clearly defined what He expected from his followers. Using THE BOOK as a guide, consider the seven thoughts and rules in this chapter to help you create a higher-accountability culture in your organization.

Some leaders believe that establishing clear, high, written expectations is harsh and is a form of micromanagement; therefore, they present their expectations punctuated with an apology. On the contrary, what is truly harsh is *not* letting people know what you expect and allowing them to fail. Thus, if you want to apologize for something, apologize for letting others flounder and drift, but never for being clear about what you expect from them.

1. Ambiguity is the enemy of accountability.

Until you define or redefine expectations for technical and behavioral performance on the job, holding others accountable is unfair and impossible, because the question becomes, “Accountable for what?”

2. Failing to communicate the truth of expectations and accountability to your associates puts “blood on your hands” when you terminate them and they don’t see it coming.

If you catch employees by surprise when you fire them, you have failed as a leader. You either failed to set clear expectations, failed to give honest feedback on their performance, or failed to hold them accountable throughout their tenure with your organization. The Bible relates a parallel situation when God instructs Ezekiel to act as a watchman for his contemporaries. In a similar manner, you serve as the watchman for any entity in which you wish to exhibit leadership.

Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me: When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that

same wicked man shall die in his inquiry, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked ways, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul. [Ezek. 3:17–19]

3. Giving honest feedback, as fast after a behavior as possible, is a key to eliminating gray areas and holding others accountable.

No one working with you should ever have to guess where they, or you, stand concerning your expectations or their performance. Give fast, honest, specific feedback to reinforce productive actions and confront errant behaviors.

4. Consequences for failing to perform must be established and imposed.

In Matthew 25, you read about the Parable of the Talents. A talent was the largest measure of money in the Greek system. The unprofitable servant had his one talent taken from him—the one he refused to use—and given to the top performer, who had increased his five talents to ten! His penalty for not using the opportunity he had been given was to lose it. Even though this “one talent” servant was trusted with less than the others, he was still accountable for what little he was given. As is typical of those failing to deliver results, this underachiever casually attempted to excuse burying his talent, almost as though he were expecting praise for his prudence in preserving rather than increasing it. To exacerbate matters, he made light of his sloth by uttering an excuse and blaming the master who had entrusted him with the talent: “*Sir, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground*” (Matt. 25:24–25).

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Like the master in this story you must “coach with consequences,” enriching those who deliver results and punishing the sluggards falling short. Without consequences for failing to reach established performance standards, those standards are reduced to suggestions, and your personal credibility is rendered ridiculous.

In the first book of Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul is writing about sexual immorality and its consequences. It seems as though a church member was sleeping with his father’s wife. Note that Paul gives no apology for the consequence. The fellow who was living in sexual sin was to be put out of the church, and suffer for lack of its fellowship, until he had repented and was spiritually restored. Paul rightly reasoned that condoning someone who publicly persisted in such scandalous sin could corrupt the entire body of believers in Corinth. Then, as now, professing Christians are on public display. Those who confess Christ with their lips, but deny Him with their lifestyle, do incalculable damage to Christ’s cause. Read these words from the apostle Paul concerning this accountability issue:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a

one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.
[1 Cor. 5:1–5]

It is essential that your team members are taught that when they choose a behavior, they are also choosing the consequences for that behavior. They should not consider themselves as victims. Rather, they're reaping what they've sown. In fact, the behavior/consequence connection works both ways: Choose a productive behavior and earn a positive consequence. Choose an unproductive behavior, and you will reap the penalty you have sown for yourself. What could be fairer?

5. Expectations are easily forgotten. Thus, the leader must live them and repeat them often.

Just about the time you tire of repeating an expectation is when others are beginning to *get* it. Never fear that you will overcommunicate any aspect of clarity to your people. It will not happen. Following are three examples.

- **The Ten Commandments (×2)**

The Ten Commandments were first given in Exodus 20. They were reviewed again in Deuteronomy 5, albeit to a new generation. Moses did not rely on his followers' memories or on what may have been passed down to them from their ancestors. He erred on the side of "repetition brings retention."

- **Finders Keepers (×2)**

In John 14:21, Jesus said: "*He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.*" One chapter later,

in John 15:10, Jesus declared to the same group of disciples: *“If you keep My commandments you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.”*

The Bible is filled with repetition, not because the authors forgot they stated these words, but because they are important! Especially in today’s age of “it is not my fault,” you must work doubly hard to eliminate the excuses of, “I did not know that was what you wanted,” “I can’t read your mind,” and the like.

- **Sexual Immorality (×3)**

In just a single chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul warns of sexual immorality three times! He made it impossible for anyone to play dumb or say, “I wonder what the church has to say about sexual immorality?”

- *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God”* (1 Cor. 6:9–10).
- *“Now the body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body”* (1 Cor. 6:13).
- *“Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality, sins against his own body”* (1 Cor. 6:18).

Even if they get it, repeat it to reinforce it.

It is estimated that Paul spent only a few weeks or months in the city of Thessalonica (now called Salonica) in modern-day Greece, before being run out of town by the Jewish leaders who opposed his teachings. Thus, some of his earliest letters were written to the Thessalonian churches to reinforce his

teachings, and encourage the new Christians there. In fact, after his letter to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians were the earliest letters written by Paul. (Contrary to what many assume, the letters of Paul are not listed in chronological order in the New Testament.) It was obvious that Paul believed the Thessalonians knew about brotherly love and lived accordingly; however, he felt compelled to repeat the expectation anyhow, in order to support and advocate more of the same behavior. *“But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so towards all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more. . . .”* (1 Thess. 4:9–10).

When it comes to your vision, values, mission, and performance expectations, err on the side of overcommunication with your words and by your deeds.

6. Expectations should be visible, in writing, and communicated through various mediums.

Human beings tend to manipulate gray areas to rationalize or excuse their failure to perform. Point 6 goes a long way in helping you to eliminate this possibility.

In Deuteronomy 6, God topped off the Ten Commandments Moses had just reviewed in Deuteronomy 5 with the greatest commandment: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength”* (Deut. 6:5).

He then instructed as follows: *“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”* (Deut. 6:6–9).

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You can make expectations visible, credible, and memorable in the following ways:

- Discuss them both publicly and one-on-one.
- Publicly commend those who fulfill an expectation.
- Evaluate employees against them during performance interviews.
- Put them in writing and go over them with each employee. Require each team member to sign off to acknowledge that they understand what is expected and affirm that you and they are on the same page.

7. Accountability is ineffective when you use it as a tool to try to trick or strong-arm the *wrong* person into doing the *right* thing.

You can't trick the wrong people into being competent. This is because empowering them with clear expectations and providing them with the training, resources, and opportunities to attain the established objectives will not improve their moral character. In other words, accountability is not a strategy for tricking a corrupt person into behaving rightly!

I cover this topic more thoroughly in Chapter 4, which relates to hiring the right people. For now, it is important to understand that if you do not start with employees who have the right character, then training them, giving them direction, and holding them accountable will not improve them or their performance in any sustainable manner.

Judas was not inferior in knowledge or miracle-working power to the other disciples. He had the same opportunities to grow, perform, and develop spiritually as his 11 counterparts; however, Jesus's clear expectations, training, positive example, and accountability did not penetrate an unyielding and willful

heart, determined to rot in its own corruption. On the contrary, Judas developed a greater guilt for neglecting to use what he was given, and he ultimately became the most shameful disciple. Without the right moral foundation, your ethically challenged employees cannot be expected to excel, despite the high degree of accountability you have as the centerpiece of your culture. A morally corrupt employee is far more likely to shape your culture than your culture is to change his or her wrong and inflexible heart.

As you can see, if you are going to hold others accountable by *THE BOOK*, your first responsibility is to create clarity. This would be an appropriate time to honestly evaluate clarity of expectations within your enterprise. As basic as this seems, it is essential to creating a high-performance culture rooted in strong accountability. Incidentally, if you're not certain whether your expectations are specific and high enough, they're not!

Consider the following Omega thoughts and Scriptures, chosen because they relate specifically to the topic of this chapter.

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OMEGA

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin’” (Exod. 32:33–34).

1. The only way you will have credibility when holding others accountable for your expectations and values is if you personally live them! Your words and deeds must be in alignment. If your organization has clear performance and behavioral standards, how consistently do you live them? If you “talk right and walk left,” you’ll leave your people behind.
2. What is your first step to create a higher-accountability culture?

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and Me in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:5–6).

