Career Compass No. 53:

How Do I Hold People Accountable?

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest explains that accountability is an ongoing conversation and relationship between the manager and an individual employee or staff team.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a division manager in the county's public works, parks, and buildings department. My concern is that some individual members of the division are not sufficiently accountable to the environmental goals that have been set. The board of supervisors has identified climate protection as a priority, and I am committed to these important environmental issues, but some of our staff do not seem too energized about them.

When I don't see a lot of energy or much desire to learn and grow, I try to encourage individuals as well as the underperforming team but I come off as carping. As their manager, I feel frustrated and inadequate.

How do I push these low-energy employees and hold them accountable?

Quit carping and create a culture of accountability.

DR. BENEST: I know that you feel responsible for your division's performance and the work of the cross-cutting team that you manage. It is frustrating when others do not share your enthusiasm about issues of consequence to the organization and the community.

Responding to the Accountability Challenge

In "[Do You Understand What Accountability Really Means?](#)" (Harvard Business Review Blog, October 13, 2016), Jonathon Raymond suggests that there are two fundamental problems with how managers view accountability. First, most of us associate accountability with punishment. Second, we often view accountability as a one-time event instead of an ongoing conversation and relationship between the manager and an individual employee or staff team.

1. DON'T RELY ON AUTHORITY

Your formal authority as a manager can only force a minimal level of performance and compliance. When you rely on authority, you try to create accountability through rewards and punishment. This kind of "pushing" creates frustration, distress, resentment, and fear. All of these reactions works against problem solving and undermine commitment.
You need to find a way to connect the motivations and energies of people to the climate protection issue and invite them to join you on the journey.

2. BE HUMBLE

Some of us leaders tend to be arrogant. We start with the assumption that others have the problem or that others need to learn and grow. Arrogance imposes goals and metrics and seeks compliance. Arrogance assumes that others need to be accountable. (See Dan Rockwell, ["Everything Good in Leadership Begins With Humility,"](#) Leadership Freak Blog, September 10, 2016.)

Humility suggests that we explore the aspirations of others, their hopes and interests as they relate to the environment challenge. As humble leaders, are we

- Seeking input, options, and feedback from others and then integrating their views into the plan?
- Listening with openness?
- Inquiring about the obstacles that people may face and how we can assist them?
- Exploring their concerns (without judging)?
- Serving others and being truly accountable to them?

3. START WITH THE AMBITIONS OF OTHERS

As leaders, we must know what motivates and energizes those who report to us. We do that by asking about their life stories, hopes and dreams, interests, and ambitions. Of course, this requires that we provide time for people to tell their stories and for us to listen and find what motivates them and compels them.

In addressing the challenge of environmental sustainability, we might want to ask what part of addressing the challenge would energize them. We might also want to ask

- What do you want to learn?
- Where do you want to "stretch"?
- What are the "gifts" that you can contribute to addressing the challenge?
- What is our "collective ambition"?
- What great things would we like to achieve together?
- What do we commit to do?
- What are the consequences for the organization and the community if we do not live up to our commitments?
- What kind of peer commitments are we all willing to make to each other?

Accountability is really about the commitments that individuals and team members are willing to freely make.

4. FOCUS ON PURPOSE

We often start with the "what" to do and "how" we need to do it. We need to start with the "why" and the meaning and purpose of the task at hand. For example, what's the purpose behind our environmental sustainability goals? What are hoped-for results for the department, organization, and community?

5. EMPHASIZE YOUR OWN ACCOUNTABILITY AS LEADER

As you discuss with individuals or the team the challenges to be addressed, stress what you are committed to do. For instance

- What obstacles will you try to eliminate or reduce?
- What resources will you secure for them?
- What learning or training will you facilitate for the individual or the team?

Then, of course, you must perform and demonstrate your commitment.

6. USE SMART GOALS AND PROMOTE "OWNERSHIP"

Once people have expressed what would energize or motivate them, what they would like to learn, and what commitments they will make to achieve the collective ambition of the group, then it is time for the individual contributor or the team to develop some SMART goals that reflect their commitments. SMART goals are

Specific
Measurable
Agreed upon
Realistic
Time-bound

SMART goals should be meaningful and help the group define success. For instance, if the division commits to address the challenge of water conservation, a SMART goal could be: "Our division will work with city departments to reduce water usage by 20% by the end of the fiscal year."

It is also a good idea to break up the work into milestones or "chunks" so that people can see progress and forward movement. As Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer documented in their book [The Progress Principle](#), people will stay motivated when they see progress.

In developing a SMART goal, it is important to clarify who "owns" the goal. That person or team needs to develop the goal (with your feedback) and then report on a regular basis to the larger group on the progress that is being made. People take pride in reporting the progress achieved. To help an individual or team quickly measure their progress, they can develop a quick-and-dirty dashboard. If the project goals are being met and the project is on track with respect to budget and timelines, the dashboard is "green." If the group is struggling to meet project goals and progress is being made only in certain areas, the dashboard is "yellow." "Yellow" suggests that the team needs to take corrective action to meet the project goals. A "red" designation means the project is not under control, and there are serious problems with scope, budget, and/or timelines. The team needs to figure it out with support from the manager.

Once an individual contributor or team owns the goal, they need some measure of autonomy in how to achieve it. If people do not have autonomy, it is difficult to own a goal. As Dan Pink noted in [Drive](#), purpose and autonomy are two of the big drivers of self-motivation.

7. MAKE IT A LEARNING JOURNEY

Since new learning engages people, you might ask an individual contributor or team member to coordinate some learning activities. For instance, a team member can arrange site visits to other public agencies that are addressing the same environmental sustainability challenges; tour corporate facilities that are "green"; or search for best practices and then share them with the group or department. In the division or team meetings, provide time for employees to share what they learned, as well as their emerging experiences.

8. TURN UP THE HEAT, LOWER THE HEAT

Stress is good if it is "eustress." It is bad if it is "distress."

As Liane Davey noted in "[How to Put the Right Amount of Pressure on Your Team](#)" (Harvard Business Review Blog, July 1, 2016), good leaders know when it is appropriate to turn up the heat and emphasize the urgency of upping performance and better responding to the challenge and the collective ambition of the group. However, with too much urgency and stress, individuals or team members feel overwhelmed, get immobilized, and basically shut down. To complicate matters for leaders trying to assess the appropriate level of stress, individuals react differently to heightened stress.

Therefore, you must first assess the amount of urgency and stress that someone is experiencing so you can dial up the heat or bring it down to a simmer. (See John Kotter's concept of the "productive range of distress" in his book [Leading Change](#).)

If an employee or team is experiencing too much comfort and is not taking action to move forward, here are some things you as the leader can do:

- Increase the frequency and specificity of feedback and coaching but decrease the intensity of the feedback. Increased frequency of specific feedback demonstrates that you are noticing one's behavior.
- Refer back to the importance and meaning of the effort.
- Check in about any problems or roadblocks that the employee may be encountering and ask how the person will solve the problem.
- Offer assistance and support (without taking on responsibility for solving the problem or doing the work).

In a high-distress situation, you can

- Break the work into smaller sequential "chunks" and focus the employee or team on the next piece of work.
- Increase positive feedback to recognize and reinforce small movements forward.
- Bring in internal customers or other stakeholders to talk about the importance of the work and how they benefit from the efforts of the team.
- Help employees problem solve in a calm and reassuring manner.

A good leader constantly monitors the temperature of individuals and teams and learns when and how to turn the heat up or down.

9. MODEL THE APPROPRIATE ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR

Modeling is the most powerful way to communicate and lead. In low-stress environments, you as the leader must model a sense of excitement and urgency about the journey. In a high-stress environment, you need to model calmness, steadiness, and optimism.

If an individual or the group needs to expand its learning due to the new challenges, you as the leader must engage in new learning and share that learning with the group.

If you want to create a safe environment for individuals and team members to ask for help when needed or acknowledge mistakes, you must be willing to show some vulnerability and ask for assistance or admit missteps. (See Career Compass No. 32 "The Power of Vulnerability.")

10. CELEBRATE COMMITMENT

Along the way, it is important to help the group recognize and celebrate movement toward success. This kind of "purposeful partying" could be a simple bagel or pizza party or ice cream social. Celebrating milestones maintains momentum and reinforces engagement and commitment.

Creating a Culture of Accountability

In responding to the accountability challenge, you cannot rely on your formal authority. You must focus on the commitments that people are willing to make, and those commitments are freely chosen.

Ultimately, we leaders must help promote a "culture of accountability." Culture is simply "the way we do things around here." (See Career Compass No. 51 "Building a World-Class Culture.") To build a culture of accountability, ask yourself and the group some questions. For example, to what degree

- Do team members truly see the meaning and purpose behind the work or task?
- Have we as a group developed through conversation a clear vision, specific goals, and expectations of each other?
- Is there shared leadership?
- Do we have the capabilities, resources (including time), and support to achieve what we intend?
- Is there a large measure of autonomy on how to do the work and achieve the goal?
- Are we debriefing along the way and learning from missteps?
- If we fail, what are the consequences for the department, organization, and community?
- Do we have true peer commitment and accountability?

As Dan Rockwell stated in "How To Hold People Accountable Without Using Authority" (Leadership Freak Blog, September 30, 2015), "Accountability isn't the cure for low commitment, it's an expression of high commitment."

Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.