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Really Means?

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Every leader I've ever met sees accountability as a foundational ingredient in a healthy and sustainable culture. The problem is, as is often the case with leadership and management ideas, we use the word without really understanding what it means.

Usually, we make the mistake of holding on to one or both of these hidden beliefs:

- We have a deeply held association between accountability and punishment — instead of considering it a tool to help people unlock their highest self.
- We have a deeply held assumption that accountability is a one-off event — rather than thinking it's a long-term personal conversation between manager and employee.

It's ironic because most of us have had at least one experience that runs counter to that. When someone in a position of authority in our life — a boss, a parent, a teacher — didn't let us take the easy way out: "This is where you are right now. This is where you say you want to be. Based on what I've learned in my life, this is what it's going to take to get there. Because I care about you, I see it as my job to let you know when you go off track."

Why are we depriving our employees of that kind of experience?

I suggest thinking of accountability as a dial with five steps. You start at the low end, and then turn up the dial if necessary.

It's the first three steps — what we call the mention, the invitation, and the conversation — that most managers skip over, leading to employee disengagement and cultural stagnation. The last two steps, what we call the boundary and the limit, cover the ground of probation and termination, albeit in a far more humanistic and supportive frame. Fortunately, most managers have to use these more extreme steps only rarely; unfortunately, too many managers jump right to them, bypassing the first three steps and leaving employees blindsided by tough feedback.

The first three steps cover the essential skills of naming, framing, and unpacking performance issues in a way that quickly moves from surface-level events to meaningful and actionable personal growth themes:

- **The mention.** The first step is naming small but problematic behaviors in an informal way in real time. By pulling an employee aside to put words to what you're noticing, instead of waiting for a crisis, you start to build a relationship of mutual respect. You show that you genuinely care about their growth by acknowledging that they're overwhelmed instead of pretending you don't see and by helping them find their contribution to a conflict instead of letting it fester.
- **The invitation.** We're great at seeing patterns in other people's behavior; it's harder to see those patterns in ourselves. The invitation is taking the time to help your employee connect the dots. For example, let's say you saw typos in a team member's client email on Monday, they seemed disengaged in a team meeting on Wednesday, and then there was a miscommunication with a teammate on Thursday. Ask them what those events might have in common, or point to a deeper theme.

- **The conversation.** This is the place to go deeper, by asking questions that guide people to the “aha!” moment, when they discover for themselves how changing this pattern at work would have positive impacts at home. It might sound something like this: “We’ve been talking about you taking on too many projects and the impact that’s having on the quality of the most important ones. I’m not asking for you to share what you come up with here, but one question that helps me is, ‘Where does this pattern show up in my personal life, and what would be the benefit if I stopped?’”

The key to building the bridge between work performance and personal growth is to focus on impacts. How are people showing up in a way that is making life harder, more complicated, or more frustrating for the people around them? It’s your job to guide them to make those connections. It’s their job to do the work from there.

In short, be observant and address problems that you see. Follow up with your employee to let them know it’s important. Then walk it down with them – to the place where the line between personal and professional growth disappears. Not because you’ve gone over that line, but because you’re treating them as a whole person.

At work as in life, we all need the people who care about us to reflect us back to ourselves, to be centered enough in themselves to let us work through our initial defensiveness and excuses so that we can let them go and get back to the work of becoming a better version of ourselves. Accountability can help do that.

Jonathan Raymond is the author of the new book [Good Authority: How to Become the Leader Your Team is Waiting For](#). He currently works with business owners, executives, and managers to help them create high performance cultures and become better leaders, and is the former CEO and CBO of E-Myth.
