

Practice Management: How leaders increase accountability and results

By **Bob Prosen**

(Dec. 11, 2006) - Leaders are always searching for ways to increase accountability to get the results they need. My advice is to start by defining your role when it comes to delivering results.

Simply put, the leader's job is to ensure every member of the team wins, and winning is defined as meeting the organization's top objectives. I only wish someone would have explained this to me earlier in my career. The reason this is so powerful is due in part to the inherent quid pro quo. Throughout my career, one of the best ways I've found to help people win is to establish an accountability-based culture focused on producing results, not activities.

Here is a seven-step formula you can use to create accountability and achieve extraordinary results in any organization:

- * Step 1: Establish the organization's top three objectives. This means the significant few, not the important many. Once identified, objectives must be clear, concise, measurable and obtainable. Notice that I didn't say easy!
- * Step 2: Assign each team member their objectives. Remember, when combined they must allow the organization to achieve its top objectives. In other words, the sum of the parts must be equal to - or greater than - the whole.
- * Step 3: Ask each team member what they need to win. To help people win, leaders must remove the roadblocks that stand in the way. Do this by having each team member identify a maximum of three things that they need to accomplish each objective. Have them put it in writing.
- * Step 4: Agree on what the leader will do to help. Meet individually with each team member to clarify the roadblocks and agree on what's needed to win and who will be responsible for making it happen. In all likelihood, the leader will assume some responsibility. Why? Because you're responsible to people, not for them. Being responsible to people means helping them get what they need to win.
- * Step 5: Follow up. Each direct report should schedule a 30-minute monthly update using a standard color-coded results report. Results at or above the plan are in green, and any area behind plan is in red. Focus the conversation on what was done to achieve green, and if the results will stay green for the rest of the year. When discussing red results, focus on what will be done to achieve green status, when it will be achieved and any help that's needed.

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* Step 6: Share lessons learned. Hold quarterly meetings with all direct reports present to discuss lessons learned, identify critical roadblocks and make specific offers to help any team member who is behind plan. Remember, the leader wins when everyone on the team wins.

* Step 7: Reward results. When objectives are achieved, ensure that rewards are proportionate and highly visible. Those who achieve the most get rewarded the most - and everyone should know that. It's just that simple. Ensure that people at the bottom are either improving their performance or being moved out. No one with poor performance gets to remain on the bottom for more than a year without action being taken.

Improving communication

Effective communication drives results. This means being direct and forthright with people in every conversation, letting them know where they stand, what's needed from them, and when it is needed.

Often, good leaders can become great leaders by reshaping the way they talk. Here's how it works: When you make a request of someone, take a little extra time to explain why you are making it. Put it in context and explain why it's important to the goals of the organization. Then the person can provide a more robust solution because she understands the purpose of the task and how the information will be used.

Last but not least, don't forget to ask what the person needs in order to complete the task. This approach removes excuses, reduces rework and is a great way to build relationships. It's also a proven way to develop future leaders by increasing responsibility and encouraging decision-making and creativity. By holding others accountable, you are teaching them to accept responsibility. Remember, making and meeting commitments is one of the best ways to build trust. So treat commitments as promises and watch how results improve.

Here's an easy way to determine the level of accountability in your organization. Just listen to the conversations going on in meetings. Is conversation directed toward commitment? Are people talking about what is important and what will and won't get done? Are they making requests of one another and asking for commitments? Or do conversations stray to generalities, vagueness, rationalization and missed expectations?

Do you have people who constantly talk about how hard they work, how many hours they put in and how little vacation they take, and yet you wonder what they actually produce? If so, most often these people are focused on activities instead of results. They will continue to do this as long as you let them. Ask yourself this important question: Do you care how hard people work, or what they get done? Top-performing organizations prefer the latter.

A group is performing well when they talk about actual results, not the activities and struggles along the way. When team members hold themselves accountable, you hear responsibility in their conversations. They ask one another for help in order to get on track. There are no victims, excuses or concerns over a lack of knowledge. Instead, they are searching for the knowledge and support that they need from everyone around the table to reach the company's goals.

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Accountable leaders work diligently to maintain focus on the achievement of the organization's most critical business goals and to see these goals become results.

When everyone is focused on achieving the organization's top objectives, every employee should be able to answer "Yes" to the question, "Did my actions today move the company closer to achieving our most critical business goals?"

I pledge to you that if you apply the seven-step formula, you will achieve extraordinary results that you may never have thought possible.

Bob Prosen is the author of *Kiss Theory Goodbye: Five Proven Ways to Get Extraordinary Results in Any Company* (www.kisstheorygoodbye.com), and president and chief executive officer of the Prosen Center for Business Advancement, in Dallas.