



The 4 ESSENTIAL Steps to Leading *Accountable Teams*



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As a leader, you are accountable for people, processes, products, and ultimately the success of your team and the goals of your business. For this to work, you need your team to be fully accountable as well. Whether that means showing up on time and prepared or executing a large project, each team members' accountability contributes directly to the success of the team.

When accountability is baked into your leadership style, it is a natural part of your team's dynamic. Accountable teams are more productive, have a greater sense of ownership of their work, and trust you and their fellow team members.

When accountability is missing from your team, there is damage to the performance of individual team members and the entire team that may not be recoverable without a lot of work. Trust is diminished, and without trust there is no team. The actions of those that are not accountable feel unfair to other team members and can spin into poor morale, lack of motivation, and increased turnover. Ultimately, your

team will not meet its goals or your vision, and the business suffers.

So how do you as the leader instill accountability into your team? Four (seemingly) easy steps can get you there, but it does take work and focus to achieve the results you want.

Step 1: Be the Accountable Leader

It starts with you and your actions. As the leader, you must be the best example of what you want from your team. Hold yourself accountable, which means being totally open with your team when you miss a deadline or a meeting. Be honest with them, tell them why, and how you will adjust – do the things you want of your team when there is a missed step.

It's also important for a high functioning team to be empowered to hold their leader accountable just as they would any other team member. Provide opportunity in meetings with your team to ask and be asked for status updates and other



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questions on accountability to the team. All it will take is for one person to ask you for status on a project, and a positive and spirited discussion resulting from it, for the team to build greater trust in you and each other.

As the leader, you get to set the tone for your team. Demonstrating your expectations of them through your own actions will also have the benefit of the chameleon effect. Research has shown that we tend to unconsciously imitate the people around us, especially those we connect with or admire. As your team trusts you, they will also mirror this good behavior and you will build accountability organically.

Actionable Takeaways:

- When you miss a commitment, own it to your team.
- Set aside time in existing meetings for status updates.
- Set the expectation for your team to ask YOU for updates as well.

Step 2: Set Clear Expectations

Accountability depends on individual and team behaviors throughout the workday. Showing up on time to work, to meetings, following through on what you commit to, being engaged with the team, responding to emails and messages all can show how accountable people are. Set expectations for even these mundane things. For example, tell your team, “Meetings start at the time in your calendar invite, if you are not there before that time, you are late. Late attendance deteriorates trust and teamwork, and that ultimately reflects in your annual review.”

When assigning work to your team, be equally clear. I advise my clients to use similar rules as a journalist, cover 4 W’s and an H, or the 4W1H rule.

- △ Who – Who is ultimately responsible for completion of the task, and who is expected to support them?
- △ What – what must the final product be when its delivered and what format – is it printed or digital? What is the outcome you are looking for? What should it be when you next check in with the team?
- △ When – When must it be completed and delivered? When do you want



to check in on the status or see an interim version? Include any lead times your team may not know about, such as the printer needs 2 days to print and bind the report.

- △ How – How do you want it – on your desk, by email, on a thumb drive?
- △ Why – why is this important, to you, to them, and to the organization?

“Why” is too often overlooked when managers ask their teams to complete tasks. Bring them into the fold as to why something must be done, what impact it will have, and how it contributes to the goals and vision of the team and the business. When team members see how they fit into the bigger picture, they will be more motivated to be accountable for the work they are assigned.

Actionable Takeaways:

- Take care in assigning work using the 4W1H rule.
- Don't assign work on the fly, pause and take the time to write out the 4W1H.
- Always tell your team why the task is important and fits into a bigger picture.

Step 3: Follow Up

When you ask your team to change behavior or complete an assignment for you, take the time to check in with them on it. This has two benefits that will not only increase accountability but improve the cohesiveness of your team.

First, your team members know these things are important to you and that

you will be checking in. Its easy to ask for change or assign a task, but the follow up stresses the importance to you and that you care about it happening. It puts some internal pressure on the team to be working towards completion before you follow up with them, which avoids procrastination. It also gives them the sense that as this is important to you, and you clearly care about it, they should want even more to do it well.

Second, you can act and address any issues before the last minute. Any misunderstandings or clarifications can happen before there is the need to completely rework the assignment. It also fosters an environment where the team members can feel more at ease of asking questions when you are routinely giving them the time and attention to do so. This helps build the habit of checking in with you without even asking. Scheduled follow-ups also have the benefit of compelling the team members to not only get to the point where you can look at it, but to assemble any questions that come up for your clarification.

This doesn't have to be time consuming. A simple call or stop by the desk to ask how things are going with a project, or if they are feeling comfortable making adjustment to their schedule, whatever the case may be. For larger assignments, ask them during the 4W1H rundown above to schedule 20 minutes with you to walk through the work at a predetermined time or point in the work. That 20 minutes may save you the heartburn of a missed deadline and hours of rework by your team.



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Actionable Takeaways:

- Set a specific time that you want to check in and follow up on tasks.
- Ensure check-ins are focused on guiding and clarifying the task, even if there are mistakes this is not the time for negativity.
- Ask the assigned team member to schedule the check-in as part of assigning the work.

Step 4: Give Feedback

Everybody wants to know how you think they are doing. The teams with the lowest morale and largest turnover are those that never receive feedback. I once went 5 years at a job without a review that gave me any feedback. My boss was grateful for my work and gave me great ratings. And I left. And when I got a detailed review at my next job, I thanked my boss for giving me something to strive for and work on. Turned out he was worried that I would be upset about a piece of criticism, but I was so thankful to know and be able to do something about it.

When good work is done, acknowledge it, celebrate it, and reward it. Too often in business, we use all the sticks and none of the carrots. It is far more motivating

to hear that things went well, and we want to continue pressing on with the same high-quality work, than it is to hear just about the one time that things didn't go well. Create incentives for your team, even ordering pizza and having a beer with the group after a big project or a long-lasting success will go a long way.

When there are problems, its even more important to give real time feedback. Do not wait and hope it will get better. This falls into a category I call STH – Shit That's Hard. You don't want to do it, it's difficult, but you must do it to build trust and relationships and establish culture of accountability.

When you need to hold a team member accountable, do so with minimal emotion. Pause before addressing it to think about using your style of leadership in addressing this authentically: show empathy, focus on expectations, be encouraging, or talk about it in terms of vision. Whatever your leadership style is though, try to drill into *why* the issue has occurred. Are there unclear expectations? Have they had bad experiences where questions were frowned upon? Are they sleep deprived from having a kid with night terrors? Address the issue head on, identify the root cause, and use that to develop a plan to avoid this again.

Through all feedback, short of yelling at people, you will get a more cohesive and productive team in the process.



Actionable Takeaways:

- Give feedback in the moment, or after a brief cooling off period. Do not wait.
- Celebrate successes with your team.
- Drill down into why an issue occurred and address the root cause head on. Ask the assigned team member to schedule the check-in as part of assigning the work.

Bonus Step: Build Trust

Accountability is important and is demonstrated by getting results or missing opportunities. But accountability may not be your real problem. Just as I recommend digging into root cause with your team when there is a missed step, you should dig into the root cause if there is a systemic accountability problem across your team.

Patrick Lencioni's book "The 5 Dysfunctions of the Team" was a game changer for me and impacted my behavior in every team I was a part of or that I led. In that book, Lencioni discussed these 5 dysfunctions as a pyramid, with avoidance of accountability being near the top. The foundation of that pyramid is the absence of trust. Many issues within a team can be traced back to trust – in their team members, in themselves, or in their leader. So, start with trust. I'm not saying you should go do a Trust Fall and a Ropes Course and your team will be perfect. But learn more about creating an atmosphere of trust and including people in your team that can be vulnerable and trust others.

I am proud to be an authorized partner in the Five Behaviors method, working with teams and leaders to build trust address conflict, gain commitment, grow accountably, and focus on getting the results they want. I have gone from geeking out over Patrick Lencioni's books to facilitating and teaching groups to use his methods to fuel their team's success.

Interested in learning more about The 5 Behaviors or leadership coaching?

Schedule a free strategy session today: <https://calendly.com/maryjomullen/strategy-session>.

Learn more at advantagestrat.com.

