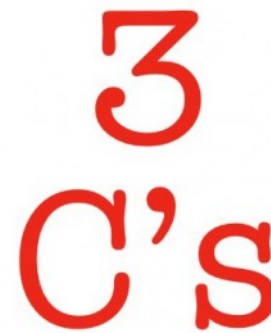


The 3 C's of Accountability

“It’s an accountability problem.” This is one of those diagnoses that sound definitive and inspire lots of nods around the conference table – right up there with “it’s a leadership issue,” and “it’s a communication problem.” But a diagnosis is no cure.

We believe that if we ask what “accountability” really means, when it’s present, when it’s missing, and why, then the answers will lead to a prescription. In conversations and seminars with leaders over many years we have come up with an operational definition of accountability that actually leads to a cure.



Accountability exists when these three elements exist:

1. Clear request from an authorized manager
2. Commitment from the subordinate to complete the assignment
3. Consequences for performance

Sounds simple enough, but each of the three elements can be difficult to deliver, which is why accountability can be elusive. So, a little more on each:

1. Clear request from an authorized manager

Often, we mistake our own redundancy for glistening lucidity. Or we mistake our audience’s apparent agreement (or fawning) for their genuine understanding.

One tech company’s CEO confided to us that he wanted to fire seven of his eight vice-presidents. He was serious. “They just don’t get it,” he complained, explaining that he couldn’t get them all pointed in the same direction.

But he had been talking in broad strokes – his request was not crystal clear. So we spent time with each VP, clarifying expected outcomes well enough to pass the **bar-bet test**. Their performance increased dramatically, and the CEO whittled his “firing list” down to one particular VP (probably a good pick).

Sometimes leaders give unclear direction because they have thought about something so much that, after a while, it seems intuitively obvious. It’s like when someone uses an acronym on you that you couldn’t possibly know, but that they use frequently. Or when a clerk is flummoxed that you don’t know a bureaucratic rule that she lives with daily.



And sometimes leaders give unclear direction because they are still unclear about what the destination will actually look like. The reasoning seems to be, “Let me think the big thoughts and you run along and figure out the details.” But there’s a difference between tactical details and precise direction; leaders shouldn’t have to figure out all the details of execution, but they should be able to spell out precisely the outcome they’re seeking.

Clarity rarely arises from dictate, but it can arise from dialog, which brings us to the next point.

2. Commitment from the subordinate to complete the assignment

A subordinate doesn’t need to agree with the brilliance of an assignment, but they do need to commit to do it. Two elements are critical to commitment: an opportunity for dialog and an answer to the question of why the assignment is important.

Except in rare instances such as military operations or medical emergencies, leaders can create the opportunity for dialog, even if it’s only a closing line to an email: “Please contact me directly if you have any questions or suggestions concerning this assignment.”

Through dialog comes understanding – for both parties. Sometimes the authorized manager gets smarter about what she’s requesting, or ought to be requesting, after talking with someone who actually does the work. And this opportunity to ask questions, clarify expectations, and offer ideas also implies mutual respect.

Dialog often leads to conveying *why* something is being requested, which is the second requisite for commitment. Knowing why gives people context for thinking about how best to approach their assignments and, perhaps more important, it gives their tasks *meaning*. “Do it because I told you,” works no better for grown-ups than for kids because it provides no context. In fact, we believe that it’s a leader’s moral duty to continually help his people see how their work fits into a bigger picture.

Part of meaningful context is that work should be a *matter of consequence*, both for the organization and for the individual. That takes us to the next point.

3. Consequences for performance

If you have ever sat in a meeting, made a clear request of one of the participants, received sincere commitment . . . and then NOTHING happened, the problem might have been an absence of performance consequences.

Your work likely fell into a queue behind other work on that person’s plate and,



guess what? Your work (of no consequence) was continually displaced by other work (of consequence), until your work dropped off the plate. Work without consequences tends to be regarded as inconsequential.

This is one reason our first component of accountability specifies that the clear request must come from an *authorized* manager. (We inserted this critical word years ago at the suggestion of now-deceased management theorist Elliott Jaques). Managers who have been duly authorized can deliver performance consequences; for others, it's harder.

Now, we hope that you don't equate the word *consequence* with *punishment*, like one of our friends who thought it sounded like we wanted to take non-performers out back and shoot them. We don't ... at least, most of the time.

The word can have a positive connotation, too, as in rewards (Plus, it starts with a C.) Performance consequences can range from a private, "Thanks! That was good work," to public praise, bonuses, promotions, and opportunities to do preferred work. But they can also include reprimands, negative performance appraisals, and firings. Research has shown that a 4:1 ratio of specific compliments to corrections maintains an optimal work environment. (We're pretty sure there's no research on taking non-performers out back and shooting them.)

Interestingly enough, performance consequences need not happen every time to be effective; only the *possibility* need happen every time to create accountability.

So, there you have it, our 3 C's: Clarity, Commitment and Consequences. We believe that if you remember — and apply — them, you will find a cure to your organization's accountability problems.

