

## Voluntary Accountability: A Gift of Excellence to Ourselves and Others

By Paul Werder

**Top athletes and performers do not need a reminder to show up for practice.** They get there early and put in the work without anyone holding them accountable. They do this for the sake of excellence, fulfillment, peace of mind, and credibility. It sets them apart as people who manage themselves impeccably in service to others. If we look around in our business world there are always a few people who do the same, which leads us to an interesting question.

**What would occur if you built your business culture around voluntary accountability?** Your initial thought might be that it's irresponsible for a leadership team to let everyone be their own boss. After all, the leader's role is to hold people accountable and ensure they show up and perform effectively. While there's an element of truth to those sentiments there is also a tremendous opportunity to expand on that truth.

**What if your leadership team began with themselves and took complete ownership of whatever they promised to one another in every meeting?** That would require setting the bar very high for being conscious of the business' shifting priorities and consulting their list of existing commitments before making any new commitment.

**Living up to these high expectations would be an expression of deep integrity to yourself, your colleagues, and your company.** You would need to keep in mind what can easily slip into the background: our choices are truly choices that come with the consequence of credibility and appreciation or disappointment and frustration. While no leader can be perfect in everything, embracing voluntary accountability will ensure you never let yourself or your colleagues down. Mastering this one capability will provide an experience of empowerment, as well as freedom from a large amount of self-inflicted stress.

**Can mere mortals achieve voluntary accountability?** Not if the unspoken, unchallenged standard is, "We do our best to achieve most of our commitments." And not if this idea becomes a lost opportunity and an undiscussable elephant in the room. However, even if your leadership team "only" fulfilled

their promises in the high 90s consistently, it would be the cornerstone of a strong culture committed to excellence.

- It begins with a choice to thoughtfully own your words and actions because they will have either positive or negative consequences.
- It continues with a clear vision of the business outcomes and quality of work experience you are committed to.
- It requires a deep understanding of your highest impact priorities and the focused discipline to say “no, not at this time, this important concern must wait.”
- It comes to life with caring about one another so strongly that you develop a “whatever it takes” mindset and have respectful, supportive coaching conversations until everyone’s word can be counted on.

**While some people will arrive at this standard more easily than others, many will need to shift their consciousness and learn new skills.** These people will need to discover they can step into greater self-responsibility and own their performance with pride. They will also need to learn the disciplined steps that lead to responsibly fulfilling all their commitments. It will take making clear promises with due dates, noting and managing all their promises on one list, referring to the list throughout the day to stay on track, and renegotiating promises when higher priorities present themselves.

**Our downfall is often thinking people should already be motivated to do what they say they will do, but that alone is often not enough.** Meaningful relationships devoted to a cause are the active ingredients to elevating a team’s performance. It’s the love for our work and a love for the people we work with that inspires us. It’s a love so strong that we never question our commitment to helping our team with our deliverables versus disappointing them.

**Is it feasible to run an entire company on voluntary accountability?** Once your leadership team gives this gift to themselves, their work is to give it to others. Again, it begins with a choice: Do you want to have the job of holding others accountable for the rest of your career or do you want to teach your people to be voluntarily accountable?

**Most managers struggle with holding others accountable and for good reason.** While hierarchy has necessary value, the mindset that someone is in charge and others must conform to their requirements can feel disempowering to both sides of that conversation. When implemented poorly hierarchy can create an us/them experience that fosters resistance, resentment, and avoidance in both directions, leaving everyone frustrated.

**Teaching your people to be accountable voluntarily is one of the greatest gifts you can give them.** It allows them to know they always have a choice and can become the master of their own destiny. The credibility and fulfillment it provides people is an intangible benefit that will spill over into their personal lives. They will feel better about themselves and be more appreciative of their workplace for attracting people with the character traits that make their work experience enjoyable.

**How do you shift the organizational mindset and culture to voluntary accountability?** It begins with clear expectations instead of an assumption that people will understand and fulfill your culture and performance requirements.

1. **Prepare People:** In the job interview process, you explain that this is a different work experience than they've likely had before. You explain that if they accept the job they will be expected to hold themselves accountable in two arenas:
  - a. These communication skills are a code of conduct that are non-negotiable, for example:
    - **Being Respectful** – caring about others' needs as much as our own.
    - **Being Coachable** – learning from everyone and everything that occurs.
    - **Being Helpful to Others** – going beyond your own duties when necessary.
  - b. These performance standards are expected of your role once you complete your training, for example:
    - Produce 2,500 widgets to quality specs per shift.
    - Leave your workstation clean and ready for the next shift.
    - Participate in our weekly meetings with your team.
2. **Truly Care:** Your managers also discover what is important to each employee and express a sincere commitment to helping them achieve their own needs and dreams that this job can help them fulfill. The manager clarifies their role as a mentor and coach that prefers not to have to resort to their authority to achieve success.
3. **Uphold Expectations:** Once expectations are established your managers reaffirm that each person will need to make consistent choices to honor and achieve the expectations on an ongoing basis.
4. **Communicate Honestly:** Your managers then provide the necessary feedback and coaching on a daily and weekly basis as people are performing and learning effectively; this allows each employee to always know what they are doing well, where they need to improve their skills and accountability, and how their performance is impacting the organization's goals.
5. **Honor Performance:** If after sufficient training, respectful feedback, and supportive coaching, your employee does not fulfill their expectations, your manager should appropriately let the employee know they are not a good match for this job and wishes them the best in their future choices. Good managers know doing anything less will send the wrong message to others who are performing at or beyond expectations.

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## Steps Towards Organizational Voluntary Accountability

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**Is voluntary accountability the key to your next level of business success?** It is not compassionate to allow your people to go unchallenged or get by with mediocre performance. It is your leaders' job to elevate them to become the best they can be and have them know they did it for themselves, their families, and their colleagues.

**When your leaders fully commit to this approach and help their people discover they have choice after choice to pursue excellence it will impact the quality of their lives forever.** Once your leaders create a true culture of empowered employees holding themselves accountable, you will outperform a business-as-usual company every time. Is there anything better than upholding high standards that benefit everyone? No, and it is simply a function of heart-centered leadership! It will start with a few people, grow within your leadership team, and become the soul of your organization.

### Questions for Action:

1. Does this shift in mindset and approach have value for you and your team?
2. Do you have a disciplined system to track and keep your promises?
3. Do have sufficient clarity on both your immediate and longer-term priorities for success?
4. Can you achieve 95+ % of your promises for these priorities?
5. Do you have a clear plan of how to implement this new approach with your team?
6. Who will support you to make voluntary accountability the way you manage?