

Building accountability

 By [Deirdre Elphick-Moore](#)

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I think Coca Cola's 2020 Vision sums up nicely what accountability is all about: "If it is to be, it's up to me". In the words of Ghandi, "be the change you want to see in the world". The sad reality, however, is that there are too many spectators pointing fingers from the sidelines about all that's wrong with the world. And, in South Africa especially, there exists a sense of entitlement that undermines the idea of doing what is best and right for the communities and businesses in which we operate.

The following behaviours should be seen as red flags in your business (be it a retailer, ad agency or any other business for that matter), indicating that you are facing a lack of accountability and need to take urgent action to prevent it becoming endemic: ignoring, denying, finger pointing, covering of tails, confusion, waiting to be told what to do, "it's not my job" statements.

Within the world of skills development, we are being called on more and more to "teach" people about accountability, to show how it applies to getting the job done and to get them to demonstrate this value in their places of work. As demonstrated in the quotes above, accountability is an individual value. Real accountability cannot be forced; it must be voluntary, but what you can do is put the tools in their hands so that you can break the cycle of anti-accountability behaviours.

According to the accountability cycle proposed by Epstein and Birchard, four elements play a role in corporate accountability: governance, measurement, management systems and reporting. You need to have all of these in place so that you can demonstrate fairness and transparency in how you manage your business. However, it is a long-term solution that may be a big project for you and your managers and is certainly beyond the scope of this article.

Looking at what can be done immediately; Partners in Leadership has developed a four-stage model for practicing accountability. This is a useful framework for addressing accountability at an employee or individual level:

1. See it: The first step to being accountable is an awareness of what the reality is. Your employees need to be conscious about what they do and what part they have in the success of the business. They need to see how they fit into the broader context of their workplace and they need to see the value they contribute. On the flip side, individuals might not recognise their short-comings or bad habits a lifetime in the making. So encourage people to engage in open dialogue and to seek feedback about how they are performing.

2. Own it: Coach your staff to identify what factors or events have led to their current reality. Do not allow the counter-productive behaviours outlined above (the blaming, denying etc.). Insist that staff objectively identify what is going on in

your business, speaking in the first person. They need to stick to the facts and avoid emotional outbursts. An example of a problem owned is the following: "that deadline was missed because I did not manage my workload properly. I completed the easy tasks rather than what was important or time sensitive".

3. Solve it: Once your employees own a problem, you can insist that they bring solutions to the proverbial table. Do not try to solve the problem for them. At best, this only makes them lazy and, at worst, it can be disempowering. Be open minded and patient. Let them make the first suggestion and then help them consider all perspectives and factors as you work with your employees towards a solution. The more they see themselves as part of the solution, the more they will develop a sense of accountability.

4. Do it: Full accountability only comes from this final step. Your employees need to be given the opportunity to make the changes necessary to solve the problem and they need to be taken to task if they don't take positive action. Encourage and reward them so that they stay motivated and gain confidence. The more positive the experience, the more likely they are to maintain their accountable attitude. Do not allow cynics and naysayers any involvement.

ABOUT DEIRDRE ELPHICK-MOORE

Deirdre Elphick-Moore, has an Honours Degree in Psychology and over 10 years of international experience in human capital management at Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley. Co-founding The Office Coach in 2009, she now focuses on personal and workplace effectiveness training and development. Her relaxed, engaging style encourages people to learn more, remember more and apply more in their workplaces, as well as inspiring to consistently better themselves in the work place. Contact her on deirdre@theofficecoach.co.za.

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