

# Peer Accountability

*Emphasize the many benefits.*



by Howard M. Guttman

AT THE END OF THE fiscal year, a large financial shortfall in one business unit came as a surprise to senior managers of a food services company. The unit manager had been aware of the problems for months but had not taken any action. Two peers had also remained silent as the situation spiraled out of control.

We rarely hold our peers accountable because we see them as our boss's challenge. Yet, today, teams constitute the basic molecular unit, and the team leader is viewed as first among equals. Holding peers accountable has become a way to leverage brainpower.

How do you get team members to call one another on behaviors that compromise results? The short answer: move to a high-performance team model.

## High-Performance Teams

All high-performance teams have clear goals, roles, and responsibilities. They have the right players, an agreed-upon decision-making mechanism, their members put winning for the business before functional self-interest, and they possess a sense of ownership and accountability for results.

In such teams, the leader is not the rescuer to whom members outsource their intelligence and judgment. Team members tackle problems head-on and find their own solutions. That includes problems with performance.

If you listen to a conversation between two high-performance-team members, you hear straight talk. An issue is stated, along with its impact and a proposed solution. It's authentic peer-to-peer exchange that avoids the need to bring in a Solomon-like third party.

## The Role of the Leader

A leader can help team members to work around the bumps of peer-to-peer accountability in five ways:

1. **Educate members in the benefits of working as a high-performance team and holding one another accountable.** Most employees view themselves as members of a certain business function. The idea that they are first members of a cross-functional team and second representatives of their special function may be alien to them. The leader needs to point out the advantages of refocusing to high-performance teams. These advantages include: faster issue identification and resolution, more time to focus on priorities, and greater engagement. And the leader should work with team members to evolve answers to: How would team behavior have to change? What would their interactions



look like? How would they deal with conflict and resolve issues?

2. **Set up protocols for peer-to-peer conflict resolution.** The leader can help the team develop rules of engagement, such as, "Conflicts between team members must be resolved within 48 hours and the results reported to the team." Or, "No triangulation, or attempting to enlist the support of either the leader or another team member."

3. **Model the protocols that the team will be expected to live by.** Leaders' actions must set the standard for expected team behavior. For example, a team leader who refuses to accept—and act on—negative feedback has no right to ask team members to do so.

4. **Coach team members in conflict-management skills.** Effective leaders are

quick to spot dysfunctional behaviors—behind-the-scenes complaining but no open confrontation, factions developing, hesitancy to take a stand on important issues, and second-guessing "done deals." When you spot such behavior, move quickly to assess cause and develop concrete plans to change it.

5. **Establish an atmosphere of trust.** Trust is the social cement of high-performance teams. The leader must be the paragon of discretion and the swift, uncompromising enforcer of rules when a violation of trust occurs.

## Skin in the Game: The Motivator

How can leaders balance positive and negative consequences to reinforce the message that "your" behavior makes a difference? How do you get peers to hold peers accountable?

Short of going through team realignment, here are two quick actions.

- First, have your team develop a simple diagnostic instrument: listing the 10 to 12 key behaviors that constitute best practices in teamwork. For example: "maintain the 48-hour rule of conflict resolution," "speak with one voice after team decisions are made," "hold peers accountable for resolving outstanding issues with other peers," and "keep the team on track during meetings."

- Second, use this list of desired behaviors as your team's assessment tool. Each member rates other members—including the team leader—on his or her behavior. Each person can see how the others have rated him or her: perceived strengths, areas of concerns, areas that require behavior change.

The first team assessment develops a baseline, a picture of current behavior and how it needs to change. Then, perhaps twice a year, the performance evaluations—and compensation—are keyed to the results.

When peers hold peers accountable, they take on new responsibilities. As people learn to operate within high-performance teams, they become smarter, better performers—and the organization benefits from their increased drive to win. LE

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**ACTION: Facilitate peer accountability.**