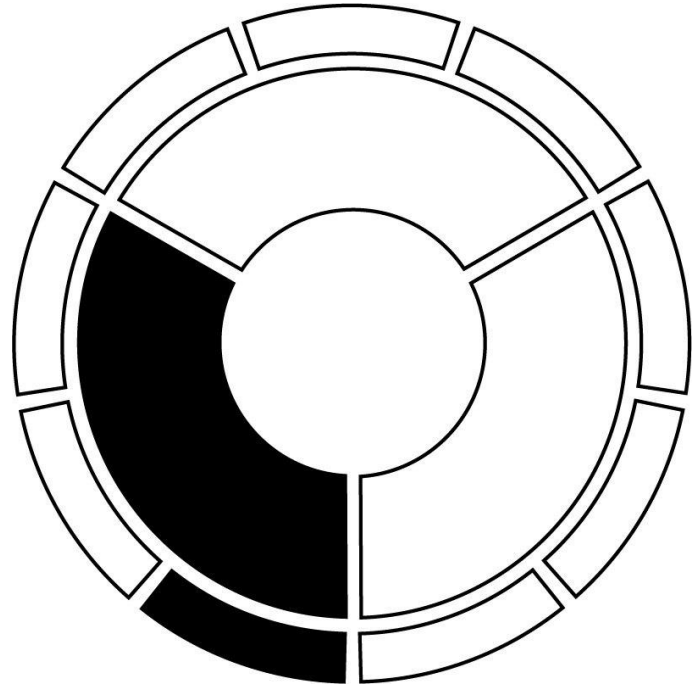


PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

ACCOUNTABILITY CONVERSATIONS HANDOUT

Introduction

Employees throughout your organization are making commitments to each other every day. Many of the challenges that managers face stem from broken or poorly crafted commitments. All too often, people fail to consider the fact that in order to actually deliver on a commitment, they may need to solicit and oversee a fairly complex set of supporting actions and agreements from other team members. By implementing the methods outlined in this lesson, you can establish the foundation for a “culture of accountability” which is essential for Performance Management.



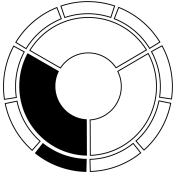
Five Characteristics of Good Commitments

Donald Sull, the author of the Harvard Business Review article entitled “Promise-Based Management,” outlines five characteristics of good commitments that support accountability.

1. Good commitments are public.

Agreements that are made, monitored, and completed in public are more binding—and therefore more desirable—than side deals hammered out in private. When individuals make commitments out in the open, in front of their peers and bosses, they can’t conveniently forget what they agreed to do, recall only a few conditions of the agreement, or back out entirely.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

2. Good commitments are active.

Negotiating a commitment should be an active, collaborative process that takes place through dialogue. Active conversations probe assumptions and should comprise offers, counteroffers, commitments, and refusals.

3. Good commitments are voluntary.

The most effective agreements are not coerced, but voluntary, and the parties have a viable option (such as a counteroffer) for saying something other than an unqualified yes.

People assume little responsibility for promises made under threat (although they may comply out of fear). By contrast, most people feel deeply obliged to follow through on a commitment if they exercise free will in making it.

4. Good commitments are mission- and values-based.

Commitments are often solicited without tying them explicitly to either the organization's goals (or values) or individual goals (or values).

Making the connection to the organization's aims helps individuals contextualize their commitment and feel integral to the success of the organization. Tying commitments to personal values taps individuals' intrinsic motivations and fosters a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

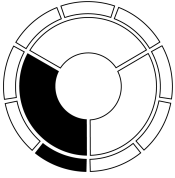
5. Good commitments are specific and explicit.

This last point cannot be emphasized enough. All parties must be specific and explicit about their commitments throughout the entire commitment lifecycle.

Requests must be clear from the start, progress reports should accurately reflect how promises are being executed, and successes (or failures) should be outlined in detail.

In the lessons that follow, we will learn how we can become more disciplined about how we make requests, make commitments, follow up on those commitments, and learn from the inevitable missed targets and communication breakdowns that can occur.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Accountability is a skill. The essence of this skill is your ability to make effective requests, make unambiguous commitments, and manage those commitments over time to completion.

It really boils down to being precise and disciplined with the way we talk about accountability, which is why we call this practice “Accountability Conversations.”

Some managers try to take a kind of “legalistic” orientation toward commitments, defining them according to the terms of the deal, much as lawyers might focus on specific clauses in a contract.

While this might be appropriate for a vendor whom you are holding accountable to a contract, this is not the appropriate tone to take with a team member.

Three Levels Accountability Operates On

According to Fred Kofman, the author of the book “Conscious Business,” our discussions related to accountability occur on three different levels (or topics) that we can highlight here.

Level 1: The Work to Be Done

The first level involves the task itself (including the broader project and work involved). Every commitment has a task implication. Accountability involves a complex network of commitments to get things done that an individual could not achieve alone.

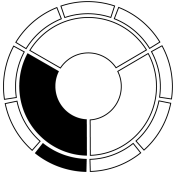
Level 2: The Relationship

The second level involves the relationship and especially the trust between the two parties. As such, every commitment has a relationship implication.

Level 3: An Individual’s Credibility

Kofman argues that on the deepest level, the way people approach commitments informs and defines their credibility on the team. “How good is your word?” he asks. “Do people view you as a person someone they can rely on to keep their commitments?”





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Accountability Conversations

One of the goals of effective Performance management is to cultivate what we call a “culture of accountability.” Creating a culture, or influencing corporate culture, always starts with the leaders, in particular, the most senior leaders. The best way to seed a culture of accountability is for all the managers to “walk the talk” and be consistent with how they approach accountability on their teams.

The essence of accountability as a “practice” is increasing awareness of what people actually say and do, and the implications of those statements and actions.

So, in this training, rather than merely speaking about the value of accountability or the concept of accountability, we practice accountability. How do we practice accountability?

By practicing what we call “accountability conversations.”

Accountability, at its essence, boils down to “making and keeping promises.”

Where commitment is absent, performance always suffers.

Employees throughout the organization are making commitments to each other every day.

Many of the challenges that managers face stem from broken or poorly crafted commitments.

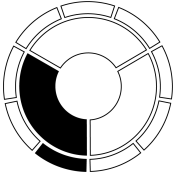
All too often, people fail to consider the fact that to actually deliver on a commitment, they may need to solicit and oversee a fairly complex set of supporting actions and agreements from other team members.

At some time or another, everyone fails to keep commitments—this cannot be avoided entirely. Yet the skill with which these commitments are managed can have a significant impact on the ability to execute successfully (individually, in teams, and organizationally).

Keeping commitments affects others’ perception of your professionalism and their willingness to trust you.

Would your co-workers and employees say that you keep your promises?





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

We believe that, in your role as a corporate leader, it is essential that you get good at this skill that we call “Accountability Conversations.”

The Four Keys of Accountability Conversations

There are four keys to the accountability conversations practice.

1. Making Effective Requests
2. Committed Responses
3. Managing Commitments
4. Managing and Learning from “Breakdowns”

Let’s go through them one at a time.

Making Effective Requests

Many people are under the impression that their requests are clear and are surprised to learn later that the expectations implicit in their requests were not met.

Do you hear exchanges like the following in your organization?

“Someone needs to work on that manager’s report.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“We need the managers’ report for the meeting next week.”

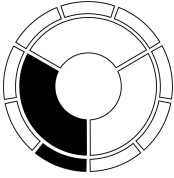
“Good idea.”

“We’ve got to get going on that report.”

“Yeah.”

Interactions like these can be deceiving. It sounds like something productive occurred, but actually, this is far from the case. These example statements are not effective requests, and the example responses are certainly not commitments.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

An Effective Request establishes clear conditions for satisfaction. Simply put, that is the what, how, and when of the request.

Conditions of Satisfaction

To establish clear conditions for satisfaction, ask the following questions:

- What exactly do I want (or need)? Under what conditions would I be satisfied?
- What would be happening or what would stop happening if my concern was resolved?
- How should the assignment or tasks be completed?

Bear in mind that every detail need not be articulated at the start of a project, but it is important to be as specific as possible and then amend the agreement as more details become available. The key point is to be able to leave the conversation with the conditions of satisfaction stated as clearly as possible and understood and agreed to by all relevant parties.

Committed Responses

We will start by looking at some familiar examples of responses that would not qualify as commitments or as we say, “Committed Responses”. Do any of these vague, non-committed replies sound familiar to you?

“I should be able to get that done.”

“I’m working on it.”

“We could do that.”

“Don’t worry. No problem.”

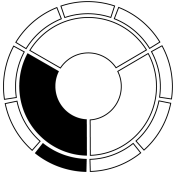
“When I get around to it.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s a good idea.”





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

“Sounds good to me.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll try.”

Clearly, none of these above responses could be categorized as commitments.

Regardless of the clarity of an “effective request,” if the reply sounds like one of these examples listed, then there is no commitment (and therefore nothing to be held accountable to).

We have looked at responses that are vague, weak, and not helpful. Now, we will suggest there are only four acceptable responses that can be considered “committed responses” in our practice of “Accountability Conversations.”

The Four Acceptable Committed Responses

“Committed Responses,” as we call them, fall into one of the following categories. Anything outside of these four kinds of responses would not be considered an actual commitment.

They are:

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Counter-Offer
- d) I will Get Back to You by this date with a firm answer.

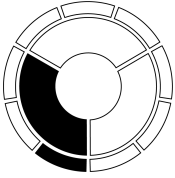
Let’s go through them one at a time.

Yes (I Commit)

Say yes only if the intention is truly there to complete the task, if you are actually able to do it, and if the resources are available. Rather than just saying yes, restate the specific request in your response.

Example: “Yes, I will complete that report and send it to you by Wednesday at 5 p.m.”





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

“No (Sorry, I can't commit to that).”

When someone says no to something, bandwidth is created to say yes to something else. Yet saying no can be difficult—people may procrastinate or avoid giving a definitive answer to a request. Although it may be slightly uncomfortable to do so, declining a request can actually build trust in a relationship. It reinforces the fact that a person doesn't commit to tasks he isn't serious about following through on.

Counteroffer (Negotiate)

When you determine you cannot fulfill a request (or offer) as proposed unless certain conditions of satisfaction are altered, you can make a “counteroffer.” In other words, you can negotiate the terms of the commitment so that it is something you can actually commit to.

I Will Let You Know by ____ (Date)

People often need some time to carefully consider the request (to check their schedule or other resources' schedules) before making a commitment.

Example

“I need to check in with my team, and I will give you a firm answer by the end of the day, Friday.”

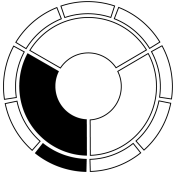
Managing Commitments

It is necessary to check in regularly (appropriate to the timing of the assignment or task) to ensure the action matches the conditions for satisfaction.

This allows enough time to “course correct” or to clarify the conditions of the agreement as time passes, more information surfaces, obstacles arise, or understanding if the circumstances change.

These check-ins can be informal via email, text, or phone or be more formally included as regular agenda items for the rhythm meetings used in project management, often making it





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

easier to surface the productive conflict of needing to change a previously promised commitment before the original deadline gets close or passes.

Canceling or Renegotiating Requests

When managing commitments, the person who makes the request is expected to formally cancel (in a timely fashion) if the work is no longer needed based on the changing context.

This avoids unnecessarily wasting time and effort.

When canceling a request or offer, it is helpful to provide the specific reasons for the cancelation so the other person can appreciate how the circumstances have shifted rather than bring negative assumptions to bear on the person originally making the request.

In some cases, it is not necessary to cancel the request completely, but it may be necessary to revise the request in terms of the details of what is being requested or the timeline.

Revoking Commitments

Another part of managing commitments is “revoking commitments.” People often ignore or duck promises they aren’t going to keep, hoping the other person won’t notice or call them on it. Over time, this behavior damages trust in relationships.

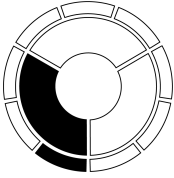
To avoid this, it is essential to revoke a commitment as soon as you realize it will be impossible to fulfill. Again, provide specific reasons so others can appreciate how the circumstances have shifted.

Revoking a commitment can be uncomfortable and difficult to do. It is human nature to prefer to avoid the issue and pretend as if everything will be fine.

However, sincerely revoking a commitment can actually build trust by showing the other person that they do not have to wonder if the commitment will be honored.

The other person will know that she or he will be notified in advance if the terms of the agreement can’t be met.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Accountability Breakdown Conversations

When requests and responses are vague and ineffective, there's no commitment to break. If no actual commitment has been made, then there is nothing to hold a person accountable to. Therefore, there can be no "breakdown" in the commitment.

For example, if a person agrees to complete a task but does not commit to a specific date, a breakdown cannot be declared. It is only when a real commitment is established that the possibility for a breakdown is created.

An interesting dynamic begins to occur when genuine commitments are made. People begin to notice everything that is inconsistent with that commitment. Given this dynamic, once real commitments are made, then occasional breakdowns can and should be expected. Indeed, it is the nature of organizational life that intentions are not always met, and milestones are not always completed by agreed-upon dates.

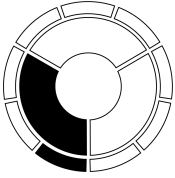
Accountability conversation practitioners learn to view breakdowns as valuable learning opportunities. When an individual or team understands why they fail to deliver on a promise, they can use that insight to bolster future performance.

Having an explicit conversation about missed targets or broken agreements gives people an opportunity to address the issue, learn from the experience, and invest in the ongoing working relationship.

This puts the issue on the radar and addresses it proactively—an empowering move. When things are considered to be working, the habit tends to be business as usual. When someone demonstrates the courage to declare a breakdown, people are snapped out of their ordinary habits and can mobilize and act in new ways. Like other techniques and skills in this training, this one takes some practice.

It begins with actually naming (or declaring) an "accountability breakdown" and scheduling a time to talk about it, figure out what happened, and how this can inform our teamwork going forward.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

During the “accountability breakdown conversation,” it is important to allow people the time and permission to express how they feel about the breakdown and, if necessary, vent their emotions. (Do not blame; simply notice and name feelings.) Be explicit about the “accountability breakdown.” Was there a missed deadline or milestone, poor quality, failure to deliver, and what was done did not actually fulfill the “conditions of satisfaction” of the original agreement? Be objective and explicit.

The goal is to get on the same page, compare notes, understand the context and circumstances, and learn from the experience to benefit future team performance and cultivate trust in the relationship.

Take a few moments to take inventory of the situation while separating objective facts from subjective interpretations. It is important to acknowledge honestly and objectively what happened or didn’t happen. What percentage of the goal (or milestone) was achieved? What was the impact (in terms of people, relationships, energy, costs, etc.)?

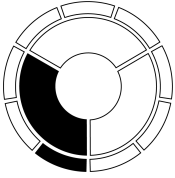
Learn from the breakdown by asking, “How did this happen?” This is not an occasion for blame or excuses but rather an objective analysis of the circumstances that created the accountability breakdown.

- Did another unanticipated priority take precedence over this one?
- Was the original goal unrealistic?
- Was the scope of the objective broader than the resources available?
- Was time mismanaged?
- Was coordination or communication a factor?
- Were there circumstances outside our control?

After learning from what happened, the next step is to “Make a renewed commitment.”

If the failure to deliver on the commitment creates a cost to the person who originally made the request in terms of time, inconvenience, pressure, and stress, then it is important to discuss these costs as part of the conversation to correct the breakdown and make good on the original or revised promise.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

- What is the intention going forward?
- What are the new conditions for satisfaction?
- Are there requests of others that will need to be made?

If necessary, adjust any relevant work structuring documents.

Example: Create a modified action plan with updated milestones.

This “Accountability Breakdown Conversation” technique is likely the most challenging of all the techniques that you have learned so far in this training. It is a kind of “crucial conversation” but not nearly as difficult or high-stakes as most crucial conversations. If you have been practicing the other skills in this training—setting clear expectations and providing feedback along the way—and if you made an effective request, obtained a committed response, and checked in on the commitment (managing the commitment, this “accountability breakdown conversation” should go smoothly for you. And if you follow the above guidelines, you may find it is actually much easier than you thought it was going to be.

It is important to emphasize that if you don’t have these accountability breakdown conversations, then it sends the signal that you won’t hold people accountable. So, the whole practice of accountability conversations rests on this final technique. You simply must do this to be able to truly hold people accountable.

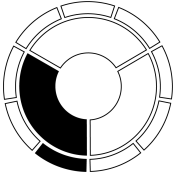
Creating A Culture of Accountability

As a manager and leader, when you hone the skills in this training, you can significantly expand your ability to add value to your organization. Beyond simply being a tool to help individuals and teams execute more effectively, over time the practice of accountability cultivates a culture of accountability. This supports both your individual and organizational success over the long term.

You need to make 4–5 “effective requests” and give half a dozen “committed responses” before it starts to feel natural.

Then, you must teach this technique to all of your direct reports.





PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Leadership is a team sport and is best practiced as a team.

Perhaps no single technique in this training is more relevant than this crucial practice of Accountability Conversations.

So, get to work on this and then teach it to your employees so that everyone on your team makes effective requests and gives committed responses.

You need to have the “break down conversations” anytime someone doesn’t keep a promise, a deadline slips, or a milestone is missed. Those breakdown conversations ensure that people take the practice seriously and provide feedback and the lessons learned so that, over time, the team gets better at holding each other accountable.

Conclusion

As a reminder, in addition to reading this handout, we encourage you to watch the video at least once prior to the upcoming workshop and perhaps listen to it a second time for review, preferably on a different day than you read this handout for optimum retention of this information. Then, we will review and practice these techniques together in our upcoming live workshop and also during the open office hours.

Please bring your questions and your experiences with this activity of holding people accountable to an upcoming live session so that we can discuss further and tease out the nuance of applying these techniques in your specific situation.

