

# Stop Punishing People For Being Accountable

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People often say they want a culture of accountability. That usually means they like to blame someone when things go wrong. Instead, make accountability a positive that helps boost your group's productivity.



Accountability shouldn't be a negative, says Brian Hartzler, former chief executive of Australia's largest bank, Westpac, and now chairman of several startup companies and president of the Australian Museum Trust.

"It should be something people seek," he said. "It should be like the guy on the sidelines: 'Put me in, coach. I want to be given the responsibility to contribute to move the agenda forward and be held accountable for that.' "

Accountability is more than just getting feedback when you fall short. It's also getting recognized when you deliver the results.

Accountability has become linked to who should be blamed when something goes wrong, says Hartzler, Sydney-based author of "The Leadership Star." That's nowhere near all it is.

"If accountability is all about that, it pushes people away from risk-taking," he said.

## Achieve By Making Accountability A Positive

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It's about creating a process for achievement.

"Accountability is a support system for winners," Greg Bustin, Dallas-based leadership consultant and coach who wrote "Accountability: The Key to Driving a High-Performance Culture," told Investor's Business Daily. "It's how successful people get things done. It's not punishment or the blame game."

That doesn't mean being accountable shouldn't include consequences. The leader, such as the CEO of a business, is answerable for anything a company does, good and bad.

Hartzler knows about being accountable. Westpac fired him as chief executive in 2019 after regulators found breaches of Australia's anti-money-laundering laws. He knew the buck stopped with him.

"I understood that as the most senior executive I bore ultimate accountability for whatever happened in the company," Hartzler wrote in his book. "I accept that as a leader you may not control everything that happens on your watch, but you still own it."

Recognize how important accountability is to your group.

"I think accountability is the greatest ability," Bustin said. "You can be really smart or have all the skills, but ultimately accountability comes down to doing what you said you're going to do. You're talking about reliability, dependability and ultimately trust. When you don't have trust everything is going to be an uphill battle."

## **Focus On Responsibility As A Positive**

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Build a culture of accountability by setting clear expectations. Make sure people know what you expect of them and make clear the end goals for outcomes. Explain why the group is doing it and how each person plays a role in delivering those outcomes.

"It's really important for people to understand where they fit in and how the work they do all day contributes to a broader purpose," Hartzler said.

Clarity is key, Bustin says. "Clarity creates confidence, confusion causes chaos," he said.

Create a relationship of mutual trust by showing you're not perfect, Hartzler says. That means being upfront about what's going wrong as well as what's succeeding.

"As part of accountability, you don't have to be afraid that being open will be detrimental," he said. "Mature business people know things go wrong. Wouldn't you rather deal with people who are facing the brutal reality of what's going on, owning up to mistakes and learning from them?"

## **Target These Five Steps**

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Bustin lays out five steps to accountability in high-achieving teams.

First, set clear goals for each team. Next, make sure everyone on the team is clear about their goals. Set clear deadlines. And trust and respect others on your team. Finally, reward people for achieving goals.

"A deadline is a powerful accountability tool," Bustin said. "My wife jokes that if you want to get things done around the house, have a party."

Consequences should be meted out when appropriate. But it goes far beyond just punishment.

"Individuals taking accountability seek feedback," Hartzler said. "They're looking for feedback that can help them get better."

Spread the importance of accountability across your organization by telling stories about it. Bustin noted FedEx (FDX) has done this well.

"They would celebrate examples of heroics of their delivery staff that would find a way to get a package to its destination the next day," Bustin said. "When you celebrate those acts of accountability, people will see what it looks like and say, 'I can do that.' "