Building Accountability to Drive Continuous Improvement

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Whether trying out a simple new process or embarking on a complex continuous improvement project, it's imperative that you have a sound technical solution to make it work, but it's also critical to have a sound change management strategy to make it last.

In any major change initiative, there will be 10% to 20% of the affected population who will readily support the change regardless of what it is. These "early adopters" are an uncommon but essential breed who thrives on change almost solely for the sake of change itself. They recognize change as an essential part of evolution. These individuals need little incentive other than a basic explanation of what it is they are being asked to do, maybe a little training, and mostly support of leadership to let them move forward unimpeded.

At the other end of the spectrum is another 10% to 20% who will oppose change for the very same reason: that it's change. These are "resisters" who see change as a bad thing, regardless of

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the potential benefits it could bring. They are content with the way things have "worked" for years, and see change as a threat to the status quo. These individuals typically find it difficult -- if not impossible -- to make even minor change happen, whether at work or at home.

In between these two poles is a majority of the population who starts out neutral. They take a wait-and-see attitude toward change until they are swayed either toward the positive end by a compelling argument about what's in it for them and why it's a good thing, or toward the negative end by a lack thereof.

The ultimate success of any change initiative lies in holding everyone accountable for doing their part in implementing the technical solution. Early adopters will most likely be self-motivated to do whatever they need to do. Those who they can sway toward their way of thinking will be easily influenced to do the same. For these groups, accountability is generally not an issue.

Resisters -- both active and passive -- often pose the largest impediment to the success of organizational change, and along with that the biggest challenge to front-line leadership. These individuals may require additional oversight, and holding them accountable often means ensuring that there are consequences for not following established guidelines.

Unfortunately, in many organizations, and for many managers, accountability equates to some form of discipline. While that may ultimately be necessary, it should be a last resort and should only be considered after careful evaluation of the situation.

A Question of Responsibility

When something doesn't get done right, the first question to ask is whether the person you expected to do it actually knew it was their responsibility. It isn't fair to hold someone accountable for something they honestly didn't know they were supposed to do. For example, if I go on vacation and don't ask my neighbors to get my mail and newspaper, I can't blame them when I come home to an overstuffed mailbox and a driveway full of paper. The first step of accountability is to clearly set expectations for what is to be done and by whom.

Having cleared that hurdle, the next question is whether the person has the appropriate knowledge to do what you wanted them do. It isn't appropriate to hold someone accountable for something they legitimately don't know how to do. In fact, if they haven't been given the proper instructions, it might be better if they DON'T do it.

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For example, my kids never expressed any interest in helping me mow the lawn until one day my youngest daughter said it looked fun and asked if she could give it a try. Not wanting to miss this window of opportunity, I fired up my self-propelled mower and turned it over to her with no more explanation of what to do than which lever to push. She did exactly as I instructed, took off, and about 10 steps later landed squarely in the trunk of a big maple tree.

Both my daughter and the tree escaped unscathed; the mower wasn't quite so fortunate. Having clearly demonstrated that she did not have the proper level of training -- and making me dig a little too deep into my shallow Scottish pockets to repair the mower -- we both agreed that she would most likely never be held accountable for cutting the grass.

A Matter of Competency

But knowing how to do something doesn't necessarily mean that you have the ability to do it; that comes with practice. Until someone has demonstrated competency to do something repeatedly the way it is supposed to be done, it's not right to hold them accountable for doing it.

That little incident with my daughter serves as a reminder when my wife asks me to remind her how to use the snow blower. She has used it before to clear our driveway but doesn't do it regularly, and it could be hazardous, if not deadly, to expect her to do it, especially when I'm not home. A cracked mower housing is one thing. I don't want to be responsible for having my wife sustain a serious injury because I didn't ensure that she was properly trained on how to operate a potentially dangerous piece of equipment.

Once you determine that expectations have been clearly set, that the appropriate level of education/training has been provided, and that there is demonstrated competency, then and only then can someone be truly held accountable for doing something effectively, efficiently and safely. At that point it becomes either a matter of individual desire to execute the assigned task, or basic management skills to make sure it happens.

If people ultimately can't or won't do what is rightfully expected of them, it is up to front-line management to find out why and determine an appropriate course of action. For example, is it due to time constraints? Is it due to resource availability? Are there organizational roadblocks that need to be removed? Are there underlying personal issues? If it simply comes down to a matter of personal choice, then there must be repercussions.

Resisters need to have expectations restated and understand what the implications will be for continuing to choose not to follow the process. This could be anything from an informal discussion (i.e. coaching) to more formal steps up to and including time off or even termination in extreme situations. That may sound harsh, but most of management's time and energy should be spent focusing on the people who are doing things right, not those who are doing it wrong.

Accountability may ultimately require discipline, but hopefully this demonstrates that discipline is the last step -- not the first -- in accountability. True accountability -- and the sustainability that results from it -- comes from developing a good technical solution to a challenge and using good change management skills to clearly set expectations, provide the necessary training, ensure demonstrated competency, determine the root cause for gaps and implement the right corrective actions to fix them.

We are all accountable for our own actions, and in that sense it could be argued that accountability ultimately rests with the person responsible for following the process. However, a portion of accountability also rests with the person who developed the technical solution in the first place. And because almost any technical solution requires people to make it successful, a great deal of the accountability also resides with front-line supervisors. They must have the change management knowledge, skills, and competency to make sure that any organizational change is implemented and sustained.

Here's a simple checklist that summarizes the points above and can be used as a quick reference for front-line supervisors or anyone else to determine exactly where accountability lies:

1. Did you know it was your responsibility?
2. Were you properly trained on how to do it?
3. Have you demonstrated that you can do it?

If the answer to any of these three questions is "no," then you need to go back and reassess the situation before taking any further action with your employees.

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