

# Accountability

*Payoffs are impressive.*



by John R. Patterson and Chip Bell

ACCOUNTABILITY IS BOTH THE SWEET spot and Achilles heel of most leaders. Leaders learn early the importance of holding employees accountable for results. Despite its downbeat reputation, accountability, effectively executed, remains the keystone for trust between leaders and employees, employees and customers.

Trust binds relationships. Without trust, leaders can't deliver the service that fuels customer loyalty. Trusting customers communicate their hopes and aspirations, not just needs and expectations. Customers who trust are more apt to become advocates and offer candid guidance for improvement, more tolerant of mistakes, and responsive to service recovery.

Customer trust is created and sustained by an accountability culture. Customers form perceptions of service by interacting with employees who learn how to treat customers from the way their leaders treat them (a.k.a., Loyalty Creators). Their actions either drive or destroy the quality of service that yields customer loyalty.

How can accountability help leaders develop a culture of trust? We share this story from Chip's teenage years.

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Ray Bell was shy and conflict-averse. At 14, his son, Chip, was the opposite. Calm conversations about chores quickly escalated into chaotic confrontations complete with slamming doors. Father-son quarrels were painful for both—Ray fought in his least comfortable arena; Chip fought for the rebellion of adolescence.

Then, Ray decided to stop being detention officer and let Chip decide the consequence of his work solely by his performance. Each week chores were discussed and expectations clarified along with the consequence for good, poor, and non-performance. Ray supplied resources and then kept his promise to deliver the consequence.

If Chip did all his chores in sync with expectations, he got to go to the movies; if he did not, he had to stay home on Saturday night. No more uproar, just clear expectations, fair consequences, helpful support, and assurance that consequences promised were consequences delivered.

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Like the "before" Ray, leaders dread the performance appraisal aspect of accountability because it often turns into hurt feelings, uncomfortable conflict, and smoldering hostility. Following the example of the "after" Ray provides a method for leaders to help Loyalty Creators put in the discipline to their own performance.

## The Accountability Path

Accountability has four parts:

### 1. Set clear expectations for outcomes.

You only get the best from Loyalty

Creators if you expect the best. Creating "buy-in" is vital to delivering the expected results. Loyalty Creators who participate in developing expectations have stronger commitment to achieving those expectations. While expectations must be determined by leaders at times, involvement should be the rule, not the exception. Involvement includes



conversations to agree on performance outcomes. If Loyalty Creators doubt the reasonableness of expectations, you need to discuss these and agree on how results can be better achieved. Communicate both the rationale and importance of expected outcomes, leaving the "how" for Loyalty Creators to discern.

### 2. Have frequent "check in" conversations to stay on track.

Feedback is crucial to assisting Loyalty Creators to a successful outcome. The frequency of feedback either makes or breaks effectiveness. Make performance discussions a habit. If feedback conversations occur monthly, they become more comfortable for both leader and Loyalty Creator. Future-stating—a conversation in which leaders graphically state what future success will look like—helps Loyalty Creators achieve their expected outcomes. State: "If expectations are realized, this will have happened." Start with the desired destination, work backwards, and agree on the action steps needed to achieve the future state. Develop touch points and "check in" conversations to

examine the path traveled to date (versus plan) and settle on course corrections to ensure arrival at the future state.

### 3. Give candid feedback for growth.

To give feedback that stimulates growth, energizes excellence, and helps Loyalty Creators know how to enhance performance, take these four steps:

- *State the rationale for feedback.* Help people make sense of the feedback. Laced communications with language that says: "I care about your effectiveness."

- *Create a climate of identification*—"I'm like you." Enhance the Loyalty Creator's receptivity to feedback by creating a climate of empathy. Avoid "should's" and "oughts." Let facts guide your feedback. Your tone is that of a thoughtful partner, not a controlling parent.

- *Recommend a "cancel-out" action.*

When feedback focuses solely on the past, it triggers defensiveness. If focused on the future, feedback communicates

promise. Instead of focusing on what the Loyalty Creator *should* have done, help channel the Loyalty Creator's energy toward what can be done to be more effective.

- *Share optimism and communicate support.* The communication of the expectation of success can turn Loyalty Creator hesitation into an enthusiastic attempt. Leader

optimism about the odds of improvement lends encouragement and support. Be a resource to help the Loyalty Creator improve.

### 4. Establish fair consequences for great performance, poor performance, and non-performances.

Accountability is reinforced by consistently applying fair consequences for performance. When results are less than expected, Loyalty Creators expect negative consequences—and they expect positive consequences for exceeding expectations. When either fails to be delivered, trust is weakened and Loyalty Creators risk drifting toward mediocrity. When there are only consequences for poor performance, fear becomes an insidious aspect of the culture, and responsible risk-taking becomes extinct. Effective leaders build a climate of trust and generate the quality of service that drives customer loyalty. LE

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**ACTION: Hold people accountable.**

Leadership Excellence