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ChoiceWords

Thoughts on Leading Accountability

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In this issue of *ChoiceWords:*

- Our primary article focuses on the necessity for everyone involved in a task, assignment or project to be accountable for effectively defining success.
- We explore what an Effective Question does and what it is.
- We describe a program we provide that can keep small organizations growing.
- We announce the availability of a new version of our book, *Leadership Simple.*

Please provide feedback so we can give you what you want that adds to your professional and personal life.

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Featured Articles:

360 Accountability

The Effective Question: What is an effective question?

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200 Harbor Drive, 1601, San Diego, CA 92101

360 Accountability
We Are All Accountable for the Results.

Accountability is taking ownership for the consequences of our choices in delivering the agreed to results and helping others take ownership for the consequences of their choices in delivering the results.

When you take on a job, you are responsible for your understanding of the work requested and the agreements you make. Sixty percent of the challenges people have with each other revolve around a person or group not meeting the expectations of others; what was wanted got lost in the communication or was just left out. This happens because people:

- Focus on problems (What's wrong?) and issues versus outcomes (what do I/we want?)
- Assumed the other party understood what was wanted.
- Assumed the person or group making the request was clear about what they wanted.
- Did not clearly ask for what was wanted.
- Did not ask for clarification of what was wanted.
- Missed one or more features or requirements of the request.
- Totally misunderstood the context of the request.
- Did not listen to what was required.
- Did not ask questions to clarify fuzzy requirements.
- Did not verify understanding.
- Never asked for an agreement.
- Did not know an agreement was made.
- Did not care if they did make an agreement.

Ensuring clarity about what we expect from each other and coming to agreement is a two way street. When we receive assignments or requests it is easy to think that accountability for clarity rests with the person initiating the work. After all, they need the work product or output from us. Nothing is further from the truth. When an agreement is made between two or more

people or groups, all participants in that relationship are responsible for the clarity they create in authoring and living up to the agreement. When points of an agreement are left open to interpretation, we misunderstand, waste time on renegotiation and rework, delay results, and foster dissatisfaction and mistrust.

Everyone connected to the result is accountable for knowing and clearly communicating what is expected, the context of the work, its purpose, what and who else is dependent on the delivery, the level of quality, detail, scope and completion expected, the delivery date, and when they want to be told if the deliverable is going to fall short; making clear requests and negotiating complete agreements.

Nine things you can do to drive successful assignments are:

1. Invest Time Up Front – Pay Attention to the Details:

Most of us have too much to do in too little time so we ignore the need to get into the details of our implied and explicit agreements. We make lots of assumptions on both sides and then we spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning it up and repairing busted relationships. A few extra minutes of deliberate attention on the front end could save hours and days on the back end. Every minute spent on planning and clarification will result in 10 minutes to an hour in recovered time. Dig deep for the details of expected outcomes up front.

2. Define What The End Product Looks Like:

Start with the end in mind. Define the acceptable output of your effort before you agree so you can make an informed commitment. If it's a document identify what is included and how it should look. If it is a result, get clear on the criteria for hitting the target. Is there a particular style you should write in? If its data, what form should it take? If it is a process improvement what other processes will it have to connect to and do you have to plan the interface? What interface do you have to provide? Get crystal clear on the deliverable.

3. Define the Purpose:

One of the most critical details people leave out in making an agreement is the purpose of the work. Having a clear picture of how the work is going to be used is essential for driving the level of accuracy, quality, detail and ultimate success. Define the results, changes, behaviors or impact the deliverable is to produce for whom? Take action to clarify the purpose.

4. Understand the Boundaries:

When we know what is included in the job AND what is not included we have created a frame around the task or project. Appropriate boundaries will provide focus, limit and avoid scope creep, reduce extra work and minimize wasted time. Stay on track with clear boundaries.

5. Connect and Collaborate With Others:

Who do you have to work with to achieve success? Most of the time we work with others to achieve shared results. We seek perspective, acquire specific information, test ideas, build on something others have done, leverage resources or collaborate for more creative power and expertise. If we are not specifically asked to bring others into our work, we may not do it. Some people think it is easier or preferable to work alone rather than collaborate. Take the time to identify and involve the expected collaborators. We are interdependent.

6. Negotiate with Respect for Your Capacity:

Realistic appraisal of our capacity and priorities supports on time and on spec delivery. People frequently fail to consider these factors or just don't know their capacity. And, when we're already over committed and someone pushes us into an agreement we are setting ourselves up for failure. We give in to get someone off our backs, to be popular or because we are intimidated by their position. Offering alternatives to a request, negotiating a shift in priorities,

asking for a more acceptable time frame or changing our level of involvement are appropriate responses. Or we end up putting in extra hours and effort that compromises other parts of our lives. Then we feel like victims because we have failed to take a stand. We know our capacity and understand our commitments more than anyone else. Manage commitments and priorities to the limits of capacity and not beyond.

7. Plan to Renegotiate:

We don't know what we will encounter until we start on a task or project. We may find unexpected challenges that will delay the delivery or interfere with our intentions to meet expectations. Late and incomplete deliveries can have cascading impacts. Other projects and decisions are dependent on what we commit to. Building specific dates into an agreement for one or more status reports will permit timely renegotiation. If we're falling behind or short on other factors of performance, the status report date is the time to reassess our capacity and renegotiate. Even if other people are disappointed, it's better that changes in agreements show up earlier rather than later so that those depending on your work can adjust their plans and commitments in a timely way. Consider renegotiation as a core skill of accountable behavior.

8. Respect the Requests, Renegotiations, and Questions of Others:

Encourage people to be proactive in creating clarity. View people's questions, renegotiations and requests as supportive, cooperative attempts to know and clarify what you want, rather than as challenges to your authority and thinking. Assume that they seek to understand you the way you intend. Assist them to succeed with you in achieving the desired result. Give others what you would like them to give you.

9. Get the Answers to This Question:

An effective Complete Agreement answers the question;

Who will do what with whom by when for what purpose at what level of quality, detail

and completion; what is not included in the work; what and who is dependent on this deliverable; when will you tell me you cannot deliver?

Most agreements leave out parts of the answer. It may be appropriate to skip over details when we have worked together successfully in the past, trust each other, have delivered on time as expected, and have done the same work together in the past. We can be selective.

When we collaborate with people we have not worked with in the past or we are taking on new tasks or projects that we have no experience with we must identify what is critical to meet the criteria for success, even if people don't ask for that clarity. When we agree to take on work it is our responsibility to find the answers to the question posed above.

Accountability is helping others take ownership for the consequences of their choices in delivering the agreed to results as well as taking the same ownership ourselves.

Accountability and clarity go hand in hand. Every successful agreement we make should start with a commitment to succeed with each other and drive to clarity.

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The Effective Question

What is an effective question?

An effective question generates some of the following responses and results.

- Leads people to think.
- Drives self-evaluation.
- Helps people find their own answers.
- Encourages discoveries and realizations beyond where people started.
- Opens a conversation to more participants and possibilities.
- Challenges and tests assumptions.

- Assists people to see another point of view.
- Clarifies a situation, event, relationship or a communication.
- Develops understanding.
- Creates better solutions.
- Supports deep reflection.
- Increases understanding.
- Get people to share their feelings.
- Probes for details.
- Expands the conversation.
- Establishes connections.
- Analyzes deeply.
- Finds the root cause.
- Set boundaries and context.
- Empowers success.
- Improves performance.
- Enables change.

I used 22 different verbs in the list above. That's a clear indicator of the power that questions have in human interaction. Yet most managers tell, tell, tell rather than ask.

Effective questions are usually open ended. They require more than a yes or no answer. The following questions will lead to some of the results shown above:

- What are your thoughts about..........? Like: What are your thoughts about the desired outcomes of this project?
- What other ways could you see this situation? What alternatives are there?
- What would success look like? What is your criterion for success?
- What have you attempted before in similar situation?
- Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? At Toyota they ask the why question five times to get to the root cause.
- What are your assumptions? What evidence do you have?
- What do you need to communicate and to whom?
- What do you have to consider in my decision?
- How can you be more strategic?
- What keeps you up at night? What is your biggest fear?
- Tell me more about that?

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We recommend six questions that you can use in any situation to lead others: :

1. What's did you perceive? (What is the situation?)
2. What did you want? (What is your vision moving forward?)
3. What have you done to get it? (What action have you taken to achieve that vision?)
4. Was it successful? (Describe how that was successful and how it was not?)
5. What else could you do? (What options do you have now?)
6. What will you do? (What is your plan for next time?)

You can ask these questions of yourself like: What do I want?
You can ask these questions in the future, present or past tense: Will that be successful? Is that successful?

You can lead a single person or a group of 100 in a highly productive, engaging day-long conversation where you ask only the six questions shown above in different forms.

Telling people is never as effective as asking them. If you want some of the results listed above learn how to ask effective questions. Read one or all of the following books:

- *Leading With Questions* by Michael Marquardt
- *Just Listen* by Mark Goulston
- *Leadership Simple* by Steve and Jill Morris
- *The Answer to How is Yes* by Peter Block

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Leadership Simple: Leading People to Lead Themselves

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From This Book You Will Learn

1. Five simple questions to lead people to lead themselves.
2. Use the same five questions to evaluate your own choices.
3. A process to change your behavior to get what you want and help others do the same.
4. A simple model of human thought and action to improve your individual and group performance.
5. Three concepts of control and agreement that will create accountability in your organization.
6. An integrated system of Gap Analysis to guide you through any group decision-making process.
7. Simplify the complexity of human interaction.

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Growing Your Business:

Do you want to grow your business or know someone who does?

We have a set of seven benchmarks and a process for small businesses and non-profits that has had proven results for rejuvenating growth. It builds on a study of over 750 businesses ranging in size from a few employees to five hundred and it helps organizations take the guesswork out of sustaining growth and momentum, When we grow a small organization we never have the bandwidth to put in place everything we need. We leave out processes, certain development efforts for our employees, strategy and communication and specific sales and marketing steps. We've defined 27 of those challenges that show up in all businesses at one time or another plus a whole host of other important factors that can keep you standing still or slow your progress. Not only don't these challenges go away, but eventually, if you have not taken care of them, they will come up behind you and bite you where it hurts, becoming unseen business maladies that could kill your business or stop you in your tracks.

Our process is simple, low in cost, generates an immediate return on investment with fast results and long lasting improvements. We assess, diagnose, report, generate agreement on next steps, guide, and help you implement a set of growth initiatives that will jump start any small business or independent unit of a larger organization.

Contact Steve or Jill if you want more information about the ChoiceWorks Growth Process.

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