

## **A New Kind of Accountability**

*by: Paula K. Martin, CEO, Martin Training Associates*

Accountability can be a help or a hindrance to a project. In the past, accountability was synonymous with blame. It created fear, forced people to cover their backsides, sabotaged learning and did very little to enhance performance. Now, we have a new way to approach accountability – as a proactive approach to preventing problems. In order to make this approach work, you need to follow these three rules:

**Tip 1. Use preventive accountability.** Accountability has been used as a club - to beat up on people when something went wrong. The statement, “Who’s accountable for this?” sent fear racing through the veins of team members. A more effective approach to accountability is to use it for prevention, not punishment. The question you should be asking team members is, “Who is accountable to make sure this outcome happens as planned?” The accountable person’s job is to do whatever is possible in order to assure the defined outcome is achieved. If something goes wrong, the question to ask is, “What can we learn from this so we can do a better job next time?”

Explain to your team at the kick-off meeting how you intend to deploy accountability and then make sure that you provide each accountable person with the resource needed to get the job done. Accountability isn’t about creating something out of thin air. It’s about using resources to get the job done. Providing the resources is the job of the project manager.

**Tip 2. Define accountability for results.** When you are accountable, you must assure that an outcome is achieved. This means you have to define the project in terms of outcomes or deliverables. Activities are not outcomes. Writing is an activity. I could write all day long and not produce any useful output. What you want is the output, the column. Focus on the deliverables, not the activities. You can and should define quality criteria for that deliverable. (Can I produce just any article or does it need to meet certain acceptance criteria?) You can and should define a delivery date for each deliverable. You can assign a budget to the deliverable. So, instead of breaking your project down into tasks, break it down into deliverables. Someone on the team will then be accountable for each deliverable (see next tip). The accountable person doesn’t necessarily have to do the work. She just has to assure that the deliverable is produced and is acceptable to the customer. The questions to ask are, “Who will be accountable to



make sure this deliverable gets produced? What acceptance criteria will the customer use to determine if he's satisfied with the deliverable?" Then if something goes wrong, focus on how to move forward. Look back only to learn from what happened (see tip 1).

3. Use team participation during planning and execution. You can assign accountability all day long but when the people on the team don't report to you, it has very little practical effect. In today's environment, accountability has to be voluntarily accepted, and the best way to accomplish that is through team participation. Team participation means having the team create the plan, as a group, with you, the project manager, as the facilitator. When the team creates the plan several things happen: the plan is improved because there are more shared ideas, it is more realistic because it reflects each person's reality, the team understands it because they all participated in creating it and finally, and most importantly, they have ownership of it and are committed to making it happen. This sense of ownership drives people to want to fulfill their accountabilities. Since they helped define the accountability in the first place, they understand what is required and have confidence that they can be successful. Then the project manager is in a position to hold people to their accountabilities.

A word of caution - don't make the mistake of taking back the ownership of the project during the execution phase. It's as important to continue the team's involvement in monitoring progress and solving problems during execution as it was for them to develop the plan in the first place. Let the team decide how to get the project back on track when things go wrong. If you do, they'll take accountability for the solutions.

Accountability is a powerful tool if used properly. The old approach to accountability - blame oriented, activity-based and assigned by a project manager - worked well enough in the old authority and control based organizations, but it does not work well in today's matrixed environment. For that, you'll need to the new approach to accountability. Try it. You might find it useful.

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