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Increasing employee accountability: The critical role of leadership

Accountability is an important feature of any workplace. When employees are able to take responsibility for their work, they feel empowered by their decision-making and engaged within their organization. Similarly, when supportive employers and team leaders are able to hold their team accountable for what they do, the result is often a committed team that leaders can rely on.

However, “with great power comes great responsibility”, for employees and for their leaders. Although employees experience greater satisfaction with their jobs in high accountability environments, they also experience higher levels of job strain. This makes intuitive sense because now employees feel (and are) directly responsible for the outcomes of their actions. This allows them to feel “like an owner” by taking ownership of a decision and accepting the consequences for their actions when the stakes are high.

As a result of this dichotomy, leaders who are trying to increase accountability within their team must consider whether their leadership style is helping or hindering their efforts. In fact, research has shown that the type and quality of leadership received under these circumstances is critical to how this enhanced accountability is received.

In an ambitious experiment, researchers were interested in how the quality of leadership

during times of heightened accountability would affect the outcomes for employees. Researchers administered surveys to almost 400 full-time employees who were asked a series of questions about their level of accountability (e.g., “I am held very accountable at work” and “The jobs of many people at work depend on my success or failures”), job tension (e.g., “I work under a great deal of tension”), job satisfaction (e.g., “Most days I am enthusiastic about my work”), and emotional exhaustion (e.g., “I feel used up at the end of each workday”).

When it came to quality of leadership, however, the researchers were specifically interested in the level of abusive supervision (e.g., “My supervisor ridicules me;” “My supervisor tells me my thoughts and feelings are stupid,” etc.). They believed that leaders who exhibited more abusive behaviours would experience much different outcomes from their employees in times of increased accountability than those who did not.

When examining the results, this is precisely what they found. When faced with increases in accountability, environments with abusive leaders experienced significant negative impacts on various outcomes, including job satisfaction, tension, and burnout. In work environments where supervisors were not abusive, increased accountability actually lead to better outcomes (e.g., reduced tension and burnout, and high levels of job satisfaction).

The researchers point out that this finding has very important implications for our organizational practices. Increasing accountability may be seen at the heart of employee empowerment and engagement, but this strategy can go off the rails without the right leadership. Organizations would be wise to consider the style of leaders who will be leading these groups before introducing measures to increase accountability within their departments.

Conclusion

Encouraging employees to take responsibility for their decisions and actions, and to accept the associated outcomes, can result in extensive benefits for organizations. However, it is crucial that such circumstances take place in a supportive environment. When this has been achieved, an organization can introduce greater accountability measures and benefit from the increased empowerment and autonomy it provides. Cultivating this type of environment will decrease tension and emotional exhaustion, and will allow employees to flourish while facilitating greater satisfaction in the workplace. ■



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