



How Leaders Can Master the Art of

Accountability

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Every business leader agrees that accountability is an essential ingredient in a healthy organizational culture. Which makes it all the more striking how little training there is out for leaders and managers on how to do it well.

Employees are left carrying the bag—working for managers who don't have the relationship skills or emotional confidence to give them direct, early feedback with supportive guidance on how to make the changes the manager wants (but isn't saying).

The challenge is that the word conjurs up deep resistance in most people. When we hear the word—accountability—it can trigger deeply-held emotional associations between accountability and punishment. We think “Uh oh, I must be in trouble.” Our first experiences of being held accountable for our actions, by teachers and parents and the other authority figures of our youth, are often associated with fear and anxiety. Sometimes they came in the form of outbursts and overt discipline, but often our experience as a child is a background anxiety, a worry that we’re somehow, in some way, not doing it right. We carry that story into our adult lives, as employees, managers, and executives on both sides of the accountability equation.

The cost to teams and organizations is high and widespread. An employee who’s worried about where they stand with their manager is less likely to take a creative risk; teammates who see their colleagues fired or passed over without a clear explanation lose trust in the process; front end personnel treat the customer with less care and authenticity; and worst of all, each time a leader talks about accountability but doesn’t follow it up with action is one more death-by-a-thousand-cuts to the fundamental trust employees have in the willingness of leaders to do what it takes to succeed. Encouragingly, more attention is being paid to track the granular cost of disengagement. Some leaders are ready to act, others don’t feel the pain enough yet. But even if you’re willing to agree that the cost to your organization is too high, how can you start to move the needle now?

We can distill down the skills that managers need into three main buckets:

1. How to name problematic (or potentially problematic) behaviors early on.
2. How to frame multiple instances of that behavior into a pattern or theme that an employee can get traction with.
3. How to guide the employee to discover their healthy self-interest in making a change.

The Accountability Dial is a method managers can use to engage with their direct reports in a way that is (1) focused on the counterproductive ways people show up at work and engage with their teammates, (2) non-punitive or authoritarian tone, and (3) sourced in your personal desire to help this person grow.

Let's unpack the first three steps in the Dial: The Mention, The Invitation, and The Conversation, each one corresponding to one the three fundamental skills above. Don't be afraid to customize the conversation based on what makes sense for the current situation. Think of the Dial as you would a blueprint for a house you're building. You'll need to make design changes when you get into the individual rooms, as the facts on the ground change, but you have a general idea of what it should look and feel like in the end.

The Mention—Naming the Behavior

The first notch on the dial is the Mention. It's the skill of noticing a behavior that may not yet be problematic but could become so, and will allow you to help someone get out ahead of the issue. At this first notch on the Dial, make your observation with warmth and an open hand. You may have a theory, but don't assume you know the cause. The goal of the Mention is to put something into the space for your team member to investigate for themselves. Here are a few examples of what the Mention sounds like in real time:

→ "I noticed a few typos in that newsletter that's about to go out. Did you see those?"

→ "I saw a flurry of trouble tickets come in overnight. Anything worth talking about?"

→ "You seem a bit overwhelmed this week. Something going on?"

→ "You seemed frustrated in the staff meeting this morning, anything you want to talk about?"

What each of these has in common is that they're things that could go unnamed. Even if the newsletter went out with a typo, the world wouldn't end. Things go wrong with technology and flurries of emails result, and who doesn't feel overwhelmed more than once in awhile?

The reason you're mentioning it isn't to rub salt in a wound or micromanage, it's to start to give the person you're trying to help real-time experiences of your standard of care. You're using the Mention to show them (1) how keeping an eye on the details is a form of caring; (2) how you're always looking for patterns in customer behavior to get out ahead of problems and look for possible innovation; and (3) that no matter what's going on in the hustle and bustle, you're tracking how they're doing with it all.

Before we move on, let's spend a minute talking about what the Mention is not. It's not a sit-down conversation, which would make too big a deal of it too soon. You're not overreacting by using an intense tone of voice or asserting "I'm the boss" in any way. The Mention is the kind of feedback that could, and often should, happen in the hallway in an off-hand moment, though out of earshot of other members of the team. It's also not something to call a meeting about, though it's a great "Oh by the way" to add to an existing meeting.

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Once you've made the Mention, you've taken the first step. Then your job is to let it go, at least for now, and see what the person does with it. If they follow up right away with a question, that's great. Don't assume they weren't listening if they don't respond right away. They may need a moment—in their own time—for what you said to register and spark their own curiosity about what else might be going on.

Here are a few things to review in the moments afterward, just to register for yourself the kinds of things that you were already feeling or thinking about during the conversation. How intently were they listening? Were they paying attention? Did they respond first with an excuse or try and pass the buck, or get defensive in some other way? Nothing is conclusive at this point, and you don't need to resolve it here and now. You're simply doing everything you can, and using your incredible powers of observation and awareness, to take as complete a snapshot of the situation as you can. By doing that, by giving yourself that little bit of extra time to capture the moment, you are allowing yourself to let it go and move on with the rest of your day. This way you will not carry whatever frustration or worry you may have had into your next interaction with them. You'll also decrease the likelihood of frowning as you walk down the hall five minutes from now. Your team is watching you closely. That's not to make you paranoid. That they're watching is the best news possible in the long run, because when you embody change, they'll notice that too.

Here's what you want to accomplish with the Mention: to plant a seed, but to leave it 100 percent up to them whether they water it, without feeling like they have to do it for you. You're hoping that seed grows, that they'll get curious and come to you proactively with something they learned, or ask a question to get more help to develop whatever skill or ability needs work. Give it a day or two. If it's something worth going deeper on it will show up again. By making the Mention, you're making yourself more likely to notice it when it does. When you have another instance to talk about, it's not quite a pattern but you can see it going there, it's time to move on to the Invitation.

The Invitation—Framing The Pattern

The Invitation is where you go when you've tried the Mention and the person you're trying to help hasn't picked up the thread on their own. You're turning the heat up here, but just slightly. It's the difference between "Come in, why don't you take a seat?" and "Please sit down."

The Invitation should take place in your office, or in some other private space. You're taking the smallest next step you can, picking up on the behavior you named in the Mention and going one step further. You're asserting a little bit of your authority in an active way. You're sketching the lines of a boundary that you can firm up later if you need to. And, most importantly, you're going to ask some questions to try and stoke the fire of their curiosity.

What you're doing differently than in the Mention can be subtle—it's more of a shift in tone than adding a lot of new words or content. The Invitation has a tone that communicates: "That thing I mentioned casually the other day, it looks like you may have forgotten about it, I'm just making sure you know that I haven't let it go yet." During the Mention, you were purposefully not asserting your authority. You hoped that the mere fact of you being their boss would be enough for them to get curious on their own and take a proactive step. With the Invitation you are asserting your authority, again just as much as is needed, which is almost always less than you think.

As you move up the dial into the Invitation, you're asking them to look at the same behaviors you asked them to look at in the Mention, but in a way that encourages them to consider the situation more proactively. Here are examples of how you might turn a Mention into an Invitation:

- "Remember that comment I made about typos in the newsletter the other day?
I saw a few in the memo you cc'd me on to the sales team yesterday. I'm a bit concerned that it may be happening more often. Are you moving too fast on things?"

- "You didn't come back to me about those trouble tickets. Did that all get resolved?
I was wondering about where it went after we talked."

→ “Are you still feeling overwhelmed? You seem a little harried still, but maybe that’s just me. Has it gotten better? Has it gotten worse?”

You’re talking about the same behavior (or emerging pattern) but your words and energy are starting to change. There’s a little more oomph. And one thing you may have picked up on in each example: you’re coming from a place of vulnerability. You’re expressing your observation in a way that shows you’re worried, a little anxious, and that it means something to you that they do something with what you’re naming. You might even name that as the context—let them know why you’re making what might seem like a big deal out of a small thing. Here’s what that might sound like:

“I’m highlighting this because I’d like you to make an effort to listen more carefully to the small pieces of feedback I offer you. I’m not doing it to micromanage you, though I get that it might feel that way. I’m doing it because I want to be able to give you more responsibility and autonomy. And I can only do that if I can let go of it. So try to hear these kinds of things in that context. It’s my job to ask you questions, to point out little things that you might not see, or might not see as being as important as I do, but it’s all in service of helping you grow. I need that kind of feedback, too. We all do. Do you know what I mean?”

Before moving on to the third notch on the Dial, let's expand one of the examples to show how a more complete version of the Invitation might sound like. Your Mention went like this:

MANAGER: "You seem a little overwhelmed. Anything I can do to help?"

TEAM MEMBER: "Oh, yeah. I've just got a lot going on I guess. I'm okay, thanks for noticing."

MANAGER: "Sure. Okay, well I trust you're on top of it, and just know I'm here for you if you need me."

Now, let's say you've waited a few days, and they haven't brought the subject up again, but you still sense that things are the same or maybe even a bit worse. They're still operating in overwhelm and not asking you for help.

Here's how you might pivot into the Invitation:

MANAGER: "Hey, so I wanted to check back in with you. I'd mentioned something about you seeming overwhelmed. You haven't brought it up again, but it seems like it's still a problem. You seem to be rushing around quite a bit the last few days. Am I mis-reading that?"

TEAM MEMBER: "Yeah, you're right. I'm totally underwater right now."

MANAGER: “Why do you think that is? I mean, I believe you that that’s how it is right now, but can you be more specific as to what’s going on?”

TEAM MEMBER: “I just have too many things on my plate, too many projects and not enough time.”

MANAGER: “Okay. I know how that feels. So, what are you going to do about that?”

TEAM MEMBER: “That’s a good question. You know, I think I need to sit down and re-prioritize some things. Everything feels urgent right now.”

MANAGER: “That seems like a good place to start. Have you ever tried to do that before?”

TEAM MEMBER: “Honestly, yeah—but it lasts for about an hour and then I get swamped again.”

MANAGER: “Okay, I really appreciate your honesty on that. Can I make a suggestion as to how to approach it a little differently?”

TEAM MEMBER: “Sure. I’d love that.”

MANAGER: “How about this: sit down for a few minutes as you planned but instead of trying to figure it all out see if you can frame the question differently, maybe something like this:

‘Who do I need help from, or what do I need my teammates to do, or not do, to help me with the overwhelm I’m feeling right now.’

TEAM MEMBER: “Huh, I never thought about it that way before. I can already think of one thing. I’ll try that.”

MANAGER: “Okay, great. I’m curious to see what you come up with.”

You’ve now completed the Invitation. In the example you’ve just read, it seems like this person is ready to take it up and do something with the mentoring you’ve offered. If so, that’s great, and in your next meeting you can debrief what they’ve discovered and offer whatever advice and make whatever changes are needed from your side. But, as we said at the outset, patterns like this—the professional ruts we’ve all developed over the course of our careers—are not easy to break out of.

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If you've made the Invitation, and the pattern persists, it's time to move on to the next step: the Conversation.

The Conversation—Getting To Self-Interest

We're at the critical notch in the Accountability Dial, the one that all of your work up to this point has led up to. It's critical because the Conversation has the potential to go two ways. If it's successful, which is as dependent on your employee as it is on you, it's the place of dramatic personal and professional breakthroughs. If not, it can mean the beginning of the end of their time with your team. You won't know which of these roads you're on going in, which is, of course the very reason for the Conversation. This is the moment where you'll bring the best of your accountability skills to bear.

Structurally, the Conversation is just what it sounds like. You'll schedule a meeting of perhaps 30 minutes, though you may not need all of it and if things go really well you might go a little over (so make sure you don't book a meeting right after this one). Put your phone in airplane mode, put the computer display to sleep. Focus in on this one conversation. This one person. Be the one who cares.

There are two important things you can do to achieve the right balance at this place on the Dial. The first is to stay on their side. Receiving critical feedback from your boss can be stressful. It's especially so when that feedback veers into more personal territory, when it's not about a specific skills gap or technical mistake, but about how you're relating to that gap or mistake. Your employee needs to feel that you're genuinely on their side, that the purpose of this conversation is to help them grow, not to punish them. Making use of the Mention and Invitation before you get here is part of how you do that.

The second thing you can do to maintain the right balance in the Conversation (and your accountability conversations overall) is not to manage it all on your own. The reason most managers avoid the Conversation is that they're afraid of what will happen if this person were to quit. It's the voice in your head that says "But they do so much, who am I going to get to handle this if they walk out?" Just keep in mind that if you're at the point of having the Conversation with someone on your team, this pattern is already having a huge impact on other members of the team. Nobody wins if you don't take the risk to help them see what's going on and move through it. Talk with a peer, check it out with your manager and let them know you're about to have a conversation like this and you're worried how it's going to go. Find someone to role-play it with you first. Great managers don't manage alone.

By this point in your mentoring there should be general agreement on what the behavior is (The Mention) and you've given examples so your employee can see the pattern (The Invitation). Your goal for the conversation is to bring it all home in the form of impacts—meaning, how is the way they're showing up having adverse impacts on the world around them. There are four essential questions, you can use to guide the conversation.

Finding The Four Corners of Impact:

1. How is this pattern or behavioral theme making more work or causing unnecessary frustration for their teammates?
2. How is this pattern or behavioral theme making more work or causing unnecessary frustration for you, as their manager?
3. How is this pattern or behavioral theme making more work or causing unnecessary frustration for your customers (or vendors, partners, or other stakeholders)?
4. How is this pattern or behavioral theme holding them back from becoming more of the person they want to be?

The most important element of the Conversation is that these are questions for your employee to answer, not you. It's fine that you have your own answers and theories, and you may want to share some or all of them in a future moment. But if you want this person to take ownership of the issue, they have to discover the impacts for themselves. It's fine if they don't know or can only give partial answers. Close up the conversation by leaving them with these questions. Make sure they understand that it's your expectation that they're going to find some time to work on it and come back ready to share what they discovered next week.

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Beyond the Conversation

While many of these new accountability conversations will go well, some won't. Sometimes you'll have to create firmer boundaries and potential consequences. That doesn't mean it's the end or you're about to let them go. It simply means that you're turning up the heat because sometimes that's what we need to light the spark in ourselves to make the change. The final two steps in the Dial—The Boundary and The Limit are where to go next (you can deepen your skills in all five of the steps at refound.com/training). As their names suggest, in these final two steps you'll be setting tighter frames and more undesirable outcomes to help someone find their way off the self-limiting or self-sabotaging path they're on. But remember, as with all the other steps, your goal is to never cross the line into punitivity. You can stay positive even when you're being firm. And, if in the end you do have to let them go, you'll know you've done everything in your power to avoid that moment. People coming and going is part of life in a healthy-functioning and growing organization. The only thing your team needs to see is that you handle it with care.

Most managers are well-intentioned people. So were, by and large, our parents, teachers, and, the other authority figures of our youth. But that didn't keep us from being terrified of getting in trouble and learning to avoid authority whenever we could, or feeling embarrassed or ashamed when we got caught even if, in the bigger picture, this person was trying to help. We all want to

feel seen and valued, to express ourselves and be rewarded for good work. It can be uncomfortable when someone challenges our self-image, and challenges us to go beyond where we are today, even if we know in our hearts that they are right.

The Accountability Dial is there to support you in that journey. Not as a rigid system or set of absolute rules, but as guideposts to look out for along the way. Remember, as with all deeply held patterns that we want to change, real change won't come overnight. It comes from persistent effort and personal vigilance. Having someone in our lives who gives us that kind of support is essential. We all need all the help we can get.

The Accountability Checklist

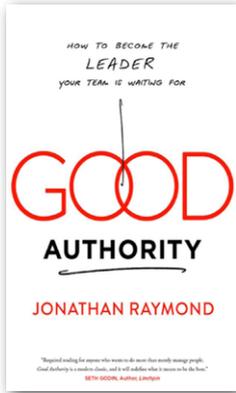
Here's a list of things you want to make sure you cover as you move through the first three steps in the Dial. If you can answer yes to all of these questions, you can rest assured that you're doing everything you can do help this person take ownership of the issue. If you get a "Maybe" or "I'm not sure," that's your cue to go back and fill in any gaps you may have missed in a follow-up conversation.

1. Have you reviewed the pattern, and gotten their agreement on what it is?
2. Have you given them at least three examples so they have enough granular data to go on to try and change things?
3. Have you shown them the specific impacts their behavior is having on rest of the team (using the Four Corners of Impact above)?
4. Have you given them your best advice about how to work on the issue (perhaps with a tip or tactic that's worked for you on this issue in the past)?
5. Have you kept your door open—literally and emotionally—letting them know that while this is serious, that you're still very much on their side and will help in any way you can?
6. Do you have a regularly scheduled weekly meeting so there's a clear date for a next conversation to stay in close conversation?
7. Have you established a clear time-horizon by when you expect to see the change start happening?

The highest form of leadership, the most value you can add—to your team, your organization, and to the world around you—is to develop the strength to not give people the answers. Rather, your job is to create a space where they can discover the answers for themselves, but you may have to spark that conversation and become a resource for them to reach their destination. The way to get people to be engaged is to be more engaged with them.

That's what it means to be a good authority. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | After twenty years of not being able to decide whether he was a business development guy or a personal growth teacher, Jonathan stopped trying to figure it out. He's the owner of Refound, an online training startup that offers Good Authority training programs for owners, executives, and managers. He's madly in love with his wife, tries not to spoil his daughter, and will never give up on the New York Knicks. Jonathan is the former CEO and Chief Brand Officer of EMyth, where he led the transformation of a global coaching brand, and has worked in tech, clean tech, and the nonprofit world after graduating law school in 1998.

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