



# ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACTION

Piece Together a Culture of Accountability

By Pamela Schumacher, MS, Prosci, RYT

**F**ostering a culture of accountability is essential to delivering safe, high-quality patient care; and yet, managers may struggle to implement this culture effectively.<sup>1</sup> When practiced correctly, accountability creates clarity, strengthens relationships, and helps every team member understand their role and contributions. Without it, engagement disappears, leaders lose their credibility, and top performers leave.<sup>2</sup>

## The Name of the Game

Accountability is a means of directing and correcting individual and organizational efforts and performance and encouraging socially responsible behaviors. It might be thought of as the “adhesive that binds social systems together.”<sup>3</sup>

“Accountability, in its simplest form, is answerability for performance—someone answers for how work gets done,” says Barbara S. Romzek, PhD, professor emerita of public administration and policy in the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington, D.C. “But that definition doesn’t capture the complexity of accountability. You should also ask, ‘Accountability to whom? Accountability for what? And what are the consequences—are there rewards, punishments, or both?’ ”

“Accountability is named by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education as a feature of the core competence of professionalism—referring to the importance of taking responsibility [and] being reliable. But the virtue goes further to refer to a process of responsiveness to

feedback, a component essential to learning and growing as a professional,” says John Peteet, MD, associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School (HMS), and a member of HMS Center for Bioethics. “Accountability as a virtue is central to learning from mistakes and supervision, and its mutuality and reciprocity strengthen the bonds necessary for effective teamwork.”

“Accountability means taking responsibility for your actions, decisions, and the outcomes that follow. It is not about punishment for mistakes but about learning from them and showing growth in your role,” says Brittany Henning-Wolfe, CMA (AAMA), an office administrator at Dermatology and Skin Surgery Associates in Mokena, Illinois. “Accountability creates understanding, consistency, and commitment to your role within the office. It requires trust, open communication, and a shared goal for the office. By holding ourselves and each other to organizational and professional standards, we reduce errors, improve workflow, and create a smoother, less stressful environment for both patients and employees.”

## Teams Talk

Accountability is not just about personal responsibility but also mutual responsibility. Everyone, including physicians, practice managers, and staff, should hold one another accountable to high standards.

“Informal accountability exists between coworkers, not just between bosses and subordinates,” says Romzek. “It’s the sense of ‘I don’t want to let my teammate down; we’re in this together,’ or ‘I’ll give you a heads-

up if I see trouble coming.’ This kind of accountability depends on trust, respect, and shared purpose. When informal accountability is strong, coworkers support each other, share information, and help prevent problems. When it’s weak, people withhold information, avoid responsibility, or even undermine each other.”

In a medical practice, accountability manifests in a few ways<sup>4</sup>:

- **Reliability:** Deliver on promises and meet deadlines.
- **Integrity:** Own up to mistakes and treat each like a learning opportunity.
- **Clarity:** Be transparent about both successes and setbacks.

“To establish a culture of accountability, [a practice] manager should set clear and actionable expectations. This helps your team focus on what’s important, adapt as needed, and measure progress in ways that encourage personal responsibility and overall engagement,” says Romzek. “The practice manager must communicate expectations clearly and consistently, meaning [they] should communicate expectations day-to-day or weekly, address problems as they arise, anticipate issues before they become crises, and communicate both good news and bad news respectfully. Accountability isn’t real without follow-through. Rewards reinforce success, and corrective conversations prevent repeated mistakes.

“When performance exceeds expectations, praise it—preferably publicly, and when performance falls short, address it privately and constructively,” she says. “A helpful principle is ‘Praise in public; criticize in private.’ In addition, accountability should feel collaborative. Use ‘we,’ not ‘you.’ Ask, ‘This situation was a problem; what are we going to do to make sure it doesn’t happen again?’ That brings employees into the problem-solving instead of putting them on the defensive.”

“Accountability involves identifying potential issues before they cause harm, taking precautions to prevent them, accepting constructive criticism, and continuously learning and trying to grow in the field,” says Henning-Wolfe. “Above all, accountability requires working as a dependable and sup-

## Stronger Together

Practices are more productive if everyone embraces accountability<sup>5</sup>:

- **Be a community builder:** Do not just lead your team; lead the organization. Look for ways to bridge divides and build unity.
- **Think and act as one company:** It is not your team versus everyone else. See yourself as part of a larger whole.
- **Build credibility and trust:** Transparency and honesty are the foundation of collaboration. Show that you are someone others can count on.
- **Support the success of your peers:** Celebrate wins across the organization. Shared success is a powerful motivator.

## No Accountability = Danger

Failing to hold your team accountable can harm your entire organization. Without accountability, your organization risks the following:

- **More errors and missed deadlines:** Projects can easily derail without clear ownership and follow-through, leading to missed deadlines, inefficiencies, and reputational damage.
- **Fractured relationships:** When some employees [do not] carry their weight, those who do eventually grow resentful, eroding trust, affecting productivity, and creating a tense work environment.
- **Toxic behaviors and underperformance:** Negative behaviors can spread in an environment [lacking] accountability, harming overall productivity and [the] quality of work.
- **Disengagement and talent loss:** Employees quickly become disillusioned when poor performance goes unchecked. This leads to low morale, disengagement, and, ultimately, high turnover.
- **Erosion of trust in leadership:** If leaders [do not] uphold accountability or address its absence, employees lose faith in them [and] in the organization's values and fairness.<sup>4</sup>

portive member of the health care team.”

“In my clinic, a culture of accountability is key,” says Michelle Potter, CMA (AAMA), who works in the Providence Medical Group vascular and vein surgery department in Everett, Washington. “As a preceptor, I foster efficiency through clear, standard practices and lots of training. Patient safety is something I am very passionate about. By openly discussing errors with staff when they happen, we secure buy-in on how to fix or improve the outcomes. Our stance is that if everyone takes a proactive role in reducing risk, we make a safer clinic for everyone, from caregivers to patients.”

### Accountability Blockers

Workplace accountability can be strengthened by identifying and addressing barriers that negatively influence organizational culture and limit broader accountability across the practice:

- **Accountability is seen as punitive.** Many people associate the word with a negative connotation because they have been in organizations where accountability was a code word for finding someone to blame when something went wrong. Shift the

focus from blame to growth and encourage employees to own mistakes and learn from them.<sup>1</sup>

- **Goals and expectations are unclear.** Ambiguity undermines accountability because employees are unsure of their responsibilities and what is expected of them. Define clear objectives and provide the tools and resources necessary to achieve them.<sup>1</sup>
- **Expectations do not apply to everyone equally.** Some managers demand accountability from everyone, but they do not model it, so the word loses its meaning. Make accountability a practice-wide goal.<sup>5</sup>

“Accountability can have a negative reputation because it’s often framed as blame,” says Romzek. “We tend to emphasize accountability only when something goes wrong. Rarely do we emphasize it when something goes right. That makes people fear the word. If accountability were also about public praise, awards, or recognition, people wouldn’t dread it. Instead, they’d welcome feedback—both positive and corrective.”

“Managers face all kinds of challenges these days, [including] not wanting or

liking change, not having enough time to adequately perform their duties, unclear or lack of expectations, [or] fear of conflict and being labeled ‘the bad guy,’” says Potter. “Managers may allow accountability to slide by taking a wait-and-see approach, instead of addressing problems when they occur. If we address a problem as [a] training issue, rather than a personality problem, this can get better results from the employee.”

Putting in the work to overcome these barriers can improve important benefits<sup>4</sup>:

- **Performance and productivity:** Employees become more invested in their work and its outcomes, leading to higher quality, more efficient results.
- **Trust between employees and leaders:** Shared goals and accountability grow trust among employees, fostering better working relationships.
- **Teamwork and communication:** Collaboration is smoother and more effective when responsibilities are clearly communicated.
- **Management:** Accountable employees need less supervision, allowing managers to empower their teams and avoid micromanagement.
- **Fairness and transparency:** A fair, equitable workplace is supported by transparent policies.
- **Continuous improvement:** Mistakes should be viewed as opportunities for learning and continuous growth.

### Coaching Before Correcting

Even if managers set examples and clearly define expectations, employees occasionally resist embracing accountability.

“You can’t change someone’s personality, but you can clarify expectations,” says Romzek. “Managers need to communicate that problem-solving, cooperation, and giving colleagues a heads-up are part of everyone’s job. When employees insist on doing the bare minimum, it often signals a failure to create shared accountability. That’s a cultural issue, not just an individual one. If

this happens, schedule a one-on-one meeting with the employee. These conversations should be direct but collaborative to clarify values, emphasize teamwork, and explain how individual actions affect others' work."

Henning-Wolfe would approach this by checking in with the employee to see whether they want to share whether any personal concerns outside the workplace might be affecting their performance. "Taking time to listen and acknowledge these concerns helps employees feel valued as individuals, not just as workers," she explains. "From there, shift the conversation to workplace issues by using recent examples and focusing on observations rather than accusations. This approach brings clarity, recognizes external challenges, and reinforces personal responsibility. Ask them how things could be done differently moving forward. This transforms the discussion from a defensive interaction into proactive problem-solving. It helps if you already have accountability language embedded in performance goals because that will make expectations objective, rather than emotional."

Dr. Peteet agrees that prompt and reg-

ular meetings focused more on improvement than on punishment can encourage a recalcitrant employee to welcome input: "Assessment of the problem can help guide intervention. How open [are they] to feedback—is it received as a threat or as potentially helpful input from others? [Do they] engage in perspective-taking that shows regard for the person providing feedback? Does the person see [their] own capacity to adapt and make needed corrections or improvements? [Do they] have an accountability partner? How consistently [have they] been able to live out [their] obligations?"

"However, if behavior does not improve, escalation will be needed," says Henning-Wolfe. "Any incident and discussions should be documented [and] consequences outlined and then followed through with appropriate disciplinary action to maintain consistency, fairness, and accountability across the organization. Corrective action is appropriate when an employee has violated a specific policy or safety protocol repeatedly. Properly document everything with timelines, detailed descriptions of the issue, and employee

acknowledgment. Feedback must be delivered privately and should be specific and factual. Leadership should also offer support and work to identify any underlying issues to prevent repeated problems and support success in the long term."

At the end of the day, good accountability is simply good management, says Romzek: "True accountability combines formal accountability, such as performance standards, rewards, and discipline, with informal accountability—the team norms, shared values, and mutual support. Managers who can balance both create organizations where people feel engaged, respected, and willing to go the extra mile. Accountability isn't about control—it's about creating a team that works well together." ♦

The CE test for this article can be found on page 28.



## Demonstrate Accountability

- **Set clear expectations:** Establish clear roles and responsibilities, ensuring that everyone knows what is expected of them. By establishing concise expectations and keeping communication open, you provide the foundation for a structured and focused work environment.<sup>6</sup>
- **Lead by example:** Consistently demonstrate accountability in the workplace and encourage others to do the same. Whether meeting deadlines or openly acknowledging mistakes, leaders set a standard that others will follow when they hold themselves accountable.<sup>6</sup>
- **Provide regular feedback:** Engage in consistent, constructive feedback sessions to keep employees on track and provide support where necessary. These feedback sessions should encourage team members to feel comfortable sharing concerns and suggestions.<sup>6</sup>
- **Encourage employee development and growth:** Invest in professional development through training, mentorship, and access to resources to ensure employees are equipped to perform their roles effectively.<sup>1</sup>
- **Recognize and reward accountable behavior:** Rewards, either formal programs or informal praise, encourage others to adopt similar behaviors, embedding accountability deeper into the workplace culture.<sup>1</sup>

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