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CONFLICT

The Best Teams Hold Themselves Accountable

by Joseph Grenny

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Want to create a high performance team? Want to limit the amount of time you spend settling squabbles between team members? It turns out those two issues are closely related: Our research shows that on top performing teams peers immediately and respectfully confront one another when problems arise. Not only does this drive greater innovation, trust, and productivity, but also it frees the boss from being the playground monitor.

I first saw the connection between high performance and peer accountability years ago when consulting with a very successful financial services company. It had an unparalleled return on capital, breathtaking sales growth, and the highest customer renewal rate in the industry.

In my first face-to-face meeting with the CEO, whose name was Paul, and his direct reports, I committed a major faux pas. I discovered halfway through the meeting that I was calling the wrong guy, "Paul."

It was an innocent mistake. When it was time to begin, one member of the executive team wasn't present. He showed up six minutes late and the guy at the head of the table (I learned later that his name was Frank) said, "We all agreed to be here at 10 AM—what happened?" It was a jarring moment. The tardy teammate flushed red, stammered an explanation, and the meeting moved on. I assumed since this guy was at the head of the table and he held the latecomer accountable that this was Paul. I smiled and made a small wave at him. He looked confused but waved back.

Ten minutes later, Lydia was reporting on sales in her business unit. Apparently, things weren't going well. The woman next to me asked most of the hard questions about her disappointing performance. Her comments were thoughtful and constructive but firm. She concluded by suggesting that they reconsider how much capital they were deploying in Lydia's business unit that year. I wondered if maybe she was in charge.

The best decision I made that day was to keep my mouth shut. It turned out Paul was the quietest guy in the room. I could have spent the entire time playing "Who's Paul?" and gotten it wrong every time. (This has since become one of my favorite stories illustrating the importance of peer accountability.)

There was something strange about that team. And many other teams we subsequently studied. We've found that teams break down in performance roughly as follows:

- In the weakest teams, there is no accountability
- In mediocre teams, bosses are the source of accountability
- In high performance teams, peers manage the vast majority of performance problems with one another

Paul didn't have to monitor latecomers or ask Lydia hard questions because he had created a culture of *universal accountability*. The basic principle was that *anyone* should be able to hold *anyone* accountable if it was in the best interest of the team. Team members were both motivated and able to handle the day-to-day concerns they had with one another, with him, or with anyone outside the team.

We've found that you can approximate the health of a relationship, a team and an organization by measuring the average lag time between identifying and discussing problems. The shorter the lag time, the faster problems get solved and the more the resolution enhances relationships. The longer the lag, the more room there is for mistrust, dysfunction, and more tangible costs to mount. The role of leader is to shrink this gap. And the best way to do it is by developing a culture of universal accountability. Here are some ways we've seen managers like Paul create this kind of norm:

1. **Set expectations.** Let new team members know up front that you want and expect them to hold *you* and others accountable.
2. **Tell stories.** Call out positive examples of team members addressing accountability concerns. Especially when they take a big risk by holding *you* accountable. Vicarious learning is a powerful form of influence, and storytelling is the best way to make it happen.
3. **Model it.** The first time your team hears you gripe about your own peers to others—rather than confronting your concerns directly—you lose moral authority to expect the same from them.
4. **Teach it.** The best leaders are teachers. Codify the skills you think are important for holding "crucial conversations"—and take 5-10 minutes in a staff meeting to teach one. In these teaching episodes, ensure the team practices on a real-life example—perhaps one that happened recently. Trust me, they'll complain, but this will make a huge difference in retention and transference to real life.

5. **Set an "It takes two to escalate" policy**. If you struggle with lots of escalations, set a policy that "it takes two to escalate." In other words, both peers need to agree they can't resolve it at their level before they bring it to you together.

The role of the boss should not be to settle problems or constantly monitor your team, it should be to create a team culture where peers address concerns immediately, directly and respectfully with each other. Yes, this takes time up front. But the return on investment happens fast as you regain lost time and see problems solved both better and faster.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.

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