

Accountability at all levels: building ownership in common goals

Definition of accountability according to Britannica:

"Principle according to which a person or institution is responsible for a set of duties and can be required to give an account of their fulfillment to an authority that is in a position to issue rewards or punishment."

Most people know that top-level management is ultimately responsible for the actions and results within their organizations, especially when it's related to workplace injuries. However, because everybody plays an important role in safety, an organization must have buy-in and accountability at all levels to be successful.

When you think about accountability you might picture disciplinary action by managers or supervisors—this is seen as a method to enforce rules and ensure compliance with policies and procedures. Accountability is much bigger than that. It includes clear expectations, strong communication, and effective training. When you align that with ongoing coaching and involving employees in developing programs, policies, and procedures, you have a recipe for good accountability (see sidebars for definition).

Duties

It all begins with management; they set the tone for the entire organization. If they share company performance results and expectations with everyone and provide resources for everyone to work safely and effectively, they are being accountable to the employees and company stakeholders. That commitment is seen by other employees, who will also fulfill their duties at their level, reinforcing accountability at all levels.

Fulfilling duties

For employees to fulfill expectations, upper management must set clear expectations that are easy to understand and measure. For example, if management wants a monthly production report, they shouldn't just ask for it. They should provide (in writing) exactly what should be included, preferred report format, who should complete the report, and the date it's due. The same is true for workers at every level; if they know what is expected, they are better positioned to meet goals.

Employees can play their part by reporting their concerns to upper management and following up to see that they are addressed. Leadership that is not responsive to their workers' concerns will struggle in all areas, because the workers are critical to overall success.

Authority

Authority can be a tricky concept because it refers to the person who can make decisions. Often it means they have control over rewards and punishments. While that is certainly a part of accountability, this view leaves out accountability at the employee level. They may not have the authority to punish and reward at a company level, but they can still get intrinsic rewards from a job well done. In that way, they hold themselves accountable.

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Bringing it all together

Employees are accountable to the organization to do a good job safely, and leadership is accountable to employees to provide a safe working environment and communicate clear expectations. When everyone at an organization is fulfilling their duties, you have accountability at all levels. More importantly, everyone has ownership in the company's mission and is more likely to step up when asked.

Examples of accountability at all levels

The structure may differ from company to company, but these are some ideas of how to have accountability at all levels.

Top management:

- Review safety and health programs annually and report findings to all staff
- Include safety in all quarterly corporate communications to employees
- Respond to all safety committee recommendations within a week
- Attend monthly all-staff safety meetings
- Include safety in annual performance reviews for employees at all levels

Middle management:

- Track employee training completion rates and communicate to supervisors
- Track supervisor completion of expected safety coaching interactions, review reports and discuss outcomes with supervisors monthly
- Track completion of incident/accident analyses and review with supervisors monthly
- Track and report injury trends to upper management on a quarterly basis

Supervisors:

- Conduct five employee observations every month and coach employees as needed
- Provide planned training to new and existing employees monthly
- Identify workplace hazards and implement controls as needed
- Complete analyses for all incident and accident reports within 24 hours of report
- Document all disciplinary actions, including verbal warnings, in company system
- Ensure that new employees complete 100% of training before starting work
- Communicate consequences, rewards, and opportunities during regular crew meetings
- Apply discipline consistently and fairly

Employees:

- Always follow company policies and procedures
- Report safety hazards and concerns promptly
- Participate in company training
- Report all incidents/accidents immediately
- Serve on the safety committee

Activity ideas

- Role play difficult conversations with employees who haven't met expectations. Is the feedback delivered in a sensitive, diplomatic, and productive way? Discuss ways to improve.
- Contract a reputable external consultant to audit your accountability system and review the findings.
- Review job descriptions to ensure expectations are clear and include safety.
- Group discussion about accountability. What is it? What does it mean at your organization?