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Memo to managers: How to use the accountability factor to boost performance



Joel Garfinkle · September 16, 2013 · Leadership

Are you feeling disappointed and frustrated that your employees are producing less than stellar results? Worried that maybe your expectations are too high?

Relax. Having high expectations is great. You just need a strategy for applying them. Here's a three-step process that will [boost your employees' performance](#) across the board.

- Set high expectations
- Communicate specifics Apply
- accountability

Set high expectations. As a leader and manager, you are responsible for creating the environment where growth and success happen. First of all, take a close look at your expectations of yourself. Do you strive for continuous performance improvement in your own job? It's difficult to motivate others toward exceptionalism if you aren't headed there yourself.

Next, take a look at where your current expectations of employees come from. There's a concept called the Pygmalion Effect based on an experiment reported in the Journal of Applied Psychology ([Eden & Shani, 1982](#)). Participants in a 15-week combat command course were rated on past performance by their commanders and randomly assigned to one of three groups. Their instructors were told that their past performance scores were either low, medium or high. Trainees whose instructors thought they were high performers and therefore expected high performance from them scored significantly higher on tests, exhibited more positive attitudes, and were seen as better leaders. Moral of the story: You get the performance you expect.

Communicate specifics. Setting expectations ought to be a shared responsibility. Top-down communication has all the motivational excitement of a day in a sweat shop. But when people have a say in setting their own performance standards, they may surprise you. Once you've set the expectations, communicate openly and often. Make [reviews and feedback](#) frequent and informal. A casual conversation over coffee once a month to evaluate performance and implement mid-course corrections is preferable to a more formal review process. It eliminates surprises and takes the sting out of what might otherwise be perceived as criticism or negative feedback.

Once you've established the process, continually acknowledge what's working. Don't make your staff meetings a recitation of where people are failing and how they need to fix it. Instead, talk about what's going right and how you can do more of that. Be free with the individual kudos as well -- both in private and in public. Recognizing outstanding employee performance can be anything from a formal award to a compliment during a casual conversation. A simple statement like, "You're really good at this," makes the recipient want to do whatever it takes to get more of the same from you.

Apply accountability. You'll need to be proactive about holding your people accountable for results. Make sure your expectations fit the recipients. Take into consideration peoples' backgrounds, abilities and current performance. Setting the bar too high or demanding a goal that's far removed from what someone has any experience of will only result in discouragement. Base your accountability on expectations that have a high probability of success—even if they sound unattainable at first.

Don't be afraid to reconfirm your expectations regularly. People won't grow at the same pace and many won't immediately grow to fit your picture. Continue to encourage people by reminding them that your expectations and your support are still there. Ask them [what they need to succeed](#), whether it's more training, better or more frequent feedback, or just more time to figure things out on their own.

Last (but actually first), walk the talk. Modeling the kind of performance you want from others is one of the best ways best ways you can communicate your own commitment to your company and your people. If you want your employees to be [better team players](#) or treat co-workers, customers and vendors with respect, you go first. You will gain credibility you'll send a strong message that you are accountable for meeting and exceeding your own goals and expectations.

Joel Garfinkle is the author of seven books, including "Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level." More than 10,000 people receive his [Fulfillment@Work](#) newsletter. [Subscribe](#) and you'll receive the free e-book "41 Proven Strategies to Get Promoted Now!" If you are looking for practical advice for advancing up the executive career ladder, view his [Career Advancement Blog](#).