

Keeping Your “Promises, Promises”



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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“You made me promises, promises, knowing I’d believe. Promises, promises, you knew you’d never keep.”
– *Promises, Promises* by Naked Eyes

Several years ago I heard a wonderfully simple definition of accountability: ‘doing what you said you were going to do.’ I often share this definition when I’m leading board orientations, governance workshops, and other [training programs](#) when the subject of accountability pops up. My perspective on accountable cultures has grown exponentially while reading *Just Culture: Balancing Safety and Accountability* by Sidney Dekker. While the simple definition still appeals to me, I’ve learned a couple of valuable nuances. First, in many organizations accountability means “blaming and punishing” and it is both backward looking and and retributive. Second, accountability and learning should be inextricably linked in a healthy, ‘just culture.’ When linked to learning, accountability becomes forward-looking.

My sense is that many nonprofit leaders take a traditional, backwards-looking approach to personal accountability in the workplace. They encourage, through words or deeds, people to own up to mistakes and accept the blame for failure. These leaders also create and impose rules and policies over-emphasizing the negative aspects of being ‘held accountable.’ Risk leaders are in many respects responsible for some of these practices, through policies that describe the harsh punishments that are sure to follow non-compliance or decisions that result in negative consequences for the organization. Because the risk function is often viewed as the ‘Department of No!’ it is even more critical for risk leaders to ensure that accountability and organizational learning are perceived as positive, holistic practices that truly benefit staff and the organization itself.

Accountability and a ‘just culture’ can manifest themselves with ample cultural support. To foster an environment conducive to accountability, we must remove cultural stigmas related to failure and blame.

Accountability Action Plan

- **Teach managers and staff to both give and receive feedback** - To reduce the punitive aspects of accountability, focus on how we talk about it. How is feedback delivered and received throughout your nonprofit? How do supervisors hold their direct reports accountable and vice versa? At the Center, we typically use a casual coaching approach in which I will speak to staff members about their performance in a timely way, in order to address issues as they arise. This method works for us, and keeps feedback loops open while ensuring that feedback is delivered in small chunks that staff are comfortable digesting.

But there are still challenges in delivering feedback, and every individual reacts differently to criticism.

I suggest that—along with training managers to *deliver* feedback in an appropriate way—managers should train their direct reports to *receive* feedback in a healthy way. The Center team once discussed this concept internally, and some of us recognized that we react to feedback in harmful ways. For example, I tend to internalize feedback, initially rejecting it until I've had time to process it. One of my staff members openly invites critical feedback but is still initially defensive when I do it out. By recognizing our natural reactions to feedback, we have learned as a team to be more accepting of feedback and to take it less personally. Similarly, as a manager, I now know how to deliver feedback to specific employees in a way that will benefit us both. This cultural shift has fostered an environment in which accountability is a more positive, team-wide value rather than a critical, individualistic burden.

- **Take a systems approach when assessing failures** - A key challenge of accountability is that it is often directed in the wrong place, or it is not applied as broadly as it should be. For example, when a staff member makes a poor decision that results in negative fallout for her nonprofit, a supervisor might be inclined to hold the staff member accountable for her actions. While this approach to accountability isn't necessarily wrong, it may not be *complete*; blaming one person may not resolve the issue at hand. Yes, the staff member may have made a bad decision, but what were the other failure points that factored into that decision?

By taking a systems approach and thinking about the organization as a complex, multifaceted entity, the supervisor might identify additional factors that must be addressed to resolve the issue. Perhaps the staff member was not on-boarded properly and therefore was unaware of a key policy that might have prevented her from making the decision. Or perhaps another supervisor gave her a conflicting directive that led her to make the decision, regardless of the possibility of negative consequences. When assessing failures and determining how to hold yourself and your team members accountable, be sure to dive deep as well as step back to see the big picture. If you fail to take a holistic approach, you might remain ignorant of critical failure points that compounded to cause the failure in the first place.

- **Put the ACT back in 'action'** - Accountability sometimes appears to exist within an organization, yet accountability efforts often lack real follow-through and action. For example, you might have conducted an incident review only to stick the review documents in a drawer; or, you might have hired a consultant to train your team and found that everyone forgot the core lessons just weeks or months after the training. It's natural to revert back to the same state you have been operating in, but it's dangerous and can lead to superficial learning—learning that is not truly retained or applied for the good of the organization.

To enhance real learning and accountability, program yourself to designate clear action steps after every conversation or meeting you have in the workplace. It's okay to sometimes add materials to the 'parking lot' for ongoing discussion at next week's meetings, but if any decisions are made, or if any good ideas are shared, then don't leave the room without defining a specific set of follow-up steps. Encourage accountability even further by making those steps the first item on the agenda at your next meeting. Small changes like these will encourage your team members to take action on their ideas, apply their learning, and hold themselves accountable to promises made during team discussions.

Fostering cultural and behavioral changes can take quite a bit of time and energy, and making accountability a friendly and effective concept is no different. The proof will be in the pudding when you can live out both personal and institutional accountability at your nonprofit, and demonstrate to all your stakeholders that you truly do what you say you are going to do.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She is grateful to her former colleague Erin Gloeckner, for her contributions to this article. Melanie welcomes your questions about risk consulting, risk-aware culture, and the link between accountability and learning in nonprofit organizations. Contact Melanie at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.