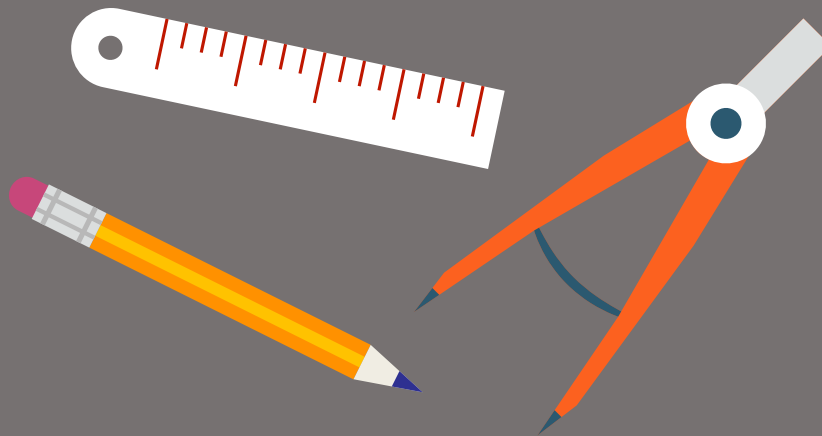


# The Language of Accountability

What's good, what's bad,  
and what it means



PRACTICAL TOOLS

# The Language of Accountability



A culture of accountability is heavily dependent on communication between management and employees. What you say plays a major role in setting the tone of the workplace.

Trust us, employees are listening to the words you use and how you say them. So make the most of it.

And what employees say is very telling, too. By listening, you'll have a good barometer of where the culture of accountability stands in your workplace.

The examples below can help you do a better job, while also understanding how employees are handling accountability:

## Good, positive phrases managers should use

- "We (I) own this." Managers have to show their accountability before they can expect it from employees.
- "Here is our company's big goal." Employees need to know the overall company's goal before they can find out how they fit into the picture.
- "Here is how you fit in as we try to achieve our company goal." This is what managers say after the employee knows the overall company goal.
- "Here are the results we want." This is bringing the plan to the employee's level – letting the employee know what is expected.
- "Here are the benefits for you." Managers need to let know employees know about the consequences (positive and negative) regarding their success or failure to complete a task.

- “I understand what happened and realize how frustrating that must be.” What a manager can say when there’s a problem without saying, “It’s OK,” when, probably, it’s not.
- “Was there a problem we didn’t anticipate?” When there is a problem, managers need to ask exploratory questions, not to cast blame, but to figure out how to do better the next time.
- “Here is the desired outcome.” Always be clear on the goals.
- “Here is how we’re going to do better.” “Here is how we’re going to get there.” Be sure the path is clearly marked.
- “I see you accomplished (be specific). Great job!” It’s as important to name the specifics of an employee’s achievement as it is to tell them “Great job.”
- “We’ve made progress. Here’s how we can do better.” When giving feedback, it helps to keep it positive and goal-oriented.
- “How can I help?” This statement is particularly important after a manager has to point out a potential problem achieving results.
- “Can I help with \_\_\_\_\_?” A more specific form of “How can I help?” It’s more appropriate when a definite problem has been identified.
- “That went well. How can we repeat that?” Feedback and analysis should happen when there are successes and progress, not just when there are problems.
- “Here’s what didn’t go well and where we want to do better next time. Let’s talk about how we’ll do that.” Avoid the blame game. Focus on how you’ll do better next time.
- “How are things going? Anything you need me for? Need to talk about anything?” Although manager involvement should happen more during planning and review than during execution, check-ins are still more than just a good idea: They’re necessary.

- “What could I have done that would have produced a better outcome?” Managers need to ask themselves this question before they ever ask employees a similar one.
- “We once had a problem with X. How did I know? John told me. He came to me as soon as he knew. And together, with the rest of the team, we put together a plan to not only fix the problem, but make us stronger for the future.” Managers have to recall situations via storytelling that encourage employees to openly come to them, quickly, when there is a problem, so a solution can be found ASAP.

## 8 qualities of good coaching language

One of the management moments when language is most important is during coaching. Here are the 8 qualities of good coaching language:

1. Its timeliness is as important as its substance. It occurs as close to the action being addressed as possible.
2. It's specific.
3. It's a discussion with questions and answers, not a lecture.
4. It involves a lot of listening by the manager.
5. It incorporates cooperative language. More “we” and “us” than “you” and “I.”
6. It shows appreciation for work done.
7. It asks for feedback.
8. It discusses problems AND solutions.

## Negative phrases managers should avoid

- **“We’re holding you accountable.”** Of course some employees have a more difficult time accepting accountability than others. You still should never have to say this in a way that it sounds like you’re threatening potential punishment.

- **"It's OK."** (after a problem arises) The fact is, it's not OK. However, this doesn't mean "fire away." Discuss the problem and focus more time on potential solutions.
- **"HR will screen the applicants."** HR will help you, the manager, screen applicants. The manager has to take the more active role.
- **"They'll figure it out."** No, they won't.
- **"It's them, not me."** See the above entry for asking yourself, "What could I have done better?"
- **"Your goal is \_\_\_\_."** Goals are limiting. Instead, talk about desired results.
- **"Your goal is (this financial metric)."** That might be the company's goal, but it's not a good goal for an individual employee, with some possible exceptions such as sales.
- **"Here is your stretch goal."** If you must use goals, they should be easily obtainable.
- **"Here's how we can become the best \_\_\_\_."** Becoming the best is a difficult-to-obtain state. Instead, strive to be better.
- **"Why didn't this work?"** Never ask an employee that question until you answered it yourself.

## Good accountability language heard from employees

When you hear these, chances are things are going well:

- **"I own this."** This one is self-explanatory.
- (To a manager): **"We have a problem with ..."** (particularly if it's soon after the problem is discovered). This shows employees have confidence that if they bring a problem to you, instead of playing the blame game, you'll work with them to find a solution.

- (To a co-worker): **"That might go better if ... "** This is the sign that workers are holding each other accountable with proper respect for each other.

## Bad accountability language heard from employees

When you hear these, you have a long way to go to achieve accountability.

- **"Do I get my bonus?"** A financial incentive has caused the employee to focus too much on the criteria to earn the bonus instead of meeting expectations.
- **"He isn't pulling his weight."** That might be true, and it's also likely that the worker isn't accountable.
- **"My supervisor is always looking over my shoulder."** The employee feels micromanaged. A potential sign the manager is focusing too much on the action phase of a project instead of the planning and review stages.
- **"What's expected of me?"** or **"I don't know what's expected of me."** A manager, most likely, hasn't sufficiently communicated expectations.
- **"I didn't know that."** See the previous entry.
- **"I need more clarity."** Ditto.
- **"I don't want to get in trouble."** The employee probably doesn't feel comfortable bringing a problem to his manager for fear of being blamed instead of focusing on finding a solution.
- **"I don't have any growth opportunity at this company."** A manager probably hasn't explained the positive consequences of success to the employee.
- **"I didn't do \_\_\_\_\_ because (excuse)."** Once again, if employees are making excuses, one possibility is they're wary of a manager playing the blame game.