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Remote yet accountable:

How to create a culture of accountability while working remotely

Right thinking

Accountability is front of mind with so many people working from home, away from the rhythms and routines of the office environment. Fostering and maintaining a culture of accountability virtually is possible by focusing on two factors: the right cadence of interactions and the right digital tools. An effective virtual cadence of accountability comprises a consistent approach to a series of interactions spanning a range of frequencies and formats. While using the right tools is the difference between working remotely and remotely working.

Accountability – doing what you say you will do – is an integral characteristic of high-performing organisations, teams and individuals.

With many people working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, away from the rhythms and routines of the office environment, there has been renewed interest in accountability. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that visibility means accountability, and therefore working remotely can lead to less accountability.

In this article, we explore the necessary conditions for a culture of accountability and how to foster these conditions when working remotely by implementing a cadence and using the right digital tools.

Creating a culture of accountability

Creating a culture of accountability has been a topic of interest for academics, business commentators and executives for many years. The current state of

knowledge on the topic of personal or individual accountability has been well summarised by Bregman (2016), who proposed five requirements of a culture of accountability:

1. Clear expectations: Set clear goals, expectations, outcomes and measurement. To ensure understanding, ask employees to summarise what has been agreed.
2. Clear capability: Establish what skills and resources people need to achieve expected results. If the skills and resources are lacking, establish a plan to acquire them.
3. Clear measurement: Set weekly milestones with clear, measurable targets.
4. Clear feedback: Regularly track and measure progress. Provide weekly feedback that is honest and helpful. Engage immediately when things get off-track.

5. Clear consequences: Depending on the outcome, there are three choices: repeat, reward or release. Repeat steps if there's a lack of understanding. Reward execution – acknowledge success, compliment, promote. Release if the person is not able to be held to account or a good fit for the job.

Falling short on even one of the requirements can hinder your ability to drive accountability.

Getting all five right can be challenging, even when working in close physical proximity. However, it is certainly possible to foster and maintain a culture of accountability virtually with the right interactions and tools.

Finding your cadence: be structured and consistent

Franklin Covey refers to a 'cadence of accountability', a rhythm of *formal* and *informal* interactions to which you will commit to keep the work you agreed to do on track (McChesney, Covey, & Huling, 2012).

It's not always easy to strike up organic, informal conversations with your team when they are working remotely. So, in a virtual environment, managers aiming to increase accountability need to intentionally create opportunities to interact with their teams.

How do you do that? In our view, an effective virtual cadence of accountability comprises a consistent approach to a series of interactions spanning a range of *frequencies* (for example, daily, weekly, fortnightly) and *formats* (for example, check-ins and updates, formal and less structured discussions). A clear leader to manage the discussion, mediate in the event of any confusion, and ensure everyone has a chance to provide ongoing input as circumstances change.

When the entire Right Lane team started working remotely, we established the following interactions:

- Broader team check-ins: We share a short Teams post that includes priorities for the day in the morning and achievements at the end of the day.

- Small team check-ins: We established 'cells' (five to six people), teams within our teams, that meet daily for 15 minutes, to check-in on priorities, ask for any help they need, and to have some fun (two truths and a lie anyone?).
- All-hands check-ins: All staff meet once a week to share how they are feeling, hear leadership updates and share achievements and wins.

We've also maintained pre-COVID-19 interactions focused on setting and reinforcing accountabilities. These include continuous within-project feedback to and from project leaders and regular weekly or fortnightly one-on-ones to track progress to long-term career and development goals and shorter term (six month) expectations.

Once frequency and format have been decided, managers should ensure that everyone on the team is aware of the cadence and what is expected of them.

Finally, maintaining your cadence of accountability relies on consistency. Ensure that interactions are scheduled well in advance, and that these interactions don't get moved. Set the expectation that everyone attends as a matter of priority. This can only be maintained if managers role model attendance and focus.

Effective use of digital tools

Setting up people to work effectively remotely includes deploying the best available digital tools to support internal and external interactions and to help people stay connected. These tools can help reinforce relationships, provide the conditions to build trust, and keep people motivated.

Using the tools at your disposal effectively is the difference between working remotely and remotely working.

Like everyone else it seems, we've found that we can't use video conferencing too much. Video conferencing feels more personal than written or audio-only communication; it can help reduce the sense of social isolation many of us are feeling; and it gives participants many of the visual cues that they would experience if they were meeting face-to-

face. The importance of visual cues and nonverbal communication for effective communication and collaboration is profound. A study by Roghanizad and Bohns (2017) found that a face-to-face request is 34 times more successful than an email.

Right Lane uses a combination of the following digital tools:

- Virtual collaboration (Microsoft Teams, Webex, Zoom, BlueJeans)
- Content co-creation (Office 365, Mural)
- Communication platforms (Microsoft Teams)
- Polling (Zeetings, Mentimeter, Slido)
- In-the-cloud document storage and file-sharing tools (SharePoint, OneDrive)
- Online scheduling (Calendly)
- Project management (Basecamp, Trello)

Choosing the right tools for your team is about being clear on the purpose of the tool and how it enables a particular interaction.

More than ever before, performance and results need to be valued over a physical presence. With the right cadence and the right tools, organisations can continue to foster a culture of accountability and deliver high-performance.

References

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want to know more?

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We employ our distinctive ideas and processes, and our absolute commitment to delivery, to help clients we care about pursue their inspiring missions.

We work alongside clients who do great work within the sectors they operate, and we are excited to be involved in creating outcomes that truly make a difference.

We are an ethical consulting firm with a strong belief in the work we do, and with a passion to give back to the broader community with the skills and expertise available within our walls.

Right Lane was established in 1997 to help private, not for profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 23 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of around 300 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.



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