

Good morning, everybody, Dennis Engelbrecht, with the Digging Deeper pod series for The Family Business Institute.

Today, I want to talk about accountability. Accountability is an interesting thing. You kind of know it when you see it. And I guess you know when you don't have it. But it's very hard, I think it's a hard word to even define. What does accountability really mean? And it's certainly very hard to achieve it when you don't have it. You can't just demand accountability and see it occur.

So, let's talk about a couple of the keys to getting true accountability in your organization. A couple of sayings that have stuck with me, I think from the first peer group I ever had the privilege of facilitating some 19 years ago, I remember two sayings from the first few meetings. And one of them was on the wall of that client company, if you don't inspect, don't expect. And certainly, that's a key aspect of accountability. If you think about it, if you don't inspect, don't expect. I'm going to give you one example of that. So oftentimes we ask our superintendents to fill out and submit a daily report. And in today's world, of course, that usually happens online, oftentimes through pro core or a similar software. But the extent to which those are done, well done, and provide all the information that could possibly be important to the business really depends on who looks at it. If I'm doing this daily report day after day and nobody ever looks at them, nobody ever asked me a question about them, nobody ever follows up on it, well I might lose my motivation and incentive for doing that because I don't see the worth in it.

So, part of the inspecting part of it, if you don't inspect don't expect, is that somebody knows they're doing something valuable. And really, if you think about it, if you have a process and nobody ever looks at it or does anything with it, is it really valuable? Well it's a human instinct to think it's probably not. And then it tends to fall through the cracks. Of course, with something like a daily report, you know those are valuable if you ever get in a lawsuit over your job or things like that or a contest at the end between subcontractor and contractor or contractor and owner. You need to have a record of exactly what happened. What was the weather that day? Who showed up on site? So those things become important at some point, but we lose that importance day to day. And that's one of the reasons we oftentimes don't have accountability because we create processes and there's no follow-up or nobody looking at the things that you do and you start to think that they're not worthwhile doing because you don't feel the value.

The other truism that I learned in those early days is what gets measured gets done. So, I was with a company the other day, and we were talking about buyout. And apparently in the manual, it says that you're supposed to complete buyout within 90 days. Well, if nobody's looking at that or nobody's measuring that, and so somebody's not completing their buyout 90 days and nobody knows about it, well that's where things get left if you're not measuring. And of course, in our discussion around that people amended it and said, "Well, you really should have 80 or 90% done in 30 days and maybe that's even a more important benchmark." So that word benchmark, by the way, has a lot to do with accountability. You can't be accountable for something unless there's a benchmark. And then if you don't measure against that benchmark, again, people will lose the need to actually achieve those aspects of accountability.

So, you also have to set an example and train. If people don't know what the expectations are, we talked about one example there, but there are expectations all across their jobs and their duties. Are those expectations clear? In this recent meeting again, somebody said, "Well, it's in the manual." Holy cow. When's the last time anybody looked at the manual, particularly somebody who's been around for 20 years? Has he actually gone through the operations manual for our company? Well very possibly maybe, probably not. So, it's in the manual. The manual doesn't create accountability. All the manual does is set the expectations which then have to be communicated, measured and inspected.

A lot of this boils down to discipline. A disciplined organization is most often an accountable organization. Discipline meaning, each day we go to our job and we do the things that we're supposed to do. And we need to do the things that are in the manual, if you will, and we do them in a discipline manner. A discipline is getting into your office and spending 15 minutes on your to-do list and your prioritization for the day. A great best practice if you haven't adopted it, but why not spend 15 minutes so you don't lose two hours being disorganized later in the day and making sure that, again, the things that need to be done, get done, get done on a timely basis.

One of the difficulties of trying to institute accountability when it's not there is it really can happen from the top of the organization to the bottom of the organization. Enforcing accountability from the top is not even possible. It's not possible because a lot of these disciplines that people need to be doing are details. If the person at the top is diving into the details a couple of layers down, they're not doing their job of leading and they're the wrong person to be looking at those details. It should be the senior project manager who's overseeing the project team, as an example, or your director of operations or whatever the title is. But it certainly isn't the senior leader of the company.

So, accountability has to be driven at that closest level. If it's not driven there or by the, let me track back. It should be driven within by the individuals. But where it needs reinforcement, it's driven by that next level. When I think of accountability, while it's hard to define, I think about an interview with a general superintendent we had about three years ago. And this fellow, Rick, was an accountability machine. And what do I mean by that? Well he inspected, so people expected. So, when people submitted their daily reports, he read every daily report every day. In fact, everything that superintendents were to submit and do, whether it's the three week look ahead or whatever, he looked at virtually every one in each cycle. So, they knew it was important. They knew it was going to be seen and he had his measurements. So, what got measured got done.

Now, the very interesting thing about this individual is when you interviewed the superintendents, they didn't feel like they were being micromanaged or they had big brother looking over their shoulder. What Rick did is he used all this information that he gathered to help them. If he saw something where they might need aid or they might need coaching, he used it as a tool for coaching and improvement and a learning opportunity as opposed to a disciplinary process or anything like that. So again, when I think about accountability, I really look at that picture of that one guy, because he had accountability down to a T. The people in his organization were disciplined, did what they need to do and got great results as a result of the way he operated.

So, the other thing I want to talk about is really accountability has a lot to do with pride and purpose. If you can remind people of the why of your business, the purpose of why they do what they do, the mission that you're trying to achieve, and you can reward them and make them feel prideful when they do the things you need them to do, those disciplines as part of a disciplined organization, what you'll find is that pride drives accountability from the bottom. And if you don't have that pride or purpose at the bottom, trying to apply accountability from the top generally will just not work and not be successful.

So think about the accountability within your organization, where you might make some changes, improvements, who in your organization might need to ramp up to help in that accountability challenge and what kind of communications you can make that can reestablish or reinforce that pride and purpose that's needed for true accountability.

Again, Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper. Thanks for tuning.

