

Accountability: Two Models, Same Word

Why "build a culture of accountability" can mean two very different things — and how to make sure your team hears the one you intend.

Accountability is one of the most common words in senior leadership conversations — and one of the most easily misheard. When the C-suite says it, they usually mean trust, ownership, and empowered decision-making. When middle managers hear it, they often hear consequences, control, and pressure to "step up." **The gap between intent and reception is where culture either deepens or breaks** — especially after layoffs, restructurings, or moments of organizational strain.

MODEL 1 Control-Based Accountability <i>Rooted in consequences. Assumes people won't do the work unless someone is watching.</i>	MODEL 2 Trust-Based Accountability <i>Rooted in ownership. Assumes people want to do meaningful work and decide well.</i>
THE INTERNAL STORY "We've gotten too loose. People mistake our kindness for weakness. They know they won't get in trouble."	THE INTERNAL STORY "We can't be everywhere at once. We need our next layer of leaders to own their scope, decide, and feel real responsibility for their people."
WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE "We need more accountability around here." "People need to step up and do their jobs." "No more excuses."	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE "What did we learn from this?" "What support do you need?" "I got this one wrong — here's what I'd do differently."
HOW THE TEAM SHOWS UP Suspicion and pressure. People manage impressions instead of solving problems — hiding mistakes, surfacing only safe ideas, waiting for direction.	HOW THE TEAM SHOWS UP Trusted and stretched. People surface problems early, make calls within their scope, and ask for support when they need it — without apology.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Amy Edmondson (Harvard) maps safety against accountability on a 2x2. High accountability + low safety is the *Anxiety Zone* — where people hide mistakes to avoid blame. High on both is the *Learning Zone* — the actual home of high performance. **David Rock** (NeuroLeadership Institute) draws the same line between *punitive accountability* and *growth-oriented accountability*: "an empowering sense of ownership... restoring dignity to individuals." **Peter Bregman** (HBR) puts it plainly — accountability isn't micromanagement. It's clear expectations, clear measurement, and clear feedback, delivered with respect.

Leading from Trust-Based Accountability

Four practices that keep your words and actions grounded in trust — so your team hears what you actually mean.

You can't fix the translation problem by using different words. You fix it by consistently showing which model you're operating from. These four practices are the signals your team reads.

PRACTICE 01

Celebrate ownership publicly

When a manager makes a decision in their scope — especially an imperfect one — name it and affirm it. Ownership you celebrate is ownership you'll see more of.

TRY SAYING

"I want to call out how Priya made the call on the vendor question last week. She didn't kick it up — she decided. That's what we need more of."

PRACTICE 02

Use the language of learning, not blame

When something goes wrong, your first sentence sets the frame. Ask what you'll take from it and do differently — not who dropped it.

TRY SAYING

"This wasn't our best. What did we take away from it, and what are we going to do differently next time?"

PRACTICE 03

Model the accountability you expect

If you want your managers to own mistakes cleanly, show them what that looks like from the top. Vulnerability at the top is permission downstream.

TRY SAYING

"I got this one wrong. Here's what I was optimizing for, here's what I missed, and here's what I'd do differently now."

PRACTICE 04

Openly invite support-seeking

Trust-based accountability assumes leading is hard. Say so out loud, and make it easy to ask for what people need — before a problem becomes a crisis.

TRY SAYING

"We can't do this alone. If the direction isn't clear, or you need more support, tell your manager or tell me. That's not weakness — it's the job."

Self-Diagnostic: Which Voice Does Your Team Hear?

Think about the last time you raised accountability with your team. Check the statements that honestly applied.

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| ☐ I named a specific behavior or outcome — not a vague "we need to step up." | ☐ I opened with what we could learn, not who dropped it. |
| ☐ I celebrated someone who took ownership in the last two weeks — by name. | ☐ I admitted a mistake of my own out loud, recently. |
| ☐ I asked what support my people need — and meant it. | ☐ I know what decisions my direct reports are empowered to make alone. |

Edmondson, A. — *The Fearless Organization* (2018)

Bregman, P. — "The Right Way to Hold People Accountable," *HBR* (2016)

Rock, D. & Edmondson, A. — *NeuroLeadership Institute conversation on safety & accountability*

Also see: Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead* · Frei & Morriss, "Begin with Trust," *HBR* · Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*