

# IF You Have TO Hold People Accountable... You've *Already* Lost

By Mike Blevins.



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*In the last of a three-part series, Mike discusses the final element of a successful culture—accountability and its relationship to a Just Culture and Discipline. His explanation offers a new way of looking at a word that has been overused and misused by many managers/leaders, and it just may eradicate the phrase “holding people accountable” from your lexicon.*

In two previous articles in this series, I shared with you some thoughts about a Just Culture and Discipline. I ended with the statement: **People expect to be and want to be disciplined in a Just Culture.** To understand this statement we need to explore accountability.

You may not be surprised to learn that I also think accountability is one of the most misused words in our language. Organizations again use

the term to mean too many things. In many organizations it is the same as responsible. And in many others it means the person we are going to blame. In others it is an elusive concept that is talked about and seldom modeled. In others it's something for everyone else, not me.

If you have heard a leader say, “If I could just get them to be accountable” then you know where the problem begins.

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Accountability is one of the most powerful characteristics of a strong, high performing organization. It is self-reporting. It is self-correcting. It brings transparency. It is contagious. It builds trust. It delivers repeatable results.

The simplest definition of accountable is:

**Able to account**

But the power is in the accounting. In order to give a full account, the person has to know the details. They have to have been involved. They have to know what happened; what the sequence was, who else was involved; what their intent was, etc. It is not merely an organizational assignment.

**Responsibility vs. Accountability**

Remember all those management classes we went to where they explained responsibility and accountability to us. I never got it because I don't think they did either. Responsible is simply being able to respond. That means having the capability, the training, the tools, the authority and the will to respond. It is in advance of accountability.

Accountability comes after the task is complete or attempted. It reports what happened in the past. So, in my book, someone is responsible for doing something in the future and accountable for doing it in the past.

This difference may be too subtle, but it helps me better understand accountability. If I assign someone to be responsible for doing something but don't train them, how can I hold them accountable after the fact? They were really not "able" to respond, not properly prepared. In error language, how can they be culpable?

**NEWSFLASH:  
We Can't Hold Others Accountable**

I just used the phrase, "hold them accountable." I actually don't believe we can do this.

Organizations cannot hold someone accountable. They either are or they are not accountable.

What we usually mean when we say, "We held them accountable" is that we disciplined them.

We delivered consequences to them. You know, all the usual stuff; coaching, counseling, written warnings, time off without pay or fired them. Or even worse yet, we may have made them the scapegoat and professionally embarrassed them in front of their peers, including doing the root cause and teaching the lessons learned class.

This is a losing course of action.

In Daniels<sup>1</sup> model (see the second article of this series), nearly everyone, including leadership gets something they don't want and you will probably never see that exact set of circumstances again because everyone is running to their corners. This scenario destroys trust and the Just Culture.



<sup>1</sup> Aubrey Daniels – see [www.aubreydaniels.com](http://www.aubreydaniels.com)

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So, how do we use accountability to build up the Just Culture? We have to make it reinforcing.

You can get more of a behavior by reinforcing it, positively or negatively. To get a behavior to sustain itself, it must be reinforced every time it is done. If a person who is the negative reinforcer leaves the formula, behavior returns to its natural state prior to negative reinforcement. If a behavior is self-reinforcing in a positive way, the performer will do it without regard to whether others provide positive reinforcement or not. That is why positive reinforcement is so powerful.

How do we do that? You make doing the desired behavior the right thing to do. Reward it until people believe it, and they will do it again and again.

People come to work to do a good days work. They want to be part of a successful operation. They want to make a contribution and they want to be appreciated for it. Basically, they want to do the “right thing” as defined by the organization. If they do, it brings a sense of self-satisfaction, which is a good feeling. If something feels good, we will repeat the behavior.

The challenge is: how do you get being accountable to feel good? The answer is simple. Expect it. When you get it reward it positively and do it again and again. You got it! People naturally love doing the right thing.

I worked to change the culture of accountability at the Comanche Peak Nuclear Power Plant with a simple but profound statement.

**Accountability is a state of being.  
If we are accountable,  
we can't lose.**

**If I have to hold you accountable,  
we have already lost.**

Would you want to be accountable in a culture like this?

## Connecting the Dots

Working for a Just Culture is a journey worth taking. Once the people, workers and leaders, believe a Just Culture will “protect them” from wrong doing, they will be accountable for their actions and expect discipline when they deviate from expectations. These are essential elements for a Just Culture to sustain itself. Without discipline or accountability, there can be no Just Culture. If you punish people unjustly and “hold them accountable” they will let the organization fail, perhaps even help it to fail.

People *want* to be part of a successful story. Workers really *want* to help management figure out how to run a business well, but there has to be something in it for them. We only do what we do because of the consequences we get. That includes leaders, too.

Building a Just Culture is good business. It aligns business goals with people goals. Workers are happier and they get better, more repeatable results. In this environment, if leaders set the right objectives, workers will achieve them and the organization accomplishes its mission with flying colors.

It is also true that it is the right thing to do. Choose your motivation. I think the stars are perfectly aligned when the right thing to do is the best thing to do.

What if you believe you have a Just Culture but discipline and/or accountability are not aligned with the culture or the organization isn't achieving its goals. If that is true, then you are not seeing or hearing the whole picture.

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Recall an event where you thought you had a good picture of what occurred but something just didn't make sense. It might have looked like this:



You eventually got enough of the story that you had one of those moments where it all came clear, like this.



A wise person said:

**“If something doesn't make sense, you don't know the whole picture.”**

The wise person in my life turns out to be my wife. I really think I used this saying on her first but she has convinced me, and many others, that it belongs to her. She uses it often and is seen as a wise woman among the young moms in our community. It is a great philosophy to live by and raise children by.

**So What?**  
**HU = B + R**

As we say in the nuclear business at times, “So what?”

If Human Performance really is the combination of Behaviors and Results, then the behaviors we want are Constructive Discipline and Self Accountability and the result we want is a Just Culture. You can't create a Just Culture first then hope for Constructive Discipline and Self Accountability. The two behaviors come first.

Behaviors generate consequences.

Constructive Discipline and Self Accountability are essential to achieving a Just Culture. In fact, I believe this is how you achieve a Just Culture.

**Constructive Discipline + Self  
Accountability = Just Culture**

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