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How to inject Mutual Accountability

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Mutual accountability is another foundation stone of an effective team. It means that team members accept that they are accountable 'to each other', which guarantees better performance and teamwork. Mutual accountability is a process by which two or more people agree to be held responsible for the commitments that they have voluntarily made to each other.

The objective is to get the team to think "team performance first" and "individual success second". As a result, individuals become focused on creating a memorable collective performance rather than thinking simply about personal achievements. All team members are expected to volunteer their time and effort to assist for the sake of the common good. Accordingly, team members need to take a constructive interest and participate in all team activities as and when required and hold themselves and each other accountable for delivering the specific actions, attitudes, and behaviours that team success requires.

The mutual accountability attribute reinforces everyone's role in sharing knowledge, ideas, experiences, and perspectives to make the team a better performing unit. Mutual accountability brings about increased effectiveness in working together. Team members recognise that collective performance is dependent on the effective collaboration of themselves with other team members resulting in increased collaborative efforts. Rather than working and thinking individually and trying to protect their own space, a team-high in mutual accountability has team members who are regularly asking themselves and each other, "how can we better work together to get the most out of each other and the whole team?"

Mutual accountability means team members equally share in the teams' outcomes, when the collective responsibility of the team works towards generating collective results, achieving success, or suffering a failure. This is irrespective of whether a single team member was responsible for a success or a failure. Mutual accountability implies an implicit acknowledgement of the joint accountability of all team members towards achieving the team vision or some other initiative such as a task or a project, in addition to their individual obligations in their specific roles. An important measure is how accountable team members are to each other, meaning that team members accept that everyone's successes or failures fall on all their shoulders.

Mutual accountability guarantees better performance and excellence in teamwork. If one team member fails, delivers a poor project outcome, for example, then all team members are equally accountable for that outcome, not just the team member concerned. Successes are similarly shared. Each team members work activities belong to the whole team; everyone owns them. Accordingly, all team members need to take a constructive

interest and participate when and where they can in all the team's activities, not just the more obvious shared activities such as a project involving several teams members. When a team member asks for help, all other team members automatically give it, and with a priority, higher than their own work priorities. (All for one and one for all applies.)

This creates a supportive environment within the team and the performance of the team improves in the presence of this type of mutual support and cohesion. The team should feel a sense of individual and collective accountability for success or failure of tasks or projects, the approach taken and the work-products that form their part of it. Progress should be measured against specific goals and individuals should be clear on individual and joint responsibilities. There should be a sense that 'only the team can succeed or fail'. (All for one, one for all.)

"Members of groups using the team discipline hold themselves individually and mutually accountable. With groups applying the team discipline, it is very difficult (if not impossible) for any one member to fail – only the team can succeed or fail. Team members are not easy on one another in this respect. Yet, they are extremely flexible and adaptable in helping each other to contribute to the fullest extent possible and to develop new skill levels in the process. Indeed, mutual accountability for shared purpose and goals may be the hallmark of the team discipline." (Katzenbach and Smith. The Discipline of Teams)

Rather than simply being individually accountable for personal roles and goals, a team works best when all team members firstly take responsibility for the overall team vision. This is followed by each team member holding themselves and each other, accountable for delivering the specific actions, attitudes, and behaviours that the team requires.

As a result of this specific thinking style there are some interesting changes in team leadership. Even though there might be a titular leader, everyone on the team starts to take responsibility for "leading the team". In this sense, the leadership is concerned with ensuring that everyone wants to provide honest, open, critical and performance focused feedback that is designed on moving the performance of the team forward.

Summary

1. **Mutual accountability.** - Is when all team members equally share in the teams' outcomes, the collective responsibility of the team towards generating results, achieving success, or suffering a failure. This irrespective of whether a single team member was responsible. Mutual accountability implies an implicit acknowledgement of the joint accountability of all team members towards the team vision or some other initiative such as a project, in addition to their individual obligations in their specific roles. An important measure is how

accountable team members are to each other, meaning that team members accept that everyone's successes or failures fall on all their shoulders.

2. **Actions.** - Rather than simply being individually accountable for personal roles and goals, a team works best when all team members firstly take responsibility for the overall team goal. Secondly, each team member holds themselves and then each other, accountable for delivering the specific actions, attitudes, and behaviours that the team requires of each team member. Gather the team together, a workshop works best. Use these notes as a handout for everyone to read first. If you can break the team into two groups and have each group answer these questions. Have each group present its results and as a team discuss them and what they mean in practice. The next question for the team is "Is this something the whole team is prepared to accept?" How does this look in practice?

Mutual Accountability Workshop	2.0 hours
Arrange a team workshop.	
Create a Handout. 1. Use the notes from this step to create a handout.	
Open the workshop. 2. Open the workshop by having everyone read the handout.	
Create two groups. 3. If you can, break the team into two groups and have each group answer these questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a team are we committed to the team vision? • Do we accept the consequences of trying to achieve the team vision? • Beyond the team vision, (such as projects and other initiatives) are we willing to put team performance first and individual success or failure second? 	20 minutes
Present results. 4. Have each group present its results and as a team discuss them and what they mean in practice. It takes some mindset adjusting to begin with, but eventually all team members on the team need to think "team performance first, individual success or failure second." The pride for the individual team members becomes refocused primarily towards being involved in creating a memorable collective performance, rather than thinking simply about personal achievements.	20 minutes

<p>Accepting Mutual Accountability.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. The next question for the team is “Is this something the whole team is prepared to accept?” 6. However junior or senior, however involved in the performance, the mutual accountability characteristic really does ensure that everyone is sharing knowledge, ideas, experiences, and perspectives with a view to making the team a better performing whole. 7. Another useful characteristic of a team high in mutual accountability is the effectiveness of working together. The individual team members recognize where collective performance is dependent on the effective collaboration of themselves with others on the team and as a result, collaborative efforts are typically just that. Rather than being individual team members trying to protect their own space, the team high in mutual accountability can be characterized by individual team members regularly asking themselves and each other, “How can we work together to get the most out of each other?” 	30 minutes
<p>Change in language.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Team members need to adopt ‘collective’ language when discussing team matters, with regular references to “OUR targets”, or “How we’re performing”, or “The implications of this for US is”. This isn’t just wordplay, the language results directly from the fact that everyone is united towards the same goal and recognizes that collectively they can achieve some great things. This deliberate change in language is a powerful change agent and motivator. 	5 minutes
<p>Recognizing success.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Celebrating successes as a team is critical, and not just shared successes but individual ones as well. Celebrating releases oxytocin, a brain hormone that promotes bonding and trust, it also acts a well-deserved reward for the hard work that has been put in. 	10 minutes
<p>Addressing failure.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. When a task or project fails to deliver or meet its expectations, there is to be no assigning of blame, that is not giving “how we got here” any attention, but rather accepting that “as a team, we are here”. This applies to shared failures and individual ones as well. 11. In place of blame, an autopsy is carried out as to what the factors were made the activity unsuccessful. Likewise, an autopsy is performed on why a task or project was successful. Autopsies allow the team to self-correct, to change work practices, processes, and behaviours. 12. The outcome of an autopsy is the updating of work practices (such as a process) with the findings. 13. An autopsy can be a 30-minute team discussion or a more formal investigation, either way the autopsy itself needs an appointed owner to drive it and to manage its outcomes. 	20 minutes

<p>Close the workshop.</p> <p>14. Ask for any questions or if anything needs to be clarified.</p> <p>15. Arrange for a copy of the team rules to be made accessible to everyone.</p>	<p>10 minutes</p>
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