

February 1, 2016

LOL Journal – Accountability: The Hard Part (gulp)

The last LOL entry left our hero (that would be YOU) facing the toughest part of accountability: dealing with broken agreements. You’ve made a clear agreement with the other person but they don’t live up to their agreement. You feel disappointed, maybe a little angry too. Lawyers call these incidents breeches of contract. At work we may call them gaps or missed commitments. Now you face a crucial confrontation.¹ Most of us would rather have a root canal with no anesthesia than to have this conversation. Why? Because we’ve never really learned HOW to have these conversations. We know we’re going into dangerous territory without equipment, training or backup. Gulp. So, we try to finesse it. In the history of business, this has worked three times.

Don’t despair. There is a way to handle these conversations skillfully. You don’t need to pray for divine intervention. The set of steps below will help you address and resolve the toughest part of accountability: the big, nasty, undeniable broken agreement.

Step 1: Determine **WHAT** the problem is. Your co-PM on the portfolio shows up 15 minutes late for the 9:00 a.m. meeting with analysts. If this is the first and only time that your co-PM has shown up late, then you can nip-it-in-the-bud by addressing it as a one-off. You might appreciate him for his normal punctuality and ask if everything is all right, given this one instance of being late. Fine. But, what if it happens a second and third time? Now a **pattern** is developing. So, it’s useful to think of:

- **Consequences:** what are the business consequences of the behavior?
- **Intentions:** what is your story about WHY the co-PM comes late to meetings?

By considering both consequences and intentions from repeated violations, you can get a clearer statement of what you believe is the real problem. It’s important to be able to state concisely what your concern is:

“When you come late to our weekly meetings, it sends a message that you don’t value the analysts’ input. My story is that this hurts team morale.”

Step 2: Determine **IF** you should raise the issue. Not every broken agreement is worth a crucial conversation. After you’ve done step 1—concisely identified the real issue—then you still have to decide if you want to bring it up. In this regard, there are three useful questions to ask yourself:

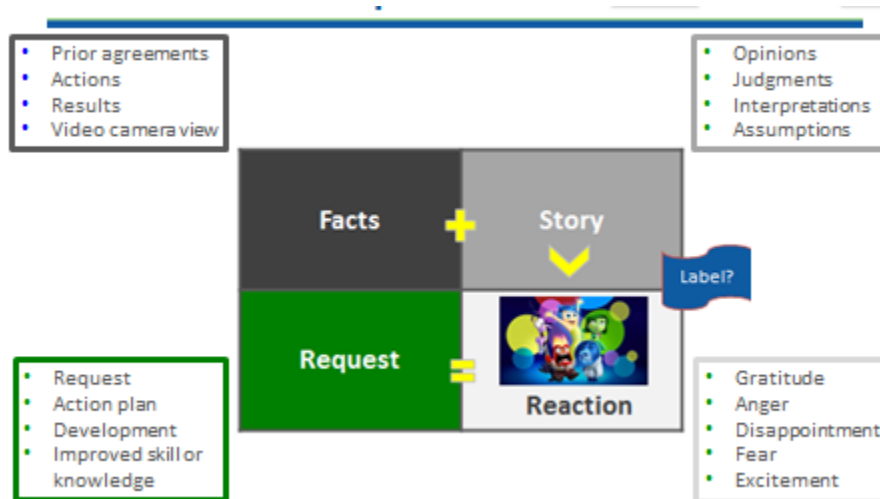
1. Is your **conscience nagging** you? You tell yourself it’s no big deal, but your gut tells you that you should say something. Pay attention to that voice. Use FCG’s “rule of three.” If your conscience nags you three times, you should probably say something.

¹ This term is from the best book we know on the topic: **Crucial Confrontations** by Kerry Patterson, et al

2. Are you **rationalizing**? Are you downplaying the significance of the issue because it will be hard to deal with? Get past the question of “will it be difficult” and ask yourself, “Should it be done?”
3. Are you **playing victim** (helpless)? You tell yourself that there’s nothing you can do to improve the situation. You don’t have the skills to approach the other person. But even a small degree of skill in the steps described in this blog can help considerably.

Finally, if you are operating in a culture that hasn’t taken accountability too seriously in the past, then it behooves you to “call your shot.” Don’t just spring this higher, more demanding level of accountability on the team, give them fair warning. Re-set their expectations. And do it in a way that doesn’t look smug. Be respectful. You may want to say, “I know there are parts of this organization that are informal about accountability, but I think it will serve us well to get better at it. I believe we can raise our game by being more precise around accountability.” (This approach works much better than labeling the rest of the firm’s leaders lily-livered losers.)

Step 3: Come from a **positive intention**. Check in with yourself around why you are giving the feedback. Make sure you’re not viewing this conversation as a chance to get revenge. That never goes well. A useful way to review what you are going to say, is to “cube it.” The model below is core to FCG’s approach to feedback:



- Start by assembling your **facts**. What is unarguable about the situation? (For example, that your co-PM was late for three meetings. It’s helpful to be able to state specifically what time s/he arrived.)
- Then ask yourself, “What do **story** do I make up about the facts?” (For example, that the co-PM does not respect me or the team.) Remember to “hold your story lightly” because it may be wrong! Be careful of assigning a label to the person: “slacker” or “arrogant.” It’s highly unlikely that the other person sees himself this way! And, what is the business impact of your story?
- Consider your **reaction**. Are you worried? Concerned? Angry? Keep in mind that your story is creating your reaction! (What if the co-PM was told by the CEO to show up late so that you

could get experience setting the tone for the meetings? That fact might well create a completely different story and reaction.)

- Finally, decide what you want. What is your **request**? What change do you want to see in the future and why?

After you've played with this "cubing it" exercise, ask yourself if you are giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. That is, assuming good intention. A good question to ask yourself is: why would an intelligent and decent person act this way? (If you find yourself re-wording this question to: Why does this bastard have to be such a jerk? Then you have a bit more preparation work to do...)

Step 4: Safely describe the gap. So far, you haven't said anything to the other person. You've thought through the situation and defined the issue, asked yourself IF you should bring it up, and then checked out your intention: is it positive? Finally, you've played with "cubing" the situation, so as to clearly understand where you are coming from and what you want. Now, you're ready to speak. The first words out of your mouth are critically important. Remember our old friend, the amygdala? The lizard part of our brain is watching for anything that might be dangerous. So, if you start the conversation with an accusation—boom!—the amygdala will hijack the rational part of his brain and prepare him for fight or flight. He may not actually start hyper-ventilating, but I can assure you he is not hearing a word you are saying. And if he is, it probably sounds to him like, "I know where you live and how to wire a car bomb."

So, what's the secret to success? Start with safety. People feel unsafe when they believe one of two things:

1. You don't respect them as a human being. (You lack **Mutual Respect**)
2. You don't share a mutual goal. (You lack **Mutual Purpose**)

Therefore, establish mutual respect and purpose. Explain that your intentions are positive and find an outcome you can both agree on: happy client, excellent report, strong team, top results, whatever. You want to solve the problem and you want to make things better. If you sense that the other person is already becoming defensive, then use a technique called "contrasting." Identify their fear—loss of job, reduced bonus, no promotion, etc.—and directly address it.² It may sound like this:

"I suspect that you might be worried that this situation affecting your chances for a promotion, but I assure you that is NOT what this conversation is about. You are highly valued. I just want to discuss the Smith account, understand what went wrong in our last meeting, and brainstorm how we can make things better."

² FCG has found that people usually get defensive because they fear the loss of 1) security 2) approval or 3) control. A feedback approach that acknowledges these three major fears and does not threaten them is optimal.

Obviously, you have to be sincere in this statement. It never, ever pays to mislead someone. Be sincere, but also be direct. Don't insult someone by playing games or hinting or challenging them to read your mind. Establish safety then describe the gap.

To continue with our co-PM example. You might simply say to your colleague,

"I noticed that you came late to the last few meetings we've had with the team. I was wondering what happened. Is there something I should know about or can help with?"

If your co-PM doesn't get defensive and seems quite willing to rationally discuss the situation, then fine. But watch for defensiveness. At the slightest sign of it, forget about the issue (the "content") and re-establish safety (the "process"). You are walking a parallel path in these confrontations: content and process. The message and safety. When safety seems threatened, step out of content and rebuild safety.

As in the example above, end with a question. Show sincere curiosity. Describe the gap and then ask an open ended question, like, "What happened?"

Step 5: Diagnose Will or Skill. After you have safely described the gap (i.e. shortfall in performance, or broken agreement), and asked an open ended question, get curious about their will or skill. Is the person unmotivated? Or is the person unable to do the task? In short, your job as manager—or as peer—is to help bring out the best in your team mates. So, when a colleague is failing at a task your two big levers are:

1. **Make it motivating.** Help them want to do it. Help them understand the consequences of their failure and link it to something they care about. See if you can reach a place where they are genuinely motivated. For example, my wife is not a "money person." She just doesn't care about making a big income. But she does care deeply about animal causes. When she links making more money to making bigger donations to animal causes, she gets excited about more income! And encourages me to do the same...
2. **Make it easy.** Not by bullying or hero-ing (micro-managing), but by being an expert enabler: one who can make the job easier for them. (Sometimes that means teaching them what the job is.) For those of us who are Puritanical by nature, this can mean letting go of the idea that something must be difficult and noxious for it to be valuable. It's ok to look for an easier, more efficient way to accomplish the task. This might mean brainstorming ways to remove barriers. Play Socrates. Ask good questions. Let them solve the issue. Avoid being the hero who rushes in to "save the day." Ask them for their ideas. Get genuinely curious about their ability to solve it on their own. Listen and encourage. And avoid the two common mistakes:
 - a. **Leading the witness.** Pretending to listen but really just guiding them to your solution.
 - b. Playing **Mr. Know-it-all.** Having an answer to any question they pose, even when you have no clue!Finally, a wonderful question to ask is, "If you were CEO, what would you do to solve this problem?" Giving the person this new framework can often unleash very creative

ideas about how to eliminate barriers. Challenge the status quo. Many policies and procedures are outdated and should be reworked.

Step 6: Develop a plan: So far you have safely described the gap in performance, diagnosed whether the cause is will (motivation) or skill (ability), brainstormed a new approach that seems like a workable solution. Great. The final step is clearly set out the plan for follow-up. Make sure that before you exhaust yourself with self-congratulatory NFL dances, you have a “who will do what by when” statement. And a plan for monitoring and following up.

There you have it: a six step plan for addressing broken promises, missed deadlines, performance gaps. A fair question at this point is, “But what if you get sidetracked?” You think you are addressing a missed deadline and suddenly it becomes evident that your employee has lied to you on several occasions. Be clear. If a separate issue comes up, then name it: “honesty.” And then decide, which is more important: the missed deadline or the trust issue with your subordinate? You can use the same six step process on the new issue. Just be clear and don’t meander. Consciously choose an issue and then stick with it.

As with any skill, practice makes perfect. Or at least helps. Don’t expect to get this process exactly right the first time you use it. But trust me on this, it does get easier. And you will get better at it.

So, as you take aim at improved accountability for your team and your firm, remember the Triple A formula:

1. Clear **Agreements**. What are you holding them accountable for? And do they buy in?
2. **Acceptance** of responsibility. All staff members take responsibility for their contribution to the results; they don’t hide or blame others. And they are open to feedback which allows for good monitoring and course correction when necessary.
3. **Achievement**. When goals are achieved, managers appreciate the team members and set new goals. When goals are missed—the subject of this LOL entry—managers follow this six step process to discover what went wrong and how to fix it.

Let’s end on a positive note. If you and your team mates embrace the goal of becoming more accountable and have even modest success, you will be way ahead of the typical firm. So, in this ever more competitive landscape, accountability is clearly a place where you can gain an edge. And isn’t that nice to consider?

Curiously yours,

Jim Ware