

Articles for Managers

Choice & Accountability: The Bedrock of Superior Performance

by Ian Cook



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps managers and supervisors get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

So, you want to be a success? And you want those who work for you to succeed? Then you might as well know the (bad ?) news. Successful, effective people are courageous people!

Aristotle said courage is the primary human virtue. And the ultimate courage is to accept what philosopher Peter Koestenbaum calls life's "dirty little secret"—that we are all *free to choose*. We are all free to decide what we desire, how we act, how we feel and who we are.

"Successful, effective people are courageous people!"

Many poor-to-moderate performers I see in organizations simply refuse to accept accountability for their job and career. Ask them what they want—besides more money—in their job or how satisfied they are with their current performance and they come up with fuzzy answers or none at all. This does not surprise me. If they were clear, they would have to admit to the choices they are making in their job.

Employees who refuse accountability cost our organizations a bundle. Precious time and energy shifts from productive work to holding on to the old ways, blaming other people or circumstances, doing unquestioningly whatever the boss wants, and avoiding confrontations or any risk.

("Hey, why should I do anything extra? It won't matter to them, anyway.")

Furthermore, when you believe you have no control—that is, no choice—over your fate at work, you feel angry and resentful. Someone else, or perhaps fate itself, is calling the shots for you. This resentment gets expressed, usually through negative comments, barely satisfactory work and/ or withholding important information, ideas, effort and enthusiasm.

"...life's 'dirty little secret'—that we are all free to choose."

How can you take on personal accountability at work?

Here are three suggestions.

1. Identify all your "customers" and what they expect from you.

Your key customer is your boss. Don't wait. Ask for his or her performance expectations for you. Approach other internal and external customers the same way. Check in periodically on how you are doing in their eyes.

2. Decide on the performance level you want to achieve.

Unless impossible, it should exceed others' expectations. Verbally commit to deliver this performance to your "customers". Stay focused on priorities that move you to these goals.

3. Where appropriate, own up to undelivered performance.

Don't blame others. Solicit and be open to feedback from others. Thank them for their advice and learn from it. Focus on what you will do differently the next time.

Individual accountability offers an extremely powerful leverage point for increasing human productivity,

Embrace it. Challenge your people to as well. Think and act as if you are in business for yourself, with an open-ended contract with a single client (your employer). Watch your performance, confidence and impact soar as you live out the words of poet William Ernest Henley: "I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul."

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