

HOW GREAT LEADERS BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY AND OWNERSHIP

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Over the years, I've led a lot of people.

Some hit their goals. Some missed them.

But I learned that one of the best indicators of ownership wasn't whether someone missed a goal.

It was what they did next.

The people who demonstrated real ownership behaved differently.

When they hit a roadblock, they looked for solutions.

When the plan wasn't producing the outcome, they adjusted.

When they missed a goal, they didn't spend their energy explaining why. They became curious.

What did we miss? What can we change? What else could we try?

Their mindset was:

There's a solution here. Let's go find it.

And they weren't afraid to ask for help. But even the way they asked sounded different:

"I still own the outcome. Here's what I'm trying. What support or resources can help me get there?"

That is ownership.

Accountability and ownership aren't quite the same thing

I believe both matter.

Accountability says: I'm responsible for the result.

Ownership says: I'm going to find a way to achieve it.

That distinction becomes especially important when things don't go according to plan.

What happens when the goal is missed?

I can remember situations where someone on my team missed an important goal but clearly still owned the outcome.

They might say:

"We missed it. Here's what I think happened. Here's what I'm going to do differently. What else do you think we could do?"

My response was different because we still had a partnership.

The outcome still belonged to them. My job wasn't to take it back. It was to come alongside them.

And that created something valuable: creative energy.

Now we were two people looking at the problem together, trying to find a better way forward.

Compare that with someone who responds to the same miss primarily with excuses.

The relationship changes.

Instead of partnering with them, I find myself pulling them along.

And when I'm pulling, we're spending our energy trying to establish ownership instead of using that energy to solve the problem.

So how do leaders build ownership?

We can't demand ownership from people while taking it away from them.

I believe leaders need to consistently do five things.

1. Clarify the outcome.

Make sure people understand what success looks like, not simply the task they've been given.

2. Give real ownership.

Once you've handed over responsibility, resist taking it back when things get difficult.

3. Expect solutions.

Create the expectation that roadblocks come with thinking, ideas and options.

4. Allow room to pivot.

Hold people accountable to the outcome while giving them room to adjust how they get there.

5. Coach, don't rescue.

Provide support without becoming the person responsible for solving it.

That last one can be difficult, particularly for experienced leaders.

Someone brings you a problem. You've probably seen it before. You know what you would do.

Giving them the answer is faster.

But do that often enough and we can unintentionally teach people:

When things get difficult, bring the problem back to me.

Instead, try asking:

What have you tried?

What options do you see?

What do you recommend?

What do you need from me?

You're still supporting them.

You're just not taking ownership away from them.

That's what I call Empowered Accountability™

The leader provides clarity, trust, appropriate authority, coaching and support.

The individual continues to own the outcome.

And when those two things come together, something else develops:

Partnership.

Not a leader pulling someone toward the goal, but two people working together while being very clear about who owns the outcome.

In simple terms:

You still own this. But you're not alone in figuring it out.

That's when we stop developing people who simply complete tasks and start developing people who think, adapt, solve problems and take responsibility for moving the business forward.

For me, it comes down to three things:

Clarity creates direction.

Ownership creates responsibility.

Partnership creates momentum.

And ultimately, that's one of the most important things we can develop in another leader:

Not dependence on us. Ownership of the outcome.

Because the goal of leadership isn't to become the person everyone needs to solve the problem.

It's to develop people who know how to own it.

If this was helpful, feel free to share it with someone who might benefit from it.