

Development of a Behavioral Contract

- ❖ **In the weakest teams, there is no accountability**
- ❖ **In mediocre teams, bosses are the source of accountability**
- ❖ **In high performance teams, peers manage the vast majority of performance problems with one another**

Accountability makes you think of enforcement. The critical distinction between “holding someone accountable,” which has mainly negative and punitive connotations, and “creating accountability in others,” which is about being vested in the performance success of others. The distinction is critical, and examples of being vested in each other’s success extend far beyond athletics.

Peer pressure, responsibility, and accountability, quite frankly, are much more efficient than any policy or system could achieve. The anxiety of not being accountable to a respected team member is a catalyst for motivating performance and building strong peer accountability.

The mindset and the actions that follow from being totally vested in someone else’s success will enable mutual success. In fact, creating a culture of accountability has little to do with coaches. It is all about peers and the commitments, relationships, and support that they provide each other – and the intense desire not to let each other down.

The power of accountability starts with behaviors. It seems that for many teams, it is easier to hold individuals accountable for results and ignore the behaviors. But since behaviors always precede results, it is critical to build new “behavioral ground rules” or “behavioral contracts” for peers to adopt to hold themselves and each other accountable.

1. Behaviors Are at the Heart of Peer Accountability

New strategies, goals, or initiatives can only be successful with new behaviors. One of the most important mantras for leaders driving performance is “What you’re waiting for will never come.” This means that leading performance in times of change can’t be intellectual for the leaders and emotional and behavioral for everyone else. Achievement and accountability are all about behavior change. The most effective way to create new team-based behavioral ground rules is for the team to identify the current team (peer) behaviors that are inconsistent with the new strategies or goals, as well as the needed behaviors for the new direction. Together the team must establish eight to ten behavioral ground rules that are critical for success. These can be general, like “Assume positive intent of others,” because distrust holds us back, or very specific, such as “Arrive 15 minutes early to every practice.” The responsibility of each team member is to step up and stand out in holding themselves and each other accountable to these ground rules.

2. Accountability Feedback and “Swim Buddies”

One of the largest obstacles to achieving peer accountability is overcoming the hesitance to give each other immediate critical feedback. Sometimes people think it will risk their positive relationship, but ultimately, if there is a lack of long-term accountability, the positive relationships disappear anyway. When we establish the peer responsibility to call out behaviors that are exhibited and inconsistent with our new behavioral ground rules, we make it more of the expected routine for

everyone. Not that it is comfortable to step into these conversations, but continuing to ignore constructive feedback will not breed a culture of accountability. It hurts the team and it hurts the teammates themselves.

The best way to frame this new peer responsibility of accountability is for team members to see themselves as “swim buddies” for each other. The swim to new behaviors is never a smooth one, and each person will go underwater at different times in pursuit of living the new behavioral ground rules. The team is there to hold you accountable, but also to make sure that nobody drowns. Because if any one person drowns, everyone does; the team just can’t let it happen.

3. Peer Behavior Scorecard

- On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is low and 10 is high, rate each ground rule on the basis of how important it is to success.
- Next, rate the team’s current performance, also on a scale of 1–10.
- Subtract the team’s performance rating from the importance rating to determine the gap.
- Re-order the behavioral ground rules, from the one with the largest gap to the one with the smallest gap.
- As a team, concentrate on the three ground rules with the largest gaps and focus with a vengeance on specific behaviors that will close the gaps most quickly.
- Re-assess individual and collective performance against the behavioral scorecard every season.

4. Strategies

- ✓ **Set expectations.** Let new team members know up front that you want and expect them to hold *you* and others accountable.
- **Tell stories.** Call out positive examples of team members addressing accountability concerns. Especially when they take a big risk by holding *you* accountable. Vicarious learning is a powerful form of influence, and storytelling is the best way to make it happen.
- **Model it.** The first time your team hears you gripe about your own peers to others—rather than confronting your concerns directly—you lose moral authority to expect the same from them.
- **Teach it.** The best leaders are teachers. Codify the skills you think are important for holding “crucial conversations”—and take 5-10 minutes in a meeting to teach one. In these teaching episodes, ensure the team practices on a real-life example— perhaps one that happened recently.
- **“It takes two to escalate” policy.** In other words, both peers need to agree they can’t resolve it at their level before they bring it to the coaching staff.