

10 Ways to Promote Employee Self-Responsibility (and 2 Things to Avoid Like the Plague!)

With a business culture that's become fraught with outsourcing, downsizing, streamlining and virtualizing, many organizations are looking for employees to become more self-sufficient. Thus, for managers and coaches, promoting self-responsibility within employees has become a primary objective.

So, what is self-responsibility in a business context? It's a practice in which an employee becomes accountable for his or her performance, in achieving objectives, and producing positive results.

Bearing in mind that employee behavior will be different between departments, there are certain basic steps any manager or coach can take to ensure positive outcomes for the employee and the company. Here are 10 ways in which managers and coaches can support employees in becoming self-responsible.

1. **Clearly outline the employee's role.** It's hard to be responsible if one doesn't know what or to whom he or she is responsible for. Ensure every report knows what their basic area of responsibility is, and who they report to.
2. **Set specific and measurable goals.** Accountability can only be produced if there is a clear set of goals and objective from which to measure progress. Goals should be concrete, with measurable benchmarks (e.g. an advertising account executive's monthly goal might be a specific dollar amount to be billed), and agreed upon deadlines. What makes goals even more effective in building self-responsibility is if the employee is involved in the goal-setting process and is able to "own" the goal.
3. **Connect goals to the company vision.** Work doesn't happen within a vacuum, and a company's projects aren't singular events that have no bearing on a larger outcome. Ensure that the employee has a clear understanding of the company's overall vision, mission and goals. Help the employee connect his or her responsibility to this vision in concrete ways. For example, a corporate goal may be to increase operational efficiency by 10%. A project manager could connect his or her ability to complete a project on-time to this larger vision by connecting his project team's efficiency with that of the company as a whole. As the manager, it would be your role to communicate company progress, or, better yet, have a communication mechanism in place in which the project manager could compare his progress with similar activities within the organization. In this respect, the employee has taken a broader level of responsibility by being able to self-assess progress.
4. **Create effective strategies.** Once goals are set, give the employee the task of creating the strategy to achieve the goals. Act as a mentor...provide the employee

with specific, useful feedback with respect to refining strategies. If the strategy is for a team, help the employee create a template for creating strategies, delegation plans, etc.

5. **Set check-in times.** Within the strategy should be regularly scheduled check-in times during which you and your report will discuss challenges and successes, make alterations to strategies, and explore opportunity. This is a tremendous opportunity for you to be a coach, not a manager. While you are responsible for accomplishing all of the goals for your area of responsibility, your report is responsible for theirs.
6. **Be a good listener.** As employees take-on more responsibility, they will most certainly face challenges. Some will be mechanical or logistical, while others will be more internal, emotional (i.e. conquering fear). Listen to their feelings, even if they are irrational. Don't judge or try to fix the problem. Just listen, be empathetic, let them know their concerns matter. Quite often they will find solutions on their own once they get through their emotional concerns. They are clearing mental and emotional space for new ideas to enter forth. Facilitate this clearing-out by listening. But, as you're interacting, also listen for what's not being said. This allows you to develop your intuition and, as a coach, provide the direction needed help the employee overcome their barriers and fears.
7. **Be authentic and real.** People can sense a con a mile away. If you aren't authentically invested in cultivating an employee's self-responsibility, your report will pick up on this and, most likely, will always be wary. Developing accountability is a two-way street that's about building trust. You're entrusting the outcomes of your department to your employees, while they are trusting that you will allow them to fail or succeed.
8. **Empower decision-making.** Cultivating self-responsibility inherently means that you as a manager must relinquish some decision-making responsibilities. Owning the goal also means being able to make decisions with respect to accomplishing the goal. Discuss decisions during check-in times. Discover your report's thinking process when making decisions. In assessing decisions that may not have created a favorable result, help cultivate and refine their process by pointing out different ways they could have approached the decision.
9. **Give permission to fail.** Good judgment can only be developed by having learned from bad judgment first. By the same token, success typically is built upon a series of failures. Allow your reports to experience failure when it occurs. If you are in an environment in which successful risk is rewarded, but failure is punished, then the effort to promote self-responsibility will also fail. Punishing failure squelches risk-taking. However, if your culture allows for failure, especially if there is a supportive accountability system in which learning is emphasized, then self-responsibility has a chance to succeed.

10. **Give recognition and praise.** As employees take on more and more responsibility, a sure way of empowering their success is to praise in private and in public. Whether it's being named "Employee-of-the-Month", given credit publicly at a meeting (especially if senior management is present), or is recognized in a company newsletter, praise is an asset that every manager has in abundance. Praise costs nothing, yet can return millions.

These may seem like common-sense measures to take. But, if any one of them is lacking, your effort to cultivate self-responsibility will be diminished. Will these measures work for everyone? No. Every human being is different, and each of us comes into the workplace with a full set of life experiences that have molded and shaped our attitudes and habits. Recognize this. Be aware of your own limitations and short-comings, in addition to your strengths, as you recognize these traits in your reports. Recognize that some will fit into leadership roles, taking more risks and making decisions more easily. Others may be more risk-averse, and will fit more neatly into follower roles.

As you institute a culture of self-responsibility, there are two things that will short-circuit your efforts 100% of the time: micro-management and poor communications.

It's axiomatic that if you **micro-manage**, your reports will hand back any responsibility they've been given. And why shouldn't they? If you micro-manage you are actually making them less accountable. If you have a tendency to micro-manage, figure out why, and stop doing it. Are you uncertain if your reports are capable of fulfilling their responsibilities? If so, get them more training or provide them with the resources needed to support their effectiveness. Are you feeling insecure in your position? All too often newer managers having feelings of insecurity is common...but the quicker you learn to promote self-responsibility, the quicker your results will actually improve.

Poor communications are sure to doom any accountability system. If employees are working, taking responsibility, and you don't check-in or you're not available, then they won't take their responsibilities seriously...and you won't drive the results you want. Maybe you're uncomfortable in a coaching role and need to develop these skills. Get the training. Conversely, if a report doesn't communicate well, work with them on developing his or her skills, provide more structure, and/or get them outside training.

Obviously every organization is different. But, if implemented, these steps will ensure better outcomes. By being more responsible, employees feel more valued and connected to the organization, thus diminishing turnover and morale deficiencies. With more responsible action, better, more consistent results are also produced.