



Two Sides of Accountability

BY SARAH DAHL

Managers who can balance an underlying concern for the person and an expectation that they adhere to the rules, policies, or goals of the co-op stand the best chance of achieving accountability without damaging the relationship.

Except perhaps for the lucky few of them still enjoying double-digit growth and staff satisfaction with wages, most co-ops are constrained by limited personnel dollars. One of the ways to make sure that you are getting what you pay for is to ensure consistent accountability for staff—that everyone is meeting or exceeding the expectations for their job. But how to do this with fairness and compassion?

This notion of accountability makes sense: if you must reduce labor hours, either because sales are down or you are paying higher wages, it becomes more important to ensure that every staff member is pulling their weight—contributing to the success of the co-op and not dragging down the morale of high performers. If you're experiencing both lower sales and pressure for higher wages, consistent accountability becomes imperative.

While most of us know that consistent accountability is important for operational success, it's not always clear how to implement it when dealing with very specific and sometimes intricate personnel situations. Even when the course is clear and we know what we should do, actually following through with consistent accountability presents a significant challenge for many managers in the co-op world. This is in part because managers are sometimes drawn to co-ops due to dissatisfaction with the typical "corporate" style of top-down management, and many of them strive to be egalitarian and compassionate managers. However, this often leads to an inability to find effective ways to hold their staff accountable to workplace standards, for fear of being seen as too authoritarian.

Managers who let issues drag on—to the detriment of the team, the co-op, and themselves—may find themselves and the rest of the staff frustrated by the same issues stemming from the same people time and again. While some managers prefer to completely avoid conflict and not mention the offending behavior at all, most fall somewhere in the middle of trying to coach and advise their employees about the problem behavior.

Sometimes managers end up on the other side of the accountability spectrum—either because they prefer the black-and-white world of "rules are rules," or maybe because they've hit their limit with not being effective by being the nice guy. When this happens, people can erupt in unhelpful ways, demanding compliance simply because of the authority of their position as a manager, or blindly enforcing the letter of the law without regard to significant extenuating circumstances. While this style may get the compliance with the immediate rules or expectations, it can also damage relationships between managers and staff. Staff may feel resentful or even try to sabotage further management efforts.

The good news is: managers can effectively address problem behavior while not being a tyrannical bully. There isn't a painless, silver bullet—it requires that you build up skills and engage in behavior that may feel uncomfortable at first. You must bring both an underlying concern for the person and an expectation that they adhere to the rules, policies, or goals of the co-op. Managers who can balance these things stand the best chance of achieving accountability without damaging the relationship. Although this may not feel natural or even comfortable at first, like all new skills, it gets easier the more you give yourself opportunities to practice it.

Start with the heart

One of the skills I teach in my "Crucial Conversations" training is called, "Start with the Heart," and it fits how I believe most co-op managers want to manage. The basic premise is that no corrective action, conversation, or performance improvement plan should take place before your heart is in the right place—meaning that you approach the conversation with genuine care and concern for the wellbeing of the employee. This step can be hard for the "rules-are-rules" managers or those who are angry or frustrated with the behavior they are addressing. >

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To start with the heart, when you notice a behavior that you need to address, it is important to come to the discussion with an open mind—ready to describe the factual behaviors you are witnessing and then to ask questions. Don't assume that you know that you know the employee's intent, for example that they are doing something because they are lazy, trying to be rude, or don't care about the co-op. Assuming reasonable intent is always the best place to start to help keep your mind open for the conversation to follow, rather than just barging through with your judgments, assumptions, or punishments at the ready. Using this strategy can also make it easier for those who are reluctant to address problem behavior, because they can still come from a place of caring instead of judgment or inherent conflict.

Describe the facts

Once you have your motivations in check, it's time to take action. Some managers never get to this step because they are fearful of a negative reaction and aren't sure how they might handle it if they got one. The best way to avoid a defensive reaction is to not be seen as attacking someone. Though you can't control how others perceive things, you can help lessen the

possibility of them feeling attacked by describing facts and separating your judgments and assumptions about those facts. This can be very hard to do because judgments happen so quickly they sometimes disguise themselves as the actual fact.

For example, you see your staff person texting on their phone in the back room. You could say, "I saw you slacking off in the back room." That may seem like a fact—something one can verifiably see or hear. However, the judgment part is "slacking." What you saw was a person typing on a phone. Perhaps they were responding to a coworker asking them to cover their shift later that day, or perhaps they were punched out at that moment.

The more you can get down to base facts with no judgments, and explain those to your staff, the less likely they will feel attacked. If, in the above example, you instead said, "I noticed you on your phone earlier in the back room—what was going on?" you would have less chance of getting a defensive or angry response.

State the expectations

If your inquiry as to what you saw and heard turns out to be benign—for instance, the staff person was punched out—then you can move

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on without having damaged the relationship with an unfair judgment that the staff person was a “slacker.” If, however, it turns out that they really weren’t meeting expectations, then it is the job of a manager to remind the employee of what the expectation is.

This is the step that is often easier for those managers who are comfortable in the “rules are rules” realm. It can help managers who are less comfortable with this to realize that there is nothing personal in stating what the expectations are. People make mistakes, and there needn’t be anything wrong with them as a person if they missed an expectation.

Again, if you are starting with the heart and genuinely care about them, you can consider why you might talk to staff members about a missed expectation. Some possible tactics may be to mention that you want: that you want to help them grow as people, be better at their jobs, not disappoint their co-workers, or get their full raise. Coming from this mindset helps ensure you are not merely trying to judge, punish, or belittle someone for not meeting expectations.

Know the consequences

If you’ve had to review a particular expectation with a staff person more than once or twice, it’s only fair to them to give them advance warning of what the consequences will be if he/she misses miss the expectations again. An employee should never be surprised by a corrective action. Many co-ops have a progressive discipline policy, where there is informal coaching as a first step, some kind of documented corrective action, potentially suspension or demotion, and eventually termination.

Be clear with the employee about your process and what the next step will be if the issue continues. This is also a good time to involve the employee in determining what actions they can take or what supports they might need from you in order to meet the expectation. For example, if someone isn’t comfortable providing excellent customer service, perhaps they could benefit from some scripts to use to approach customers or some time shadowing or role-playing with another employee who excels in that area.

Follow through

The next phase where accountability frequently fails is in follow through.

Once you’ve stated the expectations and the consequences for not meeting them and have brainstormed with the employee how to meet those expectations, if the issue recurs, there is only one possible course for you as a manager: follow through with exactly what you said you would do. It helps to have the consequences clearly spelled out in writing as an issue progresses. This phase can be very uncomfortable for some managers—but the aim isn’t to judge someone as “bad.” Your aim should be to help people to succeed so that the department and co-op succeed.

While you may feel that giving someone “one more chance” multiple times is the kind thing to do for that person, you also have a responsibility to the rest of the team as well as to the co-op. It has been shown in surveys and studies that high performers—the people you want to keep happy—can feel demoralized when they see low performers allowed to continue with no consequence. Especially if the co-op is paying staff a premium due to wage increases, you literally can’t afford to continue to allow some people to perform at a much lower level than others and expect to retain your high-performing staff.

If you have been clear about what comes next after failed expectations, your staff person should essentially know what consequence is coming. Again, this doesn’t make them or you a villain or victim. However, once both parties have given their best effort to help them meet the expectations, it may be best to acknowledge that the position isn’t a good fit for their strengths, wish them well, and part ways. Although it is never easy to do this, the rest of your team may well breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Conclusion

While high sales and paying just above minimum wage may have allowed some managers to let certain issues slide in the past, now more than ever managers need to hold all of their staff accountable to the expectations and standards of the co-op. Doing so will ensure you get what you pay for, and it helps staff to feel that those who aren’t pulling their weight will not be allowed to drag down the rest of the team. Whichever side of the accountability spectrum you are on—caring about the people to the potential detriment of the functioning of the business, or caring about the rules to the potential detriment of the people—everyone has the ability to stretch their comfort zones for the benefit of both the staff and the co-op. □

Cooperative Values and Principles

The following Statement of Cooperative Identity was adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance in 1995:

Definition: A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

Values: Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others.

Principles:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training, and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community