

Choosing Accountability and Commitment

Accountability and commitment take form in the promises we are willing to make. The language of promises is quite different from goals and objectives. Strong language, difficult to make. Yet there is something sacred and freely chosen in a promise. Here is an activity that confronts and cements people's will to proceed.

The Activity

Step 1 Sit in groups of up to eight people. The groups should be people who have a future together. A work team or people working together on a project. The boss joins the circle and participates as a member.

Step 2 People state their promises. Each person states two kinds of commitments or promises: One is the results they agree to deliver, the second is their actions and behavior that will support the team effort. Remember that these promises are voluntary. There are no weapons on the table, no implied threat of punishment, and virtue alone will be the reward. Have people actually use this language: "The promise I am willing to make is. . . ."

Step 3 People state the measures that have meaning to them. This may take more than one conversation, but it is good to begin it. The measures for each person need to fit with those of the others in the group and meet the requirements of the organization. The language to be used is: "The measures I choose and that have meaning to me are. . . ." Enforce the language if you can. It makes a difference.

Step 4 Peers answer the question, "Is that enough?" The team decides whether each person's promises and measures are enough to meet the common goals. If not enough is promised, the person is asked for more. If the measures seem too soft, the person is asked for tougher ones. What is important is that all are speaking as owners of the unit. All are forced to think about the whole change or implementation and not just their own piece. The value of this discussion is in the dialogue as much as in the outcome.

Step 5 The group picks a time to review their commitments. The promises and measures should be put in writing and copies given to each member. It is best to have the documents be handwritten and signed at the bottom. This way, they are not technological and have some symbolic value. Have the promises/measures copied and bound and give each member a copy.

Every few months, or sooner, the group meets to review them. Making promises to peers can mean unusual and very difficult discussions. It will take a few iterations before people get used to initiating with their peers real questions of performance. There are no formal punishments if people do not meet their targets. The team needs to confront the problem, but they do not need the formal sanctions of pay, probation, and low ratings to have influence on their members. In extreme cases the team and the boss may have to revert to some punitive action, but let that be the last resort instead of being built into every discussion, which is what happens when each subordinate negotiates commitments privately with the boss. These discussions can replace the usual performance review, but that is a bigger and more volatile subject than belongs here.

When we commit in this spirit, choosing accountability without barter, the discussion about how the top needs to change, how other departments and people stand in the way, how systems and practices don't support the change all disappear. At the moment of commitment, something has shifted and the institution becomes ours to create. There will still be obstacles and disappointments, but they will not breed cynicism, for we were not choosing on the basis of another's action.