

Authority, Responsibility, and Accountability

Introduction

There is a definite relationship between authority, responsibility and accountability. Without a clear understanding of this relationship, effective functional management, with clear lines of reporting and communication becomes a distinct improbability.

Authority requires the ability to give orders properly. Responsibility requires the ability to follow through, assuring that the orders are carried out properly. Authority must always equal responsibility, and must be sufficient to fulfill the requirements of the job. But never more than what is necessary to get the job done.

Authority and responsibility must never be dual, shared or overlapping. One person, and only one person, is responsible for the successful completion of every assignment. As long as there is singular delegation of authority and responsibility, the individuals with responsibility may be assigned accountability; however, when more than one person shares the authority and responsibility for something, neither can be held accountable for that which might go wrong.

Authority

Authority must be clearly defined and follow clear paths. Without clear definition, there will be confusion. The organizational chart clearly defines the paths, while job descriptions clearly define the full scope of the authority for each position.

Every individual, from the President of the company down to the ditch digger, must know the limits and scope of the authority of his/her position. These limitations, this scope, must never be circumvented. When an individual circumvents the authority of any other, he effectively relieves that individual of all responsibility and accountability for an unspecified length of time. Additionally, such circumvention harms the morale of that individual. The side effects will spread downwards to the individual's subordinates.

Authority may be delegated along with equal and corresponding responsibility. The extent of such delegation must be clearly spelled out in writing. Authority does not imply autocracy, but it does require the use of orders and instructions.

Orders

The order may be defined as the signal, which makes coordinated action possible. Orders cannot be given blindly; each must be tested to assure that it is necessary, clear, complete, and reasonable, with compliance both possible and probable.

A complete order will supply a specific goal or objective, with permissible variations. It will note a method or means of performance. It will state who, what, when, where, and how, specifying the individual who will be held responsible and accountable for its proper performance.

Authority, Responsibility, and Accountability (continued)

Ensuing Responsibility

The prime task of every manager is the Assumption of Responsibility. Measure your own performance in terms of what you were ordered to do and what you actually accomplished.

Stimulate interest and, whenever possible, provide incentive. The incentive of reward, after the successful completion of a task, does work, when properly handled. The use of fear as a driving force is obsolete in modern American business practice. Punishment is correct after willful wrongdoing, but only if it is willful. Any other type of wrongdoing merely implies a lack of training and a need for coaching.

Inflexible rule: You will see to it that every order, which is issued, is carried out. You will not forget it, change it, or countermand it. If it is your responsibility to do something, there are no excuses for not accomplishing that objective. Regardless of what happens, you are answerable for attaining, or not attaining, that objective. You cannot shift the responsibility for not having it done. There might be mitigating circumstances, but you are still responsible.

Accountability

Every order that has been given - and given correctly - carries responsibility. Responsibility implies accountability. Accountability is a two way street for every Manager. A Supervisor will hold each accountable, and each will hold a Subordinate accountable. Accountability means liability for any variance from the anticipated norm, whether that variance is a positive or a negative one. It implies the need for explanation.

If you are to avoid blame, you must exercise accountability over your subordinates, and you must do it consistently if your department is to operate effectively. Inconsistency breeds a loss of credibility, a loss of trust, and a loss of respect. Without trust, there is no loyalty; and when there is no loyalty, morale drops. As morale drops, so do the motivation and both the quality and quantity of production. Inconsistency creates inefficiencies.

Hold people accountable and do it consistently. Offer praise when it is due and training or disciplinary action when indicated. If you fail to do either, or both, the chances are that your department will not run efficiently, economically, or effectively.

Managers that cannot, or will not, shoulder the responsibility and accountability for the economic, efficient and effective operation of their department, deserves neither the title of manager, nor the salary of a manager.