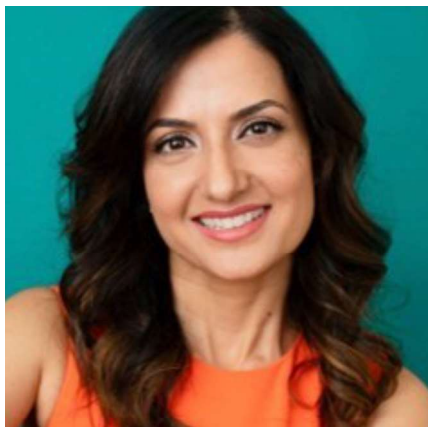# WHY EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES DOESN'T WORK

*by **Sonia Singh**, from Sonia Singh International LLC, a leadership coach, managing partner of MPlus, and an adjunct professor at the University of San Francisco.*

Empowering employees has long been a strategy to improve engagement and performance.

When a manager empowers an employee, the thought is the team member will become more confident in taking initiative in their work. The empowered employee is solution-focused, forward thinking, and takes action. However, if the only strategy is to give your team authority, without showing them how to own their decisions, success will be limited.

Here's why creating a culture of accountability is even more important than trying to empower people. Accountability is the state in which an individual feels responsible, takes pride in the ownership of a task, and has courage to admit when they've failed. When someone accepts responsibility for their actions, there's a level of intrinsic motivation driving them forward. They will own a mistake and share it as a learning experience.

Those who are empowered to speak up, but lack accountability, will complain, place blame on others, and see responsibility as a burden. Those who are accountable, and acknowledge their own power, are more likely to recognize opportunities.

The perspective shifts from, "I have to do this," to "I get to do this."

Leaders who create a safe and positive environment for their teams where accountability is consistently celebrated will see higher performance and engagement. It's about setting expectations together and holding ourselves accountable, rather than waiting for someone else to tell us what to do, when to do it, and when we've failed.

As a manager, you can help your teams create accountability by clearly defining the company or department's mission, values, and goals and regularly sharing stories of how people are living these shared values. Work cultures where accountability is embedded may include values such as:

Self-honesty – owning up to your role, actions, and potential mistakes,

Empathy – placing yourself in others' shoes; thinking of how your actions may impact others,

Integrity – doing the right thing when no one is watching, and

**Progress** – focusing on progress over perfection.

Empowerment without Accountability

Many organizations jump on the empowerment bandwagon to make sure they give their employees the freedom to direct their own workflow. This is wonderful in theory, but it assumes that those empowered are also personally accountable for their actions. This isn't always the case. For example, a company asks its employees for feedback or suggestions on improvement, with no expectation for follow-through. Managers are then expected to keep track of all the feedback, create action plans, and assign responsibilities to those interested. It not only becomes an increasing burden on managers, but it can also create frustration when ideas are not executed or worse, when only a handful of high performers will take on the responsibility.

In contrast, another company asks for ideas in which the idea submitter can and will see it through. It's easy to identify what others can do differently, but a different reality when the focus is on your own accountability. Leaders can delegate or try to motivate their people, but the ultimate decision to take action, or not, is the individual's. No one else can empower us. It's an inside job. But, great leaders can help us recognize the power that's already within us.

An organizational culture that focuses on empowerment but lacks accountability will create victim behavior, which is a huge drain on company resources. It might show up as entitlement, blaming others, or making excuses to prove "it's not my fault." Time may also wasted on discussing things outside of people's span of control.

Ladder of Accountability
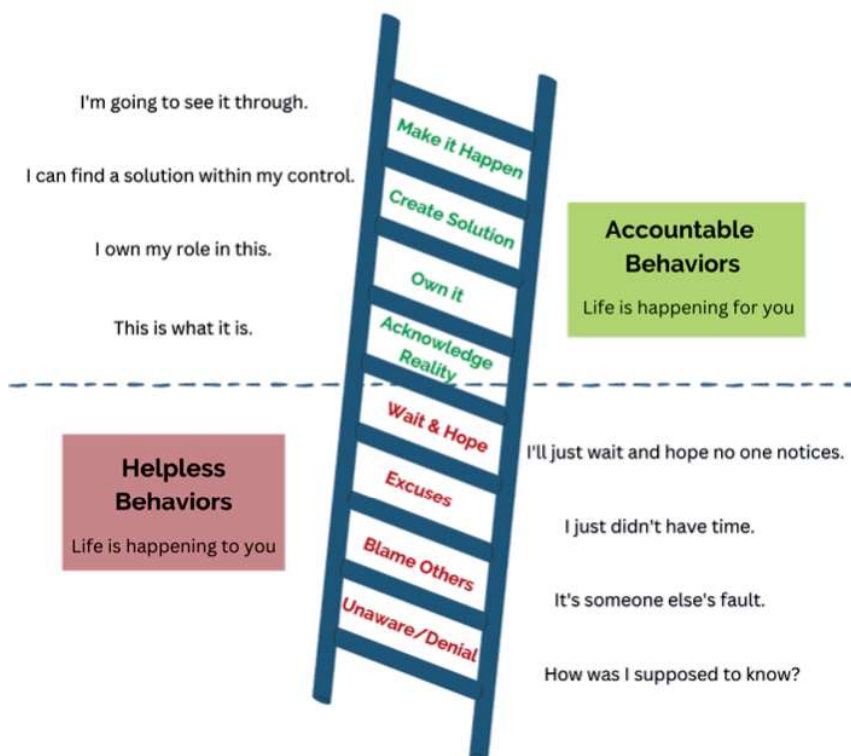
Ladder of Accountability

The Ladder of Accountability is a tool that can help you determine your personal level of accountability and where you might need to go next.

Here's a scenario of how this could play out.

1. "My co-worker just told me a task is due tomorrow, but I didn't know about it." (Unaware/Denial)

2. "My boss didn't remind to complete it." (Blame others)

3. "It's too late now. Nothing I can do." (Excuses)

4. "I'll just wait and hope no one notices. (Wait & hope)

This is an example of a victim mentality, where someone doesn't take accountability for themself.

To build accountability, they could take the following steps.

1. "Uh oh, my task is due tomorrow. (Acknowledge reality)

2. "I messed up. I didn't set a reminder for myself. (Own it)

3. "I still have time, but I'll need to stay up late to complete it. (Create a solution)

4. "I'll reach out to a peer to help me get it done quickly. (Make it happen)

Final Thoughts

A piece of accountability is realistically recognizing what's within your control. We tend to worry about things we can't control and get stuck waiting for others to change. It's important to question our assumptions. If you believe you can't do something, ask if that is 100% true. Are you sure about that? People will underestimate what they can do themselves, and over-estimate what others can do.

Find out what is within your control, even if it's just 10%. Focus on that. Ask your teams to do the same. You can escalate issues beyond your control once you've appropriately assessed the situation. And then, let it go. Let go of your desire for a particular outcome when you have no control over it. The higher up you go on the ladder of accountability, the greater power and confidence you will experience.

"*Grant me the serenity to accept the **people** I cannot change, the courage to change the **person** I can, and the wisdom to know it's **me**.*" - Accountability version of the Serenity Prayer by American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. ■