

q &amp; a: who's to blame?

# Tell Me Your Problem, And I'll Tell You Mine

ON THE JOB

Are you worried about brain drain? Have you tried every gimmick and stretched your compensation budget to the limit to keep employees from running out the door, to no avail? Consider, then, the advice of Mark Samuel. If you want good people to stay, he says, make them own up to their mistakes. Samuel, a Los Angeles consultant, trains corporations to make people more accountable. He doesn't mean that management should hunt down deadline deadbeats or promise breakers and hold them up to public ridicule. Rather, he thinks companies should organize themselves into teams where each person knows his responsibilities and is held to them not just by a boss but by peers. If people learn to take responsibility for the success of the team, they will come to the aid of struggling colleagues, instead of badmouthing them behind their backs. Take St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, Ore., where Samuel has consulted for a decade. He helped the hospital restructure into 16 clusters—critical care, nursing, finance, etc.—where managers meet in teams. The 16 leaders of those clusters now decide together how to share scarce resources. The result, says Lois Vallerga, the hospital's vice president of education and development, is that costs declined 9% over six years while employee satisfaction, as measured in an annual survey, has increased every year. Has St. Charles eliminated blame and backbiting? No, says Vallerga, but it's come a long way. Samuel recently talked to senior editor Vera Titunik

about his new book, *The Accountability Revolution*, and how companies can end blame in the ranks and create a place where people want to work.

What happens when there is no accountability in an organization?

People don't keep their commitments. They come late to meetings. They don't complete projects on time. You ask for information, and they never get it to you. I'm working with a high-tech company where recruitment is the No. 1 issue. But the managers were all calling it the recruiting person's issue. We said, No, let's change the accountability so that we are all accountable for the problems of that project. All of a sudden, three people were offering suggestions for getting new people and giving names.

What does being individually accountable really mean?

Instead of being accountable just to your boss, you are accountable to everyone you affect. We don't do that in most organizations. We expect you to show up and do your job. I'm going to do my job, and each department is kept separate. You are responsible for financing, you are responsible for marketing. But it just can't work that way. It's kind of like playing music or baseball. We all have our parts, but we are all responsible for the success of the company.

What are the roadblocks to creating this kind of accountability?

In order to have any accountability at

all, you have to have safety first. Not comfort, but safety. Comfort is "I'm happy with the way things are." Safety is "It's safe to take the risks of change." If I don't have the safety to make mistakes, there is no way I'm going to take actions that are different from those I've taken before.

We also have to change the perfection-oriented nature in business. Most businesses plan to perfection. That needs to switch in an accountable organization; the focus becomes recovery. Let's make sure we have a recovery plan for the unexpected, for the problems that could show up. If I go in with a recovery strategy, I'm not expected to be perfect, so I'm not as worried about making a mistake. In a perfection-oriented approach, when a mistake happens, no one is prepared for it; so we all freeze, and become paralyzed, and then that leads right into blaming.

What effect does accountability have on employee retention?

It changes the game. We worked with one organization that at the time was a division of TRW. It reduced turnover from 22% to 7% inside of a year. I've seen this over and over. I've worked with people who said, "I was about ready to quit, but now we have a vision, now we have success, now there is accountability." When there's no accountability, I can't depend on you. Your top performers will never stay in the environment.

You have some problems with empowerment. What's wrong with it?

Empowerment often becomes an abdication of leadership. In other words, if I empower you, I don't have to guide you. People need guidance. Leadership cannot abdicate the role of providing guidance.

Mark Samuel, a speaker and consultant is the author of the new book, *The Accountability Revolution: Achieving Breakthrough Results in Half the Time*. His concepts on accountability have transformed organizations like Chevron, General Motors, Hewlett-Packard, Sun Microsystems, and The United States Navy. His company, IMPAQ, publishes an online newsletter that brings accountability to everyday workplace operations with practical tips and advice that can be implemented on a daily basis. This free newsletter can be subscribed to by visiting the web site [www.impaqcorp.com](http://www.impaqcorp.com). IMPAQ is based in Los Angeles and can be reached at 800-332-2251.