

## The Lessons of the Crying Baby

When my son was a senior in high school, he brought home a baby. It was bald, quite heavy, and cried frequently. While it was made of plastic, the "baby" had a computer chip that prompted crying spells and recorded how often the sobbing doll was ignored or dropped.



While an interesting, amusing, and sometimes annoying assignment (especially when the "baby" cried loudly in the middle of the night), here's the lesson taught by my son's teacher: you are responsible for the care of the baby. When the baby cries, you must feed it or hold it until it stops crying. It's that simple. If you convince your mother or girlfriend to care for your baby while you're at soccer practice or taking a nap, you still are accountable for the baby. If your mother leaves the house and the baby is alone and crying, you can try and blame your mom but it is your grade that will suffer. The baby is all yours for three days.

How does this high school Accountability 101 lesson translate into the workplace? What do you do when your people have trouble with their crying babies? Let's first define accountability for the sake of this discussion. When people are accountable, they are responsible for the output of tasks. Output happens or it does not. It's the report scheduled to be on your boss's desk at 10 a.m. today. It's the bread on the tray for the patient. It is the conversation held as promised. Each person is accountable for turning off the computer chip in his/her own crying baby.

The definition seems so simple but many of my clients have talked with me recently about accountability issues. The same mistakes occur day after day. Work is not completed. Customers are complaining. The larger the organization, the more complex the system, the more people involved, the greater the chance accountability gaps will occur. At the same time, when leaders are clear about expectations, when in the words of Kouzes and Posner they "model the way," when people have the resources they need and reasonable work loads, the opportunity for success is greatly increased.

Yes, immediate accountability problems can be solved through tactical steps: shifting or terminating employees, re-assessing responsibilities, reviewing processes, examining job-fit, and increasing feedback. But let's take a look at accountability through the larger lens of strategic leadership.

Number One on my Top Ten List of Leadership Articles is "The Survival Guide To Leadership" by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. Professors at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, they wrote the article to help leaders with large scale change management. Yet their words of wisdom are perfect for this issue as well. When faced with obstacles to success, Heifetz and Linsky recommend that leaders take themselves up to the figurative balcony and look down at the dance floor to get a true picture of what is really happening. That short trip up the stairs to the balcony gives leaders the distance they need to look at the big picture, not just the tactical steps that need to be taken. For example, when your manager does not complete the report on time, what are the possible issues involved? Let's assume that he has the same personal commitment to accountability that you do. Does he have too many important tasks to accomplish at once? Does he have the authority to get

the information he required? Does he have to fill in for absent employees and complete their work first? Does he have the right people in the right jobs on his team? Does he have competing priorities? What are the system issues contributing to this problem? What is your role in it? What needs to happen? Once you are able to answer the large lens questions, you can decide where change would be most effective back on the dance floor.

Beware of taking on more work yourself. As Heifetz and Linsky noted, "All too often, people look up the chain of command, expecting senior management to meet market challenges for which they themselves are responsible...People tend to become passive, and senior managers who pride themselves on being problem solvers take decisive action. That behavior restores equilibrium in the short term but ultimately leads to complacency and habits of work avoidance that shield people from responsibility, pain, and the need to change."

So, when the babies keep crying, spend some time on the balcony. Have some popcorn and a soda. Invite your people to join you. That broader perspective will help you as a leader and give you and your people some new steps to try on the dance floor.

Best,  
Sharon

*Sharon Dougherty, CEO of Priority Coaching, is an executive coach with twenty-five years experience working with more than 160 corporations and health care systems throughout the United States. Her work includes executive and manager coaching for high potentials and for those in danger of derailing, teaching leadership development programs, facilitating team and department retreats, conducting management competency assessments and system reviews, and serving as a thought partner for senior executives. Sharon's work has been featured in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. She has been asked to present on the topic of "Developing Conflict Management Skills" at the Garden State Society For Human Resources Professionals Annual Conference on October 27, 2009.*

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