Accountability

Accountability is a word we often hear in discussions about leadership. But what does accountability mean? And what do we mean when we talk about accountability in relation to long-term care nursing?

Accountability is a commitment, a promise to deliver a result by a given time. Simply put, accountability is about commitment: getting people to commit to doing something and then knowing they will follow through.

What people say they will do can be very different from what they actually do, and what we think they have committed to is often worlds apart from what they think they committed to. Yet accountability is critical when providing quality care and maintaining good working relationships with coworkers.

In this lesson you will learn the basics of an accountability culture, the key elements of personal accountability, and how to improve communication to maintain peer accountability.

Have a good day of training, and stay tuned for next month’s issue of CNA Training Advisor on autoimmune disorders.

Improving accountability

Creating and maintaining a culture of accountability can be a challenge for any facility. To improve accountability, start by identifying problem areas. As a group, share your thoughts or concerns about accountability at work. Suggest potential factors that are limiting the accountability of staff members. Then try to identify where improvements can be made.

Program Prep

Program time
Approximately 30 minutes

Learning objectives
Participants in this activity will learn how to:
➤ Define accountability
➤ Maintain personal accountability
➤ Communicate effectively to ensure accountability

Preparation
➤ Review the material on pp. 2-4
➤ Duplicate the CNA Professor insert for participants
➤ Gather equipment for participants (e.g., an attendance sheet, pencils, etc.)

Method
1. Place a copy of CNA Professor and a pencil at each participant’s seat
2. Conduct the questionnaire as a pretest or, if participants’ reading skills are limited, as an oral posttest
3. Present the program material
4. Review the questionnaire
5. Discuss the answers

Quiz answer key

1. a 3. d 5. c 7. b 9. a
2. c 4. a 6. b 8. c 10. d

Your shortcut to compliant documentation

The Long-Term Care Clinical Assessment and Documentation Cheat Sheets is the ultimate blueprint for how to provide resident-centered care. This electronic-only resource provides nurses with a thorough list of what to check and what to document during every shift, based on the specific circumstances of a given resident. Best of all, the new electronic format of this content enables long-term care clinicians to easily search for the condition they need to treat and access the appropriate checklist within seconds.

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Before you can work toward achieving accountability, you need to ensure that you understand what the term means. We frequently hear the terms “responsibility” and “accountability” used interchangeably, but they do not mean the same thing.

If you look up the terms in a dictionary, you’ll find the following definitions:
- **Accountability:**
  - Responsible for something
  - Capable of being explained
- **Responsibility:**
  - Being accountable for something
  - Authority to make decisions independently

These definitions are not much help. So let’s consider alternative definitions. A powerful distinction can exist between accountability and responsibility. An effective way to distinguish them is as follows:
- **Accountability:** a commitment to others to deliver and account for a result by a given date
- **Responsibility:** an authority over people to have them respond to one’s direction

Accountability is about the results to be delivered. A result is a desired outcome that can be described. It is measurable, observable, and time-limited—for example, “I will have the infection report completed by Friday.”

Responsibility is about things that will respond to you. Think of responsibility as what is included in a job description. Your job responsibilities include the things you need to do to perform your job.

### Accountability and Organizational Roles

Professionals in any organization often find themselves assuming three different roles at different times: supervisor, manager, and leader. Each role requires a different kind of work that calls for distinct skills:
- **Supervisors** are responsible for a well-defined set of activities to be carried out in a prescribed way. They know the work to be done and can tell someone else what to do and how to do it. However, supervisors are not held accountable for another professional’s actions and results.
- **Managers** are responsible for how their unit runs, the staff employed, and the care that is provided. Managers have to produce results with those resources. For example, a nurse manager is accountable for a range of items from accurate documentation on the unit and quality care to nurse productivity and staffing costs. A manager has all of the resources needed to deliver a well-defined set of expected results. A manager organizes, oversees, and responds to produce results. A manager needs to influence others to achieve expected results with available resources.
- **A leader** appears when a person has intent that far exceeds his or her reach. The intent, expressed as a vision or goal, cannot be achieved with the resources the person is responsible for. A leader envisions exciting possibilities and enlists others in a shared vision. This person has accepted accountability for an outcome that is beyond his or her ability to produce independently.

### An Accountability Culture

Being accountable is a choice people make. To have a culture that promotes accountability, facilities need a culture that encourages and celebrates people making choices, celebrates success, and celebrates the learning that occurs with every mistake.

In an accountability culture, there is no punishment. Punishment causes people to be risk-averse and avoid accountability. Instead, an accountability culture promotes learning, performing, and improving.

What does accountability look like in such a culture?

With accountability, you are seeking a result; you need someone to ensure that you understand what the term means. We frequently hear the terms “responsibility” and “accountability” used interchangeably, but they do not mean the same thing.

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### Relocating? Taking a new job?

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be accountable for the result. As a CNA, staff nurses or managers may call on you to perform particular tasks with each patient, such as reporting vital signs that are outside of the normal range. With every task that is assigned, you accept accountability for that assignment. Based on your performance over time, staff members will gauge whether you are accountable or not.

**Personal accountability**

Accountability is about making and keeping commitments, and it starts with you. To demonstrate that you are accountable, you need to ask yourself what it will take for you to make a commitment. Start with yourself:

➤ Do you practice accountability?
➤ Do you do what you say you will do?
➤ Do others believe they can count on you?

It is unrealistic to expect accountability of others if you don’t expect it of yourself. Accountability exists in all facets of your life and in every relationship. It is about expectations and commitments. If you do not understand what is expected of you, you will not be successful in meeting commitments, even though you may work very hard to be accountable. It starts with clearly understanding what the other person is expecting.

Take time to assess your ability to be accountable with the following questions:

➤ When you say you are going to do something, do you mean it?
➤ Are your commitments realistic?
➤ Do you ensure that you understand what is expected of you?
➤ If you realize that you cannot keep a commitment, do you communicate this in a timely manner?
➤ Do you ask for help when making commitments and working on them?

Accountability often means you have to engage others to help you keep your commitments. Some people find this—depending on others—to be the most challenging part of accountability. Many times, we need others’ help to be accountable.

New CNAs will often find themselves assigned to a task which they have never performed before or are uncomfortable with. One common example is when CNAs are asked to empty a catheter or drain. If a CNA does not know how or is uncomfortable performing this task, it is unacceptable to delay the task. Instead, a CNA should communicate their concerns to the staff nurse they are working with. Another approach would be to contact the nurse educator for further education on the procedure. Approaching others for help demonstrate that you are holding yourself accountable to understanding your assignments and providing the best care possible to residents.

**Identify sore spots**

It is important to understand what prevents you from meeting expectations, making a commitment, and keeping a commitment. You need to understand your sore spots: the situations, individuals, or groups that threaten your ability to be accountable.

When someone in authority asks you to do something, do you say yes regardless of whether you mean it because of the position of the person who is asking you? Is there an individual who you have a hard time saying no to? You don’t want to let this person down, so you say yes, but you may not be willing or able to do what this person is requesting.

When you are not clear on what is expected of you, ask questions—make requests—until you understand what is expected, how it will be measured, and when it is expected to be completed.

**Your communication style**

How effectively do you communicate? Your accountability language can help you be an effective communicator. It will help you clearly communicate your expectations. Consider the following:

➤ **Communication during challenging times.** When you are faced with challenges, it is easy to fall into the trap of blame and excuses. In an accountability culture, there is no blame or punishment. These create negative energy and cause you to lose focus on the goal. When you are in a difficult situation and are tempted to break into a bad story, remember that accountability is about clear expectations and making and keeping commitments. When commitments are not met, you need to understand what happened. What went well? The answer to this question is meant to create positive energy to generate more new ideas.

➤ **Use your language and behavior to promote personal accountability.** Being accountable does not mean you can always do what is being requested. You may not be able to say yes to a request. The important part of accountability is that you commit to something. It is your job to make a commitment that you understand and can keep. If you cannot, you need to adjust the commitment to what you can achieve. Remember, use your accountability

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language to help you make and keep commitments. The earlier example where a CNA is asked to empty a catheter but is unfamiliar with the procedure is a situation where instead of committing to the task, the CNA should ask for help. Along with this, however, the CNA can commit to reviewing this procedure or working with the nurse educator so he or she can assume the task later on. By doing so, the CNA is addressing the task at hand, while making a realistic commitment.

➤ **Nonverbal communication.** Watch your nonverbal communication, too. Sometimes what you don’t say reveals much more about your accountability. Take, for instance, a meeting you are in where everyone seems to be committing to doing something: heads are nodding, people are smiling, and everyone seems to be engaged. In reality, the people walking out of the room may be saying to themselves, “I have no idea what they were talking about. I just said yes so that we could get out of there.” Pay attention to whether you are behaving in the same way.

### Holding peers accountable

The nature of an accountability culture and the dynamics of an effective accountability conversation are clearest when peers are involved. Here there is no clear line of authority to provide you with context. It’s you trying to get another person to help you when the person doesn’t have to. It’s the other person trying to get your support when you do not have to be involved.

The fact that all parties are equal puts the focus on the nature of the relationship you are creating. Most accountability conversations are about building relationships. Trust has to be built and communication has to be effective. Accountability is relationship-driven; it’s about relationships without fear of blame or punishment.

Think about who your peers are. As a CNA, your peers are fellow CNAs and anyone with whom you may work side by side. Peers are the people who are at your level within the organization. You find yourself interacting with them, often on matters that affect your performance or your unit’s performance.

Since you most often communicate with your peers, understanding how to communicate with one another in a way that ensures accountability is essential. Doing so will reduce the risks of complications with regard to resident care, as well as conflicts among staff.

### Having the conversation

You need to make sure the environment around you is free of punishment and blame and allows people to take risks. You need to make requests and offers. Ask your peers to make commitments and find out what it may take for them to keep their commitments.

Remember, commitments need to be defined, measurable, and time-limited. When you are dealing with other people—in this situation, your peers—make sure you understand what the expectations are, the person you are working with understands what the expectations are, and you do your part to create an environment that supports and demands accountability.

The next time you want to achieve accountability, try using language that produces it. The following speech techniques can be very useful when having an accountability conversation:

➤ **Framing.** Turn on the listening you need by asking your audience to listen and process what they are hearing in a positive way. It creates a listening environment in which you can speak.

➤ **Effective questions.** Turn on the creative power of the listeners by prompting them to consider positive questions during a discussion (e.g., In what ways does this contribute to our goals?)

➤ **Active listening.** Listening can be a passive activity. As somebody is listening, they can be distracted, superimposing their own thoughts and drifting away in reverie. Make sure people understand the conversation by having them restate what is said in their own words.

➤ **Requests and offers.** How many times have you talked about what you needed but not received a response from the listener? We are good at describing and explaining, but we are not good at asking. This is how you generate commitments. Most meetings do not end with people leaving in action because no one made a request and offer; often, it is simply assumed that everyone knew what to do.

➤ **Hear yes/no.** When you are talking to someone about accountability, you want to know whether the person is committed to achieving the result under discussion. Too often we hear what we want to, rather than what was said (e.g., “Yes, but …”). Verify what is being said.

➤ **Acknowledgment.** If someone makes a commitment and, more importantly, keeps that commitment, acknowledge it.

By understanding what accountability means in the clinical setting, how to maintain personal accountability, and when to work with peers to achieve accountability, CNAs have the opportunity to improve the culture of accountability within a facility.
ACCOUNTABILITY

Mark the correct response.

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

1. Accountability is a commitment to others to deliver and account for a result by a given date.
   a. True
   b. False

2. ________ are responsible for a well-defined set of activities to be carried out in a prescribed way.
   a. Leaders
   b. Managers
   c. Supervisors
   d. CNAs

3. In an accountability culture there is no ________.
   a. negative energy
   b. punishment
   c. blame
   d. all of the above

4. Being accountable does not mean you can always do what is being requested. You may not be able to say yes to a request.
   a. True
   b. False

5. Commitments need to be all of the following except ________.
   a. defined
   b. measurable
   c. ambiguous
   d. time-limited

6. Nodding your head and smiling as you are assigned a task are examples of ________.
   a. verbal communication
   b. nonverbal communication
   c. confusion
   d. accountability

7. A leader accepts accountability only for an outcome that is within his or her ability to produce independently.
   a. True
   b. False

8. Which of the following is not a suggested question for assessing one’s ability to be accountable?
   a. Are your commitments realistic?
   b. Do you ensure that you understand what is expected of you?
   c. When peers say they are going to do something, do they mean it?
   d. If you realize that you cannot keep a commitment, do you communicate this in a timely manner?

9. Which of the following speech techniques is used to generate commitment?
   a. Requests and offers
   b. Effective questions
   c. Framing
   d. Acknowledgment

10. When you are not clear on what is expected of you, ask questions until you understand ________.
    a. what is expected
    b. how it will be measured
    c. when it is expected to be completed
    d. all of the above