

# Beyond the Blame: Rebuilding Accountability on the Team

Focus: Team Leadership • Accountability • Workflow • Employee Engagement • Training • Operations

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## The Situation

A wood-fired pizza team that had once taken real pride in its craft was starting to lose momentum. Productivity had slipped, service had slowed down, and customers were noticing. Inside the team, frustration was building too, one employee came to me convinced that a coworker wasn't pulling his weight anymore and had even started bragging about quitting soon.

Rumors aren't a management strategy, though, so before I made any assumptions, I needed to find out what was actually going on.

## Looking Beyond the Complaint

I sat down with the employee whose performance had become a concern. At first, he told me everything was fine. But the way he was working said otherwise — he'd clearly lost some of the enthusiasm he used to bring to the job.

It took a real one-on-one conversation to get there, but I eventually learned he was dealing with personal challenges at home, and had built up some resentment toward the coworker who'd complained about him. None of that erased the performance issue, but it completely changed how I wanted to handle it. My goal wasn't to figure out who was right, it was to understand what was actually affecting the team, make sure expectations were clear, and give both employees what they needed to succeed.

## Turning Expectations Into Something Measurable

The biggest issue I found was that responsibilities were never clearly defined. Everyone knew there was work to do, but there was too much gray area around who owned what — especially cleaning, prep, closing duties, and getting the kitchen ready for the next day.

So I built clear responsibility checklists for each employee, covering daily prep, cleaning, station duties, closing procedures, next-shift prep, and handoffs between team members. I walked through the expectations one-on-one with each person, so there was no confusion about what belonged to whom. That checklist gave us something objective to work from — instead of one employee's word against another's, we could just look at whether the assigned work was actually getting done.

## Accountability Without Losing the Human Element

The checklist was never meant as a punishment. It created clarity, cut down on the gossip and finger-pointing that happens when responsibilities are fuzzy, and gave me a real way to track progress and see where someone needed more coaching.

But I didn't stop there. I kept having one-on-ones and team conversations alongside it, because accountability tells you what's happening, and conversation tells you why. You really do need both.

## The Outcome

Between the clear expectations, the documented responsibilities, and consistently following up, the team had an objective way to understand what needed to get done, and I had better visibility into where each person actually stood. Most importantly, the conversation shifted from “who's not doing their job?” to “what does this role actually require, and are we meeting it?”

## **What I Learned**

Not every performance problem starts with a bad employee. Sometimes expectations were never clear. Sometimes responsibilities overlap in ways nobody sorted out. Sometimes someone's dealing with something outside work that's bleeding into their shift. And sometimes, yes, there really is a performance problem that calls for a hard decision.

Part of a manager's job is telling the difference. Before I escalate anything, I want to know that the person understood what was expected of them, had the tools and support to meet it, and had a real chance to explain what might be going on. That doesn't mean avoiding hard calls, it just means making them with better information.

Good management isn't choosing between accountability and empathy. It's knowing how to use both.