

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

8/31/2026

Responsibility vs. Accountability

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It's 2:00 p.m. on a steaming hot July day when my phone rings. It's a client that I'd just started work with on communication structures and leadership.

"I've got a problem with the new manager we just promoted," he said. "I told her she is responsible for the irrigation for that block. I thought she had it covered, but this morning I go out there to find it hasn't been watered since Tuesday. Why do I still have to be the one who catches the problems?"

Fair question, wrong assumption. He wasn't wrong to hand her the job—she'd worked with the previous irrigation manager for months and said she knew what to do. However, he was wrong to expect that handing her the job would simply produce ownership. Those are two different things and most of the friction I see inside nurseries and greenhouses traces back to leaders treating them as the same thing.

Responsibility fits in a job description. It's given to a person who we feel is capable. Accountability, on the other hand, requires something much more because it isn't given, it's owned by the person themselves.

Responsibility is given

Every operation runs on responsibility and it should. Someone owns shipping. Someone owns the liner house. Someone owns irrigation zones, inventory counts, the loading dock at 6:00 a.m. That's basic structure. The term that typically and most accurately describes what I see in real life is "assumed responsibility."

What this means is that the assignment contains something unspoken. "You're responsible for shipping" is also everything that goes with it. This "everything else" is what creates the disconnect and leads to "they aren't doing their job." The problem is when leaders assume assigning responsibility builds ownership, it then gets confusing when an employee stays perfectly inside the lines they were given and nothing more. Or worse, fails to meet these ghost expectations.

Accountability is chosen

Accountability shows up without anyone asking for it. It's the irrigation lead who catches a solenoid cycling wrong before a block wilts because they understood that they need to do cycle checks regularly. It's the shipping employee who stops working around a recurring pull-order mistake and traces it back to the source. It's a grower who tells sales about a crop delay before they hear it from an angry customer.

None of that was in anyone's job description. That's the point. A responsible employee reports what happened in their own area. An accountable one shares what's relevant to someone else's area, unprompted, because the plants don't care whose department the problem technically belongs to.

An accountable employee will come to you with suggestions, ideas, inspirations and concerns regularly because they want to see success.

A responsible employee walks in asking, "What's on my list today?" An accountable one asks, "What can I improve today?" The first question is bound by a task list; the second isn't bound by anything except the health of the business and that's the difference between completing work and improving it. Completing work keeps things running today; improving it determines whether the same bottlenecks are still there in five years.

You can't demand it

Leaders often say, "I need my people to be more accountable" the way they'd say, "I need my people to clock in on time," as if it's a policy you can enforce. It isn't. Accountability can't be assigned by memo or in a handbook, for that matter. It can only be grown or, more often, unintentionally suppressed.

What leaders can actually do is create clarity about why the work matters, remove obstacles instead of adding them, take time to understand why those obstacles matter and notice initiative instead of punishing it. Nothing kills accountability faster than an employee who speaks up about a problem outside their lane and gets told to stay in it. Think about it—if you keep getting told no when you make a request, eventually you just stop asking. Same goes for managers versus leaders. Your leadership culture decides this more than any policy does.

Reward initiative specifically and in front of others. People repeat what gets noticed. Ask questions instead of always supplying answers. Give people visibility into parts of the business they don't touch directly. None of this guarantees accountability—that's the nature of something a person has to choose. But it removes the reasons people default back to "not my job."

What we want to do is put together a system and structure that nurture and give the opportunity to build and show their accountability.

The distinction that matters

Responsibility fills job descriptions; accountability builds companies. You can staff an entire operation with responsible people who complete every task on their list—yes, things will get done and there will always be places that demand list-checkers. However, I want to make sure that, as a leader, I'm giving others the ability to also become leaders and show me their accountability. The best leaders improve the work they inherited.

Start taking notice—who in your organization comes to you with ideas before they become problems and how do you help support their accountability? **GT**

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