Ownership

Idea In Short

Ownership is the 2nd among the Leadership Principles that Amazon uses its every day, whether discussing ideas for new projects or deciding on the best approach to solving a problem.

> Leaders are owners. They think long term and don't sacrifice long-term value for short-term results. They act on behalf of the entire company, beyond just their own team. They never say “that's not my job."

We've all received customer service from an employee who doesn't care. They are content to do the minimum. They don't seem invested or happy to be there. Anything outside a routine transaction is met with indifference. And, they certainly don't make an effort to solve problems. If you're a customer service leader, these employees are frustrating. Likewise, when consultants take ownership of their work, every engagement receives the same care and attention of a passion project. They take pride in their work, taking on engagements knowing that they'll serve as a reflection of their abilities rather than evidence of their obedience to superiors. A sense of ownership promotes accountability and innovation, saves time and produces superior results.

Learn from the kids

Can you imagine a school where kids are responsible enough to make all the rules? They get to choose what they study, when they study, and for how long. Moreover, they also get to make all the decisions that impact their school. Are you picturing chaos? The Brooklyn Free School in New York was created on this democratic principle—and it's working. How has the school achieved such a high level of personal accountability? It holds mandatory weekly gatherings called the Democratic Meeting, where students pose challenges, propose new rules, and set policies. The school ensures that all voices are be heard and equally counted.

The youngest kids have a vote equal to staffers. As it turns out, when students know that their voices have a direct impact on the school, they begin to feel that the success of the organization is their own success, too.

Example from HBR

In an HBR article titled, Let's Hold Consultants Accountable for Results, Ron Ashkenas provides a disguised example of the lacking accountability and client ownership among consultants:

> The head of a large consumer products division felt that one of the keys to future growth would be a greater focus on emerging markets. To that end, she hired a large consulting firm to provide recommendations, including which countries to target, what organizational changes to make, what hiring would be needed, and how products might be modified. The only problem with the study was that it didn't take into consideration the readiness and capability of the managers and staff, both in the division and at corporate, to carry it out. As a result the client was unable to get her team on board and secure necessary budget, and most of the recommendations were shelved. The odd thing about this case is that afterwards the lead consultant felt that the project was a success, and was even proud to use some of the research insights with other clients. After all, the study was done well, with the highest standards of analytic rigor and thinking. The failure to implement and achieve any results was the division manager's problem, so the consulting firm – which was paid a very large fee for this work – was off the hook. Even more troubling was the unwillingness of the client to hold the consultant even partly accountable for the lack of results. Her feeling was that the consulting firm provided good, solid answers and she attributed the absence of implementation to her team's weaknesses and a lack of understanding by her corporate bosses.

Ownership is a frame of mind

Ownership and accountability are not ways of doing things as most people see it. They are a way of thinking and behaving. Specifically, as consultants, it's how we think about our clients. That's a different relationship. If you own client problems and feel accountable to delivering results, clients will see it. They know that you are helping them achieve their

goals. If they know you're helping them succeed, then there's a different bond between you and your clients. That different bond is going to create a scenario, an environment where they want to be accountable. As soon as that happens, the game changes. You define accountability and ownership specifically as keeping your commitments to people. In client engagements, we always have people - client stakeholders - involved. There are always relationships. Those commitments aren't showing up at 9:00, getting the report done by 3:00, cleaning up where you're supposed to clean up. Those are your responsibilities. If you're not doing your responsibilities, you should be fired. It's that simple. Why would your clients engage someone that's not doing what they're supposed to be doing? The real commitments require leadership and are never spoken. Leadership is based on such things as accountability, ownership, and commitment. Standing by your client when all hell breaks loose is exceptional leadership that creates strong bonds. Hence, consultants must take ownership if they're looking to build that deeper and more meaningful client relationships that inspire accountability.

Tips for consultants

In my experience, taking ownership involves several elements:

Define Your Values

From the start, every consultant should define their values, inform his / her team of them, and work them into day-to-day procedures. You can't live out values if you're not sure what they are. If you're a Manager / Leader of a consulting team / firm, building a culture of ownership requires giving the team a certain amount of independence, so you'll want a strong value-based foundation for them to build upon. If you want your team to be independently motivated representatives of your firm, you need to make sure that they see your firm's values in action around them.

Don't micro-manage

Micromanaging is the antithesis of an ownership culture. It kills innovation, discourages independence, and wastes time. When someone is signing off on your work every step of the way, you lose a sense of accountability and ownership. Only by giving the engagement team the freedom to work independently will you see them take the type of pride in their work that inspires higher quality client results.

Empathize your client stakeholders

See the problem as they do and think through their challenges before offering your solutions. Invest the time to engage in conversations and clearly understand their situation. Empathy allows the conversation to flow from a business conversation to more of a personal one. Once you've built a personal connection with your client stakeholders, they become more open to your recommendations and sharing their consensus.

Do not pass the buck

Often, when we are dealing with frustrated or stubborn client stakeholders, it becomes easy to pass the problem off or advise the client that there is nothing we can do. Taking ownership in these scenarios requires a willingness to see the problem through to the end. As a consultant, you can brainstorm potential solutions with those challenging client stakeholders, reach out to your peers, Partners / Senior Managers for advice based on their experiences with similar situations, or talk to other client business units to find alternate solutions to their problem. By being resourceful and willing to go the extra mile, you give your client the confidence that you have done everything in your power to try and solve their problem.

Be resourceful

Gather creative ideas towards a successful resolution. Rather than focusing on what you can't do, come up with several different possible solutions to your client's problem. There is a good chance that they will accept of at least one of them.

Provide assurances

Clients can quickly become frustrated when they can't get an answer to their questions. It is easy to escalate a situation by advising the client that it was their business unit / department that did not follow through on their commitments. Instead of playing the blame game, advise the customer that you can help resolve this impasse. A simple phrase, such as, I would be happy to help you with that., may not have a direct impact on the problem or the solution. But, your clients will see you are the first step in handling the challenge. That simple phrase tells the customer that you are going to take responsibility for handling the issue.

Accept that you don't have all the answers

As a consultant, there will always be times when you won't be able to resolve the issue during the first interaction. However, you can still take ownership of the problem. To do this, assure your client that even though you don't have an answer right now. Inform them that you or someone else will contact them as soon as possible with the needed information. You haven't finished your job just yet! You must follow through with your promise. If you let the request fall through the cracks, you become part of a now bigger problem instead of taking responsibility for your client's issue.

Be accountable for your work

As consultants, we need to make sure that we have the mindset of being accountable for our work. Once we have this as our mindset, it will show in our behavior and our actions. It will also show in our language and the way we talk to customers in general. We won't come off as just trying to finish this engagement as quickly as possible. Always treat your clients as you want to be treated, if you were the client or customer.

Set clear expectations

The best engagement teams not only focus on the deliverables, but also on the overall process and quality. As an Engagement Manager / Leader, you should set clear expectations on the engagement team. This should happen as soon as you have formed the engagement team. You should also set some ground rules how the team members will work together. Expectations can be explicit, such as requesting punctuality for meetings, or implicit, like beginning meetings on time. You should ensure that the team members clearly understand your expectations and their role in the engagement.

Commitment

When you clearly articulate your expectations and also identify the proper owners regarding execution, then the team can easily follow up through the necessary activities. This means that team members take responsibility for setting expectations and voluntarily agree to them. When this happens, the team members are more committed towards acting in the best interests of the entire team. This involves a willingness to prioritize collective over personal interest.

Communicate clearly

Fundamental to accountability is clear communication. This not only pertains to setting and enforcing expectations, but includes all team interactions. Misunderstandings are common in relationships. But, take the time to check in with yourself about your intention. Likewise, pay close attention to how you deliver your messages and how the recipients perceive them. Such an understanding can help minimize miscommunication.

Take care of the trivia

When misunderstandings, conflicts, or other issues that negatively affect the team arise. When such an event occurs, it's usually better to address them early on. A consequence of holding back is that problems can fester. Eventually, trivial issues become more complicated and time consuming to resolve. Sometimes, speaking up about a small issue can help resolve the issue early on; this can make a big difference, especially in complex engagements.

Make time for relationships

Even the best accountability and ownership intentions can fall apart if relationships are not in place to support it. This means valuing the importance of getting to know your client stakeholders and engagement team members. For example, you can allocate extra time in meetings for informal conversations, organize social activities, etc. The more familiar we are with our team members, the easier it is to build trust.

Summary

By incorporating these elements into your conversations, taking ownership will become seamless and less daunting. Much like client relationships, ownership isn't easy. It requires communication, commitment, and consistency. The reward for making ownership and accountability count is that teams are not only higher performing, but your client engagements also more enjoyable to work on.