

Performance Management and Artificial Intelligence

FOSTERING ACCOUNTABILITY WHEN AI IS INVOLVED



There is frequently a sense of moral judgment associated with the word *should*. “She *should* have done this,” we think, or “He *shouldn’t* have done that.” It moves from judgment to moral judgment when the “should” implies that the *person*—not just the deed—is good or bad. “She should have done this” becomes “she *is* that.”

This tendency to moralize often appears in accountability conversations and during performance management. For example:

- “He should have kept his commitments” becomes “He isn’t trustworthy.”
- “She should have been on time” becomes “She is selfish and inconsiderate.”
- “They should have done what I asked” becomes “They are lazy.”

But moralizing in the context of accountability and performance management backfires and ultimately becomes demoralizing. A “you should” approach promotes condescension, not collaboration, and likely detracts from the kind of change and growth that is at the heart of productive performance management.

Today this moral value judgment is pervasive when it comes to the role of AI in performance. When managers and team members talk about an employees’ use of AI, it can range from “It’s great and you’d be a fool not to use AI to get results” to “AI is cheating and

you are morally derelict to use ChatGPT to do the work you should be doing yourself.” Underpinning all of this judgment about whether, when, and how to use AI is a subtle moral reckoning. Is it “right” to use AI to do your work? The answer to that question has profound implications for accountability and performance management in organizations where work is being reshaped by AI.

As we consider how AI will impact accountability and performance management, it is essential that we stop seeing accountability as a moral question and start seeing it as a behavior challenge. At its heart, accountability is defined by a gap in expectations and experiences. I have expectations. You do things. If the things you do align with my expectations, there is no accountability issue.

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But when the things you do don’t align with my expectations, then there is a gap. That gap is the accountability problem. When seen as a moral failing, discussing the gap sounds like “You need to take

accountability for your actions” or “I need to hold you accountable for what you have done.” When viewed as a behavioral challenge, the conversation sounds very different: “There is a gap between what I was expecting and what I am experiencing. Why is that? And what would it take to close this gap?”

When viewed through this behavior-based frame, accountability is fostered through three key steps:

1. **Clear Expectations**
2. **Fair Evaluation**
3. **Honest Feedback**

The introduction of AI tools at work will likely impact each of these steps. And while it is too soon to know how AI will impact accountability, there are questions we should be asking. Getting clear now on how AI may affect accountability can help leaders adapt to the inevitable disruptions.

1. CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Setting clear expectations is where people often fall short in fostering accountability. Either we assume that expectations are already clear, or we fail to do the work to establish clear expectations.

One important question to ask in the age of AI is this: do you expect your employee or team member to use AI? Of course, the question is far more nuanced than that because it can’t be simply role- or person-based. Ideally, it is a task-based question that may change based on the primary goal of the task.

For example, say you are a marketing manager, and you have a new marketing specialist on your team. This specialist is just a year or so out of college and this is their first marketing role. One of their responsibilities is to draft marketing copy. Do you expect them to use AI for this task? It likely depends on your goal. If the desired outcome is good marketing copy quickly, using AI is likely the best way for this new specialist to achieve that outcome. But if your goal is to mentor and develop this new employee, you may want them to write copy without using AI, so that you can evaluate their critical thinking, writing, and overall approach. Same task, but different goals, and thus different expectations around using AI.

Setting clear expectations obviously pre-dates AI. But the introduction of AI requires us to set clear expectations around the use of AI. For managers and leaders, this will require not only thoughtful consideration of what outcomes you want, but also a healthy knowledge of how AI works. There will be no way for managers to set clear expectations around using AI if they aren’t familiar with AI tools themselves.

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One specific expectation managers can set to lay ground for future expectations involves transparency. Especially during the “figuring it out stage,” ask employees to be proactively transparent about their use of AI. If setting task-specific expectations feels onerous or impossible right now, consider a learning approach. Set the expectation that when employees do use AI, they are upfront about noting that they used AI in their work. This transparency builds trust while communicating there will be future expectations about AI use. Setting this expectation might sound like: “As we experiment with how to use AI in our work, I may not always know which tasks it should be used for. So, I ask that whenever you use AI, let me know. This will help us both identify how we can best use it in our work.”

Clear Expectations Key Questions

- Do I know enough about AI to understand how my employees can, should, or could be using it? If not, what do I need to do to learn more?
- Am I setting expectations around AI use that are reasonable and connected to desired outcomes?
- Have I considered AI use in terms of both employee performance and employee growth development?
- Do I know what my employees use AI for?

2. FAIR EVALUATION

Once you set clear expectations and the work is done, the next component of accountability is evaluating the work against those expectations. While some work can be objectively or quantitatively evaluated, much performance today (especially in knowledge work) must include subjective and/or qualitative measures. This means a person or group of people must judge the quality of the work that was done or the behavior that occurred and how the work and behavior compare to expectations.

Interestingly, some people would prefer to be evaluated by AI rather than by their manager. There are several plausible reasons for this. First, AI tends to be sycophantic—it's often pleasant, positive, and even flattering. Even when you push it to give you critical feedback, it usually phrases output gently. A human boss, on the other hand, might not be as tactful. So, feedback from AI may be easier to receive. Second, feedback from AI feels somewhat disembodied. It's not a person judging me, with all the emotional weight that carries. It's just a machine assessing my output.

The more interesting question, though, is whether AI creates more fairness in evaluation. Two elements routinely come into play when a human being makes a judgment, and both can impact fairness: expertise and bias. Expertise is important. You can see that in great coaches. They can provide better feedback (and better value) than a random person off the street. So, the quality of evaluation depends in part on the evaluator's expertise.

Some managers or peers may lack the expertise to accurately judge your work—or they may carry biases that distort their evaluations. These could be personal biases (“I just don’t like you”) or broader biases related to age, gender, race, or other characteristics. In such cases, an AI system—while not bias-free—might provide a more even-handed evaluation than a

human evaluator. A wise approach is to use AI not as a replacement evaluator, but as an augmentation tool—a way to check your own evaluation. For example, a manager could use AI to identify blind spots, test their reasoning, or compare judgments. Done well, this can help increase expertise while also guarding against bias—both human and algorithmic.

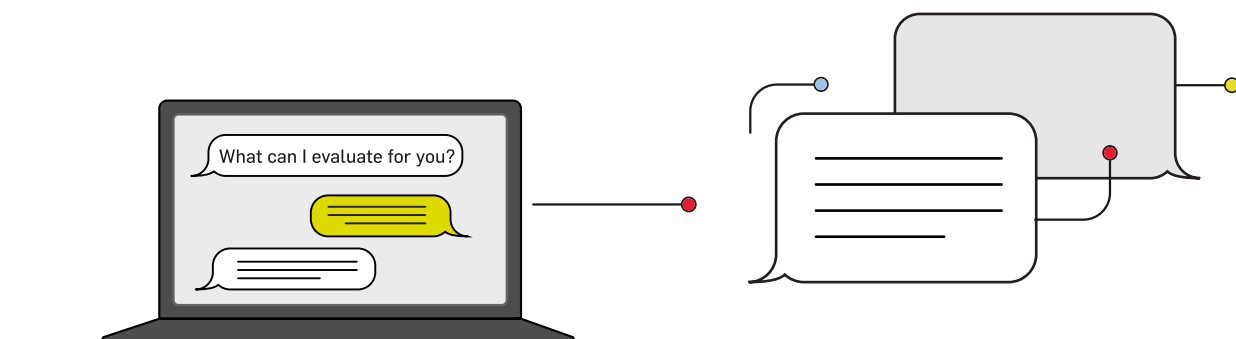
Fair Evaluation Key Questions

- Do I have the expertise to fairly evaluate my employee's performance?
- Do I have biases that may keep me from being fair?
- Do I have a history with this person that makes it hard for me to objectively evaluate them?
- Do I have the expertise to fairly judge the quality of their work and performance and provide valuable feedback?
- How can I use AI as a check against my judgment?

3. HONEST FEEDBACK

Once you've set clear expectations and evaluated the work, the third component of accountability is communicating that evaluation by sharing your judgment and feedback. Here again, AI can be helpful—but only with nuance and caution.

Feedback conversations can be hard. Asking AI for coaching on how to handle a difficult conversation can be helpful. Everyone can benefit from a coach, and AI may be a useful guide when used with care. However, don't let it become a scriptwriter, dictating the exact words you will say. Rather, ask for principles you can use and then validate the sources it uses.



The goal of an accountability conversation is behavior change. For that to happen, you absolutely need to give clear, specific feedback. That is the content of the conversation. But the context of the conversation is equally important if you want to create change. Change is more likely to happen when information is delivered in the context of an authentic, connected relationship. If your goal is simply to “deliver feedback,” you might provoke resistance or defensiveness. But if your goal is to partner with the person—to share information, align on goals, and demonstrate genuine support—they are far more likely to change. You need to show up as a human being, not an AI chatbot, if you want to have a successful accountability conversation, one grounded in good intent and psychological safety.

So yes, AI can help you prepare. It can help you find words that create safety or express empathy. But ultimately, accountability is a human-to-human endeavor. Authenticity cannot be outsourced. A message written or delivered by AI—without your own voice and presence—will likely not create the trust and connection needed to nurture real change.

Honest Feedback Key Questions

- Do I have specific, clear feedback to give? If not, what information do I need to gather so that I do?
- What is my goal for this conversation?
- How can I create a sense of safety and show up authentically in this conversation?

Accountability has always been about reckoning—between expectation and experience, between what was promised and what was delivered. AI doesn’t change that. Rather, it challenges us to more carefully consider what our expectations are, whether they are outcome-based or behavior-based, and how we can fairly (not morally) judge others’ work against those expectations. Our task is to move accountability out of the realm of moral judgment and into the realm of shared learning—to replace condemnation with curiosity and fear with fairness. In doing so, accountability becomes not a reckoning to dread, but an interaction that fosters connection and growth.



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