

WHERE LOYALTY ENDS & ACCOUNTABILITY BEGINS

Loyalty is one of those traits that looks admirable from a distance. It suggests commitment and trust. It can even feel like stability in environments where turnover and uncertainty are constant. In parks and recreation, where relationships are super important and teams often rely on each other in very real ways, loyalty is something most of us value and try to cultivate.

But there is a line, and when that line gets crossed, loyalty stops being a strength and starts becoming a liability. What you have then is blind loyalty. By definition, blind loyalty asks people to stay aligned no matter what. It discourages questions and it softens criticism. Over time, it starts to replace honest conversation with unspoken agreements to “just go along.” While that might keep things smooth on the surface, it often creates deeper problems beneath the surface. One of the most concerning outcomes is the erosion of accountability.

At its core, accountability is about shared responsibility and the willingness to say when something is not working, even when it is uncomfortable. It requires people to be honest with each other, to challenge decisions, and to stay focused on outcomes rather than personalities. Blind loyalty makes that difficult.

When loyalty is tied to individuals instead of values, people start protecting relationships instead of protecting the work. Folks tend to clam up. Decisions go unchallenged because questioning them feels disloyal. Patterns of behavior get excused because “that’s just how they are.” Over time, the standard for how the

organization operates begins to shift. What should have been addressed directly in a healthy culture becomes something people work around and simply tolerate.

You can see this play out in a variety of ways. A program that continues to underperform, but no one wants to revisit it because of who started it. A staff member whose behavior creates friction, but no one addresses it because they are well-liked or well-connected. A decision that doesn’t quite make sense, but everyone nods along in the meeting and saves their concerns for the informal conversation in the hallway afterward.

None of these moments seem significant on their own, but collectively, they shape culture. In organizations that lean too heavily into blind loyalty, accountability slowly fades rather than disappearing quickly. The application of rules and expectations become inconsistent. It gets applied in some situations but not others and once people start noticing that inconsistency, trust begins to fade, too.

When I use the word trust, I’m not talking about the kind that shows up in mission statements or staff retreats, but the day-to-day kind. The kind that determines whether someone feels comfortable speaking up. Whether they believe they belong in the organization and that their perspective is valued. Whether they think standards actually mean something. Without that kind of trust, even the best teams lose their edge.

For a field like ours, where so much of our



Michael D. Clark, CPRE, AFO
Owner + Principal Consultant Oxbow



work is rooted in community impact, that loss is significant. We’re not managing abstract systems or processes. We’re responsible for spaces, programs, and services that shape how people experience their communities. When accountability slips, the impact is real, even if it is not immediately visible.

So where does that leave loyalty? I don’t think the answer is to reject it. Loyalty is still important. It means a lot when you know your supervisor has your back. It builds cohesion and creates continuity. It helps teams stay grounded and focused when things get difficult. But it needs to be anchored in something stronger than personal alignment.

Healthy loyalty is tied to purpose and values, not individuals. It allows room for disagreement. It expects people to speak up when something doesn’t feel right. It recognizes that holding each other accountable is a commitment to the

relationship and not a betrayal of it.

It's not an easy shift to make and it requires leaders to be open to critique, even when it is uncomfortable. It asks staff to engage in conversations they might otherwise avoid. It challenges the idea that harmony is always the goal. Sometimes the most productive teams are not the ones that agree the most, but the ones that are willing to work through disagreement in a way that keeps the focus on the work and the mission.

There is also a level of clarity that has to come with it. Expectations need to be defined and applied consistently. Accountability cannot be selective. Once

people start to see that standards are real, and that they apply across the board, the culture begins to shift in a more sustainable way.

In many ways, this is less about changing people and more about resetting norms. What gets discussed openly? What gets ignored? What gets rewarded? What gets tolerated? Those answers shape behavior more than any formal policy ever will.

Blind loyalty often grows in environments where those norms are unclear or uneven. Addressing it does not require dramatic action as much as it requires consistent, intentional leadership. It's in the small moments that might seem insignificant at

the time. The decision to ask a follow-up question. The willingness to revisit a past decision and perhaps (clutch your pearls) consider the fact that you may have made a mistake. The choice to be direct and have a conversation instead of avoiding it.

Over time, those small moments add up and when they do, loyalty starts to look a little different. It becomes less about standing behind people no matter what and more about standing with them in a way that keeps everyone accountable to the same standard.

That's the kind of loyalty that strengthens organizations rather than holding them back.

Naturalist *Nugget*



COPPERHEAD SNAKE

It's copperhead season! May marks the beginning of the most active time of year for the northern copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*), Virginia's most widespread venomous snake. These beautiful snakes are essential rodent control and can help reduce the risk of tick-borne infections.

Photo Credits: Bella Canovas, Rockwood Nature Center

