



# Ditch the Annual Enrollment Drama

Empower your Team with Personal Accountability



# It's not like Christmas. It's not like Valentine's Day. It's not even like your birthday.

Perhaps the only thing Annual Enrollment (AE) has in common with yearly observances like these is that it only comes once a year.

Whether you're thinking, "Thank goodness!" or "Bring it on!" one thing is certain — AE can be accompanied by both adrenaline and anxiety, enthusiasm and exhaustion.

You'll get through it. But rather than simply "survive" AE, wouldn't it be better to "thrive" in AE?

The key to helping your team thrive during this important time of year — and exceed the expectations of the employees you serve — can be summed up in a single word:

## **accountability.**

As a certified Reality-Based Leadership Consultant at Businessolver, I'm happy to share the four essential elements of personal accountability with you. Each is presented in the context of AE with tips on how to build personal accountability among those you rely on for a successful enrollment season and beyond — your team members.

We'll tackle each element in four bite-sized sections. (If video is more your thing, check out [these clips](#).) **Let's get started!**



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# Commitment

**Personal Accountability starts with commitment, and that commitment needs to be made at the individual level.** As a leader, understand that it's not enough to get your whole team together and ask for a group pledge. Group commitments fall apart when the team encounters obstacles. Team members often start pointing fingers at each other, complaining about who's not working hard enough, and finding fault with everyone else.

As a leader, speak with each member of your team about the challenges that lie ahead and about expectations for their performance. These conversations should lead to individuals making a personal commitment to success during annual enrollment.

Personal commitments help the team stick together during tough times. As each person is thinking about their own performance and how it compares to what they said they would do, there's a lot less room for finger-pointing and scapegoating. Instead, the team draws together to help each other keep their commitments.

As you meet with each member of your team and secure their commitment to the success of your Annual Enrollment, the nature of the commitment must be clear. It's not enough to commit to making a "reasonable effort." What we need is an individual commitment to achieving results.

When leaders give out assignments without asking for a commitment to completing the work, most people assume they are committing to making a reasonable effort. If the assignment doesn't get done, they can merely say they made a reasonable effort to succeed. Then they don't need to feel bad about missing the deadline; they can let themselves off the hook because they met their obligation to try to get it done.

**Committing to a result means not letting yourself off the hook.** With this commitment, the task either gets done or it doesn't, regardless of extenuating circumstances. Individuals with a personal commitment find a way to overcome every obstacle, leverage all their resources, get teammates to help, work extra hours, etc. They do what it takes to deliver on their commitment.



**Group commitments fall apart when the team encounters obstacles.**



**Personal commitments help the team to stick together during tough times**

# Resilience

Annual Enrollment is our most challenging season — our industry’s “Superbowl.” We know there are going to be obstacles, crises, emergencies, unexpected, out-of-nowhere, I-can’t-believe-that-just-happened problems. As a leader, you need to keep your eye on the big AE picture as it unfolds. Everyone has a plan going into AE. But as that plan meets reality, the plan will need to evolve.

This brings us to the second element of accountability: **resilience**. Having made a personal commitment to the success of AE, **each of your team members must develop the ability to recover quickly from difficulties and pivot where necessary.**

As you head into AE, make sure your team members commit to success in the big picture, not just the implementation of the plan. If the commitment is only to implementing the plan, the team may balk at being asked to do something different or something more when — not if — the plan changes. When individual team members commit to the larger goal of a successful AE, they will know that implementing a revised plan is just part of the agreement.

During every AE season something unexpected comes up. That’s just a challenge we face in this line of work. But knowing in advance that there will be problems gives us the opportunity to start making plans now for how we will handle them. Even if we don’t know what the exact problems will be, we can prepare our teams with strategies to succeed in the face of adversity.



**Make sure your team members commit to success in the big picture, not just the implementation of the plan.**



Unfortunately, an unexpected crisis can bring out the worst in people. Many times, these situations are met with surprise, panic and blame. The natural reaction for leaders is to respond with a heroic effort to save the day. "Drop everything! All hands, on deck! This is your top priority." These heroic responses may resolve the immediate crisis, but they are not a sustainable strategy for thriving throughout the entire AE season. Personal heroics quickly lead to burnout; people just can't live in crisis mode for weeks or months on end. Even the Avengers take time off between movies.

Instead of last-minute heroics, make plans now to build in resilience. **A resilient team member knows what resources are available and recognizes right away when it's time to leverage them.** If the team prepares a strategy for responding to emergencies, crises can be dealt with quickly and without a lot of drama.

**Imagine how this would look in the real world:**

One team member discovers an error that will impact 50 employees right now and it could affect more every day. On a resilient team, once the problem is discovered, they can adjust their workloads to respond as a team. Nobody needs stay until 2:00 am, manually correcting records one at a time. The team has made a plan to respond in a way that doesn't put the whole burden on one person.

Maybe instead of one person working on the problem all night, the whole team works on it until 7:00 pm. That kind of experience will draw the team together in mutual support instead of burning them out one at a time.

**The key to making it work is to get resilient now, before the crisis hits.** Talk about how you will handle emergencies. Commit to supporting each other and resolve to stick together as a team through the highs and lows of AE.

Annual Enrollment tests us every year. As you make plans and develop your strategies for the next AE, think about how to be resilient. Get the whole team to think about it.

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**How will your team pull together to overcome obstacles, especially the unexpected ones?**

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**A resilient team member knows what resources are available and recognizes right away when it's time to leverage them.**

# Ownership

Have you ever heard someone say, “I’m going to hold you personally responsible for this!” Or perhaps, “Who got us into this mess?”

This gives accountability a bad name. There’s a lot more to it than that. We’ve covered commitment and resilience. Those are the prerequisites to the third element of accountability — **ownership**.

It would be foolish (and irresponsible as a leader) to make someone own a bad result when they don’t believe they ever committed to delivering a good result. That’s why we say, “You can’t start with ownership, because ownership without commitment is just blame.”

**Let me give you an example.** My supervisor tells me, “I need you to do this project and have it done by Friday.” She never asked for my commitment; she just told me her expectations. So, I’m going to assume my commitment is to make a reasonable effort to get it done by Friday. When Friday rolls around and I don’t have the project done, I’m going to let myself off the hook as long as I can show that I made a good faith effort. If my supervisor insists that I own the failure to get it done without having discussed this element or making it a part of our team culture, I’m going to feel like I’m being unfairly blamed for the situation. After all, I had extenuating circumstances that prevented me from getting it done.

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**Ownership without commitment is just the blame game.**

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**It would be foolish (and irresponsible as a leader) to make someone own a bad result when they don’t believe they ever committed to delivering a good result.**



**Let's go through that scenario again, but this time my supervisor starts with commitment.** She says, "I have a project that's due on Friday and I'd like you to take it on. Can I count on you to have it complete by Friday?"

Now, when I say, "Yes, I'll get it done by Friday," I better get resilient. No matter what extenuating circumstances come up, I have agreed to own the results. I may have to ask for help or even find resources to delegate or outsource the entirety of the work. Regardless, I said I would get it done, so I am going to make sure it gets done on time.

When Friday comes around, there won't be any disagreement about whether I own the results or not. I agreed to get it done, so I own the result, whether the result was good or bad.

As a leader heading into Annual Enrollment, make sure every individual on your team commits to owning their responsibilities. If you aren't asking people to own the results of the project, they are only going to commit to making a reasonable effort. Ask your team members to commit to owning results. Then encourage them to be resilient, leveraging their resources and overcoming obstacles to deliver a good result. When you start with commitment and resilience, asking for ownership isn't a problem, because everyone is already in agreement about who bears responsibility for each task.



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# Continuous Learning

But what if we do miss the deadline? What if the effort — the one we committed to owning — comes up short?

Ownership isn't the end, nor should it be. Personally accountable people make the most of their losses, probably more than they do of their wins. That's the fourth element of accountability — **continuous learning**.

At the end of every challenge, the results are either good or bad, success or failure. It's easy to learn from the good experiences. Good results build morale, confidence and the pride of a job well done. Bad results, however, can be more difficult to learn from. Personally accountable people know that even in defeat, they can come away stronger.

For people who practice personal accountability, the process of continuous learning is not painful; it's hopeful. Those who are committed and resilient find no shame in owning the result, even when the result is negative, because they know that there will be a next time.

**As a leader, you play a critical role in helping the team turn their losses into lessons.** Review the strategies that were employed and evaluate how effective they were. Now is the time to brainstorm; if we had it to do over again, what could we do differently to get the win? How could we be more resilient next time?

All too often, people will make a mistake or miss a deadline and never take time to learn from the experience. Continuous learning is the process of taking those experiences and using them to grow and improve our performance in the future. Leaders can facilitate this process by encouraging team members to reflect on their results and make plans for development.



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# In challenging times, great leaders know how to call their teams to greatness.

It doesn't happen by protecting everyone from every problem. And it doesn't happen by telling everyone how easy it's going to be. AE isn't easy.

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**Calling your team to greatness means sharing your vision of success and asking each person to commit, stay resilient, take ownership and continually learn.**

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Now is the time! Take these ideas and use them to get your team geared up for Annual Enrollment. Yes, there will be obstacles. Yes, it's going to be difficult. But we don't need to rely on heroics and we don't need to get burned out by living in crisis mode. Pull together as a team today and you will be positioned for success throughout the AE season this year, and next year, and the year after that.



## Want to learn more?

Reality-Based Leadership is a professional development approach that teaches people how to improve their level of satisfaction at work, boost their value, own their career, and become the kind of leader no organization can afford to lose. Businessolver's certified RBL Consultants can work with you to understand your current situation and customize an engagement strategy to help you ditch the drama, optimize business readiness and drive business results. We are already working with clients to design sessions for their teams, and we'd love to work with you as well.

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