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# ACCOUNTABILITY AS OWNERSHIP

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**W**hat if there was one basic human trait that was the foundation of virtually everything that we achieve in life? One characteristic that creates our results, fosters our learning and growth, keeps us sharp and adaptable, builds healthy relationships, improves our mental and physical health, and positively influences nearly everyone that we associate with?

And what if this one thing, this ground-spring of lasting success in life, was also perhaps the most widely misunderstood concept in our culture today? What if the way that most of us think about and apply this fundamental success concept causes many to live a life of mediocrity, disappointment, and frustration rather than the life we are truly capable of? What if the way that most of us engage this concept actually creates the exact opposite of what we desire in life?

If you're like me, you're an avid reader. I learned early on that "leaders are readers," and one particular area of interest for me has always been the strategies, habits, and behaviors of successful people. While I've lost count of all the books that I've read in this genre, some classics like *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey, as well as more recent works such as *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, stand out to me. In the end, many of these books have positively impacted my success in business, and in life.

Most of the books I've read on this topic identify a set of foundational characteristics and habits that contribute to high achievement. Interestingly, though, many of these works contain different success attributes! While this seemed confusing to me at first, I'm now fine with the variation. The diversity of ideas tells me that there is more than one formula for success in life. That, in and of itself, is encouraging. Over my career, I've applied much of what I learned from these books, and I have benefited greatly.

However, as I have applied the concepts from these books, and developed a few of my own, there is one characteristic that I've found has had by far the greatest impact on my success and my happiness. This one characteristic is common in almost all of the successful people that I've met or studied. It is the one characteristic that is the bedrock of success and achievement. In fact, without it, none of the ideas in all of the books that I've read on self-improvement can deliver on their potential. Yet, this characteristic is also the most frequently misunderstood concept in business and in society today. And this misunderstanding creates the very opposite of what we intend.

I am talking about *personal accountability*, and flipping the way we understand and apply this principle is the mission of this book.

Our experience, working with over one hundred Fortune 1000 companies and tens of thousands of individuals, is that there is a fundamental misperception of what accountability truly is.

Intuitively, most sense that accountability is a good thing, something that leads to better performance and increased results, yet we most often experience accountability as something that is far less than empowering – and in fact is often

disempowering. Too often, accountability is synonymous with consequences – in particular, negative consequences. Virtually everywhere you hear accountability mentioned in society, it is typically affiliated with bad behavior, poor performance, and negative consequences. It is a wonder that anyone would want anything to do with it.

Let me give you an example. Let's say a professional athlete does something egregious. What typically happens is that someone in authority – usually the coach or the commissioner – calls a press conference or releases a statement where they assert that they intend to “hold this person accountable” for the offensive actions. Then they fine, suspend, or fire the athlete. In other words, they create some form of negative consequence.

And this approach to accountability is not just reserved for the famous. We all have experienced something like this at various times in our lives. Most often, when accountability is mentioned or practiced it is really just the application of negative consequences.

The costs of this misunderstanding are significant. If we experience accountability as negative consequences and punishment, then it only makes sense that, on an individual level, we would be smart to avoid it. Yet when we shun accountability, there are significant downsides; we often repeat mistakes, miss opportunities, fail to learn and adapt, and generally underperform relative to our potential. At the organizational level, when leaders use negative consequences to shape behavior, they create unintended collateral damage, and ultimately limit individual and group performance. Leaders with this misguided view of accountability create a culture of unmet milestones, missed opportunities, and poor results. The prices of this mindset include lost productivity, lower quality,

customer dissatisfaction, low morale, high turnover, lower sales, and diminished profits.

Few words in the English language carry the emotional impact that *accountability* does. Simply mentioning the word can create powerful physiological and emotional responses in the hearer. Accountability has undeniable power to create results, and yet for many people, when it's promoted by someone with authority, the word often elicits anxiety and engenders avoidance behaviors. There is a reason for this *accountability anxiety*, and it starts with the widely promulgated meaning of accountability.

The early 2020 version of Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines accountability as (emphasis and underlines are mine):

### ACCOUNTABLE

1. Subject to giving an account: ANSWERABLE ...  
held her accountable for the damage
2. Capable of being explained: EXPLAINABLE ...  
leaving aside variations accountable as printer errors ... – Peter Shaw

Examples of *accountable* in a sentence:

If anything goes wrong, I will hold you personally accountable!

The owner was held accountable for his dog's biting of the child.

Did you notice the hidden assumption evident in each example and definition?

Each one was negative: *damage, errors, goes wrong, dog's biting!* Further, three of the four examples *included the application of negative consequences* to a performer from some unnamed external power or authority. In those examples, one person with authority blames and punishes another person who lacks authority. The authority is active, the person being punished is passive. Accountability as defined above is profoundly asymmetrical.

There were no mentions of the benefits of accountability. No description of personal growth. Nothing about accountability's life-changing power. If you believe the dictionary definitions, you would think that people wanting to take more accountability must first become masochistic. Success, according to *Webster's*, requires punishment!

This traditional view of accountability as punishment creates a power dynamic where authorities seek to assign blame and performers seek to shift it. Accountability in this traditional view is something to be avoided when possible. Further, a person with authority places blame based on the implicit assumption that the performer *intended* to make a mistake or to fall short. What a mess! It's no wonder so many people avoid this view of accountability.

Creating consequences for people when they don't do what you want them to do is not accountability, it's consequence management. Yes, consequences shape behavior but you will never get discretionary effort with negative consequences. You simply get just enough to stop the consequences, *and* it comes with collateral damage, from passive resistance to outright

sabotage. Ultimately, we choose our consequences in life by the choices we make every day.

There is another definition of accountability, one that isn't in the dictionary. It is a definition that many people naturally understand and gravitate toward. In this intuitive understanding, personal accountability isn't about negative consequences for poor performance, it's about taking personal ownership of one's state in life. This view of accountability is the foundation of this book.

We either walk our own personal path toward greater accountability, or we don't. No one else can hold us accountable, only we can hold ourselves accountable. In fact, looking for someone else to hold you accountable may be the most unaccountable thing that you can do.

True accountability is based on the realization that we all have free-will choice. By the way, if you think that free will is an illusion and that it does not exist, you are free to hold that belief! For the rest of us who think that we actually do have choices in life, this realization is earth-shattering. If we believe that we "have to" do things, those things naturally become a burden. When we "have to" do something, we feel trapped, coerced into doing things that others want us to do. Life lived with a have-to mindset can begin to feel like a prison.

As soon as we realize that everything is a choice, the prison walls disappear. When we *choose to do something* rather than *have to*, we have a greater sense of personal control and freedom. Obviously, consequences come with every choice. When you take an action (or avoid taking one), you are also choosing the consequences of that action. It's not that consequences are not a part of accountability, it's just that if you are

accountable, you see them differently. You realize that you choose your consequences in life.

## YOUR CHOICES DETERMINE YOUR LIFE

*“Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning.” “Freedom is what we do with what is done to us.”*

– Jean-Paul Sartre

A few years ago, we asked our 12 Week Year community to share with us their personal experiences with our execution system, and while many of the stories were moving, one especially stood out for us. It was the story of how Barbara Shorerock, a retired real estate agent from Alberta, Canada, decided to take ownership of the toughest challenge in her life. What follows is her story in her own words.

At the beginning of 2017, a friend told me about *The 12 Week Year*, and I borrowed the book from the library, and read it. After 22 years of running a real estate business, and 10 years of running my own company before that, *The 12 Week Year* made sense to me. I was used to structure in my life, and planning, and achieving.

But now I was retired. I was looking ahead at the next five years without a need to make sales or to accomplish things financially. That part of my life was set. I couldn't change it now. Now the question before me was, how was I going to operate going forward?

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I read *The 12 Week Year* with that in mind. With aspirations for personal things – fitness and health, family, friends, and community – I thought, “I can make that happen.” My first 12 weeks were going to be really exciting!

That feeling changed quickly. By the end of February, I learned that I had cancer. By the end of March, at the end of the first 12 weeks, I knew that it was metastatic breast cancer, having already spread to lung and liver, and it was serious.

After the initial shock wore off, I realized that I still had choice about how I would fight my battle and live out the rest of my life, not knowing if that would be a few months, or if I’m fortunate, a number of years.

My new life was all about chemotherapy. Every week, it was up to the chemo clinic, get my chemo injections. Before I even had a chance to implement my “be a better friend” program, I had to call upon my friends and my daughter to drive me around every week. To feed me. To care for me.

After chemo, my choice was to get stronger.

I started up some of the things that I had left behind, such as volunteering for English as a Second Language, volunteering at the theater. I also started walking again, with a goal that by the end of the year I would be able to walk for 60 minutes. My first walk after all the antibiotics was to the end of the block and back.

Other things, like spending time with family, being a better friend, started up again.

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It really helped with my life to think about what was in front of me, the choices I still had available to me to do the things that are important to me. The choice to not give into fear of loss, or a lack of time. I can't now, with my new reality, think about a year. But I can think about 12 weeks. I have that choice.

There were two questions that motivated me: "What if?" and "How might I?" Because I was looking forward. I looked at my one-year vision and then put into effect what I can do in the next 12 weeks. That's easy.

It gives my days focus. When I open my day planner and look at a week at a glance and see what's there, I look at where the blank spaces are. There have been times in the last year where there were no blank spaces. Now, I actually have whole days where I can decide what to do with them. I have my goals, and I look at how I fit those in. It gives my days structure, and it gives me focus and purpose.

In spite of the discouraging diagnosis, Barbara never lost sight of the fact that she still had a choice about how to live her life. A little more than a year ago, Barbara's daughter contacted us to let us know that she had passed. When, like Barbara, we look at the choices that are available to us rather than the choices that are not, we retain the freedom to live a life of intentional purpose and fulfillment.

Coming at life from "choose to" rather than "have to" gives you the only control that you have in life. The quality of your

choices determines the quality of your life. As Barbara bravely testifies, we are free to choose in all circumstances.

When my youngest (Emma) was 7 or 8, my wife, Judy, and I began confronting her with her freedom to choose for herself, and to consider the consequences of her choices. Early on, we would have to “coach” her through the process of identifying the consequences.

When Emma would ask to do something that we felt was not likely to turn out well, we would ask her, “Emma, if you do that, what do you think will happen?” This question was intended to help her learn to connect her choices with their likely consequences (natural or applied). Next, we would ask her, “Is there anything else you could do?” And then lastly, “What do you think will happen if you make that choice instead?”

In the end, even at 7, most of the time Emma would make the productive choice. Learning to make choices by weighing the short- and longer-term consequences at a young age is a life skill that can change everything.

Regardless of how you’ve experienced it, accountability is not consequences, it’s *ownership*. At the heart of accountability is free-will choice. You always, always, always have choice. That doesn’t mean you will always like the choices available to you, but you have choice.

Our definition of accountability *as* ownership first appeared in our book *The 12 Week Year*, and was perhaps an even more disruptive insight than our view that your year should be only 12 weeks long. Our insight, which has changed the lives of so many of our readers and clients, was that the power of true accountability lies entirely in our freedom of choice.

There have been others before us who have talked about accountability as choice and have hinted at this notion of accountability as ownership. Peter Koestenbaum and Peter Block, in their profound book *Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Insight to the Real World*, establish the conflict between management and the individuals they lead when it comes to who is the author of accountability.

For us, what makes our take unique is that the insights that we have had regarding personal accountability have arisen directly out of the crucible of working with others so that they can tap into their capabilities in life. In helping our clients, we have found some basic tools and approaches that cut through the fog of what you control and what you don't control, creating immense freedom along the way.

Relationships have been saved. Businesses have been transformed. Careers have been resurrected, and the world has been changed by the working model of accountability that we have built in partnership with our clients. In short, accountability is a much more powerful tool than most people realize.

In the course of our work, we have fleshed out a working model of accountability that allows our clients to take ownership of their thinking and actions in such a way that they can accomplish things that they had stopped trying to do – believing that they were just not good enough, diligent enough, or worthy enough to accomplish before. We have helped people to see their degrees of freedom and then to act on them.

In spite of the common notions about accountability, when we ran a promotion for voluntary accountability groups recently, we had the program fill up faster than any other promotion before or since. It seems that many people instinctively

know that there *is* life-changing power in becoming more accountable, regardless of the negative connotations of the word. Accountability isn't an outside-in process where others force you to be accountable – it is an inside job, a personal stance in life that changes everything!

Before you start to think that this is just another book that will focus on how leaders can create more accountability in their teams, I want to be clear. A true understanding of accountability is that it is a choice and cannot be forced. In its purest form, accountability is simply taking ownership of one's actions and results.

Accountability is the foundation of lasting individual success. It enables people to reach their most important personal goals and objectives, and in the long run become more influential, more successful, and more fulfilled.

A victim allows his success to be limited by external circumstances, people, or events. As long as we continue to be victims of our circumstances, we will experience life as a struggle, and other people as a threat. Accountability, on the other hand, allows you to gain control of your life, to shape your destiny, to fulfill your potential. Accountability is not about blaming yourself, or a way to enable punishment of others. It is simply a stance in life where one acknowledges one's role in outcomes.

Accountability is not concerned with fault but, rather, what it takes to create better results. Until we and our organizations accept ownership of our actions, and our outcomes, we will be helpless to change or improve the results. Once we accept that our actions have an impact on the outcome, then, and only then, are we truly empowered to create the results we desire. Some of the more powerful benefits of accountability are highlighted in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 The Benefits of Accountability**

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- *Healthy relationships.* Accountable relationships lift both people.
  - *Better health.* Less stress and more control lead to greater well-being.
  - *Confidence in abilities.* Track record builds an assuredness to handle what comes up.
  - *Better results.* Accountability leads to better execution of the high-value actions.
  - *Growth.* Accountable people push past their comfort zone more frequently.
  - *Learning.* Confronting what isn't working creates learning about what does work.
  - *Respect.* Results, commitment, and integrity are all hallmarks of accountability.
  - *Sustained career success.* High personal effectiveness leads to more options.
  - *Ability to overcome setbacks.* Accountable people aren't for long victims of circumstance.
  - *Being in demand/More Opportunities.* People want you on their projects, initiatives, and teams.
  - *Better finances.* Accountability in one area fosters accountability in others.
  - *Greater self-assurance and confidence.* Accountable people are high in self-efficacy.
  - *More control in life.* Empowered people say no to things that don't fit.
  - *More influence.* Respect leads to a platform to influence others.
  - *Better control of time use.* Fewer messes to clean up – don't engage in low-value work.
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When we acknowledge our accountability, our focus shifts from defending our actions to learning from them. *Failures* simply become feedback in an ongoing process of becoming excellent. Unfavorable circumstances and uncooperative people don't prohibit us from reaching our goals. We stand in a different way, thereby creating different results.

Accountability is a life stance based on the understanding that you don't control circumstances and events, but you do control how you respond to them. Accountability begins with the realization that the quality of your choices determines the quality of your life.

When you view accountability as choice, as ownership, I think it is probably *the* most empowering concept to live your best life. Accountability holds the keys to unlocking most everything you want in life, from career success to income and wealth, good health, strong relationships, confidence, and personal fulfillment. Accountability doesn't guarantee these things, but it does give you your best chance at achieving them.

In our work with thousands of top performers and others pursuing greatness, we've seen time and time again how critical accountability is to success. If there is one characteristic that is a game changer, it's accountability.

In this book, we outline the key tenets of true accountability. The first half of the book focuses on individual accountability. This creates a health foundation for growth and success. In these chapters, we demystify the concept with real-life examples that will help you more fully grasp accountability and its impact. The second half of the book focuses on applying accountability as a leader. Whether you are a leader at work, in your community or place of worship, or in your home, you will discover how

much of what you have learned about accountability is actually causing issues and inhibiting performance. You will learn a better way of applying accountability and why you will want to discard the practice of “holding” people accountable.

Setbacks and challenges are part of life. The key to success and happiness is how you handle the failures – and the victories. Armed with the truth about accountability, you will be better enabled to pursue opportunities as they arise and to overcome the inevitable setbacks. Ultimately, you will be empowered to achieve what you are truly capable of in life.

Greatness is a natural byproduct of accountability and cannot be attained, or sustained, without it. All truly successful people are accountable long before anyone recognizes their accomplishments. Accountability, more than any other personal character trait, ensures that you will live the best life possible in the circumstances that you face.

