

# Accountable Communication

Make clear commitments without wiggle room, and you will empower yourself and others.

by Joshua Freedman

**Can you hold someone accountable?** Some people talk about accountability as a system for making sure people do what we want them to do. In other words, a way of creating obedience – the person in power shapes behavior through rewards and punishments. In this system, the “boss” sets expectations, and the “inferior” person complies. The boss “holds people accountable” by punishing those who disobey. While the inferior may follow through, they really do it out of fear or greed – without the boss and his rewards or punishments, the action would not occur. So, the inferior only does the work when he might get caught – this is obedience, not accountability.

**So what’s real accountability?** Accountability means accepting responsibility for the outcome of your choices. It means taking ownership of your life – the successes and the failures. Under this definition, I can not make someone else accountable, all I can do is set a context for people to become accountable. If I take responsibility for someone else’s life, I actually take away his accountability.

If accountability means “owning my results” (another way of saying, “accepting responsibility for the outcomes of my choices”) then what’s the opposite? Non-accountability means giving up ownership, or even forcing others to take ownership of my results. It means being a victim. Think of a non-accountable person in a workplace – can you see how they evade responsibility for

failures AND for successes? They’re along for the ride. So the question of accountability is simple: Do you want to ride along in your life, or drive?

If I am not choosing to be accountable, what am I choosing? If I “ride along,” am I part of the problem instead of part of the solution? Am I a “slacker?” A “taker?” A “victim?” Sometimes I am all of these. Sometimes I choose to take a break from the hard work of actually leading my life. Ironically I’m most likely to do that at home – in the place I care most about modeling my best self. One reason it’s easy for me to be less accountable at home is that my wife is so strong, capable, and nurturing. I know she’ll forgive me, and I take advantage of that by doing less than my best. It’s awfully seductive sometimes to stay in that passive, non-accountable role.

When I was teaching, it was a constant struggle to increase accountability for some students. Some kids consistently failed to do their best work, and I told them I was not satisfied with that performance. At the same time, I know that sometimes I read student homework thoroughly, and sometimes I barely looked at it. The result

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was that I was creating a context of inconsistent accountability – not only was I modeling poorly, I was making the choice to leave “wobble room” or ambiguity. I can see now that if I wanted my students to be more accountable, I had to be more accountable.

In my work with managers, leaders, teachers, and parents, I see this dynamic over and over. We want people to behave a certain way, and we confuse obedience and accountability. Real accountability takes a great deal of effort, so we attempt to mandate it, and the results are mediocre. When it’s something people “should do,” those who don’t like accountability dig in their heels and resist – the more it’s a “have to,” the more they resist! On the other hand, if the resisters can see that accountable people have more inner power, learning, joy, and fulfillment, perhaps they’ll be more likely to join?

If we want better results, we become doubly accountable. We find the loopholes and “wobble room” we’re leaving, and do the hard work to close those gaps. Then we do the even harder work of following through on every single promise that we make. Against that backdrop, others’ lack of accountability becomes vivid and uncomfortable, and they develop an inner motivation to grow.

Wobble room is the gray area we leave when we don’t say what we really mean because we are not committed to total clarity. In my own interactions, I leave wobble room for a variety of reasons. If I take out the wobble room – and use accountable communication – I have to make stronger commitments. There are some significant costs to getting to that level of clarity:

- Clarity takes time: In the rush of day-to-day life, who has time to slow down and be specific?
- Clarity might mean more work: For example, perhaps Patty, my wife, is asking me to help get ready for a party. I suspect she wants a lot of work from me, so I evade a specific commitment – I don’t say exactly what I will

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do, by when; instead I work a bit then hide for awhile. In consultant-speak, I have not committed to specific deliverables.

- Clarity can mean loss of face: If I make a specific commitment and don’t follow through, it will be evident that I failed.
- Seeking clarity can imply a lack of trust: When you ask questions about “what exactly am I committing to?” and “What if it doesn’t go as planned?” people begin to call you “lawyer-ish.” They might even say, “It will just work out, don’t you trust me?”
- Asking for specific commitment appears aggressive: Especially for people conditioned to “be nice,” it can be extremely uncomfortable to push someone to make a clear commitment.
- An ambiguous agreement might lead to a “better deal”: If we pin one another down to specifics, there’s no way I am going to get more than I’ve asked for, but if it’s open, I could be pleasantly surprised.

Given all these problems with creating accountability, why would I do it? Just reading my own list I’m feeling threatened by the apparent conflict in this accountable communication! First, it’s important to see that many of those potential negatives are simply assumptions. For all I know, the other person could welcome accountable communication as a breath of fresh air! The certain negatives of non-accountability should have more weight than the potential negatives of

my assumptions. More importantly, by practicing accountable communication I will empower myself and empower others.

So, assuming you see that the benefits outweigh the costs, here are four “checkpoints” to watch in creating accountable communication:

1. **Am I hiding?** (*Don't miss the chance!*)
2. **Am I hedging?** (*Don't "try"!*)
3. **Am I “making it ok”?** (*Don't “rescue”!*)
4. **Am I supporting learning?** (*Don't oversimplify!*)

“**Am I hiding?**” is a reminder to push yourself and others to identify the specific details of the commitment – often called “rules of engagement,” “deliverables,” or “conditions of satisfaction.” In practice, this might sound like, “I am not 100% clear on what you want me to agree to – let’s talk through the specifics.” Or, “Let me repeat back what I hear you asking.” The words you use are not so important as your intention to be clear. Sometimes people will be rude or tactless in the name of clarity, “I’m just being direct,” they’ll say to themselves. Most often, this kind of behavior is just another way of hiding. Some people hide from clarity through shyness, some people hide through roughness, neither works. True clarity is vivid and calm – like a cool wind on a hot day, like a silver bell ringing in the gloaming, like a child’s kiss on your cheek. When you experience it, you know. If you choose to stop hiding, you

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will experience clarity more often.

“**Am I hedging?**” asks you to either make a commitment or not – there is not middle ground to clear commitment. If you are not ready to commit, say, “Right now, my answer is no,” or “I will think about it,” or “I’d like to discuss this again in 24 hours.” Most people say, “I’ll try,” when they mean, “No, but I don’t want to let you down,” or “This is a low priority for me.” If you say, “I’ll try,” it leaves wiggle room a mile wide. If you intend to leave wiggle room, then saying, “I’ll try” is effective. You just have to be careful because it’s totally ambiguous; you might mean, “I’m going to commit in a moment,” or you might mean, “Not in a hundred years!” – how are other people going to know? They’ll make assumptions about what you mean by, “try,” you’ll make assumptions about what they heard, and you will have a muddle.

“**Am I “making it ok”?**” If you are “making it ok” when someone fails in their commitment, you are reducing accountability. If that’s what you intend to do, perhaps because you know they’re just learning, or having a difficult time, then “making it ok” is fine. Otherwise, tell them you are not satisfied and you ask for redress. When they give an excuse, you empathically listen and kindly, firmly negotiate a new agreement. This is a foreign language to many people, it seems uncomfortable and “not nice” to confront someone with their failure to follow through. On the other hand, is it “nice,” to let someone break their word to you and then lie about your real feelings about that? Discomfort is not bad! Discomfort and remorse are important teachers, and when you take those away from people because you don’t like “making them uncomfortable,” you take away their learning. At the same time, remember that people don’t learn under threat – so you have to carefully watch how much you push people. The balance is the point of the last checkpoint.

“**Am I supporting learning?**” is an essential reminder about the real purpose of accountability – growing. And forgiveness is an essential nutrient for growth. Every moment, we each

have the chance to practice our skills and get better – the goal is to be conscious and intentional, not to be perfect. I make mistakes, you make mistakes, and others do to. Life is complicated, events occur that we could not predict, and caring people shift their priorities to meet the changing landscape. Sometimes you consciously need to leave wiggle room so people can save face, sometimes you consciously break one of the other three rules. The point is to do this intentionally rather than habitually. You can choose to be clear and accountable as well as flexible, generous, and caring! Just keep practicing.

If you support your own learning, and support others to keep learning, you will automatically increase this deep, meaningful inner accountability. Instead of motivating by punishment, motivate by curiosity. Motivate yourself and others by inspiring commitment to something worth learning, worth learning to do with 100% of your capacity and greatness. This kind of accountability will increase joy, commitment, fun, personal power, and it's infectious! As you practice internal accountability and clear communication, you become an inspiration to others to do the same, and together you create the best possible results.

#### About the Author

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