

## Accountability

When we are accountable to something or someone outside of ourselves, our actions have a greater chance of taking place than when we are not accountable. Webster's Dictionary defines the word "accountable" as being "subject to giving an account: answerable; capable of being accounted for: explainable; held responsible."

We may have many people who hold us accountable for actions in our lives. For example, a boss may require a monthly business report from us, which he or she will ask for if it doesn't arrive on time. If you are studying, your lecturer may remove points for every day that your assignment is late. The taxation department may issue a fine if taxes are not dealt with fairly and on time. There are many forms of accountability for the mundane and everyday activities that characterize many of our lives. BUT, who keeps us accountable for the essential, the life-changing, the profound and the deeply important? Who keeps us accountable for the changes in behavior that will reap rewards years from now? We hold ourselves accountable!

### Doing What You Say and Saying What You Mean

Doing what you say you are going to do is incredibly powerful. It builds a sense of achievement and builds trust in those around you. don Miguel Ruiz describes it in this way:

*"Being impeccable with your word is the correct use of your energy; it means to use your energy in the direction of truth and love for yourself. If you make an agreement with yourself to be impeccable with your word, just with that intention, the truth will manifest itself through you and clean all the emotional poison that exists within you."* Don Miguel Ruiz, 20

Being impeccable with your word involves thinking carefully before we make commitments and making sure that we only commit to things that support our values. This is not typical behavior for human beings. It is tempting to commit to doing something without thinking and to then forget about it. We generally have an unwritten agreement with others to let each other go on what we do and say. This is often because we enter into commitments too quickly, without really thinking or being present in the moment. If we think carefully about what we want

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in life and only commit to those things that support our values then we will find it easy to adhere to what we say.

There is a strong connection between accountability and self-trust. When we are impeccable with our word and hold ourselves true to this then we feel a greater sense of self-trust. Each time we hold ourselves accountable we also empower ourselves and this converts into confidence. With each step our word is strong, our impact stronger and our confidence growing all the time.

## Self Application

If we stop and think about accountability in our life for a moment, it can be a very interesting reflective moment. In what areas of our life do we hold ourselves accountable? Every moment of our day requires us to be accountable, to ourselves. We often associate accountability to others, how we can hold someone accountable to achieve what we need. If we changed this perception to one of how can we hold ourselves to be accountable for an outcome then we empower ourselves. We play a powerful role in everything that we are part of.

## Avoiding Accountability

Avoiding accountability is like avoiding living – it's not possible. Avoiding being accountable is like handing all of our power over to someone else and then feeling fine about doing it. We never feel 'fine' about doing this. It eventually has ramifications – anger, resentment, feeling left out, feeling disempowered. We may initially feel that avoiding accountability or giving it to someone else is an easier way of removing a problem but it is really just a short term outlook. We may ask our coach to hold us accountable but we don't ask them to become accountable for our life. Imagine the image of someone stepping literally into your shoes and taking over your life. Walking down the street as you, going to work as you, feeling the same way as you. Just the very nature of this takes away our uniqueness, our identity – who we are.

So accountability is about being true to who we want to be and who we are. It is part of each of us. It strengthens each of us. It reminds each of us of our uniqueness and our qualities. It reminds each of us of our purpose in life.

## Coaching Application

As a coach, you are a partner in your clients' success. One of the ways you may be able to help them to achieve that success is by holding them accountable for their actions. Most clients will come into coaching wanting to move forward and achieve goals. In a business or executive coaching environment, you may be employed specifically to assist someone to meet a particular set of goals. Accountability is the delicate act of supporting the client to do the things they said that they would do.

## The Nature of Commitments

Before you can hold a client accountable for their commitments, it is worth considering the nature of behavioural change. In most advanced western countries at the moment, books on health and diet are dominating the bestseller lists at the same time that these countries are experiencing dramatic increases in obesity and so-called "lifestyle diseases". If change were easy, all the people who read these books would change their behaviour. Clearly, "knowledge" is not enough! There is a wide gulf between actually knowing that you would benefit from doing something and making it an ongoing part of your life.

In reviewing research on the nature of effective goal setting and achievement in coaching, Marshall and Kelly Goldsmith came up with six significant factors. Each of these factors has implications for the way coaches work with their clients, the ways they support them to set effective goals and the ways that they hold clients accountable for their commitments. These are:

### Factor 1: Ownership

The Goldsmiths found that when the commitment to change comes from "inside" the person, there is an increase in the likelihood that clients will achieve their goals. Clients, who genuinely want to change, and see coaching as a vehicle to support this commitment rather than something that could make the change for them, are more likely to succeed.

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## Implications for Coaching

It is important to challenge the reasons why a client has taken up coaching before you begin asking for commitments from the client. If the client is coming to coaching because it is on offer in their company and they think they might give it a try, then they are unlikely to succeed in their commitments. The coach may be able to work with the client to better understand and appreciate coaching, but unless they get the necessary self-determination from the client, he or she will be unlikely to meet their early commitments and will more than likely drop out of coaching. “Coaches and companies that have the greatest success in helping leaders achieve long-term change have learned a great lesson – don’t work with leaders who don’t “buy-in” to the process”. (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2000) This adage is true not just for leaders but also for all coaching clients across all of the niche areas.

Similarly, if a client comes to coaching with a set of goals it is worth exploring where the goals came from before holding a client accountable for them. If the client is having these goals imposed on them, if they don’t understand or agree with them, then no amount of accountability is going to help them achieve these goals. Commitment to change needs to come from a good place. Having to do something because your boss tells you to, or because you believe it is expected of you, or because you think it is the “right thing to do” will not compel you forward. Some initial work on exploring a client’s values and determining what they really want from the coaching process will increase the likelihood of success.

## Factor 2: Time

The Goldsmiths found that people have a natural tendency to underestimate the time it will take to achieve change. This can lead to frustration that the goal is taking so long, or even despair that achieving the goal might not be worth it. The Goldsmiths also talk about an “optimism bias’ amongst high achieving individuals, where they want to believe they have achieved a goal when they have really only made a few strides in the right direction, “Harried executives often want to “check the box” and assume that once they understand what to do – and communicate this understanding to others – their problems are solved. If only the world were this simple.” (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2000)

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## Implications for Coaching

A coach should never rush a client towards their goals. Coaching should be a positive, not a negative experience. If a client says that they will achieve X by June and June arrives and they have not completed it, a skilled coach should not be surprised or disappointed. Knowing what we know about the tendency to underestimate the time it takes to achieve change, a coach should be prepared for this eventuality with some strategies to move forward. These can include:

- Acknowledging the steps that the client has made so far
- Enthusing the client into taking just one more step forward
- Reframing the client's perspective from one of failure to one of success
- Exploring any barriers to the client achieving their goals,
- Reminding a client of the big picture and the many wonderful things that will flow into their lives from achieving the change.

## Factor 3: Difficulty

This is similar to factor 2. Clients often underestimate how difficult it will be to change. They make the assumption that because they understand what they need to do, that doing it should be easy. However, a behaviour that has been built up over 50 years is not going to change just because the client identifies it and wants to change. If this were the case, the countries where dieting books are sold by the millions would have fit and healthy citizens. Real change requires real work.

Change looks easy from the outside. An achievement that is simple for one person can be incredibly difficult for another because every human being is different. Take active listening, for example. People with high levels of empathy and a fascination with other people may read about the concept of "active listening" once and be able to practice it almost immediately. However, a busy executive who makes decisions all day and is called on for their opinion constantly might find it incredibly difficult to simply stop talking and tune in to the other person. This person is not bad or wrong; they just have more difficulty reaching this achievement than another person.

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## Implications for Coaching

When we are enthusing our clients into action, we need to be mindful that we don't lead them to believe that change will be easy. There is a world of difference between "I know you can do this" and "this will be easy". By acknowledging the size of the challenge at the beginning of the coaching process and all the way through it, the client can be prepared when inevitable challenges arise.

Coaches also need to be respectful of every client's individual learning journey. We need to ensure that a client is in action, but it is up to the client to determine how much action is enough. One of the greatest challenges of coaching is really listening to a client to ensure that we don't miss opportunities to acknowledge subtle but deeply significant moments of growth.

## Factor 4: Distractions

At the time that a client sets a goal or makes a commitment to change, their future is a big blank canvas. The sales target that they have set themselves or the fitness regime that they have committed to are the only challenges on the horizon. But guess what? Storms can crop up from nowhere. New paths can reveal themselves. Perhaps, despite their best efforts, the client will get sick, or lose a major account, or win a bigger account than they ever imagined! The research on goal setting indicates that clients almost always underestimate the distractions and competing goals that will inevitably crop up.

## Implications for Coaching

Knowing that distractions are bound to arise, coaches can support clients to prepare for them. They can encourage a client to build-in time buffers to their goals that they might not otherwise do unprompted. They can talk a client through some "scenario planning" where they explore a series of "what ifs" to ensure that they are ready for a range of eventualities. When the distractions pass, the coach is also in a unique position to gently reengage the client with their long-term goals so that the distraction remains simply a distraction, and not a permanent deterrent or opportunity to give up.

## Factor 5: Rewards

Sometimes goal-setters can become despondent that success in one area doesn't bring the immediate rewards that they desire. For example, a client who works on his or her communication skills may find it frustrating that this change is not immediately recognised by those around them. A business leader who builds their skills through coaching and then doesn't get an immediate promotion may feel disappointed.

There is considerable research indicating that companies that invest in leadership coaching have greater long-term profits. However, there is no research to indicate that companies that employ coaches have greater short-term profits. The change process almost always leads to long-term success rather than short-term success.

If it were possible to learn how to be more focussed, to be aligned with your values and to gain more joy from achievements through a short course, then it would be the most popular course in the world. If it were possible to learn how to communicate in a way that sustains and builds those around you to achieve greater business success from a book, it would be a bestseller. These "transformational" skills are notoriously difficult to develop and sustain. (Moreton, 2007) The rapid development of coaching as a field is, in part, due to its effectiveness in supporting clients to tackle these difficult but incredibly powerful skills.

## Implications for Coaching

Some explanation about the benefits and limitations of coaching can be of great use before the client engages in the coaching process. Coaching is not a quick fix. Coaching is a long-term investment in an individual's development. It works best in the areas that are the hardest for people to develop through other means.

Coaches may also need to consider the "minimum time" they are willing to work with a client. If clients want to tackle significant behaviours built up over time that will create long-term benefits, then they are not going to be able to do this in three weeks. Many coaches insist on a minimum period of 3 months for coaching, or they offer a discount for the client signing up for 3 to 6 months. If you are willing to work for a smaller period than this, make sure the client is clear about what is likely to be achieved in this short period so that they don't begin with unrealistic expectations.

## Factor 6: Maintenance

Often coaching clients find making a change easy but maintaining it hard. “Once a goal setter has put in all of the effort to achieve a goal, it can be tough to face the reality of maintaining changed behaviour.” (Goldsmith & Goldsmith) You may be familiar with the concept of “yo-yo dieting” where an overweight person goes on a dramatic weight reduction diet and loses large amounts of weight, only to find that they put even more weight back on because they can’t maintain the restricted diet they set for themselves. They then look for another short-term diet to lose weight again. Each time they go back and forth (like a yo-yo) their confidence diminishes and they do enormous damage to their bodies.

The “yo-yo effect” can occur in many different types of goals. A client aiming for a one-off return or “state” rather than embarking on a “lifelong journey” may move at a pace that they can’t maintain. Once they achieve their short-term goal, they can become overwhelmed at the thought of all the hard work that they will have to do to remain at that fast pace.

## Implications for Coaching

There are a number of strategies that a coach can employ to ensure that they don’t unwittingly support the “yo-yo effect” in their clients. Firstly, in their discussions with the client, they need to frame the client’s development as a “process” or “journey” rather than a destination. Secondly, they need to acknowledge the small steps along the way in order to encourage an attitude of gratitude and celebration in the client. Finally, they need to give the client feedback if they think the client is moving at an unsustainable rate.

## Managing Accountability

Managing accountability is a complex thing and varies enormously from client to client. Holding a client accountable for their commitments will only work if this is what the client wants. Clients should be free to talk through issues without having to make firm commitments before they are ready. Beware of clients committing to short term goals because this is what they think you expect.

Talk to your client about what they expect from you with regard to accountability. Make sure that the language they use to make commitments is clear to both parties and that they feel supported. Questions you could ask include:

- “are you ready to make a commitment to that goal?”
- “can I check with you next time on how you went with that?”
- “would you like me to hold you accountable for that goal?”

Ask them about their past history of success. What goals have they achieved in the past? How did they do this? What accountability did they have? What accountability may have been helpful at the time?

## A Gentle Art

Accountability is one of the most complex aspects of coaching. Reminding a client of a goal or commitment in a way that doesn't judge or control is challenging to manage and takes practice. Helping a client discern what might be holding them back from reaching their dreams takes a high level of trust between coach and client.

Accountability needs to be carefully balanced with encouragement, enthusing and acknowledging. It needs to come from an understanding of how challenging real change and achievement can be. It also needs to come from an absolute belief in the power of coaching to enact real change. If the coach believes that the goal is attainable then this will flow on to the client. The client will feel the energy from the coach and be compelled to move forward.

## Reflection

1. Do you hold yourself accountable for the things you said you would do? How can you improve this area of your life?
2. In what areas of your life are you held accountable? How does this work for you?
3. What are some areas of your life that you have struggled to make a change in, despite wanting to do so?
4. What are some ways that a coach can encourage clients to keep commitments?
5. How can understand the nature of achievement help a coach support clients?