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# Accountability: Empowering you and shaping your practice

*Looking at a problem in a different way can produce positive changes.*

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“I wish that client would stop calling me all the time! What does he think, he’s the only client I have?”

“The court set the hearing for the wrong date! How am I going to take that depo it took me so long to set?”

“Why is this depo taking so long? I wish my opposing counsel had prepared a little better.”

“I can’t believe how inept that new associate is; I guess I’ll be spending another weekend working!”

Does this sound like you? Are you sometimes struck by how out of control you feel in your own practice? From the courts, which have a mind (and an agenda) all their own, to opposing counsel, who seem to go out of their way to make your life difficult, to clients, who seem to have no concept that you might want or need to do something other than work on their case or listen to their complaints, much of practicing law can feel completely out of your control.

And the truth is that much of it is. You have no control over the courts, or opposing counsel, or your clients, or even, to

a large extent, your own support staff. But there is a huge portion of your practice that is under your control. And recognizing what is within your control and being accountable for the choices that you have made will actually empower you in your practice and give you a renewed sense of control over your own life.

## What is accountability?

I am sure you have heard the word and perhaps you have a sense of what it means. In this article, I will define it this way: Accountability is the ability to account for the choices you have made or are making. It is a simple concept and very powerful. Let’s look at how it works.

Imagine that you are on your way to a deposition and there is a traffic accident. You get stuck on the freeway for 15 minutes and you are late for the depo. When you arrive and opposing counsel asks why you are late, what do you say? If you are like most people, you will likely say, “There was a traffic accident and it made me late.”

*Accountability* is the belief that an individual’s actions (or inactions) are the major determining factors for their success or lack thereof. Once you recognize

this, choice becomes your greatest tool for making decisions and influencing outcomes and results. The concept of accountability will allow you to stop pointing at external factors and begin to take responsibility for your own actions. This will in turn allow you to see how your actions affect your results. Then you will learn to change your actions to get the results you desire.

There are reasons people look to outside circumstances to explain their results. These include gaining sympathy, avoiding blame and saving face. But consider this – if you truly believe it is the traffic’s fault that you were late for the depo, what can you do to ensure that you are not late for another depo? The most you can do is hope for lighter traffic. But that is something that is completely outside of your control.

If you blame the traffic, you do have an excuse that most people will accept. But you do not have the power to change anything; you are still being controlled by the traffic. What if you find that you are often late for important meetings? What if you really would like to be on time? Looking to the traffic as the *reason* you are late will not help you. At the point



where you decide to change, to take control of your results, you must always ask, "What did I do to get here?" And often it is uncomfortable because we are not trained to do this. For the most part, we live in a finger-pointing society. We are trained to find reasons and excuses for our behavior so others will not be angry with us or see us as imperfect and so we don't have to correct our mistakes. Being accountable means we have to admit we made a mistake, assume some risk and be willing to fix our mistakes.

So why be accountable? In short, because to make any kind of change, you must see what *you* have done to create the situation. "Our lives are the results of our choices. To blame and accuse other people, the environment, or other extrinsic factors is to choose to empower those things to control us." (First Things First, Stephen Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1994, p. 70.)

But when you look at yourself for what was created, you are empowered to make a change in your behavior and ultimately, your results. There are other pay-offs for accountability:

- You learn from your mistakes. In this way you are not destined to repeat them. If you discover that you leave at the last minute each day, just this discovery may be enough to allow you to make a different choice.
- You begin to focus on finding the solution, rather than focusing on the problem. If you are looking at the traffic delay, you are focusing on the problem. If you are asking, "What could I do differently," you are focusing on the solution.
- You get the results you want. Again, looking at what you can do to be on time even when there is an accident will allow you to create that result.
- Others will trust you more. You probably know that keeping your agreement builds trust. But being honest when you don't keep your agreements also builds trust. It teaches people that being on time, or keeping other agreements, is important to you.
- You feel better about yourself. Not only is accountability empowering, but you will

feel better knowing that you are being honest with yourself about your part in events and finding that you have much more control than you thought. Now that you have seen the benefits of accountability, here is a model to use as you begin to practice accountability.

### The Accountability Model

Even if you are not verbally accountable to opposing counsel or your client or the court, get in the habit of being accountable to yourself.

- You see the result; e.g., I was late for this meeting. This is not a result you want, and you do not want to repeat it in the future.
- Ask yourself, "Why was I late?" If the answer is something that involves a person or event outside yourself, you know you are in a blaming mode. When you notice you are blaming others, this is a great indication that you are not being accountable. So ask, "What choice did I make that I got this result?" Some situations will be more challenging than others. Let's go back to the traffic accident illustration above. Perhaps you leave at the same time every day. You feel that you leave yourself plenty of time to arrive to work on time. This leads you to believe that this unanticipated event was unavoidable and not about you. To really learn though and make a change, you must be willing to look deep enough to see where your involvement was. In the end you will likely say, "I did not leave in time to deal with an accident if it arose."
- The next question to ask yourself is, "What did I learn?" Perhaps you learned that each morning you leave at the last possible minute. Perhaps you learned that you leave in enough time to make it if nothing comes up.
- Another helpful question then, will be, "Is this a pattern in my life?" "Do I leave at the last minute for other events?" "For all events?" "For which events?" Looking for patterns will help you make the most significant change.
- Then you take the learning, and you decide what to do moving forward.

Maybe you are okay with the way you do it. You are rarely late and you choose to keep leaving when you do. This is fine. You are being accountable for your choice to leave at a particular time knowing you may be late if there is an accident. But you may also find you typically wait until the last minute to leave for things that are important to you. Now you can make a new choice. And this is the most important part – taking committed action. What will you do as a new practice? You may decide to leave five minutes early everywhere you go for a week and see what happens. You may decide to leave 15 minutes early for things you deem high priority. Whatever you choose, have it be an action you can commit to and keep doing it and see what changes.

### Conclusion

Accountability assists us in becoming aware of what we are doing that gets in the way of what we want. It assists us in discovering repetitive patterns that stop us from getting what we want. By contrast, blame focuses on others and outside circumstances and prevents us from looking at what we can control – ourselves and our actions and choices. Accountability is about curiosity and discovery and true responsibility.

When accountability is prevalent in a firm, results are more positive because people do not get stuck in the past, explaining why something did not work. They are always looking forward, asking, "What more can I do to get the results I want?" Try it yourself and then teach it as a tool at your firm. It will produce a significant change in your results.

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