

Ali:

Hi, everybody this is Ali, and I'm here with my colleague, Virginia.

Virginia:

Hi.

Ali:

We're here to talk about accountability and why it's so hard, or why it can be so hard.

Virginia:

Accountability is a word that has a lot of different meanings, and I see people using it in a lot of different contexts. So the way that I think we're gonna explore it today, also, is not the full definition of the word at all, um, but I think, in a lot of ways, when we talk about accountability in coaching but also accountability at work and in our relationships, there's a form of accountability that I think people maybe, um, often don't see, uh, to their benefit. Um, and- and that's part of what I want to discuss about why it might be hard.

Ali:

Yeah, cool.

Virginia:

When I first started thinking about accountability, it came from, you know, the perspective of, How do we really build trust in relationships with people who rely on us and also build trust and relationship with self? There's a really great framing by someone who used to be a coach at Reboot, um, Chad Dickerson. He defined this, uh, part of, you know, the strong back of leadership as, you know, building accountability. How do I build accountability, given the challenges I'm tackling?

And this is a question that I often ask, uh, clients. And more often than not, um, immediately, the- the brain makes meaning of accountability from the stance of, "Oh, well, I have accountability with the board," right? There's an immediate connection to the board, and I have to explore thinking about accountability in a much more expansive light, because we do have, you know... Founders do have a fiduciary accountability, responsibility to the people who are helping them build the company, but with our clients, we can ask what forms of accountability help an individual as they progress through a challenge that's in front of them. And that's a much broader definition and a much more empowering definition than someone who is, um, thinking about accountability from a more, um, perhaps justice mindset or even punitive mindset.

Ali:

Mm-hmm.

Virginia:

So there's a question about where... (laughs) When you hear the word "accountability" in your body, like where does it sit? Does it sit in the... in a fearful place? Does it sit in a... in a dread place, or does it sit in a place of, "I'm really excited to actually define what form of accountability will help me"?

Ali:

Mm, that's interesting. I know when you said that, um, my whole kind of central core was a little bit activated, but, like, there was kind of this, like, pit of my stomach, pit of my, like, abdomen kind of feeling, in terms of where it was located.

Virginia:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Ali:

I'm not sure what that says about me or how we want to, you know, divinate that one, but... (laughs)

Virginia:

Well, I certainly... I certainly feel like there is, like... I feel it in multiple places, depending on how people are using the word. And I've seen a lot of accountability processes go wrong, and I've seen a lot of people ask for accountability or even demand accountability in a setting where the person is not really ready for that or didn't really consent to the way they wanted to be held accountable. And this is, I think, an interesting, uh, dimension into why accountability might be really, really challenging. Is it originating from the person who is asking for that support mechanism or is it originating outside of the person, as a means of, um... as a means of building trust that they may or may not agree with? So, you know, if we think about certain processes that, um, are often driven by people who are not us, what... and that could be more powerful if they were driven by us, like feedback, for instance. If someone offers you feedback that you don't want, that's not nearly as powerful as if you seek out feedback that you do want.

Ali:

Mm-hmm.

Virginia:

You know, those are two entirely different experiences. And I think with accountability, you can define the accountability that is helpful for a challenge and helpful for a relationship, and it can serve you to be in relationship and to be supported by another person.

That's where it's coming from, whether it's coming from self or whether it's coming from somebody else, is, I think, one question that could help us figure out, um, how to make accountability easier or more empowering.

Ali:

Yeah. That, to me, makes me think that accountability is one of those things that have... In terms of how do we define our relationship or our working relationship, accountability is one of those things that should be talked about, like, at the beginning whether it's, "This is what I need to be held accountable," or, "This is how I want to be held accountable," or also, maybe in terms of just expectations around things, like, "This is how I'm going to be holding you accountable," from the other side of the table.

Virginia:

Absolutely. The meaning I'm making from what you're saying is that, um, the explicitness with which we are able to proactively define accountability could also greatly impact our ability to access accountability and make it easier and more empowering.

Well, there's a frame of accountability that I often also use in coaching when it comes to having conversations with clients but also empowering them to have conversations with their direct reports. So as leaders, we often... And this is something that I've heard from clients a lot, um, and peers, and- and myself, um, is, you know, as a leader, it's very, very difficult and taxing to hold everybody accountable. And one of the things that I'm very invested in is flipping the responsibility of, you know, leaders who feel that it is their role to hold others accountable, may be able to actually flip that a little bit and offer to be a sounding board for others to hold themselves accountable and bring information to that leader.

So if you're scaling your company or you're scaling your team or even just you're trying to be there as a friend in a community, being an accountable partner could be just helping the person define their own accountability, and that gives them clarity and pride and confidence that you trust them to hold themselves accountable but also that you're there to help them define what type of accountability will actually be supportive in their task. And this could be checking up in a week, this could be, um... And what I mean by that is the person who's holding themselves accountable can check in with the leader, right? Trying to make sure that they're not bottle-necking themselves and their company by thinking that they have to be the accountable police, for a better word, right?

Ali:

Mm-hmm.

Virginia:

For lack of a better word. There's an energy you know, being someone's support team versus being someone who's going to be looking over their shoulder and judging the work, right? You want to empower the person to judge their own work.

Ali:

Yeah. What I'm loving about this and what I'm hearing is, you know, even as an accountability partner or as a leader, it's not... Like, the burden of holding people accountable isn't on you. Like, you don't have to be a- a rough taskmaster or be super harsh or go after someone and track them down and like, "Why didn't you do X, Y, and Z?" Or, "Where were you yesterday at 4:00?" Um, no flashlights shined in anybody's faces, right?

Virginia:

Exactly.

Ali:

This is kind of the essence of leader as coach too, is how do you really get the people who work for you or, you know, the people who are... who need to be, who want to be held accountable, like, to come up with their own style and to stand on their own two feet, right?

Virginia:

Yes.

Ali:

You're not carrying them along or pushing them along or prodding them along, right? Like, you're trusting that they can stand in front of you and say, "Oh, hey, so that thing I committed to last week... This is... All this stuff went wrong. I need to recommit. Here's our new timeline. Um, I'm gonna check in with you on Friday on this, um, just about our progress."

Virginia:

Yes.

Ali:

I feel like there's a... There's a sense of ownership. The onus is on them. Uh, the responsibility is on them so the relationship is different.

Virginia:

Yeah. You can access more vulnerability, um, and you can access, um, more learning, like more communication.

Ali:

You know, I work with a lot of clients who have people-pleasing tendencies or people who have, you know, their own, um, stuff that comes up, just i- in their leadership roles that- that prevents them, to some degree, from- from really, uh, holding other people accountable in a healthy way, in this kind of healthy dynamic. And I mean, some people, um, will go to the ends of the earth to explore how they did something wrong or how they need to make something better, as the leader, whereas the person standing in... Like, they're not pushing back on the person, uh, you know, who works with them on, "Well, why didn't you do X, Y, and Z? H- you know, how are you going to do this moving forward? What's- what's the plan? How are you gonna check in? How are you gonna hold..." Y- all those things, right?

I think, our- our own tendencies as leaders, no matter what they are... And we all come by our own tendencies, honestly, whether it's people pleasing or harsh inner critics that then, you know, affect our leadership style and what we project out onto others. I mean, the list goes on and on because there are so many different humans with so many different patterns, um, but those patterns feed, um, potentially, an unhealthy structure when it comes to just holding people accountable because it's not like, "I am complete over here on this side, as leader or as manager or whatever, and- and so is this other person." It- it gets... It gets enmeshed.

Virginia:

Right

Ali:

It gets mushy. It gets codependent. There are so many things that go on and on, which can make it really hard. The beauty of what I hear you saying is the clarity piece, right? When something's separated.

Virginia:

I mean, the codependent word came to my mind too, as you were speaking, and I- I also think that there's a question of, do we feel that it is our responsibility to b- be the source of people's growth or do we trust them to be their own source of growth? Are we fixing or are we walking alongside?

Ali:

Mm-hmm.

Virginia:

And a leader who can scale often ends up coming to the- the discipline of walking alongside, eventually. And I think that is something that is a very very powerful shift. When thinking about the word "accountability" and how it related to responsibility there's sometimes a question of, well, what's the difference, if I'm responsible for this thing versus if I'm accountable for this thing. And if you break apart the word "accountability" and think about where it's derived, from the word "account," which, you know, very much is sort of a, um... a measure of taking stock of what happened, of- of what transpired, and reporting out what the accounting was. Accountability has embedded, an implicit meaning of communication, whereas responsibility does not.

You can be responsible for something and complete it and tell no one. If you're accountable for something, then there is some form of tracking. There's some form of communication that is communicating what happened that you are responsible for to others. And so there's- there's a real, uh, sense of, how are we going to talk about this? How are we going to, uh, frame this? How are we going to look back at this? And if we think about accountability as a form of communication, as a form of supportive communication, then I think we get really close to the power that accountability can provide our relationships, both at work and in- in life.

Ali:

To me, it feeds a more collaborative sense versus, "Here we are. We're in this together. And here I am, from my piece of this pie, bringing forth all that I've experienced or learned or- or gathered," you know?

Virginia:

Mm-hmm.

Ali:

I mean, there's an alternative, which is, um, "I am here doing this thing just for myself." So maybe there's that shift from "I" to "we" that I'm speaking to here, but there is, like, th- that stance that makes that, um... that level of accountability really successful.

Virginia:

Yeah. I think there's magic in shifting from an "I" to a "we," You may be endeavoring on something alone, but you don't have to actually be along while you do that. You can be communicating about it. You can use communication as a support mechanism, as a way to focus your efforts on what matters. As coaches, we sometimes ask a client at the end of a call, "Well, would it be helpful to define some accountability steps around the thing that you're tackling?" And if- if that doesn't get done, of course, we... it's not a problem. It's a learning exercise of that person is... has to be motivated to say, "Well, this happened and

this is the thing that I'm taking away from it," and I can ask questions and provide inquiry to kind of get at the root of that, but there's- there's a... There's a consent to how this person wants to communicate to me in a helpful way for them about the thing that is hard that I can't do for them but I can certainly receive information in a way that is supportive, that's how leaders can imagine accountability, serving their teams and their relationships at work.

Ali:

Would it be worth giving a few examples? If I was a leader and I was trying to step into this more and maybe try something new, like, what- what are some phrases or some words or some things that I might want to try on?

Virginia:

Well, the first, I think, um, is simply the question that we mentioned earlier, which is, "How do you want to hold yourself accountable?" The answer to that could be, "I'm not ready," right? That's fine, um, in some contexts. In other contexts, it could be, "I want to tell you when I am... I am done with this thing." At the most simple, uh, y- you know, level, there is simply some communication when the task is either done or not.

Other times, accountability can be a little bit more involved, where, "Well, I will give you progress updates as we go. And I have an intention or commitment to do X number of things by Y date." And, you know, I want to say that this is so much more powerful when you are saying, "How do you want to hold yourself accountable?" Because the person is thinking about what will actually versus what will help the leader or what will help the company. It starts with the person responsible for the task.

Some other forms of accountability, could be around commitments that maybe are not being acknowledged, that may be... You know, there- there are sort of elephants in the room and, you know, we can bring those elephants and sort of- of name them by saying, you know, "I think we all have this commitment, and we want to be accountable to it. What has happened and how do we want to reinvest and be accountable for making sure that we don't, you know, make this an elephant in the room in the future?"

Those are the first things that come to mind, but there's also accountability in terms of just sharing space. A lot of people that I've encountered have had a friend who is an accountability buddy in the sense that they make commitments to them about what they do or are going to do, and then they follow up and give an accounting of what actually got done. "Here's what got done. Here's what didn't get done." And, you know, these things aren't... Um, if things don't get done, again, it's not punitive. It's- it's- it's simply, "Here's what I learned in this week. You know, when this happens, it's gonna derail some things."

There's also accountability just in terms of, how are we going to know if this is off track? Are we going to commit to communicate when things are not hitting plan? And how are we going to handle that case? How do we want to agree ahead of time, should this happen, that we're going to talk about it? Again, trying to move from reactive when we don't hit plan to proactively defining how we're going to handle communication when plan, uh, is not hit. So these types of things reduce shame and reduce, uh, the feeling of- of threat when things are going badly. And so I think that, if we think about the accountability serving us to move forward, we have to recognize that moving forward is going to be an imperfect exercise.

Ali:

Mm-hmm.

Virginia:

So talking about the scenarios that are not pleasant is... can be a form of very empowering accountability.

Ali:

These kinds of conversations, I think, are so important, and they require, uh, a little bit of a slowing down. I feel like so- so much, you know, in our leadership, even if we're, like, hiring on a new person, we've got, like, you know, a- a ton of other things we're already doing. We're maybe bringing on one or two new people or maybe more. And these- these kinds of conversations at the beginning of a relationship, right, get flipped over until later on, like 60 days, 90 days, 120 days, or a year later, you're like, "Oh, s- man, like, there's some stuff that's just grinding on my side of things. And I really need to communicate these and, um, have these conversations of clarity. And how are we gonna have these hard conversations?" Like, that kind of a conversation happened at the beginning things would be much smoother, you know, in theory, as things were moving along. So there's always that... I think, that tension, especially in our- our super fast paced, uh, moving at mach 10 with our hair on fire kind of environments, where, um, we're like, "No, no, no, we can have these conversations later," but at some point, it just hits critical mass and that's like, "Oh, dang. I should've had that conversation months ago, from when we started."

Virginia:

Yeah. Yeah, it is a very good area to build, you know, what we often call a conscious relationship, explicit relationship. Some inquiries to think about that might be, you know, "When have I had a conversation about something not going well that felt empowering?" That's a... probably contains some seeds for how you could define accountability in that case. "How have I liked being supported with accountability where it's coming from me in the past? And if I haven't done that, like if it's always been sort of, uh, implicit and not explicitly defined, how can I... How... Who... What relationship can I try this out in? What relationship would be safe for me to say, 'I am interested in- in simply practicing accountable conversations and accountable commitments, where they originate from me. I am reporting out to them, and they're designed to help me not feel as isolated when I'm tackling very difficult things?'"

I think another word that- that comes to mind with this is just if you give yourself a lot of grace, then accountability has a lot of the sting taken out of it. Oftentimes, you know, if accountability is coming from an outside party, you don't really know how much grace is going to be afforded, right?

And in certain situations, for instance, uh, the fiduciary responsibility of a CEO and- and those who sit on their board. There are plans for what happens if, you know, uh, plans aren't hit. And those things are a part of the explicit design so that, you know, everybody is not... No one is surprised, hopefully, um, about the steps that this system is going to have to take, right, but when accountability is coming from you and it's set up to support you, you should think about how grace functions to empower you and reduce, you know, shame and self-criticism and, self-blame.

Ali:

So I'm- I'm really seeing this as, you know, on one... on one side of the table, there's, um, "How do I... What do I need for my accountability?" And then on the other side of the table, it's, "How can I, as- as leader, um, set up the- the structure to have the right conversations at the right time that support, um, clarity around, you know, accountability? And what are my on-hand questions to ask folks about what they need to be held accountable?"

Virginia:

Yeah. And how can I foster my team growing in self-led accountability, rather than leader-led accountability?

Ali:

I imagine that's a palpable difference.

Virginia:

Yes. I think, when we have teams that demonstrate this discipline, it is palpable and exciting.

Ali:

Yeah.

Virginia:

The bar gets raised for everybody but in an empowering way.

Ali:

And if we were to put words to what it can feel like versus what it doesn't feel like, what's in that "what it feels like" bucket? Or what's possible?

Virginia:

I think there's a healthy pride that's more possible. I think there's speed. There's trust. And we... You know, we know that trust contributes to a safe environment to a huge degree.

Ali:

Which lubricates all things.

Virginia:

I think there's also a universe where you- you essentially are watching people grow alongside you, and you are growing alongside them. And that feels, um, much more freeing and much more, um, liberating than growing through another person's perspective.

Ali:

Mm-hmm.

Virginia:



We're growing through the leader's perspective, or whoever might be the external source of accountability. Um, when we are able to recognize that our workforces are, in face, uh, diverse in many different ways, some that we can see, some that we can't, if accountability is, uh, limited to the leader's perspective or to the leader's understanding, even, about what is helpful or supportive or needed to form, uh, a sense of accountability, then we may be missing some of the magic that comes from, uh, understanding how others need to employ accountability. So there's also... There's a creativity that might emerge in how people use this tool, that if it was defined by one narrow perspective, you- you would... you would not get there.

Virginia:

Are we working in concert or are we trying to be the same? Are we playing to our strengths or are we playing to someone else's strengths?

You know, one of the things that I think could also be felt when people have self-led accountability is a sense of mastery and a sense of, um, confidence that kind of only stems from when you're able to access an inner knowing and make that, um, tangible in your work, something about you, something that's important, and we all need more motivation, especially when there's so much happening outside of the workplace these days. And as we think about being responsible for our own motivation and leaders expecting their teams to be responsible for their own motivation, well, one way that you can contribute to that is by expecting them to be responsible for their own accountability.

Ali:

Well, this has been awesome. Virginia, thank you for all of that. I hope this lands in a really, um, wonderful way for a lot of our listeners.

Virginia:

Same. Thanks for having me.