IRRESPONSIBILITY, ACCOUNTABILITY[1], AND OBSESSIVENESS STORIES[2]

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of accountability. When we lead with exceptional accountability, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we inspire others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders do not lead with enough accountability, people may feel resentful and distrustful of their leaders. When leaders lead with too much accountability, people may feel constrained and avoid their leaders.

Leading with exceptional accountability is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of accountability between irresponsibility and obsessiveness. It is difficult because an accountable action in one situation is not an accountable action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit accountability. In many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional accountability, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being accountable and of failing to be accountable. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional accountability, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

[1] In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of accountability, these stories may also be used for discussions about duty, honor, ownership, or responsibility.

[2] The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited the stories and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was accountable?
2. How could the people in this story have been more accountable? How could they have been exceptionally accountable?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Jordan Morris, Technical Sales Representative

One of my co-workers had multiple miscommunications with his customer and with others in our organization, so we ended up selling the same item to two different customers. As a result, we would not be able to live up to the delivery deadline we gave to one of the customers. As a team, we had to decide which customer to give the product to now, and how to mitigate the potential negative impact to the other customer.

At first this seemed daunting because it was inevitable that either my co-worker or I would be on the receiving end of a tongue lashing from a very unhappy customer—or worse. Fortunately, I took the time to look at the issue from a 10,000-foot view. This gave me the confidence and direction I needed to move forward.

I discussed our options with my co-worker. It would not be possible to get a second product in the lead time needed, so we had to work together to find the best possible alternative. We divided up the research we would do and planned to meet again. We found a solution that would only delay delivery by a month—which is much less than the nearly year-long standard lead time.

Next, we had to decide who would get to deliver the product to their customer on time, and who would have to tell their customer that they would have to wait. It was ultimately decided that I would be the bearer of bad news, because there was a decent chance that we would lose my coworker's customer if we delivered his product a month late. My customer wasn't happy with the news, but we softened the blow slightly by giving them a more expensive product for the same price.

Story #2: Paul Jones, Manager

Ninety days after being promoted to a managerial position in a hospital, it was time to give my boss a status update. She had just returned from a three-month maternity leave. Before she left, she and I discussed a shared vision for the direction of the business unit I manage. She had high expectations when she left. I warned her that it might not be possible to reach those objectives in the time frame she proposed, given the shifting landscape of healthcare and limited resources. As it turns out, my hunch was right. While she was gone, we made significant strides on some key areas, but one area that was of particular concern for her was still in process. My boss believed that my team would have been able to accomplish the goals she set for us in this area if I had used my positional authority to "task" my team and "make it happen." My analysis of trends in health care caused me to question whether it was possible, and my personal belief was that I did not want to run my unit by command and control. Given these disagreements, my goal for my conversation with my boss was to give her an honest assessment of our progress, stay committed to my values, and lead her to understand and accept that sustainable processes take time to build.

Although I had concerns about this conversation with my boss, it is important to say that throughout my career at the hospital, my boss has been nothing but supportive. She has high standards, and I appreciate that. Even so, the meeting approached, I found myself getting more and more nervous about telling her that we were not going to hit her deadline. If she'd always been supportive and open-minded, why was I so worried?

The problem, it turns out, comes from me. I was bringing a lot of baggage to the situation from my childhood and previous career experiences. I was taught from an early age that "no" is not a complete sentence, and never an acceptable answer. Perfection was the standard. Anything less would not be tolerated. This way of interacting with the world followed me into adulthood and throughout my career. As a result, I became a chronically paralyzed people-pleaser.

Ten years before this meeting with my boss, I had some serious personal problems. The perfectionism strategy was no longer sustainable, and I began to put together a new life strategy. However, the damage done from years of perfectionism takes time to repair. Therefore, I reframed my meeting with my boss as another opportunity to practice. I needed to stay internally directed and committed to my values, no matter what. My boss knew me to be a straight-shooter and now was no time to give in. I had to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong.

I allowed myself some time to think about the blind spots that I typically create for myself when I give in to my perfectionism. Also, I shared my worry about saying "no" with a trusted friend who helped me unpack my emotional baggage. With his help, I was able to map out a practical strategy for the conversation. I literally wrote down several strategies and had them on my legal pad during the conversation, just in case my emotions got the better of me and I was tempted to give in.

I also prepared a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats] analysis for my boss, including a few pages of highlights, and delivered it to her at the beginning of our meeting. We spent several moments reviewing it broadly. Then she asked if we met her target.

My answer? “No.”

The word actually crossed my lips, with no need to explain or equivocate. I felt 10-feet tall and bullet proof, and yet unemotional. There was a surprising calm in the room.

She studied me and the document briefly and asked, “Why?” Rather than hearing her question as a veiled "you better explain yourself!" comment, which is how I would have interpreted it if I was thinking like a perfectionist, I heard it as a genuine question from the heart of someone who I believe is fair and open.

“You're holding the answer in your hands,” I said. I pointed to the SWOT and the other documents I prepared for her. She nodded and said, "I can see that now...tell me...what do we need to do?"

That's when the magic happened. I began asking *her* questions. I began with “What result do you want to create?”

What unfolded was beyond anything I expected. It certainly went beyond anything we would have experienced had I given into my perfectionism and denied my values. As we talked, her whole paradigm of leading others shifted in the span of a two-hour conversation. She was amazingly open. We both made notes and some quick plans for next steps together.

At the end, my boss thanked me and asked if I could help teach her other managers to approach their work strategically. As we wrapped up, she asked me about my next career move and together we enjoyed a great conversation about how she and I could work together to build moments like these all across the organization.

Story #3: Chloe Miller, Director

I was asked to leave my current role and temporarily work on a high priority situation for my company. My company had been audited by our largest customer and the results were less than favorable. A team had been working to remediate the identified issues, but also working to understand what led to the poor results. As part of that effort, we had a meeting with representatives from the Human Resources department to talk through future roles and responsibilities.

As I prepared for the meeting, I realized that I should focus less on what the roles and responsibilities should be, and more on the overall desired outcome of what we hoped these roles would achieve: to create a culture of compliance and to become our customer's best contractor. I also thought about how difficult this meeting would be for participants, as we would be discussing potential failures in their areas of responsibility that led to our audit. This made me realize that I needed to be extra sensitive.

The meeting started off fairly well, but the longer it went on, the more apparent it became that the proposed changes were more superficial than meaningful. In an attempt to refocus the conversation, I started asking questions such as, "If we believe the functional areas are responsible for compliance, why might they not be compliant?" "Do they understand the requirements?" "What can we do to help them understand these?" "What else can we do?" As I did, the comments people made changed from, "They just need to do their job" to "What can we do to help them be successful?" We also began to identify processes which were not working well. Instead of criticizing these processes, I asked more questions such as, "What are we trying to achieve with this process?" and "Is it achieving the desired results?" This really changed the dialogue and made leaders open to talk more honestly about challenges they were facing and opportunities for improvement.

In the end, the meeting went better than expected and there was an overall spirit of collaboration. By using this approach throughout the project, the results were successful. A year later, the same customer re-audited the company and the company performed extremely well. Chloe was promoted from director to vice president of one of the highest risk areas of the company.

Story #4: P'o Su-Min, Analytics Intern

When I started my internship, my manager asked me to run several monthly reports for our colleagues. As my internship continued, I acquired other responsibilities, but I continued to run the monthly reports. One monthly report in particular had a lot of problems. It was hard to use, had not been updated in approximately two years, and was visually unpleasing.

I knew that the report could be improved, but my manager was hesitant to change a document that was so widely used throughout the enterprise. I decided to prove that I could create a better report that was more functional and would better serve enterprise needs. If I could make such a report, I was sure it would sway my manager. I wanted the report to be used and appreciated, even by those who were used to the old report format and who tend to dislike change.

The first thing I did was set up meeting with the business associates who use the report. I contacted three market leaders to get their opinions on what worked and what did not. These people held positions much higher than mine in the company, so I was nervous to contact them, but all of them were willing to tell me what they liked and did not like about the report. Using their suggestions, I created an outline of what I wanted the new report to look like. Then I contacted a coworker in my department who I did not know well, but who is a genius in using Microsoft Visual Basic for Applications to help me design the report.

My colleague was helpful, but after our meeting, it was clear that this project would not be an overnight success. The procedures needed to make a new report format work would require weeks of effort and significant help. In fact, the new report was not finished until after was converted to be a full-time employee. We initially thought we would create the report in Microsoft Excel, but in the end, we built the report in Tableau. I have since been promoted and left that area of the company, but the last I heard, my colleagues in that department were still using the report we built.