

GETTING UNSTUCK: THE PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY CANVAS

Ann Herd & Ryan Quinn

Instructions

Have you ever felt “stuck?” You know what you need to do, but you struggle to find the motivation, direction, and insight you need to move forward? The personal accountability canvas was designed to help you get unstuck.

Accountability can be one of the most challenging and difficult virtues to practice consistently through all of life’s events and seasons. It is a learned skill that involves identifying and following through on achieving goals and responsibilities. At the University of Louisville, accountability is one of our “Cardinal” values. To us, accountability means keeping our promises, owning our mistakes, and meeting our responsibilities to our teams.

Leading with Exceptional Accountability

When we lead with exceptional accountability, we begin with ownership: you, and only you, are responsible for achieving your goals. Even when challenges and roadblocks caused by others or outside factors get in the way, accountability begins and ends with you: you are the person who determines whether and how to manage the roadblocks. You decide how to communicate revised expectations with others. Exceptional accountability also requires prioritization. Just as an unfinished song can replay in our head, unfinished tasks often juggle around in our mind, interfering with our focus, causing tension, and hampering accountability. We must decide which projects and tasks are most important and then focus on those if we want to perform with clear minds. Finally, leading with exceptional accountability requires persistence. We need to see the tasks through to the end.

The Personal Accountability Canvas

The personal accountability canvas helps us to own, prioritize, and follow through on our work. The remainder of this document explains how to use the canvas. Use the canvas to practice personal accountability with projects or tasks that should be prioritized, but that you find challenging to get done. Practice using the canvas yourself, first, and when you get a feel for it, you may also use it to help others. These instructions will walk you through the five steps of filling out the canvas.

1. Articulate the Goal Area

The first step in building personal accountability is to decide where to focus. Identify an area in your work or your life in which you are feeling stuck. This may be an area that is broad or somewhat vague, such as “I do not feel like I have executive presence” or “I want to clarify my brand,” or it may already be a specific goal, such as “I need to get the paperwork for seven clients approved before work ends on Thursday.”

Articulating and labeling a target goal area is important for sparking motivation and gaining clarity. The important thing is to articulate how you define the area upon which you are focusing. Articulation provides focus for the other steps of the Personal Accountability Canvas.

2. Clarify the Whys and the Whats

Take a few minutes to write freely about why you want to make progress in the goal area you identified. Getting in touch with the “why” is pivotal for tapping into the motivation you need to become accountable. In this section of the canvas, you should drop your critical thinking. Do not worry about whether what you write is true or what others will think about it or even if what you are writing makes sense. Let go and write freely. Try to let your subconscious express itself here, and if your conscious mind wants to add a few things, let it do so as well. Describe how progress in this goal area will help you to come closer to being your best self or to build a more ideal life. Connect this area of your life to the larger purposes of your life. What will be different in your life when you make progress in this goal area? Describe your vision of the change you will experience. How does this goal relate to your core values? How might it be important to you to be accountable in achieving this goal?

Please note that although we list the elements of the Personal Accountability Canvas as steps, you should not feel beholden to a linear process. For example, as you write about your reasons for wanting to make progress in your goal area, you may discover things about yourself or your goal area that might change what you think your goal area should be, or about how you define your goal area. As you work in one area of the canvas, you may change other areas of the canvas as well.

3. Identify Specific Action Steps and a Timeline

With increased clarity on your goal area and reasons it should be easier to get specific about what you will do. Specificity gives direction and motivation, and makes ownership, prioritization, and persistence easier. Set at least one specific, concrete goal for your goal area. Make it behavioral and measurable if you can. Be ambitious, but not so ambitious as to be unachievable. Then break the goal down into action steps and set deadlines for each step. For example, if your target goal area is to “have more energy by getting in better physical shape,” you may set goals such as “eat a 50-calorie protein snack every two hours,” “run two miles four times a week,” or “get to bed by 10pm and up by 6am every night.” Further, if your goal is running two miles four times in a week, then action steps might include setting the alarm, setting out clothing, checking the weather, and so on, and your timeline might include specific days and times for each step.

4. Select Measures

Exceptional accountability is more likely when we measure results. For each of your goals, ask yourself how you will know how well you have achieved the goal. Some target areas and goal steps are easily measured, others are not. If you cannot come up with objective measures, consider designing a subjective scale to measure your success. For example, if one

aspect of your target area for change is to “feel more confident presenting to small groups,” consider noting that a measure of success will be “to move from a self-rating of “5” to “9” in my feelings of confidence before I make a presentation.”

5. Identify Resources and Support

Perhaps the most-neglected component in personal accountability is to acknowledge the importance of identifying resources and support structures that will help you overcome barriers and challenges. In this section of the canvas, list the barriers and challenges you are likely to face. Then, for each barrier or challenge, identify resources or support that could help you overcome it. Examples of resources and support structures include written materials, subject matter experts or role models, accountability partners, and micro-habits such as putting your running shoes by the door at night before you plan to run in the morning. The point is to not think you must, should, or even feasibly can, go it alone. Don’t be ashamed to ask for what you need. Part of getting unstuck is to recognize that you provide a privilege and opportunity to others when you ask for their support, and it is a self-affirming, intelligent move to leverage existing resources.

Getting Unstuck: The Personal Accountability Canvas

Developed by Ann Herd and Ryan Quinn in Partnership with the University of Louisville Center for Positive Leadership

Goal Area

In what area of work or life do you want to get “unstuck?”

Reasons for Pursuing the Goal

Drop your critical mind and write freely about how your work and life are likely to improve if you can make progress in this goal area.

Action Steps and Timeline

Write at least one specific, concrete goal that you want to accomplish. Make it numerical if you can. Then identity action steps.

What will you do?	By when?

Measures

Resources & Support