



THE LANGUAGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Keith Casebolt

Your practice works better when people see themselves as being accountable rather than seeing themselves as being victimized. Victims see others as perpetrators. They see themselves as helpless, at the mercy of “the system” or other people. Because they see their situation as beyond their control, they are often passive and resistant to making changes themselves. This is a problem at work.

Victims are also a drag on team morale. Being around committed victims is tiring for most of us. Choosing victimization is a form of learned helplessness. In his classic book *Learned Optimism*, psychologist Martin Seligman used research to demonstrate that those

with an internal sense of control were far more persistent than those who felt victimized. His research further showed that persistence pays off in life and in business in powerful ways.

One way to measure the level of accountability vs. blame in your organization is to simply listen to the language that is commonly used. Of course, accountability would mean starting with yourself. You might keep a tally to see how often you use this language. (Case in point: Sixteen years after beginning work with consultant Thompson Barton, from whom I learned these concepts, I still often hear myself talking like a victim.) This exercise is meant to be diagnostic rather than punitive. The opportunity lies

in increasing your own accountability and that of your team a little bit at a time by becoming more aware and choosing differently.

CAN'T VS. WON'T

Usage of “can’t” is endemic. It is rarely accurate. Here’s how to tell: If there were \$2 million sitting in front of you, tax free, could you figure out how to get the thing done you say you can’t? If so, then it’s accurate to say you won’t do it. Or to say that you like the consequences of not doing it more than those of doing it. Owning the choices you are making is fundamental to accountability. Hiding behind “can’t” is generally a statement of powerlessness intended to stop ourselves, or to stop others from hassling us.

Language reveals how we think. ... You can improve accountability—and improve the quality of work that gets done in your practice—simply by changing the kind of language that is spoken there.

I DIDN'T HAVE TIME

This is another classic means of avoiding accountability. From one point of view, time is the one thing we all have in the same quantity. If we're still breathing, we all have the same amount. "I didn't want to take the time, given other commitments I have previously made" might be closer to the truth. Notice the feeling you get from saying the phrase "I didn't want to..." That's owning your choices.

YOU MAKE ME FEEL...

Yes, I felt angry when you forgot to pick me up at the airport, but I actually pick my reactions and feelings. No one can *make* you feel happy, sad, angry, or hurt. Consider a meeting: three people were bored to death while seven loved it. Same speaker, different choice of reactions. Here's how owning your own feelings sounds: "I took offense when you didn't pick me up." Or "I felt really happy when I saw this month's numbers."

THEY DON'T LISTEN TO ME

The common thread here is whether we accept responsibility for what is happening or take the easy and familiar way out by blaming someone else. Getting heard by those who may not be interested in listening could take some doing.

Accepting your role in getting heard is a great first step. There are many behaviors you could employ. You can always start by asking if someone is open for business, like this: "Hey, I have something to discuss with you that's important to me. I think it will take 15 minutes. Are you willing to do that?"

If you find that others generally seem to tune out, you can ask for feedback. Do you take a long time to get to the point? Are your discussions actually monologues? Though others share a role in listening to you, you are accountable for getting heard.

HE BORED ME

Try this on: I allow myself to become bored. Boredom is not something "you are doing to me." If you are bored in a meeting, try stating that. Whatever happens next, you probably will no longer be bored. And the meeting might take a turn for the better. Granted, this sounds unusual, but keeping meetings productive and on track is a shared accountability.

I HAVE TO (GO PICK UP MY KIDS, HAVE SURGERY, ETC.)

This may sound extreme, but you don't have to pick up your kids. There are people who don't. They usually get in trouble and may lose parenting privileges. But consequences are different than "have to's."

Notice your energy when your world is filled with "have to's" versus choices. "I am choosing to go pick up my kids" feels a little different. The difference is important.

I recently learned I urgently needed surgery. I had a day-and-a-half to prepare. On the morning of surgery, I realized I was telling myself I *had to have* surgery. I was in resistance, avoiding the upcoming experience. This time I caught myself. I reviewed my options. No surgery, possibly fatal consequence.

With surgery, 90% cure. Given those two options, I realized I was wildly in favor of surgery. I repeated several times "I am choosing surgery to save my life." My anxiety fell nearly to zero. When the nurse came in to start the I.V., I was happy to see her. When the orderly came to push me down the hall, I was delighted. When I saw the surgery crew, I was grateful they were there to help me. As a result, this surgery experience was entirely different than my previous ones.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Language reveals how we think. Most of us are programmed in the language of victimhood, so it might take some attention to break the mental habits our language reflects. To focus attention on this issue, one business near ours sponsored a new contest every month using examples like the ones provided above. Everyone received a certain number of tickets. If someone heard a coworker use victim language, that individual got to claim one of the "victim's" tickets. The person with the most tickets received a cash prize. Most employees had fun with this exercise, which reinforced the language of accountability.

The best work gets done by people who are persistent and take responsibility for everything that is going on at work. The problems with blaming are numerous and detrimental to the success of your practice. You can improve accountability—and improve the quality of work that gets done in your practice—simply by changing the kind of language that is spoken there. **AE**



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