

A is for ACCOUNTABILITY

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The Values' Alphabet starts with **Accountability**, not only because A is the first letter of the alphabet, but because it requires you to define the standards you are willing to account for. In other words, you get to determine what you want to do, who you want to be, and the impact you want to have. This **autonomy** (another value starting with A), like everything, has its pros and cons. The advantage is that you have control. The disadvantage is that you are responsible for the results.

When asked to list their values, not many people would put **accountability** at the top, yet having a clear goal, a defined structure, and a sense of obligation, encourages **growth**, motivates **accomplishment**, provides **purpose**, and leads to **recognition**... values that many of us value.

Early in my coaching career, I was an outplacement consultant working with people who had been laid-off. A common trait my clients sought in a new job was feedback. They not only wanted acknowledgment for what they did well, they desired direction regarding where they were failing to meet expectations. Knowing that others recognize our potential and are invested in our growth feeds our values and makes us feel valued. The issue remains that many of us do not know how to effectively give nor graciously receive constructive feedback, either in a professional setting or in our personal lives. In fact, the term feedback has such a negative connotation in the workplace, that Marshall Goldsmith (b. 1949), the management expert credited with creating the 360-feedback tool, later advocated that business leaders instead provide feedforward – focusing on future opportunities rather than past mistakes. I see this as just a matter of semantics; changing the name of something that has been tarnished due to poor execution, rather than holding ourselves accountable to providing effective feedback.

Accountability requires feedback and at times consequence. The process might sting in the moment, but if it speaks to our potential and provides wisdom to help us do better in the future, then it contributes to our self-awareness and makes us stronger.

In the Jane Austen (1775-1817) novel **Emma** (1815), Mr. Knightly confronts the title character after she has teased another woman in public. He takes her aside and declares, "It was badly done, indeed! You...in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her...and before others. [Telling you] this is not pleasant to you, Emma—and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must...I will tell you truths while I can."

By accosting Emma in this manner and holding her accountable for the impact of her behavior, Mr. Knightley is defending what he believes to be her true character and inherent nature. We are all capable of showing up as less-than; of being selfish, mean-spirited, and insensitive. What a gift it is to have someone who can see beyond that particular moment and serve as guardian

of our better self. This could be a friend, a partner, a colleague, or a coach, who challenges us to act with integrity and allow us the opportunity to make amends when we fall short.

Sometimes we can hold ourselves accountable, but often, as in the case of New Year's Resolutions, this is not a successful strategy. Our challenge lies in envisioning our fullest potential while not getting trapped in a loop between unattainable expectations and demoralizing disappointment. Karen Horney (1885-1952), a German psychoanalyst credited with founding feminist psychology and author of *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937), warned against the human tendency to fluctuate between false conceptions of the *Ideal Self* and the *Despised Self*. Horney asserted that to experience true health we must live as our *Real Self*, which she suggests can be achieved by aligning the "doing" and "being" of life.

The Values Alphabet is intended to help us get to know, befriend, and hold ourselves accountable to our *Real Self*. The next value of **Balance**, continues to build a healthy relationship between who we are being and what we are doing. First, I invite you to reflect on the value of **Accountability** and the value it brings to your life and work. Suggestion: Engage a partner to go through these questions (and maybe the whole alphabet) with you so that you can hold each other accountable.

Reflective Questions:

1. What is your relationship with accountability? For example, is structure motivating or smothering; do you like to collaborate and receive feedback, or do you just want a clear goal and deadline; are you driven by intellectual reasons or get more done when emotionally inspired?
2. Who or what currently holds *you* accountable...and is the *you* being held to account the *Real You*?
3. In what areas of your life does accountability show up the most, in what areas the least?
4. Reflect back to a productive time in your life, a time when you felt 'on track,' 'in the zone,' and satisfied with what you were doing and who you were being. Identify the elements that fostered those feelings. Determine if you want to hold yourself accountable to honoring and integrating those values.
5. Select a small but meaningful goal to accomplish. Decide:
 - When you want to complete it?
 - Why it is important to you?
 - What values will it honor/fulfill?
 - How will you be held accountable?

Accountably yours,

Stacey