

SIGMA **Leader Character Series**



**Great Leaders
Are Accountable**



GREAT LEADERS ARE ACCOUNTABLE

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Accountability is the glue that ties commitment to the result.

— Bob Proctor

One of the most frustrating experiences is when someone refuses to take responsibility for their actions. Think back to a time when you were seeking to correct an error and the other side wouldn't admit that there was a problem, or that if there was, it was someone else's fault. After experiencing this, you may have found that you lost respect for that person as they were determined to place blame on everyone but themselves. Along the same lines, when we don't take accountability for our own actions, others may form less favorable impressions of us, thereby harming the potential for a healthy relationship. Accountability is foundational to being perceived as a leader, and fostering employee trust.¹ The good news is that accountability is something that can be practiced and demonstrated on a daily basis.

Accountable leaders take responsibility for the outcomes of their actions and decisions. They take ownership of challenging issues instead of avoiding them. Accountable leaders can be relied on to achieve their deliverables and step up during a crisis. These behaviors signal to others in the organization that they can be trusted.² Accountable leaders are likely to be asked to contribute to challenging projects and valued as part of a high-performing team.

In assessing your tendency to be accountable, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I do my best to deliver on my commitments even in the face of obstacles?
- Am I likely to admit when I've made a mistake?
- Do I carry out my duties and obligations?
- Am I able to take ownership of my decisions when problems arise?
- Do I address difficult questions with openness?

Ways to Improve Your Accountability

Align your words and actions: Sometimes you can agree to do something, then later realize you've overcommitted or are encountering more issues than anticipated. Before you commit to a task, think about whether it's something you will have time for. If you have time for it, be clear with others about what they can expect from you and when they can expect it. Then, try your best to deliver. If you find yourself in a position where a higher-priority task or strict deadline conflicts with your earlier commitments, ensure that you notify others as soon as possible so they can manage their expectations.

Take personal responsibility: It's easy to blame others or external factors when a project is stalling or an initiative is unsuccessful, but pointing to factors outside of your control reduces your ability to learn from experiences. Before you decide you won't be able to meet your commitment, think about what you can do to turn things around. Can you ask others for help, or work on it more efficiently? If it's too late, think about how your decisions contributed to the outcome so that you can be successful with similar endeavors in the future. By taking personal responsibility for poor outcomes, you'll set a strong example of accountability to others.

Reframe mistakes: One of the challenges of taking responsibility for past actions and decisions is that it makes us vulnerable. Vulnerability can be an uncomfortable and scary feeling, especially if we believe that mistakes are not acceptable, or that we'll be penalized more harshly if we admit we're at fault. Everyone makes mistakes, it's how we handle them that determines our character and reputation. Reframe mistakes as an opportunity to learn and demonstrate character — this will help you hold yourself and others accountable in a healthy way.

Consider These Tips to Moderate Your Accountability

Effective leaders are able to balance the 11 leader character dimensions rather than focusing on just a few. As you develop your leader character, look for places where strengths may need to be moderated. If you scored a 4 or higher on accountability, use the tips below to help you balance the expression of this character dimension.

Set clear boundaries. If you're a naturally responsible person, you may have a tendency to take on the duties and obligations of others. If left unchecked, this tendency to take on others' work may lead to others underperforming, and it can lead to burnout in yourself.³ Watch out for this tendency and pause before you take ownership of tasks that are truly not your responsibility. It's important to say "no" when others ask for favors, particularly when you lack time, expertise, or other resources to commit to the task.

Celebrate successes. Often, people with a strong sense of accountability focus on their mistakes and take their accomplishments for granted. Make sure you reflect on and celebrate your successes! If you're managing others, make sure you celebrate their successes too, even if it's just recognizing someone who excels in their day-to-day work.

Communicate your expectations when working with others. People who are naturally conscientious and responsible might think that a particular approach to a challenge is universally understood by everyone else on your team, but others may struggle to know what your expectations are if you don't communicate them directly. Ensure anyone who is accountable to a deliverable knows what the shared goal is, why it is important, when you expect them to achieve the goal, and roughly how you expect them to accomplish the goal. You can avoid common teamwork mistakes with honest communication about personal expectations and by clearly assigning responsibilities to each team member.

Resources



[Question Behind the Question Technique — John Miller](#)



[How Real Leaders Demonstrate Accountability](#)



Develop your accountability by taking advantage of SIGMA's [coaching services](#).

Contact SIGMA for more information about leader character.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

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References

¹ Akker, V. D. L., Heres, L., Lasthuizen, K., & Six, F. E. (2009). Ethical leadership and trust: It's all about meeting expectations. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 5(2), 102-122.

² Ghanem, K. A., & Castelli, P. A. (2019). Accountability and moral competence promote ethical leadership. *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, 12(1), 11.

³ Seppälä, E., & Moeller, J. (2018, February 2). 1 in 5 employees is highly engaged and at risk of burnout. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2018/02/1-in-5-highly-engaged-employees-is-at-risk-of-burnout>