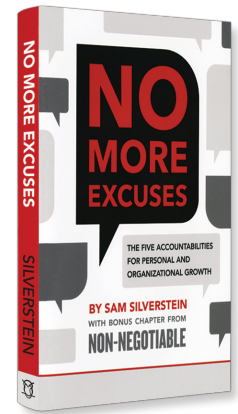


# No More Excuses

The Five Accountabilities for Personal and Organizational Growth

by **Sam Silverstein**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

*No More Excuses* is a way of looking at the world—a standard to which we hold ourselves and others accountable. It's a strategy that attracts others to us, because accountability is a universal trait of admired people. *No More Excuses* is not a slogan. It is a competitive choice.

*No More Excuses* is about closing the gap between where we are and where we could be as individuals and as organizations. We can do this by learning and applying, on a personal level, the five critical principles that support an expanding “Accountability Zone” that has us at the very center. Author Sam Silverstein challenges us to expand our Accountability Zone by embracing the Five Accountabilities: right things, new space, process, expectations, and relationships.

Using interviews with Highly Accountable People from all walks of life including corporate CEOs, politicians, professional athletes, educators and more, Silverstein shows how the Five Accountabilities can be used to open doors, take advantage of new opportunities, and expand Accountability Zones in our lives, careers and our organizations.

*No More Excuses* gives us the tools we need to design and live an excuse-free life.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To align your strategic intent with doing your right thing.
- To evaluate and optimize your space for growth.
- How to lead from the future instead of being stuck in the past.

### Introduction

Every meaningful achievement and every great organization starts with an individual who has established a personal Accountability Zone—a place where transparency is high, the values are clear, and the commitment to the Five Accountabilities is unmistakable.

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### The 1st Accountability: Doing the Right Things

Be accountable for doing the right things. This means ethical execution of the activities that will support the goals you have chosen for yourself.

#### Strategic Intent

Silverstein relates the story of Mount Everest explorer, Ronnie Muhl. Muhl told him, “One of the things that climbing Mt. Everest does for you is help you get very clear about what you should be doing and what you shouldn’t be doing. Because so much of what you do has such direct impact on whether you live or die, you have to do the right things, and you have to do that consistently. . . . You get into the habit of asking yourself, ‘If my life depended on the next action I took, how differently would I perform that action?’—because doing the wrong thing can have massive consequences.”

How do we know what our own right things are? By asking a critical question, “Is what I am doing right now supporting my own strategic intent?” Strategic intent is nothing more or less than a driving goal, passion, or purpose that we are motivated to pursue at the level of excellence. On the individual level, strategic intent is that which you are personally most committed to making happen in your life at the level of excellence.

John Hannah held the strategic intent to become the best offensive lineman in the National Football League. He achieved that goal. How did he do it? In part, by using a single stance to throw off his opponents about what he was planning. He pursued that goal by studying game films for hours on end so that he could uncover opportunities that didn’t look like opportunities to most people. He found his right thing, and that aligned with his personal goal of being the best offensive lineman in the NFL. It was something he was willing to pursue and execute at the level of excellence.

#### Know Your Right Thing

We are each accountable for doing the right things consistently in life. If something is not working at the level of excellence

for us, that fact is our responsibility and no one else’s. That means choosing activities that support our strategic intent.

Once we have settled on a goal that makes sense for us, we must be relentless in pursuing the answer to this question, “What can I do consistently, with a commitment to excellence, that will make it easier to achieve this goal sooner rather than later?” We must pose this question for ourselves as individuals and for any people who are looking to us as a leader.

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### The 2nd Accountability: Managing Your Space

We must be accountable to ourselves to create the new space we need to grow and innovate in our own lives, which sometimes means taking space from something else that we’re doing. No one else is going to do that for us, and if we don’t do it, it won’t get done.

Be accountable for managing your space for new opportunities. This means being willing to step away from things that are working, even though they may be familiar, to make room for something that may work better.

Silverstein tells the story of finding space in his closet for a new and much-desired coat given to him by his daughter. “I went to put the big down jacket into my hall closet where all my other coats were stored. Guess what? It wouldn’t fit. I began to wonder something. Why hadn’t I gotten rid of some of those coats—thrown them away or given them to charity—years ago? The answer was that I had simply gotten used to seeing them each time I opened that closet door. I started pulling out old jackets that I didn’t wear anymore and putting them into a big pile to give to a local charity. I just had to clear out the old stuff so that I could make room for the new stuff, the stuff that really mattered to me.”

Your personal priorities must be based on your optimum choices, which are not necessarily your most familiar choices. Ask yourself, “If I finished my work by noon and I still had to do something productive for the afternoon, what would that something be?” What would you do with that time that could produce even greater results for you? We are each accountable for asking the questions that allow us to manage our own space.

#### Ask What If?

We are accountable to ask what if. We are responsible to explore where we can create space that could be filled with something that could offer a greater yield.

A few years ago, Apple, the dominant player in the personal music player category at the time, dropped its best-selling product, the iPod Mini. Why? Because they were launching a brand-new product that took the iPod experience to another level: the iPod Nano. Most businesses would have been extremely hesitant to simply jettison a profitable product, let alone a category leader, regardless of what they had on the drawing board at the time. Apple was different. Why?

The answer: Apple's business philosophy was based on creating new space. The company's stated operating principle was that they would rather make themselves obsolete than watch the competition do it!

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### The 3rd Accountability: Managing the Process

Managing the process is what happens when our strategic intent faces an obstacle, and we still move forward to take creative action toward attaining the goal. Effective people and effective organizations accept full accountability for managing the process rather than let unforeseen obstacles and unanticipated events manage them.

When the lives of the Apollo 13 astronauts were in grave and immediate danger, NASA didn't throw up its collective hands and say, "Well, I guess a successful outcome to this mission just wasn't meant to be." Why are so many people ready to relinquish their accountability for managing the process when they hit obstacles that are far less daunting?

To provide that kind of leadership, we must model the skill of thinking and acting creatively. Following the most familiar set of instructions wouldn't have gotten the Apollo 13 astronauts home safely, and it won't get your team past the many unpredictable challenges they will encounter.

#### Examine Near Misses

One big asset in managing the process is close analysis of the phenomenon known as a near miss. The near miss idea applies not only to processes that affect human safety but to every undertaking with the potential to affect our strategic intent. That means we want to know about the sales that were nearly lost, the defective units that were nearly shipped, the P.R. disaster that nearly played out.

If we are truly accountable, we will recognize these events for the blessings in disguise that they are. Near misses tell us where there are likely to be challenges that keep us from realizing our strategic intent.

### The 4th Accountability: Establishing the Right Expectations

Expectations are the targets we set for ourselves. Once we accept them, they determine our actions, our outlook, and our destinies. They create our world.

#### Mutual Expectations

Sometimes, when people think of accountability, they think of the traumatic experience of being held accountable to someone else's goal. Silverstein tells a story from his window business.

Competition was squeezing the production timeline. There had to be a better process. He could have mandated the new process. But, he took a different approach and got a better outcome. His team focused on developing shared expectations based on the situation being faced, the true capacities, and the company's strategic intent.

Instead of his holding them accountable for a goal that they had no role in shaping, he asked the team some questions: "What are all the steps in the process of making a window, and how long does each step take?"

Silverstein knew that just setting the target was not enough. He had to give his employees ownership of what was going to happen on the production floor. They had to feel empowered and challenged by the new goal, and they had to decide for themselves that the goal was realistic.

Without shared expectations, the production process had rambled aimlessly. With shared expectations, a quality product was manufactured in a much shorter period of time, and the customers were happier. What allowed them to turn things around? It was the ability to set and act on mutual expectations and the willingness to give the team both the responsibility and the authority they needed to do the job.

#### Stretch Your Expectations

We have to be extremely careful with expectations, because if we're not careful, we can train ourselves to build our expectations around what was possible for us. That is very different from what is possible! The present and the future may have entirely different requirements than those faced in the past, and our own capacities may be far greater than we realize.

What are you using to establish your expectations—your goals for yourself and your organization? If it's past pre-

edent, or what you've always been able to do before, your expectations may not reflect your true potential, either as an individual or as an organization.

## The 5th Accountability: Contributing to Your Relationships

The final accountability involves our relationships with others and with the larger world. Success means managing our relationships. This depends entirely on the quality of our contributions.

Stop and think about any great accomplishment or positive event in your life. Whether it was your graduation, a promotion, or starting your own company, you didn't experience it entirely on your own. Whatever that achievement or positive experience was, it involved someone else.

Our accountabilities to manage our relationships come in two big categories. First, we need to contribute to our relationships with family, friends, and business associates. This falls under the heading of *personal accountability*. We also need to contribute to our relationships with the larger world in which we live. This is *social accountability*. The secret of successful relationship management in terms of both personal and social accountability can be summed up in one word: give.

How do you treat the key relationships in your life? Do you look for reasons to give? Or, do you look for reasons to give because you feel you owe someone something? There's a big difference. The kind of giving that supports relationships is the giving that doesn't think about what's gone before or what's likely to come back in return.

## Your Sphere of Contribution

Building relationships is about choices, and the choices should always be based on your values. To get a fix on your values, ask yourself, "How can I best serve this relationship in the short term and the long term?" Posing that question on a consistent basis allows you to create a group of values-based connections—this is your sphere of contribution.

Keep giving to the people in your sphere. Give time, give energy, give thought, and give care. The relationships will grow. Don't worry about what's coming back to you. Get better at giving than anyone else. This is one of the classic secrets of leadership. Someone always has to start digging the well. If you stop and take a look around, you'll realize there are a lot of wells waiting to be dug.

You can begin the job of building a more accountable world by building a more accountable you. That means practicing and implementing what you've learned here about right things, new space, managing the process, establishing expectations, and contributing to relationships. It means reaching the point in your life where you can say, "No More Excuses! I'm not going to make excuses, and I'm not going to buy excuses, and I want the world to know that." Remember that accountability is not a consequence—accountability is your competitive advantage!



Sam Silverstein is founder and CEO of Sam Silverstein Enterprises, Inc., a think tank dedicated to helping companies create an organizational culture that prioritizes and inspires accountability. He is both a sought-after speaker and the author of several books including *Non-Negotiable* and *Making Accountable Decisions*. He is an internationally recognized consultant, coach, and business advisor. A past president of The National Speakers Association, his client list includes such organizations as AFLAC, Lucent Technologies, the National Association of Home Builders, Prudential Insurance Company, and the United States Postal Service.

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