

Who is Accountable for This?

By Brian Brittain

How often have you heard this question? Who in their right mind would answer, “Me”? It always seems to have a punitive, blaming quality to it, doesn't it?

It has been our experience that the issue of a lack of clarity regarding accountability is at the root cause of failed change projects and slow responses to competitive forces in the market place. Stuff does not get done without clear accountability contracts.

The term “accountability” is a much maligned and misunderstood term. I was fortunate to study with Elliot Jacques (Requisite Organization) during the 90s. He has been a huge influence on my thinking in this topic and others. Our intent here is to reframe it as a concept that, when used correctly, provides focus and clarity, enhancing both performance and trust in an organization. We will do this by outlining our views on the purpose of accountability, defining it, explaining what you can hold someone accountable for, and showing how it can work in tandem with a similar concept called “responsibility”.

Purpose of Accountability

The purpose of accountability at a macro level is to translate strategy from the top of the house into task assignment, or work, through the different levels of the organization. At a more micro level, the purpose of accountability is to clarify the terms of the working relationship between a manager and his team members. When it is done well, people understand what they need to deliver and why, with full commitment and capability.

Defining Accountability

How does it do this? First, it makes sure there is regular dialogue between manager and team members on expected outputs – not just on a

list of tasks to perform. The output conversation needs to cover the full QQT/R equation, where:

- Q = Quantity – how much of something?
- Q = Quality – meeting what specifications or requirements?
- T = Target completion date – by when?
- R = Resources – with what tools and within what constraints?

In our experience the QQT/R is rarely clearly defined and agreed between managers and team members, and is in fact surprisingly vague. Here's how my conversation usually goes:

Me to Leader:

How have you defined the accountability of your Director of X?

Leader:

She knows what she's supposed to do. She has been working here for 4 years.

Me to Director:

Do you know what's expected of you?

Director:

Not really. Things have changed.

The leader ultimately decides the terms, as she is accountable for the outputs of her team members. But the accountability dialogue can be initiated by either party, and both sides need to believe what's decided makes sense or there's little hope the expected outputs will be delivered.

Once accountability is defined, the manager has to consistently hold the team member to account for delivery, or the time taken has been wasted. Gerry Kraines (The Levinson Institute and author of Accountability Leadership) is fond of stating that accountability means both “keeping your word” (performance) and “earning your keep” (effectiveness). I find this a useful construct because it is practical and easy to remember.

Keeping Your Word

There are two ways in which a team member needs to be accountable for keeping his word once he has accepted the terms of the task assignment. The first is the principle of “no surprises” – constantly managing expectations along the way as “stuff happens” that impacts the agreed-upon QQT (how much, of what, by when).

It will not always be possible to meet the QQT terms. An unplanned-for event may trigger a need to renegotiate either the target completion date, the quantity or quality of the performance objective. What’s critical is that this renegotiation happens immediately after the event occurs, not the night before delivery is expected. The manager may agree to adjust the QQT, or to provide additional resources (R), but the team member has kept his word in making sure there are no surprises. What should be acceptable is renegotiating the teams of an agreed upon task. The vagaries of life happen. What shouldn’t be acceptable is surprising one’s manager with non-delivery of a promise.

The second aspect of keeping one’s word is to agree to adhere to organizational policy or constraints. There should be no forgiveness regarding breaking organizational values and policy. It is through collectively keeping our word that organizations maintain stakeholder trust and loyalty. We can rely on organizations that keep their word for sustainable performance and citizenship expectations.

Earning Your Keep

Team members are also accountable to earn their keep, working at the level of effectiveness required of the role. This is about applying one’s full horsepower (cognitive capacity), skill set, and creative initiative, and motivation to meet stretch goals. It is through individuals earning their keep that organizations collectively stay vital and responsive to their changing environments, continuously improving processes at the lower levels of the organization and also constantly renewing their products, services and business model at the higher levels of leadership.

Earning our keep also means that we accept responsibility (I will come back to this word shortly) for the effectiveness of the team of which we are part. In other words; we try our best to balance the team’s goals and effectiveness with our own goals and effectiveness.

A third way we earn our keep is to be mindful and respectful of our use of resources. We are continually working on both conserving organizational resources and improving on them when we see the opportunity to do so.

Accountability and Responsibility

These two words are often used interchangeably. I don’t believe they mean the same thing. I do think they can be complementary if properly differentiated.

I think the phrase “everybody is accountable for this” is dangerous, because it generally means everybody points at someone else if things go wrong, or acquiesces to peer pressure on the direction of a decision, that they wouldn’t if they had been individually accountable for the decision. On the other hand, it’s very powerful when you have a team where everyone feels personal responsibility for the outcome – because of their personal pride in their work and for the simple fact that it is just the right thing to do. Effective leadership will accept accountability for the team, but will have instilled personal responsibility in everyone.

A widespread sense of responsibility in an organization is a sign of a committed and engaged workforce. Clear accountability for outputs is the foundation for successful delivery of business results and productive leader/team relationships.

When we have seen this working well, a senior leader engages his team in a dialogue regarding the strategic priorities and change agenda for the business unit. Once these have been agreed upon, these strategic priorities get translated into tasks (QQT/R), for each team member, designed for both running the business (technical, routine

work) and for changing the business (adaptive, innovative work). These in turn get cascaded down through the organization, the lower levels more focused on the tasks of running the business, while the higher levels of leadership are focused on the adaptive challenges of changing the business. Unforeseen events will impact these nice tidy accountability contracts, but the behavioural norm will be to immediately evaluate those events on the unit's strategic priorities and on each one's (QQT/Rs) and immediately address those and renegotiate the terms if required. No surprises, and no forgiveness for managing this otherwise. The ideal result is everybody working in a unified manner to keep their word and earn their keep.

Wouldn't it be nice?

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We welcome feedback to this **Insight**.
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