

Excellence in Leadership: Responsibility, Accountability and Authority (3 Factor RAA model)

Within organisations, accountability and responsibility are often used interchangeably. Why? Because they point to who has ownership of getting a task done. However, understanding the subtle difference of the two words is important to having true ownership in being able to complete a task. The nuance of accountability and responsibility clarifies who needs to be involved in ensuring a task or project is delivered on-time. The concept of authority is rarely discussed, which in turn creates unnecessary risk. Understanding these differences and ensuring that the three RAA factors are clearly defined can create both understanding within a project as well as either a culture of blame or accountability.

Definitions

Responsibility means that you have both the authority to make decisions and the ability to make those decisions or take action. In general, responsibility is a broader term, defining obligations and expected outcomes. Having responsibility means you are given a task and the skills and/or resources and people to complete it. If you don't have it, you consult the team and/or the accountable person. For example: the driver of the delivery van is responsible for delivering the parcels in a certain area, but the driver's manager is accountable for the delivery of parcels by the company in general. Responsibility can be given to many people and/or shared by a group or team of people to complete a task or project. This same thinking applies to individual tasks within a project delivery.

Accountability literally means to hold to account. In other words, after a decision has been made, if it goes well or badly, the accountable person (and nobody else) deserves the praise or the blame. It is this link to blame that the term accountability has become confused with personal ownership for actions taken.

Testing accountability

- To be accountable, a person must have both the authority to make decisions and be able to allocate the necessary resources to deliver and/or oversee the result.
- Only one person can genuinely be accountable for the results of a decision or action.
- If you are accountable for something, you can't blame someone else if it goes badly.

Authority is linked to power both individually and positionally. Leaders who have authority can commit the resources and/or time necessary, command a situation, give direction and orders. There tends to be an expectation of obeying the orders from someone in authority. It becomes confused with accountability as it can feel as if the person having authority will also have equal accountability, though this is not always true.

The confusion arises because the accountable person is responsible to hold others to account for their unique contribution to the tasks and/or delivery. When things go badly, this is often a trigger for leaders to micro-manage and/or control and sometimes even blame others. This is how accountability gets confused with authority.

Ensuring full engagement

To ensure everyone is engaged and clear about their contributions to the outcome, using the 3 factor Responsibility, Accountability and Authority (RAA) model, can help. After the project requirements and deadlines are agreed, internal and external stakeholders mapped, but before responsibilities are clearly defined, using the 3 factor RAA model can be useful. Drawing the 3 factor RAA model on a virtual white board with members using coloured pens or a physical white board with post-it notes, team members can map specific people and/or tasks against the 3 factors ensures that all elements to be delivered are appropriately allocated to the person who has either responsibility, accountability and/or the authority to complete their deliverable. Pressure testing that the assigned leader has accountability and authority and active oversight to hold others to account.



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In Working Groups and Teams

Responsibility and accountability can get blurred without careful consideration and specific agreements. In working groups and teams, responsibility implies a proactive stance on the part of each responsible member(s) and a causal relationship between the responsible member(s) and a given outcome. In other words, if you say you will get something done, you've now taken responsibility (ownership) to do it. If you do not flag you do not have the appropriate resources, time and/or authority to complete the task, you put both the task(s) and/or yourself at risk.

Individual responsibility implies a member could be responsible for their actions (and may have consequences as a result) though they are not held accountable as they do not have accountability for the entire resulting outcome. Only the accountable party has the responsibility for the overall end result.

When group/team agreements are not clearly defined, often this creates polarities which can result in:

- Either putting off a difficult conversation or being too confrontational
- Staying quiet in meetings or being overly directive
- Giving 'artificial' praise and/or negative feedback
- Passing the buck and allowing the leader 'above' to make the decision
- Delegating away or avoiding responsibilities that are within their own remit
- Overworking or over-responsibility for tasks that could be delegated to responsible people

By working through the 3 factor RAA model and ensuring each task has the appropriate factor(s) assigned by person, you can save time and ensure everyone is clear about the ownership level they have to complete their tasks. To avoid blame, all team members commit to being inclusive, transparent, holding each other to account so the collective team can deliver against its overall objective together.

Impact to Culture

Creating a culture of accountability is a perennial desire within organisations. However, this elusive hope is often dashed because the focus of individuals is misplaced. As the table below clearly illustrates, power over others and the 'hoarding' of knowledge and/or decision-making authority is a leadership bottleneck. Simply by re-focusing attention on the opportunity and looking for facts, processes and/or improvements that in-build learning and continual improvement foster ownership.

	Culture of Blame	Culture of Accountability
Believes	People are the problem	People are problem solvers
	Problems are headaches	Problems are learning opportunities
	Admitting weakness is career limiting	We are all still learning
Focused On	Who is wrong	What is wrong
	The individual	The process
	Fault-finding	Fact-finding
	The past	The future
	Assigning punishment	Improving future results
Results In	Making assumptions	Considering alternatives
	Hoarding decision-making authority	Delegating decision-making authority
	Hiding problems	Surfacing problems and solutions
	Finger-pointing and CYA behaviour	Learning from mistakes
	Distrust	Trust
	Turf wars	Cross-functional cooperation
	Risk adverse	Calculated risk taking
	Wait until told	Taking initiative
	Lack of innovation	Innovation

Source: <https://turnerinternational.live/c4caf>

Changing the focus to 'what have we learned?' is the starting point for generative solution-focused conversations and/or meetings. By understanding what went well and what could have been done better allows everyone to share their perspective and contribute openly to innovative solutions. Over time this become the way we work around here and a culture of accountability.

Key Tips

- Clearly define the task, when it is due, who is/are the responsible parties and their individual contributions in completing the task
- Discuss and agree who is the accountable person to go to when things need further clarification and/or problems arise
- Ensure the people with responsibility have either the appropriate authority (actual oversight, personnel, budget and/or KPIs) OR access through an accountable person who would have authority so they can get the job done with minimal interference
- Have clear metrics of when things are due and reporting progress to others

- Ensure that people have the skills, capabilities and/or resources necessary to complete the task(s)
- Reign in power 'over others' channeling any frustration into inquisitiveness to better understand the problem
- Agree people collectively hold each other to account (anyone on the team or group can inquire as to progress) and have an accountable team leader or sponsor
- Ensure appropriate visibility to task completion
- In-build opportunities for 'small failures' and/or re-visiting milestones regularly
- Avoid interfering or telling people how to do their job
- Reward and celebrate successful outcomes -- Have fun!

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