Accountability and Responsibility

Introduction

In the English language, we frequently use the words Accountability and Responsibility interchangeably. The problem is that the two words are not synonymous, and we are creating confusion by using them that way.

What doesn't help is the focus on accountability. Organizations have built entire systems around accountability, despite calling it responsibility.

For example, the RACI chart is used to identify who will be responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed. There are numerous problems with the RACI chart. Often the definitions of each category are misunderstood, even within the same organization. People will often talk about accountability as the "one throat to choke" if things go wrong (a great way to create the wrong behaviours and fear). Worse yet, nothing in the chart is about people taking responsibility. RACI mislabels responsibility as it's often a lightweight version of accountability (i.e. we won't choke their throats).

Responsibility

Responsibility is an internal process. Given this, no one can assign or entice you into taking responsibility. Only you can choose whether you do or don't take responsibility.

To better understand responsibility let’s break it into its components:

> **Response -** a reaction to something
>
> **Ability** - a talent, skill, or proficiency in a particular area

A different way of saying "responsibility" is "an ability to respond." The ability is pointing to your skill at doing something. In this case, we're talking about your skill at responding to a problem. Much like any skill, your ability to respond is something you can get better at over time. It doesn't mean you'll always get it right, but the good news is that it'll become another chance to strengthen your ability to respond.

When people choose to take responsibility, the result is higher innovation, creativity, and problem-solving. Rather than getting hung up on why something didn't work, they will respond by learning and adapting. People who demonstrate responsibility inspire others to do the same.

When it comes to change in an organization, there is not one bit of good you could introduce that the lack of responsibility won't unravel.

Accountability

Accountability is an external process and is assigned to you by another person. The origins of the word accountability is the Latin word, accomptare, which means "to account." Accountability is to hold someone *to account* for an outcome, action, or behaviour.

In modern organizations, accountability exists to control the risk and uncertainty associated with the work. People are held to account once a year during their annual performance appraisal. People are held to account for delivering through sign-offs and documentation. People are held to account for things delegated to them. People are held to account for following new processes, like Scrum or Kanban.

The problem with accountability is that the person with the accountability may not feel responsible. When accountability is stronger than responsibility, they are more likely to blame or give you an excuse if things don't go well. How many times have you heard, "well, I was following the process?"

People who chose to take responsibility for something don't need to be held accountable.

Which would you prefer?

By now, I hope you're starting to see the difference between responsibility and accountability. Responsibility will have people taking ownership for doing something great; accountability will tell them what to do and give them an out if things go wrong. Which would you prefer to have more of in your life?

Often, people will say they want more accountability. This belief is common in organizations where success, power, and position is associated with how many accountabilities a person holds.

I prefer never to be held accountable. If someone has to hold me accountable, it means I'm not taking responsibility, and I likely have something in my life, I'd rather not have. I only want the things in my life for which I'm willing to take responsibility. I'm far more likely to do a great job with it.

What type of culture is your organization

Truthfully, there's no way to look at people or teams and know if they are in accountability or responsibility. However, you can look for symptoms, which might give you some clues to which is stronger in your organization.

The signs that you can observe include:

Accountability	Responsibility
Managers require teams to publish their metrics regularly, and use them to ensure the team is doing the right thing	Teams publish metrics themselves and use them as insights into how they might improve themselves
Performance management is an annual or quarterly activity in which everyone scrambles to get it done by the deadline	Performance management is an ongoing activity consisting of regular interactions between leaders and team members
People are expected to follow the process that consultants sold the company	People are expected to continually improve their processes
When problems or risks emerge, people are frequently hiding reality until they can tell a better story	When problems arise, people are quick to make them visible and bring together the right people to resolve the problem quickly

Why the difference matters

Would you rather work in an organization full of people who are taking responsibility? Or, an organization full of people who are being held accountable? I hope you said responsibility if you're wanting higher innovation, creativity, and problem-solving.

Take, for example, organizations adopting new ways of working, such as Agile or Lean. They're unlikely to get beyond the basics of a new method when their culture is focused on accountability. They're likely too busy being held accountable for following Scrum or Kanban. It likely won't feel safe for people to look for innovative and creative ways to solve problems while advancing beyond the basics.

Organizations with higher degrees of responsibility, tend to give their people the freedom and power to experiment and find innovative ways to improve the outcomes. Highly responsible teams are the ones who are far more likely to become the high performing teams we all want.

Inspiring Responsibility

Helping the people around you to take responsibility starts with you. Are you taking responsibility as it’s the best way to inspire others to do the same?

When you're asking others to do something, does it start by wanting them to take responsibility? Or, are you simply wanting to assign them a task that you can hold them to account for in the future?

When holding up problems for the team to examine, are you holding them to account for the problem? Or, are you wanting and inspiring them to take responsibility for their domain? It's the difference between saying, "this is a terrible result," and asking, "What do you make of this result?" One will put them in a mindset of being held to account; the other opens the door to helping them take Responsibility.

Let's talk

"What got you here, won't get you there." — Marshall Goldsmith

Companies have a long history of holding their people accountable. The accountability can be so pervasive that it's difficult to see how responsibility will work. However, with our chaotic and rapidly changing world, I know your future depends on everyone taking responsibility for what's happening.

I work with corporate leaders who want to allow everyone to share the responsibility for great outcomes. It starts with what your intention to take responsibility and an awareness when you're not. With an awareness you can choose a path that will inspire others to do the same.

Want to learn more and explore how responsibility can get you where you want to go? Email me at *mike@leadingforchange.ca* or visit *leadingforchange.ca* and let's talk!