Performance Frontiers

Leaning In

The Difference between Being Accountable

and Taking Accountability

Organisations run on accountability. As a consequence, few things preoccupy leaders more than ensuring that their teams take responsibility for their actions, decisions, and performance for the benefit of the whole. However, what it means to "be accountable" and "take accountability" is not necessarily clear cut, particularly when expectations differ or when issues, problems and opportunities don't neatly fall within the remit of established job titles. In our increasingly complex and distributed workplaces, this question is further complicated by flexible team structures and the importance of horizontal coordination as much as vertical. So, what is accountability? What does it mean to "take accountability?" And how should we think about this concept as leaders?

The Two Meanings of Accountability

In our time working with leaders across every type of organisation, we see two essential dimensions to accountability: accountability as a noun and as a verb. Over and over, we've seen our clients struggle with finding the balance between these aspects of accountability.

In the **noun**, accountability is something we **assign**. We hand to someone an accountability – this is what we see on RACI models and other frameworks for tracking who does what. In this dimension, we know who is accountable for something by searching for the name(s) listed against it. But accountability is also a **verb**. It's the **conversation** we hold to clarify expectations, explore opportunities, and make joint decisions, particularly when we are not sure exactly where the noun accountability resides. It's a continuous process of working together as members of an organisation to find the best and most efficient outcome for the work we do.

Importantly, we can't have one without the other. They are mutually enabling.

Noun

What it looks like:
- Clear who is assigned to what tasks
- Agreement on what "done" looks like
- Shared view on who to go to for what

Where we fall short:
- Ambiguous who owns what
- Misalignment in what "done" looks like
- Unclear decision-making rights

Verb

What it looks like:
- Interest in finding the best process
- People leaning in to get work done
- Open communication on filtering tasks and opportunities

Where we fall short:
- Weaponising labels and categories
- "It's not my job"
- Disinterest in broader organisational goals
- Throwing work "over the fence" to other teams, paying little attention to hand-offs

While we need both types of accountability, we most typically fall short in the verb version. Leaders tend to focus on getting the parts of their organisation running smoothly, while placing less attention on how the parts should or could work together. Similarly, teams can tend to focus overwhelmingly on optimising their own part, whilst downplaying how this interacts and is interdependent with others' work. This emphasis on the components of the organisation rather than the relationships between them manifests in a concept of accountability as more a noun than a verb.

This tendency becomes less surprising when we step back to reflect on how we have been culturally conditioned to think. In Western cultures, research has shown that there is a tendency to focus predominantly on categories rather than relationships. We are more likely to analyse tasks or objects in accordance with their properties rather than how they are placed contextually. On top of this cognitive bias, the way incentive schemes work only pushes us further towards the noun version, with KPIs and other formal target and incentive measures routinely tied to role titles and definitions.

The unfortunate result of all this can be that nobody leans into take responsibility for problems, opportunities, and tasks that are critical to group success.

Environments of Accountability

Putting this dual understanding of accountability into practice in an organisation is not always easy. There are common factors which can enable (and block) accountability as a verb. Let's take a look at some:

Where we've seen this work:

- During the pandemic, we observed leaders and teams within large organisations come together in new ways to deliver under immensely challenging circumstances. Faced with unprecedented, multifaceted challenges that rendered their formal roles and titles less important, leaders and teams leaned into joint accountability for the good of the whole. We still hear leaders in these organisations reminisce today about how their teams worked together to deliver beyond expectations and tackle extraordinary challenges, united and energised by a compelling shared mandate.

- Outside of a crisis, we notice that teams and organisations with a strong shared purpose and a culture of holding candid yet caring conversations are more likely to practice accountability as a verb. These are the leaders and teams whose first instinct, when faced with unique and ambiguous challenges, is to build coalitions and lean into collaborative conversation to get the right outcome, rather than to figure out "who should be doing what" based on pre-defined roles and remits. This isn't always easy: doing so often requires us to enter the "danger zone" of productive conflict, and so teams with high psychological safety and a strong focus on collective results are best placed to do it well.

When we've seen it collapse:

- Under certain pressures (and absent a sufficiently compelling higher purpose), teams are more likely to turn inward and adopt a scarcity mindset about work. This occurs, for example, around budgeting time of year. We also see it when teams have no slack in their planning. There's a tendency to seek sanctuary in established definitions in response to their limited time and resources – e.g. "that's not really what we do, it must be someone else's remit".

- It is not uncommon for team members to worry about going out on a limb to help outside of their subject matter specialty. A fear of "getting it wrong" in a new area makes us hesitant to lean in – e.g. "I haven't worked on this before, I don't want to create more problems."

- More cynically, this can happen when people want to pick what they work on – e.g. "I don't want to do that boring stuff, it's not my role."

Finding the Balance

So, short of a crisis, how do we find balance between the noun and verb of accountability?

- **Ground stories and conversations in shared purpose** – Wherever possible, speak to the higher purpose of the organisation and share stories that depict the success of the whole. When singling out high-performing individuals and teams, remember to connect their achievements to a bigger picture in ways that elicit feelings of shared success

- **Set team targets** - make people dependent on each other's success through KPIs and targets that reward collaborative outcomes.

- **Explore cultural levers** – it's impractical and infeasible to fully align KPIs and other formal incentives across teams, and so cultural levers are integral to encouraging people to take responsibility for what happens between the components of an organisation (beyond their own part). Being purposeful in role modelling, recognising, and appreciating behaviours that reach across silos, such as building strong informal relationships and initiating conversations and collaboration between teams, will help to cultivate the practice of accountability as a verb

- **Make it safe to explore new areas** – through role modelling and starting the conversation, make it know that helping out – even when it's not your area – is encouraged

- **Conclude with who is doing what** – always, always, always be clear on responsibilities at the end of a conversation so that the noun accountability is completely unambiguous

- **When in doubt, have the conversation** – default to holding conversations across teams and functions, demonstrating to all that we need to take responsibility not just for the parts of the organisation, but what happens between them

Accountability is not something we can set and forget. Whilst assigning formal accountability (the noun) is essential, ongoing accountability conversations are the lifeblood of a well-functioning organisation that is working together for a greater purpose.

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