

THE GROWTH OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY ¹

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PROJECT MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY CHALLENGE _____

We all use words and expressions to say things that are important to us and have a specific meaning to us as we use them. Unfortunately, the same words and expressions can be interpreted differently by others that hear the words and expressions. A classic example is when the word “accountability” is used in a project management environment. Accountability in project management has undergone several meaning changes over the past several decades and eventually helped generate significant improvements that are now used in project management practices.

This challenge is also seen in the potential missed opportunity when not comprehending the difference between accountability and responsibility. This is coupled with the complexity in how these two words are used across global languages. Another word that might have to be considered in the mix is the word “ownership.”

BACKGROUND TO PROJECT MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY _____

Most definitions of accountability include wording such as “a willingness to accept responsibility for one’s performance.” Responsibility is the major component of accountability. You cannot have accountability without responsibility, but you can have responsibility without accountability.

In the early years of project management, especially for contractors that relied upon competitive bidding success on government contracts to support their organizations, accountability was non-existent. Salespeople believed that they had exclusive rights to handle all communications with clients. Salespeople measured project success by the size of the bonuses they received for work they brought into the firm, even if the client was unhappy with the deliverables. Almost all project managers were engineers who defined success in technical terms only, regardless of the number of often unnecessary scope changes and final project costs that elongated the schedules and increased the budgets by several hundred percent. Salespeople refused to allow project managers to communicate with clients for fear of having to share bonuses with them. Project managers

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were not allowed to make business-related decisions. Sponsors were assigned from the senior levels of management to make business-related decisions. Sponsors defined success as not being personally blamed for any project that may have been unsuccessful.

When projects got into trouble, salespeople blamed the project managers who then blamed the functional managers for assigning the wrong workers. Executives were also criticized for not being more involved in projects and possibly making the wrong decisions. Finger-pointing for transferring blame to others appeared everywhere. Simply stated, accountability was nonexistent.

Senior management tried to enforce a policy where everyone maintained some degree of responsibility. Unfortunately, workers felt the pressure of responsibility but at the same time did not believe they were accountable. The resistance to acceptance of accountability resulted in more damage than cost overruns, schedule slippages, and loss of business. Everyone felt responsibility but not accountability. As referenced in Figure 1, the result was finger-pointing and placing blame on others for being lazy or incompetent. This dilutes accountability and sets an unhealthy culture for the program and project teams that directly affects the potential of success.



Figure 1 – Finger-Pointing and Diluting Accountability

<https://pixabay.com/photos/pointing-gesture-confrontation-6043176/>

THE NEED FOR IDENTIFYING RESPONSIBILITY GROWS _____

Both customers and contractors realized quickly the need to clearly identify responsibilities for certain team members as well as governance personnel. Stakeholders and clients wanted to talk directly to people responsible for doing the work rather than having the answers to all questions filtered through the sales force.

The Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) appeared to be the ideal means for assigning responsibilities to the workforce. Alongside each work package or major element of work in the WBS would be the name of the person ultimately responsible for performing the work.

Companies began creating and sharing with clients Responsibility Assignment Matrices (RAMs) and Linear Responsibility Charts (LRCs) showing who is responsible for each element of work. Unfortunately, when problems occurred, things still did not change much. There was still finger pointing and trying to blame others.

What companies soon realized was that workers will not feel totally accountable for the responsibilities they are assigned unless they also have sufficient decision-making authority to enforce the responsibilities. Simply stated, in equation format:

$$\text{Accountability} = \text{Responsibility} + \text{Decision-Making Authority}$$

Accountability is when people have the right to make decisions, rather than having decisions made for them, and they then accept **ownership**. Accountability includes selecting or requesting the right resources, negotiating for the right commitments, resolving behavioral issues that may come up, solving problems, and defining success for the work you are responsible for. To accept accountability for these items, you need authority. Otherwise, you have just responsibility and may not be able to get team members to live up to their commitments or stakeholder expectations. This clear accountability is the key to owning the successful completion of outcomes and to achieving value.

THE GROWTH OF INFORMED DECISION-MAKING _____

Decision-making authority requires that you have the right information at the right time to make the correct decision. Making an informed decision requires access to the people that possess critical information. Accountability must include access to the sources of information for informed decision-making to take place.

The need for informed decision-making resulted in the development of the RACI matrix (**R**esponsible, **A**ccountable, **C**onsulted, and **I**nformed). The RACI matrix made it clear that project managers and people held accountable for portions of the work need not be engineers or experts in the project's technology. The focus is on the timely sharing of information and decision-making. The RACI matrix eliminated much of the finger-pointing and assignment of blame to others. All members of the project team, stakeholders, and corporate governance personnel now understood:

- Who is **responsible** for major and even minor elements of work

- Who is **accountable** for ensuring the work is accomplished
- Who may be responsible for providing information for decisions and must be **consulted** and participate in decision-making, if necessary
- Who must be periodically **informed** of status

The use of the RACI matrix, especially when combined with other project management tools such as the WBS and new methodologies such as Agile and Scrum, have provided significant benefits and improved our understanding of accountability. Some of the benefits we have recognized related to accountability include:

- Elimination of guesswork, confusion and bottlenecks
- Problems surface quickly
- Ownership of elements of work become quite clear
- More team members are delivering on their commitments
- Decisions are being made by the right people
- Success is more easily defined and measurable
- Significant increase in effective communication and collaboration
- Significant growth in empowerment, trust and supporting one another
- Reduction or elimination of micromanagement project leadership practices
- Team members have a better understanding of their role and are willing to accept ownership even for unfavorable results

For years, companies relied upon fear-based accountability where team members would accept accountability mainly if threatened with punishment if they did not achieve the desired results. Accountability expectations succeed when team members accept ownership and a culture is developed based upon collaboration, trust, clarity, experimentation, and shared responsibilities among team members. The result is usually sustainable accountability.

THE GROWTH OF ACCOUNTABILITY _____

Building an environment to support accountability takes time. Some of the steps that can be used include:

- Set clear expectations, if possible, for the work to be performed
- Make sure all team members understand their roles and responsibilities
- Develop a RACI matrix
- Conduct regular meetings to ensure accountability compliance rather than waiting for problems to surface
- Establish a culture where people feel safe expressing ideas, asking questions, and not being punished for admitting mistakes

When everyone understands their roles, responsibilities, and decisions they must make, finger-pointing is eliminated or minimized. Role clarity is the building block for accountability. Role clarity also includes upwards accountability where executives understand their role in assisting teams to resolve challenges, provide support for necessary funding changes, and recognize that some projects are high risk and may fail. Team members then understand that strategic oversight and feedback from above are attributes of effective accountability and achieving meaningful outcomes.

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS TEAM ACCOUNTABILITY _____

Previously, we discussed LRCs, RAMs and RACI matrices. These tools were designed to help individual team members to take ownership for their actions and results. The focus was on personal accountability. Another related topic which is often overlooked is team accountability where the entire team must accept accountability for success even though they most likely have personal accountability roles.

Team accountability requires the building of a project culture based upon ownership, trust, and recognition of achievements. The project culture is based upon clarity, trust, and collaboration where everyone feels motivated to perform at their highest level of expectation. Team accountability also allows the team to actively participate in project decision-making. Team accountability begins with individual accountability where everyone knows what their responsibilities are, confusion is lessened, and team members do not blame others if things go poorly. Many of the behavioral topics discussed in project management textbooks, such as leadership, team member engagement practices, walk-the-halls-management, and working with underperforming team members focused upon team member engagement practices to encourage individual accountability. These topics should also be practiced throughout the life of the project to obtain team accountability. Everyone must be fully committed to making success happen.

THE PATH FORWARD _____

Understanding the challenges associated with maturing the practice of accountability and the criticality of individual and team accountability are foundational elements of the Human Intelligence going into the highly digitalized projects future. As highlighted in Figure 2, there are multiple focus areas that project leaders and team members should consider to ensure clarity, fluidity of project work, and increasing the potential of projects' success:



Figure 2 – Building the Ownership Muscle

- With the clear success destination, teams own the need to clarify expectations, address necessary capabilities, and have the critical dialogues to support what is required for the project to be successful and who is the best position to take on the matching roles to meet that success
- Prioritization of taking the time to invest in building the proper RACI at the various levels of work details as necessary, and guided by a well-structured WBS as possible, is foundational to success. Using the RACI as a contract with individuals across the team, provides the human glue for project success. This is especially critical as we utilize more and more of AI capabilities, in order to ensure that key work packages and their success will not fall through the cracks
- Given that the project environment is highly uncertain and strategic shifts will happen and could affect the view of success and directional clarity, the project team should remain fluid with their roles and responsibilities. This requires us to keep the RACI as a dynamic guide and tool, and that we scan emerging risks to guide necessary changes along the way
- And since culture eats strategy for breakfast, as Peter Drucker highlighted, the must-have for any of these practices to stick and create lasting impact, is to invest in building an ownership culture where there is an acknowledgment of the strategic importance of the maturity of this accountability topic and the supporting organizational change management and healthy behaviors required to support sustaining this ownership clarity muscle into the future.

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Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at

Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.
- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.

- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

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In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the \$40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

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