The Difference between "Responsibility" and "Accountability"

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Have you ever been engaged in a discussion about the difference between "responsibility" and "accountability"? I'll speculate the conversation arose because neither was being satisfied adequately.

My experience has been that the topics aren't even raised if desired outcomes are being satisfied and especially exceeded. Both terms deal somewhat with expectations. If the anticipated results are not achieved, and especially if the expected process is not followed, questions about "Who is responsible?" and "Who is accountable?" are inevitable. There is energy to pin down the "Who?" Why is that?

We look for the right person to answer questions about the unfulfilled expectations. Since words are merely symbols of concepts, different people have their perceptions of the meanings of the two words.

To my knowledge, there is no accepted clear differentiation. If any readers know of such an unquestioned distinction, please send an e-mail and I will share the information in a future article and on my website. Meanwhile, I'll offer some delineations that have been meaningful to me.

Responsibility seems to be the broader of the two terms. Accountability seems to be narrower in focus and more explicitly defined, even to the point of comparing outcomes to expected specific measures.

Responsibility is the term that seems to be used in advance of an event or obligation. The reference is typically that a person is responsible "for" some expectation being achieved.

Accountability is the term that seems more often to be raised after an event or obligation. The reference is typically that the person is accountable "to" someone for having achieved (or not) some outcome.

Responsibility is the word describing the person or group who will ensure the work is done as expected. Accountability is the word that pinpoints the person or group who will "make good" (or take the blame for) any work that was not performed or performed inadequately.

With this concept in mind, some people claim that a leader (at any level) may delegate responsibility yet remains accountable to someone (an internal or external customer) to ensure that the quality and quantity of work are adequate.

A person typically takes responsibility. A person is typically held accountable.

This concept denotes a difference in internal vs. external motivation and approval. A person who assumes responsibility typically does so based on a sense of personal ownership and commitment. Someone who is held accountable is subject to the guidance and limitations defined by someone else.

Similarly, responsible individuals feel they have the authority to act on their own. Accountable individuals feel they must check with or obtain the approval of someone else before taking action.

I also sometimes find myself being seduced into debates about the differences between leading and managing. Those, too, are hard to differentiate, as there is such a strong overlap between them. Realistically, no leader is devoid of managing, and no manager is relieved of leading.

However, as I think of "responsibility," it seems to correlate more closely with leading (doing the right things). Managers of processes seem to think more frequently in terms of their own "accountability" or that of their direct reports (doing things right).

I imagine you might disagree with some (and maybe a lot) of the above. If you do, please articulate your thoughts, and then share them with me. More than any article I've written over the past eleven years, this one is intended to evoke thought and comment. I welcome your greater clarity on this topic!

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