Accountability vs. Responsibility
Success Culture™ Beliefs & Models

Accountability vs. Responsibility
private distinction

The need for a distinction
In the world at large, many speakers use these words interchangeably, with confusing results. Further, responsibility has alternate meanings which are themselves distinct, leading to imprecision in its use. At least one of these alternate meanings of responsible involves the concept of accountability within it, a clear source of confusion. Accountable is also sometimes used to indicate responsibility, adding to the confusion.

In Success Culture™ we create a private distinction, so that the words accountability and responsibility may be perceived to have single and distinct meanings. In order to be clear in the use of each, we first clarify the definition of each.

Definitions

- **Accountability**
  
  \[n.\] is the quality or state of being subject to giving a statement or explanation of one’s activities, conduct, and discharge of commitments and duties, or of underlying or explanatory reasons, causes, grounds or motives.

  When I say that someone demonstrates a high degree of accountability to his or her commitments, I mean that he or she clearly explains how and why a particular commitment was upheld or broken—accounting for his/her choices. When I speak of holding someone accountable, I am inviting them to provide me with a detailed explanation of the discharge of their commitments and agreements.

  Accountability is neutral—it involves neither blame or punishment. It describes a quality that may or may not be found in a person, group or process. It is not a comment about how well or poorly a person upholds commitments; rather it is about how clearly and willingly that person accounts for [reports on] their actions and choices.

- **Responsibility**

  \[n.\] is the quality or state of being answerable as the primary source, cause, motive or agent of something – used with for (“She bears responsibility for her choice to react in that way.”)

  This is an intentionally narrow definition, based on a single meaning and use of the word responsible. The definition specifically excludes uses that refer to the reliability of a person, the moral/ethical quality of behaviors, or accountability.
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When I say that someone is *responsible*, I mean that I am declaring that person to be the primary cause of something. I am saying that they are the creator and author of it through their choices. I make no comment on the quality, usefulness, or advisability of that choice.

*Responsibility* in this sense is value-neutral—it is not about assigning blame or credit, nor is it a comment about how well or poorly a person behaves. It simply relates to the source of a choice or action.

**Distinction**

While both words deal with actions and choices, *responsibility* is about assigning causality to a person, group or thing. It is a way of saying, “you are the creator of ‘X’ through your choices.” *Accountability* is about what sequence of actions and choices actually came to pass. It is a way of saying, “as the party *responsible* for the choices leading up to ‘X’, I will now be *accountable* by reporting the choices I made.”

*Responsibility* locates causality for choices. *Accountability* is the ability to report accurately and neutrally on a sequence of choices.

**Examples of Success Culture™ usage**

The engineering team is *responsible* for the design of the collapsed bridge. The highway department expects some *accountability* around their actions and decisions.

He was being *accountable* to himself when he looked at the choices that led him into bankruptcy. In doing so, he acknowledged his *responsibility* for those choices.

**Examples of common usage**

“He behaved responsibly in the situation.” Responsible is used here as an evaluation of behavior against norms, one of its alternate meanings.

“I am going to hold him accountable for ramming into the back of my car!” Accountability is used here to mean retribution, punishment or blaming—a misusage.

“He’s not very responsible.” Responsible is used here to comment on overall morality or reliability of an individual, again an alternate meaning.

“She is accountable for our losses this quarter.” While this *could* be correct usage, based strictly on outer form, when used this way it often means responsibility plus blame. This is easily confused.

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Consequences of imprecise usage

When accountability and responsibility become confused, each loses its usefulness to precisely distinguish between the concepts of: a.) the causality of “X”; and b.) explaining the sequence of choices and actions that led to “X”. This creates an opportunity for mis-communication between speaker and listener. If I am speaking about the causality of “X”, and you think I’m talking about assigning blame, we’re confused.

A common consequence of this confusion is for listeners to react defensively—they may fear being blamed, or having their morality or reliability questioned in a way that feels threatening. When they react defensively, they usually stop listening, and go further into their individual belief systems for interpretations, creating a wider gap in the communication.

Consequences of precise usage

When I use the word responsible precisely with another person who understands the private distinction, I can talk about the causality of an event separate from explanation or motivation. This provides a neutral [non-reactive] environment for determining ownership of causality.

Once responsibility has been correctly established, I can begin to discuss accountability. When I use the word accountable precisely, I can talk about the “how and why” of an event separate from an evaluation or interpretation of motivation and “good- or bad-ness.” This provides a neutral environment for collecting data uncolored by fear of blaming or judgment.

The primary consequence of applying responsibility and accountability in this way is to provide a more-solid ground for interpretation of the meaning and usefulness of the event. If the data are uncolored by fear, a conclusion about the data will likely be more neutral as well. Future choices are more likely to be useful as a result.

Precise usage provides a powerful tool to “tease apart” the sometimes-tangled strands of causality, eventuality, and rationale, to create a deeper understanding of the event.

REFERENCES:

Success Culture™ Glossary
Personal Responsibility
Survival Value and Learning

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