



# The Accountability Mess

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**W**hile getting corporate accountability and government accountability in place to rectify some past ills is a topic of great concern these days, the means to go about it espoused by Parliamentarians, public servants, some business people and reporters, appears to be poorly constructed. The consequence of questionable approaches to accountability will likely lead to more red tape, more constraints, worse results and even less accountability.

## 1. Accountability Defined

To start, we need to ask: What is accountability? Simply put, accountability is having a person agree to: "I understand my role; I know what I am supposed to deliver; I know the reward I will get for doing it and I agree that my survival on the job depends on these parameters." Implied in that simple statement is a flow chain consisting of a feedback loop with measurement accompanied by a fair reward and punishment system.

Poor accountability is with us everywhere. Perhaps it is best manifested by a measure of the public's disappointment. Look where the public pain lies and you will be staring at accountability run amuck. For example, public disappointment abounds with the medical care system, the school system, Parliament, city governments, other governments, some businesses etc. The greater the public pain the odds are, the greater the divergence from true accountability. On the other hand look where the public's enthusiasm lies: books, movies, entertainment, electronic devices and food. Within these domains reside much better accountability systems.

## 2. The Basic Rules

We can define the 17-step accountability chain – but not in a short essay. So let us look at some key parameters that capture the essence of accountability.

**A person must agree to it:** Unless you have the person's full agreement to the system and the measures within it, you cannot have accountability. Therefore it has to be designed for each individual with the person as an active, willing, contributing participant. They must see the benefit of it to themselves.

**A person must have control:** A person can only be held responsible for things over which that person has control. Once the control lies in

the hands of someone else, somewhere else, the 'accountable' individual cannot be deemed to be truly responsible. Thus, avoid using 'allocated' accounts.

**Measurement must capture the essence of it:** Every job is infinitely complex, so its description and its measurement could be equally complex. Brevity of this paper does not allow us to fully describe measurement, but keep in mind two things. (1) The measure must be about what the individual is supposed to deliver to the 'customer' which most times is the person's boss. (2) Ideally keep it to one or two items to be measured that cover 80% of what the person is supposed to do. "What one or two items, if you deliver them consistently as expected, will make your boss deliriously happy?"

**Measurements must be gather-able and simple:** It is one thing to agree to a measure, but it must come forward regularly without obstruction or difficulty. Also, it must be simple so that you know if you have it, your boss knows if you have it and your co-workers know too.

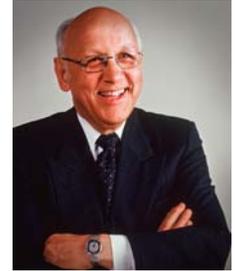
**There must be feedback:** Once the measure comes, an ongoing indication of by how much it exceeds or is short of expectations must be provided to the individual in an indisputable manner.

**The accountability should be expandable:** Having established accountability for one person, you should be able to expand it to the group, to the department and to the company.

## 3. Conclusion

Accountability systems are totally achievable in any work domain if there is the political will to put them in place.

Good luck!  
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