Accountability: More Than a Buzzword

Evan Abbott, M.A., SPHR; S-CP
I. TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

The workplace abounds with slang, acronyms, and business jargon. We use these in order to emphasize a point, quicken our speech, and occasionally, in an attempt to sound intelligent and contemporary. However, many of these phrases and terms have been given the (unfortunate?) distinction of graduating to a new level of vocabulary: the Buzzword. A buzzword is a word (or phrase) that through overuse or misuse has lost its meaning or has become fashionable to say, regardless of accuracy. Forbes recently identified the worst buzzwords and phrases in today’s workplace. They include: Buy-In, Core Competencies, Lane of Traffic, Laser Focus, Empower, Drinking the Kool Aid, Bleeding Edge, Tiger Teams, Lots of Moving Parts, Scalable, Best Practice, Outside the Box, Ducks in a Row, Ecosystem, Leverage, Vertical, Full Service, Drill Down, It is What it Is, Robust, Take Offline, Synergize, Learnings, Monies, Reach Out, Hard Stop, Take it to the Next Level, Out of Pocket, Window of Opportunity, and Low Hanging Fruit. If a small blush of self-acknowledgement came across your face as you read this, do not be too hard on yourself. Most of us are guilty of uttering a few of these on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, a critical word is poised to become the newest addition to this list: Accountability. We hear the word so frequently, it’s on the verge of overuse—and potential ridicule. Just listen to the news. Someone or some entity seems to always be on the hot seat (another buzzword) for something that went wrong. Corporate accounting scandals, economic downturns, political dramas and other recent events all ask the question “Who is accountable?” “Whose responsibility was it?” and “How will they be punished?” Most people view accountability as something that happens to them when performance wanes, goals are not met, or results fail to materialize. In fact, many think accountability only crops up when something goes wrong or when someone else wants to pinpoint the cause of the problem, all for the sake of assigning blame and pointing the finger. However, when things are rolling along smoothly and failure has not yet derailed our efforts, people rarely ask, “Who is accountable for success?” It seems that only when the train jumps the track (another buzzphrase) does anyone start looking around for the responsible party. The tone seems to be increasingly one of “If we can find someone to blame—to be accountable, then all will be well … and we can move on to the next scandal or drama.” This is not what accountability is intended to be.

II. THE CONTEXT OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is one of those golden concepts that no one can be against. It is a word which a few decades ago was used only rarely and with relatively restricted meaning. Now it is increasingly included in any number of settings and contexts. A multitude of authors and consultants position their solution to creating fully accountable organizations and employees. The demand for accountability comes from external groups such as the government, media, and the public, as well as internal groups such as boards, leadership teams, and cross-
departmental relationships. Declining revenue and increasing demand for cost control, rising client awareness and demands, strong market forces, and growing political pressures are some of the dynamics that influence demand for greater accountability from all kinds of organizations.

Despite increasing attention to accountability and its enforcement, it is one of the least consistent of all the words that have found their way into the lexicon of the workplace. The concept continues to be a dilemma; it is largely undefined in theory, hard to implement, and difficult to assess in practice. There is no general consensus about its definition or standards for what it means to be accountable. The term has multiple meanings that differ from role to role, time to time, place to place, and speaker to speaker. The concept of accountability has increasingly become ambiguous and ill-structured. Some writers interpret accountability narrowly as “answerability” to a higher authority for one’s actions or behaviors. Others view accountability as a moral and ethical discipline that assumes willingness to take responsibility for decisions and resultant consequences. Still others define accountability as meeting the performance expectations of multiple stakeholders and a sense of ownership. The resulting confusion often makes the topic appear unclear and ill defined, and that much more difficult to implement.

So for individuals and organizations who genuinely want to be more accountable, what should they do? How do organizations best define, implement, cultivate, encourage, and measure accountability without slipping into the Buzz Zone? Understanding the variety of definitions attached to accountability, as well as elements which inhibit and support it in an organization’s culture can allow even the most buzz-worthy of businesses to take it from concept into application. Building accountability across an organization is entirely possible, but first it is helpful to make sure everyone is using the same vocabulary.

Grammar Geeks Unite: Defining Accountability

In the world of grammar and semantics (the study of the meaning of words) a polyseme is a word which has the capacity for multiple meanings based on the context and usage of the word (not to be confused with a homonym—a word that is said or spelled the same way as another word but has a different meaning—did I write that right? Are you getting flashbacks of 8th Grade English class yet?). Accountability has become the newest polyseme in a growing dictionary of workplace vocabulary. Depending on the article you read, the class you take, or the expert you consult, accountability seems to mean different things to different people in different contexts. Let’s enjoy a small sampling:

★ According to Webster’s Dictionary, accountability is defined as, “subject to having to report, explain, or justify: being answerable, responsible.” Notice how the definition begins with the words “subject to,” implying little choice in the matter. This confession-oriented and powerless definition suggests what we all have observed—accountability viewed as a consequence for poor performance, a principle you should fear because it can only end up hurting you.

★ Researcher Samuel Paul (1991) defines accountability as “holding individuals and organizations responsible for performance.” Similar to the Webster’s definition, note the importance of the action of some outside agent ensuring that responsibility is taken.
∗ Researcher G.W. Jones (1992) further expands on these expectations in his definition. Accountability is “the process of being called ‘to account’ to some authority for one’s actions.” Accountability is also defined as the implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one’s beliefs, feelings, and actions to others. Accountability has to do with acceptance of responsibility, and answerability. It is a general term for any mechanism that makes institutions and individuals responsive to their particular publics. From his perspective, accountability serves as a conceptual umbrella that covers various other distinct concepts, such as transparency, equity, efficiency, responsiveness, responsibility, and integrity. Accountability is applicable in every direction, whether it is upwards, downwards, inwards, or outwards.

∗ Roger Connors, Tom Smith and Craig Hickman, authors of The Oz Principle, take a much more personal and pragmatic approach to defining accountability. They define it as “a personal choice to rise above one’s circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for achieving desired outcomes—to See It, Own It, Solve It, and Do It.” Accountability is something you choose to exhibit—it is not assigned to you. You can be given responsibility, but you have to take accountability.

∗ Finally, Linda Galindo, author of “The 85% Solution” defines accountability as consisting of three facets: 1) being responsible for all of your choices before you know the outcome of your actions; 2) maintaining a mindset of ownership and empowering yourself to succeed in the face of risk; and 3) demonstrating a willingness to answer for your outcomes after the fact without fault, blame, or guilt. According to Galindo, these facets are inseparable. You can’t have one without the other two and still call yourself accountable.

Notice the conflicting elements of these varying definitions. Is accountability a proactive or reactive state? Is it internally driven or is it externally enforced? Can one act as an owner, but not be accountable, or vice versa? And how is accountability similar to responsibility? How is it different? The questions go on and on with very little consistency across the experts to provide a clear direction. Outlining the various parts of accountability can begin to feel like diagraming the sentences of a 10th grade thesis paper.

Synonyms no more: Responsibility vs. Accountability

A synonym is a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase. Click on your synonym feature in Microsoft Word after typing the word “accountability” and the first word is answerability. The second word is responsibility. Even your computer identifies responsibility and accountability as interchangeable. However, not everyone does.

Recalling the earlier definitions, researchers on the topic of accountability find agreement on differentiating responsibility from accountability. Both Connors et. al. and Galindo see responsibility as the proactive mindset taken by an individual prior to their actions with accountability being more of the reactive state once the consequences of actions (good, bad or indifferent) are known. Responsibility is not something you do; rather, it’s a way of thinking and a way of being. There are no rules that govern the correct way to be responsible for your actions; rather, it’s a frame of mind. You are responsible. You decide to accept that responsibility. You believe that the success or failure of your actions is up to you, even if you’re working with lots of other people. Personal responsibility is a “before-the-fact” mindset of
personal ownership and commitment to a result. It is a conscious recognition of the ownership and impact of one’s choices, behaviors, and actions.

Researchers Brees and Martinko (2015) expand this distinction to how others assign personal judgments of responsibility to others and evaluate “who is responsible” and “who should be held accountable.” Judgments of responsibility are assessments of who or what caused an event or outcome. The basic human urge to ascribe causality for events is instinctual and results from a desire to anticipate and predict future events and choose productive response strategies. If a manager assigns responsibility for a set of job tasks to an employee, she can be reasonably confident that the outcomes of that task are a direct result of the employee’s action or inaction. The need for this kind of predictability is the cornerstone of most relationships. In organizations, personal causality attributions for outcomes are important because they often inform when and how people are evaluated and how rewards and punishments are distributed.

However, different from responsibility, judgments of accountability refer to the consequences (good or bad) that should be assigned for a behavior or outcome. People are held accountable for the accomplishment or lack of fulfillment of social obligations, duties, and expectations. These perspectives are the “shoulds and oughts” that most social systems rely on. People should engage civilly and respectfully with one another. When assigned a task, one ought to complete it to the best of his or her ability. If there is a discrepancy between the actors’ behavior and observers’ “ought beliefs,” a psychological state of tension is incurred, which leads to the evaluation and judgment of others.

According to Brees and Martinko the law provides a metaphor to distinguish between these judgments of responsibility versus accountability: a judgment or responsibility is the verdict of either guilty or innocent, whereas a judgment of accountability is the sentencing of punishment. They go on to say that “life is a courtroom where interpersonal dramas are played out and where we judge one another, gather information to determine causality and responsibility, allow for self-defense, pass sentences, consider parole, and so on.” While judgments of responsibility and accountability are likely interrelated in the context of judgments at work, there are frequent instances where one does not necessarily lead to the other. For example, John may be responsible for not complying with customers’ demands but may not be held accountable because the store was unusually busy at the time. There are also situations where people are held accountable when they are not responsible. For example, Mike may be held accountable for losing a customer account when the actual event was a result of his employees’ negligence.

Distinguishing responsibility from accountability may seem like a bit of wordsmithing, but it’s important. Words matter, especially as we use them to communicate thoughts, ideas, concepts, and expectations in the workplace. In order to be responsible, you need to own your decisions fully. In order to own your choices, you need to be clear about what you are choosing. In order to be clear, you need to ask a lot of questions. The most direct route to accountability and all that goes along with it involves taking the risk to be clear about what you expect and about what is expected of you. The source of most conflict is a missed expectation. Clearly distinguishing responsibilities (both personal and of others) is the foundation of the employer-employee relationship. Knowing and trusting who is responsible for what at the beginning of a relationship or task sets the tone for most organizational
interactions. This desire for clarity goes both ways. While employers certainly want employees to follow through on their responsibilities, employees want clarity on the responsibilities of their employer.

So what about accountability? How do we begin to dig through the plethora of definitions in order to develop a common understanding of the term? Perhaps a good place to start is with understanding a little bit of theory … and some building blocks of grammar.

III. ACCOUNTABILITY AS A SUBJECT-OBJECT PAIRING: PRINCIPAL-AGENT THEORY

Traditional grammar defines the object in a sentence as the entity that is acted upon by the subject. There is thus a primary distinction between subjects and objects that is understood in terms of the action expressed by the verb. For example, “The EEOC holds employers accountable to the law.” In this example, the EEOC holds employers accountable. The EEOC is the subject and employers are the object, while “holds” is the verb. Similarly, the principal-agent theory of accountability identifies the relation between a principal and an agent as the core of accountability. Accountability is a relationship where the agent has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the principal can pose questions and pass judgment, and the agent may face the consequences. In our grammar example, the EEOC would be the principal and the employer would be the agent. You might recall the earlier definitions of accountability that reflect this action of holding others accountable. According to this theory, agents (e.g. an employee) are assumed to possess self-interests (e.g. free time, ease of work, etc.) over and above the wishes (e.g. attendance, productivity) of the principal (e.g. a manager) in the absence of threats, sanctions, or inducements. In other words, people possess more complex interests than just the goals and expectations set forward by their organization. Because of this, systems must be put in place that keep individuals focused on and accountable to organizational expectations or those expectations will not be met. Therefore, the core sense of accountability, according to principal-agent theory, is grounded in the sole purpose of making agents act in accordance with the wishes of their principals.

As we think about today’s workplace setting, we are all agents exercising the authority delegated by our employers, managers, public, or government as principals. The beneficiaries to this relationship are government, businesses, social groups, civic organizations, customers, and the general public. Agency theory provides the foundation for the design and implementation of most methods used by government and administrators in professional settings to establish and maintain accountability. Most employment laws originate as a result of some perceived need to hold employers accountable for their actions as it relates to the expectations and treatment of their employees or potential employees. Mechanisms (e.g. regulations) are put into place in order to identify appropriate and inappropriate actions (e.g. refusing to hire someone based on their religion). If the expectations are not met then the principal (e.g. the EEOC) can hold the agent (e.g. the employer) accountable for their actions and potentially inflict consequences. The rationale is that the threat of these sanctions and
knowing the impact of violating the established expectations will keep the agent’s self-serving behavior or bias in check.

The phrase “being held accountable” or “holding someone accountable” is a by-product of principal-agent theory. Accountability, used in this context, represents the idea that behavior is externally driven. In order to ensure compliance with expectations, external monitors, systems, rewards, and punishments must be established. The principal must act in a way that holds the agent accountable for expectations and the agent must ensure satisfaction of the principal.

This “subject-object” definition of accountability provides structure, guidelines and, usually, an objective view of behaviors and consequences. Knowing we must account for our actions to others can often drive behavior toward compliance and completion of required expectations, tasks, and activities. This philosophy often runs at the core of many performance management systems. Knowing a supervisor will require us to account for our actions and activities often provides the structure and motivation many need to be successful and accomplish work goals. Principal-agent theory begins to give us a glimpse of how outside forces maintain accountability in our workplace interactions. While this “outside-in” approach provides some insights, it does not explain all accountability-related behavior. If we edit the sentence a bit, we might look at accountability from the inside out.

IV. ACCOUNTABILITY AS AN ADJECTIVE: STEWARDSHIP THEORY

An adjective is a word or phrase naming an attribute, added to or grammatically related to a noun to modify or describe it. The cat is fat. The dog is loyal. She is accountable. Rather than thinking about accountability as some outcome based on the expectations of an outside entity, accountability can be thought of as an adjective describing the state and intentions of an individual, much like the fat cat and loyal dog. This is the true value and benefit of accountability. It stems from a person’s or an organization’s ability to influence events and outcomes before they happen; to take a more proactive stance rather than a passive one. Accountability thought of as an adjective facilitates this proactive mindset.

The theory that best describes this point of view is the stewardship perspective of accountability. Instead of merely using extrinsic factors to create accountability (as the principal-agent theory suggests), it explains internal factors facilitating accountability, such as self-regulation, self-motivation, commitment, respect, values, and intrinsic locus of control. Stewardship Theory states that individuals are driven by a need to achieve, to gain intrinsic satisfaction through successfully performing inherently challenging work, to exercise responsibility and authority. Stewardship theory particularly emphasizes the importance of an involvement-oriented relationship, one built on trust between the principal and the steward. Stewardship theorists focus on the value of structures that facilitate and empower, rather than monitor and control. According to the theory, involvement is associated with increased skills and autonomy, reduced mismanagement and abuse, and greater pride and commitment at work.
Incorporating stewardship theory creates an effective system which regenerates accountability and reduces growing needs for monitory incentives and external control systems. The organization functions based on transparency, trust, and involvement which creates openness and a sense of ownership at every level of the organization. Peter Block refers to this as organizational stewardship: “to hold something in trust for another; the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control of those around us.” Creating this form of an accountable system makes it self-sustainable. It is not reliant on outside pressures or agencies in order to do what is best. It is an inherent part of the organization and everyone in it. Involvement and trust are highly critical for a stewardship mindset. Embracing the stewardship perspective, accountability can be facilitated more when organizations involve employees and give them sufficient autonomy and discretion. The need for external controls to help ensure that they exhibit “the right behaviors” might be reduced if internal controls can be identified and cultivated. Here, the source of obligation is internal; the individual’s personally endorsed values. This is one of the best ways organizations can increase the number of employees who are motivated to do the right thing even when no one is watching. Stewardship theory encourages organizations to rethink accountability and take a more proactive approach to cultivating it among employees. Organizations need to intentionally build a culture of accountability, in which employees take pride in their work and in the organization’s mission, and hold themselves to high standards of performance on a daily basis. Each employee sees themselves as an owner, a steward of the organization’s success.

Ownership and accountability are the most common threads among the most admired firms. Most admired companies treat their employees exceptionally well, which is a factor in, and a result of, their success. Robert Haas, CEO of Levi Strauss Associates, thinks employee engagement and satisfaction are fundamental to running a strong business. You have to create an environment where everyone feels like a representative of the company. Unless you have people who know what you stand for, and want to make every transaction the best, you’re going to stub your toe.

So what’s the relationship between responsibility and accountability? Is one more important than the other? Are they two entirely different skillsets or just different sides of the same coin? Unfortunately, there is no definitive definition or grammatical rule to answer this question for us. However, we might take a lesson from Saturday morning cartoons.

V. CONJUNCTION JUNCTION: THE POWER OF AND

If you are of a certain age, you remember Saturday mornings and “Schoolhouse Rock.” Children of the ’70s and ‘80s were educated on topics of civics, diversity, science, and grammar all through songs and animation. One of the most well-known was “Conjunction Junction.” In a period of just over three minutes we learned that the role of conjunctions is “hooking up words and phrases and clauses.” The most well-recognized of all conjunctions is “and.” As a term, “and” joins concepts together. Regardless of definition, responsibility and accountability are concepts highly reliant on the conjunction “and.” If you recall Galindo’s definition of
accountability, we can’t have accountability without responsibility. Conners et al. embed the same premise in their combination of actions—“See It, Own It, Solve It, Do It.” Ideally, these are partnered in the best of organizational settings. When you are hired for a job, your manager provides you a list of your duties, also known as responsibilities. She’ll tell you that it is your job to ensure the tasks on the list are completed when due. While you can be assigned a variety of responsibilities, whether or not you are accountable depends on 1) your internal state of drive (stewardship theory) and 2) the interaction between you and your manager (principal-agent theory). In the best of settings, responsibility and accountability act in a partnership which marries the proactive intent or responsibility and the reactive state and actions of accountability. This combination of “being” and “doing” represents accountability at its ideal.

Unfortunately, the ideal is not always reality. Accountable intentions do not always lead to accountable behavior. While it’s no small feat to stand up and say, “I am responsible for this choice even when it produces a bad outcome,” that’s still a lot easier than standing up after everyone knows the outcome is bad and saying “I still own this, even though it’s a disaster. You can hold me accountable. It was my choice. I’m responsible.” The accountable person doesn’t get to change her mind about who is responsible once she learns that she has created a mess.

We face a conundrum. How do we challenge a refusal to be accountable without it turning into a witch hunt? When we as leaders keep pressing to understand why something in our own organization went wrong and what we need to do to stop it from happening again, we find some who deflect the process. However, without an acceptance of responsibility and reflection on what went wrong and why, no one will ever learn and nothing will ever change. So what is it about most organizational systems that interfere with responsibility and accountability operating at their best?

VI. THE APA VS. COMMON VERNACULAR

The American Psychological Association has established a set of writing guidelines used by many academic and research institutions. It’s referred to as APA Style. It involves everything from the appropriate grammatical tenses to the placement of punctuation. One example is the use of contractions. In APA Style it is inappropriate to write “won’t.” The full words—will not—should be written. Why? It makes for more formal, professional, “academic-y” speech. However, one doesn’t need to look very far to see that just because a set of academic guidelines encourage one form of writing, that doesn’t always immediately translate to the real world. Newspapers, emails, professional documents, as well as everyday speech, are littered with contractions. Our common vernacular doesn’t always call for professional speech.

Why the writing style lesson? Practice does not always follow theory. While we can know the best forms for responsibility and accountability to take, these can be prevented by a variety of factors. It’s important for organizations to understand some of the common inhibitors of full accountability in order to turn theory into practice.
Past Imperfect: The Tense of Blame

Past imperfect tense expresses the past as an action which is still going on at the time or a habitual action. “Jane was playing the guitar.” “Spot always slept in the sun.” “That’s how we’ve always done it.” Responsibility and accountability can be quickly undone with just a few phrases. Most of these live in the past imperfect: actions that originate in the past, potentially habitual in nature, living on in the present. Some of the definitions reflected on earlier either explicitly state or imply an element of blame. This “tense of blame” can create an organizational culture that specifically, and unintentionally, discourages people from taking responsibility and feeling accountable for their actions because they are focused on past behaviors and assigning fault.

How does the search for accountability become associated with a culture of blame? Blame seems to have a propensity for resonance. How often do we see a wave of outrage, imputation, and accusation sweep through an organization after the revelation of an egregious act or mistake? Recall earlier when we differentiated responsibility from accountability. After we divide the experienced world into discrete events, actors, and outcomes, we can specify which actor caused what event—the concept of attributability. Each identified outcome or event can be attributed to specific actions of specific individuals. The belief that people’s actions cause events to occur is a precondition for their answerability to others for the resulting outcomes. To examine an event means to examine a collection of individual actions. Under specific conditions people are held responsible with an attribution of responsibility. Attributions of responsibility often lead to blame. When we blame we tend to seek causal explanations for how and why things happen. We make attributions and judgments about: causality (e.g., “Tim’s actions directly led to the outcome”); knowledge (e.g., “He knew exactly what he was doing”); foreseeability (e.g., “He should have known how things would turn out”); and intentionality (e.g., “He meant for this to happen”).

These rationalizations of blame make the situation easier to understand and distance the action and outcomes from ourselves onto another. Blaming provides an early, simple, and artificial solution to complex interpersonal or situational problems. It’s the process of identifying the problem as being in another person. It generates fear, destroys trust, makes further data gathering and analysis difficult, and shifts the burden of seeking true or more complex explanations that may involve owning some of the responsibility oneself.

An organizational culture of blame can have crippling side effects. Blame cultures drive underground the very people with knowledge of what went wrong. Who would want to speak up with fingers at the ready to point and the axe positioned to drop? Blame is most commonly associated with retaliations and punishment. These can be very simple (e.g., being called out in a staff meeting) or complex (e.g., being disciplined, or even fired). Blame and the accompanying threat of punishment and stigmatization activates defensive mechanisms, drives out information about systemic vulnerabilities, stops learning, and undermines the potential for improvement. Blame keeps us all running in place, never moving forward. It takes a lot of energy to figure out who’s to blame, to point fingers, to convince everyone it wasn’t your fault and to make sure someone else takes the fall.

Cultures viewing blame as a synonym for accountability may also engage in any number of dysfunctional organizational behaviors. Blame cultures marginalize cooperative relationships
and decrease transparency. Information sharing with peers or the public is discouraged because of the risks associated with the loss of credit or the assigning of blame. Sharing useful information may allow competitors to reap rewards for an individual’s achievements, and sharing negative information makes one vulnerable to blame. Secrecy is encouraged, and problems are concealed. The desire to avoid the negative consequences of failure can have a tendency to discourage innovation and creativity. It can also stimulate efforts to blame others or circumstances, thus encouraging a vicious circle of blame and avoidance of risk quickly overtaking the culture. Even worse, high-blame cultures play an active role in employees’ considerations of acts of revenge and thoughts of legal action against their employer.

Corpus Juris: Accountability and the Law

The phrase corpus juris is Latin for "body of law." It is the complete collection of laws of a particular jurisdiction or court. It would seem that we can’t adequately discuss accountability in the workplace without acknowledging the impact of the body of law on the topic. By its nature, our legal system is one of accountability. As described earlier, it is a system that defines responsibility and assigns accountability. At its core, it is the physical representation of principal-agent accountability theory in action. Organizations (agents) are held to account to the requirements of various laws and regulatory agencies (principals). Herein lies one of the very real challenges and inhibitors of full organizational accountability.

When many of us think of accountability and employment law, the events of the late 1990s and early 2000s come to mind. In 2002 Congress enacted the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, also known as the Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002. It sets specific mandates and requirements for financial reporting and was the result of a number of scandals that cost investors billions of dollars. The Act is administered by the Securities and Exchange Commission, which sets deadlines for compliance and publishes rules on requirements. However, accountability and employment law started long before 2002. If you have been in the world of management or human resources longer than 20 minutes, you know there are any number of acronyms to which you and your organization are held accountable. The ADA, FMLA, ADEA, EEOC, OSHA, PPACA, and FLSA make up just the beginning of a list of standards and regulations employers must comply with on a regular basis. Each of these represents a set of concepts, beliefs and practices of what it means to have a fair and equal workplace.

When we operate within these guidelines, all is well. When we operate outside of these guidelines (or are perceived to do so), we are made to account for our actions and the resulting consequences. During the process different ‘facts’ emerge according to what lens is applied to the review or investigation of an adverse incident. The accusatory approach used in tort law seeks to find a guilty party so that damages may be awarded and punishment meted out. This tends to dichotomize actions as “right” or “wrong” and individuals or organizations as guilty or innocent. This is referred to as Blame Function Logic (BFL). BFL, by its nature, is one of blame assignment. As identified earlier, blame is one of the biggest dissuaders of accountability. To be accountable for one’s actions, typically results in one outcome—punishment.

None of this is to say that these laws and expectations of accountability are wrong. Each of these laws represents the intent of righting a past wrong or setting an expectation of future behavior—all things critical for maintaining responsibility and accountability. The problem
emerges with a bit of an Accountability Catch-22: Being accountable in the context of employment law means taking responsibility and ownership for one’s actions and their outcomes, as well as the punishment that goes along with them. Most people like to avoid punishment, thus, as a function of the very system, will avoid accountability. It is a fundamental principle of operant conditioning: behaviors that are punished are frequently avoided. In this case, taking ownership and accountability for an illegal act most often results in punishment (e.g., fines and penalties). Blaming and finger-pointing can help avoid the punishment; another operant conditioning principle—behavior that is rewarded is repeated.

Of course, the solution is simple: don’t do anything illegal and there will be nothing to account for. This is the foundational premise of Principal-Agent Theory: the knowledge of eventually being made to account will proactively ensure appropriate behavior, avoiding the need for punishment. If only it were that simple. Because, unfortunately, our final impediment to being a fully accountable organization is the most pervasive of them all.

Avoiding First Person Singular/Possessive: It’s Not My Fault

I, me, my, mine. These are all examples of first person singular and first person possessives. My dog. They’re with me. It’s my responsibility. I’m accountable. Each of these conveys personal ownership. Responsibility and accountability fail to develop in organizations when people avoid first person singular and first person possessive. Even more distressing is when this avoidance turns into excuses and victimhood. We waste valuable time, energy, and resources: ignoring and denying; making excuses; developing explanations; pointing fingers; getting confused; and waiting to see if some miracle will make things better. A fear of failure can create a terrible burden making any steps towards accountability virtually impossible. It seems so much easier to hide in a false sense of security, citing excuses for avoiding the dangers associated with personal ownership.

While often associated with blame, it’s not always the case. The fear associated with accountability and the ease of victimhood has caused any number of people in countless organizations to expend their valuable time and energy justifying their lack of performance with such excuses as “we were over budget, overextended, overloaded, under-informed, underfunded, and underutilized.” Justification then becomes the aim, damaging or replacing a conscientious focus on what else can be done to achieve results.

Do any of these excuses sound familiar?

★ That’s the way we’ve always done it.
★ It’s not my job.
★ I didn’t know.
★ It’s not my fault.
★ That’s not my department.
★ No one told me what to do.
★ I’m waiting for approval.
★ Someone should have told me to do that.
★ Somebody else dropped the ball.
★ Nobody followed up with me so I didn’t think it was important.

Each of these is an example of an avoidance of responsibility and a resistance to being accountable. Where does it come from? For many organizations it comes from a reliance of being told what to do, how to do it, when to do, and don’t ask any questions. Over time, the norm becomes, “Not my responsibility, not my fault. I’ll wait to be told what to do. If it doesn’t turn out well, it’s not on me.” Some of us have probably found ourselves in a similar endless circular pattern of “tell me what to do.” It plays itself out in business every day, as people try to shift accountability by refusing to take responsibility for their future actions. Corporate cultures of the past that relied heavily on a command-and-control model provided a paternalistic approach to employee involvement that promoted this variation of the victim cycle: “You just do what you are told, do it well and we will take care of you for the rest of your life.” Some people still depict their organizations as places where you begin work in the morning by “checking your brain at the front door.” However, most organizations today are fleeing from this “tell me what to do” model in an effort to create an environment that attracts, develops, and retains the best and the brightest people.

There is also a bit of psychology at play when we explore why people do or do not take accountability. In studies of individuals in organizational environments, employees’ response strategies suggest that they think differently when faced with accountability. Researchers found that when people face accountability, they often avoid culpability by engaging in self-protective behaviors. Moral behavior and self-insight research reveals that actors believe their moral character is superior to others (e.g., “I did my best. Other people don’t care as much as I do”); rely on their intentions rather than outcomes when evaluating themselves (e.g., I meant to follow-up! That should count for something!); and disproportionately focus on favorable rather than negative information to explain their failures (e.g., But I was at every meeting. It’s not my fault I didn’t remember that the deadline changed). Therefore, failures that may lead to sanctions heighten individuals’ cognitive processing and defensive posturing behaviors increasing the likelihood that employees rely on situational or external factors to explain their failure (e.g., make excuses).

Falling into the victim cycle from time to time is understandable. It’s human. All of us can feel scared at the potential of failure. But accountable individuals learn to recognize those moments and overcome the fear. Whether this victimhood status is a function of the person, the environment, or a combination of both, a lack of first-person ownership significantly impacts the creation of a fully responsible and accountable organization. Getting past these inhibitors of accountability can be challenge, but it’s not impossible. With a bit of editing, we can bring accountability back from the brink of the buzzword.
VII. THE POWER OF THE SEMICOLON: BUILDING ACCOUNTABILITY

Quick quiz: What’s the purpose of the semicolon? If you answered, “to make the winky-face emoticon” you probably need to revisit an introductory English class. The semicolon is used to join two closely related independent clauses. Accountability, done well, operates in much the same way; it joins organizations, managers and employees together in their accountability efforts. In his best-selling book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen R. Covey discusses the continuum of connectedness of relationships. On the maturity continuum, dependence is the paradigm of you—you take care of me; you come through for me; you didn’t come through; I blame you for the results. It is the mindset of the victimhood. Independence is the paradigm of I—I can do it; I am responsible; I am self-reliant; I can choose. Here we get closer to a mindset of responsibility. Interdependence is the paradigm of we—we can do it; we can cooperate; we can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together. Here we experience full mutual accountability.

The most powerful working environments apply the principles of interdependence and mutual/joint accountability, where people don’t fear accountability but teach and coach each other in order accomplish whatever goals have been set. While each individual is responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and results, each also knows that it takes teamwork and a sense of shared responsibility to achieve overall objectives. For people working in such environments, accountability propels everyone forward. Each individual must account for his or her own mistakes, but each person knows such an accounting will drive forward a better future. In such an environment, people spend less time and fewer resources creating excuses and more time and resources uncovering problems, taking risks, and initiating positive action to solve problems. Learning replaces punishment, success replaces failure, and victimization gives way to accountability. All elements—the organizational culture, management, and each individual—play a role and join together to create accountability at all levels.

Outlines Create “A” Papers: Structure Supports Substance

It took me until my senior year of high school to earn an “A” on a thesis paper (An analysis of The Scarlet Letter ... not bad if I do say so myself). I won’t bore you with all the details. However, one detail is crucial. It only happened because of Ms. Gonzales. She spent the time and effort to reinforce the value of crafting an outline before you write your paper (who knew?!). Other teachers might have said it, but she was the first one I really heard it from. The lesson was clear: preparation and structure support and enhance substance. The same can be said for accountability. If we want accountable employees, there must be a structure in place—modeled, lived, and breathed by the organization—to support it. The organizational culture and philosophy your organization creates around what it means to be accountable will act as that outline or superstructure allowing the substance of accountable employees to shine through.

Not surprisingly, whenever the blame game singles out an individual as the one responsible for poor results, everyone else heaves a sigh of relief now that they’re off the hook. Assigning singular responsibility may comfort the majority, but the fact remains, organizational results
come from collective, not individual activity. Hence, when an organization fails to perform well, it represents, ultimately, a collective or shared failure. Re-visioning accountability as collaborative discourse has the potential to transform it into a productive organizational process that promotes open and transparent relationships. Outcomes are rarely the result of a single individual decision but rather a collective interaction among many actors over time. Collective accountability is based not on a system of required answers to predetermined questions, but on ongoing iterative sharing of understandings, leading to a collective agreement on action. Accountability is not an end in itself, but it is a means to improve.

This form of collective accountability encompasses several core areas of the organization’s culture that define how work gets done within a team and the organization. It is exhibited through:

- People’s commitment to one another
- How they measure and report progress
- How they react when things go wrong
- How much ownership people assume

How an individual, team, or organization operationalizes accountability determines its ability to execute its strategy, achieve results, and benefit from feedback. Accountability affects every task, big or small, within the organization, and how smoothly and productively individuals work together. In organizations that struggle with accountability, employees (and leadership) often will make excuses, blame others, spread confusion about goals, and have an attitude of helplessness. Accountable organizations, meanwhile, foster a sense of reality, ownership, commitment, solutions to problems and determined action.

And just as papers do not write themselves, these kinds of corporate cultures don’t just emerge overnight. They require the conscious attention of every individual—especially those in management and leadership roles.

Time for a Rewrite: Focusing on Principles rather than Principals

Scour the internet and you can find a variety of lists demonstrating the most commonly confused words. Is it “affect” or “effect”? “Their,” “they’re,” or “there”? “Poured” or “pored”? “Accept” or “except”? The list goes on and on. Another example, one particularly connected to accountability, is the difference between principal and principle. As described earlier in principal-agent theory, a principal, used as a noun, refers to the person of highest authority; used as an adjective it identifies what is first in order of importance. In comparison, a principle refers to a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system or belief or behavior or a chain of reasoning.

Traditional management systems, like principal-agent theory, rely on the concept of an employee reporting to a principal, an individual of higher authority—a supervisor or a manager—to be held accountable. In order to develop a culture of increased responsibility and accountability, managers and leaders must rethink their roles and shift from managing as principals to managing with principles. Rather than continuing to enforce accountability as a
kind of damage control or an after-the-fact performance management strategy, reframe it as not only a quality that employees should exhibit in their daily work, but as a larger organizational value demonstrated at every level of the organization in every action. Rewrite the performance management tool and expectation discussions to ones that focus on commonly held principles and values and how those drive behaviors and outcomes.

Holding employees accountable in a positive and principled way creates a positive workplace culture with improved morale, reduced performance gaps, fulfilled expectations, and ultimately, an increase in an organization’s ability to accomplish its strategic goals. If you are a manager or in a management position, displaying the principles of personal accountability will help build a culture of accountability in your organization. Your employees will watch as you create an acceptance and understanding of accountability, and will more than likely follow your actions. Knowing that personal accountability is something that even management is responsible for will help employees feel balanced and bonded through that shared responsibility.

However, just like confusing “affect” and “effect” can happen to even the best of writers, a variety of elements can interfere with manager accountability:

★ The wrong corporate culture. If the organization is not accountable and doesn’t reward accountability in its people, it can be hard for a single manager to be accountable and require his people to be the same.

★ Pressure from above. Sometimes that pressure is for a cover up. Sometimes it is to place the blame for a mistake. Sometimes it is pressure to conform to the culture, if the culture doesn’t reward accountability. Finally, it could be time pressure or just pressure to get things done.

★ Unclear or undefined goals. This lack of clarity could become a point of blame or excuses in later conversations. Ensure that the goals that you set with your employees are clear.

★ Unrealistic goals. Stretch goals are fine, but all goals have to be realistic or people won’t even try to attain them.

★ No measures of success. Whether those measures are quantitative (e.g., a specific quarterly revenue goal) or qualitative (e.g., actions an employee will take to reach out to clients to maintain the relationship), establish some kind of metric. This will help ground performance discussions.

★ Favoritism. We at MSEC see it all the time in Employee Opinion Surveys. At some point someone provides the feedback, “People need to be held more accountable!” While this can sometimes be as simple as the surface statement, it is often a code for something more dark underneath: People are not treated equally. If you’re “in,” you have one set of expectations. If you’re “out,” different rules apply. Managers who play favorites face a credibility issue as it relates to accountability.

★ Fear of confrontation. Accountability discussions can be difficult. Depending on the culture of the organization and the background of the person, even the most well-intentioned, principle-based conversations can sound like blame. Managers who are uncomfortable or unskilled in managing difficult conversations must hold themselves accountable to this skill gap and learn how to approach these conversations.
The most accountable managers recognize that their own behavior models the responsible and accountable principles they expect from others. Some of these actions include:

★ **Saying what they are going to do.** They communicate their plans and decisions, keeping people under and over them informed. They share information in an open and transparent manner.

★ **Doing what they said they would do.** They follow through, linking their actions to their words. They walk the talk.

★ **Explaining promptly when saying and doing don’t align.** They let their employees and others know what happened to prevent them from following through on their word. No excuses—just explanations, owning the outcomes of their choices.

★ **Considering the results of their actions in advance and take responsibility for their actions and mistakes.** In the process they learn from their mistakes and identify specific actions to take in the future.

Finally, remember that although it is okay for a manager to make mistakes, an accountable manager won’t make excuses, point fingers or play the blame game. Even if it is not your fault but falls under your purview, you are accountable for your actions and your team’s actions—for everyone and everything in the area you supervise. When you stand up to accept the accountability, that’s when you are seen as an accountable manager. And of all manager behaviors, this is most likely the one to have the greatest impact on encouraging and creating accountability in others.

**Owning First Person Possessive: Individual Accountability**

If avoiding first person possessive is the grammatical rule of the victim, then truly owning it is the grammatical rule of the responsible and accountable person. This definition includes a mindset or attitude of continually asking “What else can I do to rise above my circumstances and achieve the results I desire?” As defined by Connors, et al., it involves a process of seeing it, owning it, solving it, and doing it, and requires a level of ownership that includes making, keeping, and answering for personal commitments. Such a perspective embraces both current and future efforts rather than reactive and historical explanations.

The **Do It step** bestows accountability, not just for activities, circumstances, or feelings, but for future accomplishment. Doing it requires that individuals continually work to avoid the occurrences inherent in daily circumstances and problems that can tempt them back into victimhood. It requires diligence, perseverance, and vigilance. It also requires a willingness to accept risk and to take the giant step that’s often necessary to achieve organizational goals. Fear of the risk of failing can be so debilitating for many people that they build walls between identifying a solution to an issue and actually implementing it. Fully accountable individuals embrace the responsibility for results and remain answerable for their progress toward those results, regardless of how or why they managed to get into their current situation.

Improving our own accountability is not a simple sentence; it is a complex novel (perhaps the length of War and Peace) with many facets, layers, nuances, twists and turns. The body of knowledge encompassing responsibility and accountability draws from multiple disciplines.
Individuals looking to grow their sense of personal accountability can invest time and development in any of these areas. Some of these disciplines include:

- **Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation.** Principal-Agent theory relies on compliance and external rewards/punishment. This is, practically by definition, a model of extrinsic rewards and punishment—feeling motivated to attain or avoid outside stimuli. Most research supports that extrinsic motivation has limited long-term impact. Being driven simply by the regulations and expectations of outside agencies and influences creates a culture of compliance—following the rules and laws as far as one must. By comparison, intrinsic motivation operates on an internal drive of commitment. While complying with external expectations is seen as important, the dominating drive is one of values and a personal sense of reward. Intrinsic motivators tend to be much more predictive of long-term behavior and sustain commitment behaviors rather than compliance. Truly responsible and accountable individuals find that sense of internal drive and reward . . . even when no one is looking.

- **Internal vs. External Locus of Control.** Developed by Julian Rotter in the early 1950s, the concept of locus of control (LOC) refers to the extent to which individuals believe they can control events affecting them or if they are controlled by those events. Individuals with an external LOC believe the world happens to them with very little control over the resulting circumstances or outcomes. This control belief more easily facilitates a victimhood/low accountability mindset. Individuals with an internal LOC believe they have impact on the world and exert more control on circumstances and outcomes they achieve. Galindo refers to this as “the 85 percent solution.” While no one can control 100 percent of their world, the most personally accountable individuals believe they control at least 85 percent of the outcomes they experience. And while the remaining 15 percent is out of their control, they can control how they respond and adapt to those external events.

- **Emotional Intelligence.** The study of Emotional Intelligence (EI) connects how our emotional system influences, supports, and enhances our decision-making system. Heavily reliant on principles of neuroscience and cognitive psychology, EI links how our emotional brain serves as an adaptive, rational component of our own personal awareness and interpersonal relationships. Two skills critical to both EI and accountability are self-regulation and self-motivation. Originally discussed by Daniel Goleman in his research on EI, he identifies self-regulation as our ability to identify and regulate how our emotional state influences our cognitive state. This self-regulation allows us to choose our behaviors in an informed manner rather than be hijacked by our emotional state. If a particular set of responsibilities is creating a state of doubt and fear, an emotionally intelligent person will identify this emotional state and regulate their thinking in order to prevent destructive behaviors such as procrastination and self-sabotage. Rather, the individual will self-motivate and choose behaviors which create an intrinsic sense of motivation and encouragement. Emotional Intelligence is a core skill for anyone attempting to become more accountable.

- **Feedback.** Individuals truly invested in owning their own responsibilities and becoming more accountable have a high desire for feedback. They invite candid feedback about their performance, facing the truth (both good and bad) rather than hiding from it. These most reflective individuals readily acknowledge that no one is perfect; everyone has room to grow and develop. We can gain great insight from frequent, regular and ongoing feedback from others. Although it can cause a great deal of pain and embarrassment at times, honest inputs help create the accurate picture of reality that lies at the core of accountability. Since no one individual can capture a perfectly accurate description of reality, drawing from many other
people's perceptions can create a more accurate picture. This is where many people engage in 360 feedback devices in order to acquire that most full picture.

A word of caution: Like anything else in life, our desire to become more accountable can be taken too far, turning an asset into a liability. Any virtue or strength taken to an extreme can eventually become a vice that actually gets in the way of achieving the performance and results you desire. Not all variables can be controlled. However, this does not mean one can suffer as a victim of their circumstances. Even in the most difficult, uncontrolled events, individuals can take accountability for how they allow the experience to affect the rest of their lives. Recognizing that you cannot control everything is as much a skill of accountability as is a mindset of ownership. Accountable individuals apply a delicate touch in those situations where things lie completely or partially beyond their control.

**VIII. ENGLISH AS A LIVING LANGUAGE: RECONCEPTUALIZING ACCOUNTABILITY**

One final grammar lesson and your ad hoc semester of English class will come to a close. Pop Quiz! Is “irregardless” a word? If you said “no,” you might be over-reliant on Spell Check. Back in 2012, Merriam-Webster officially added irregardless to the ranks of defined words (it would appear Microsoft still does not agree). The folks at Merriam-Webster argue that English, as a living language, continually experiences words that enter and exit our common vocabulary. Irregardless is used so frequently that it has created meaning and active usage. This would be similar to how many words enter the English language. With use comes acceptance and understanding. One could simply google any number of words that have entered the English language through continual use (Did you catch that sneaky example embedded in this sentence?). “Irregardless” is now one of those words.

Why the lesson in etymology? Our history and understanding of responsibility and accountability have continued to evolve just as our language evolves . . . and it will likely continue to evolve. As the need and desire for accountability grows ever more important, adapting how we think about what it means to be accountable will become increasingly important. Shifting away from a compliance and “being held” definition to one of commitment and simply “being” will only become more important, not less. Perhaps we need a new word—one that represents the proactive state of responsibility, the answerability and accounting for one’s actions, blended with the larger psychological state of stewardship. Recountership. Increasing the recountership in each of our organizations might begin to provide us with satisfaction and results we all desire. Hiring, supporting, rewarding and encouraging recountership behaviors will be the next phase of organizational success. Identifying how we can each be more recountable in our jobs will be active discussions between not only managers and employers, but actively discussed between team members. What do you think? Just an idea. Period.
SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES


