

Accountability = account x ability

A brief essay on a misused word.

by Hayagreeva Rao

Semantic satiation, a term coined by Leon Jakobovits in 1962, means that incessant repetition of a word leads to a loss of meaning for the listener. The language of management has several such words. One prime example is “accountability.” The term is so beloved by so many leaders at so many levels of so many organizations that over time it’s lost its truly powerful meaning.

Etymologically, accountability derives from the Latin *accomptare* (to account), which stems from *computare* (to calculate), which, in turn, stems from *putare* (to reckon). To account, calculate, and reckon. Clearly, accountability relates to measurement and answerability based on the *state of affairs* of an individual. This does not mean, however, that accountability is limited to the state of affairs that can be measured by key performance indicators (KPIs). There’s nothing in the Latin about KPIs. This definition of the word only accounts for the point of view of the observer wanting an easy way to measure another individual’s state of affairs.

What about the *state of mind* of the individual? What does accountability look like when considered from the employee’s state of mind? Peter Drucker, the sage of modern management who presciently declared “Treat your employee as a volunteer,” suggested that an employee’s important question is not “What can I achieve?” but “What can I contribute?” My *Scaling Up Excellence* coauthor, Bob Sutton, and I have suggested that *felt* accountability matters: it rests on an employee’s feelings of psychological ownership—“I own the place”—as well as a feeling of moral obligation—“The place owns me.” The question for employers: Are you holding people to account for things that line up with their own sense of purpose?

Leaders who want true accountability should pay as much attention to this state of mind anchored on feelings of felt accountability as they do to the state of affairs measured by KPIs. In particular, they ought to pay attention to a tension between multiple measures of the state of affairs and feelings of felt accountability. As Peter Drucker put it, “If you have five goals, you have none.” Proliferating metrics means that people are spread too thin, like butter on toast, and as a result cannot accomplish to their full ability.

This is why accountability must be seen as a multiplication of two words: account x ability. If all that we have are accounts (metrics), they will erode motivation and, yes, ability. Before you create myriad metrics to account for your employees' performance, you'd be a wise leader to think about what you are doing to strengthen their abilities. Q

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