

When Accountability Becomes Unclear

A practical guide to clarifying accountability, decision rights and shared responsibility



Accountability enables performance when people know what is theirs to own - and have the authority to act on it.

FRAMEWORKS & GUIDES • PRACTICAL GUIDE • CROSS-SECTOR

Accountability problems rarely announce themselves as accountability problems

They appear as slow decisions. Repeated escalation. Work being duplicated. Important issues falling between teams. Meetings revisiting decisions people thought had already been made. Leaders becoming involved in matters that should reasonably be resolved elsewhere.

The instinctive response can be to add more structure: another approval, another report, another governance forum or another layer of oversight.

But more accountability machinery does not necessarily create clearer accountability.

People are no longer sufficiently clear about what they own, what they can decide and where responsibility genuinely needs to be shared.

This guide builds on the Deep Waters Signature Insight *Clear Accountability Enables Performance*. That insight makes the case for accountability as a source of agency: clarity before action about purpose, responsibility, authority, decision-making and the outcomes people are trusted to deliver.

The questions and tools that follow turn that idea into a practical diagnostic for leaders and leadership teams.

Five signs to look for

- 01 Decisions continually escalate
- 02 Several people appear to own the same thing
- 03 Responsibility and authority have become separated
- 04 Meetings repeatedly revisit decisions
- 05 Leaders become the organisational safety net

Decisions continually escalate

Senior leaders find themselves making decisions that should reasonably be made closer to the work.

Repeated escalation can indicate that people are unclear about their authority, uncertain about organisational expectations or concerned about the consequences of exercising judgement.

What this can look like

- Senior leaders are repeatedly drawn into operational decisions.
- Teams seek approval for matters they should reasonably resolve.
- Progress slows when particular leaders are unavailable.
- Delegation exists, but decision authority remains uncertain.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

Did they understand that the decision was theirs to make?

Several people appear to own the same thing

Complex work often requires several people, functions or organisations to contribute to an outcome.

When everyone is described as responsible, it can become difficult to determine who can make a decision, who must act and who is expected to ensure progress continues. Shared outcomes still require distinct accountabilities.

What this can look like

- Important outcomes involve many contributors but no clearly understood owner.
- Responsibilities overlap across teams or functions.
- Issues move between groups rather than being resolved.
- Coordination activity grows while ownership becomes less visible.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

Who owns the outcome? Who contributes? Who decides?

Responsibility and authority have become separated

Someone may be expected to deliver an outcome without sufficient authority, information, resources or influence to affect it.

Equally, someone may hold significant decision-making authority without clear expectations about the outcomes that authority is intended to serve. Both create problems.

What this can look like

- People are held responsible for outcomes they cannot materially influence.
- Authority exists, but its boundaries are poorly understood.
- People hesitate to exercise judgement even where delegation exists.
- Accountability discussions focus on responsibility without examining agency.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

Does authority travel with the responsibility we have assigned?

Meetings repeatedly revisit decisions

A decision is discussed. A direction appears to be agreed. The issue returns at the next meeting - and then again.

Repeated reconsideration can indicate that nobody was clear about whether a decision had actually been made, who had authority to make it, what happened next or under what circumstances it could legitimately be reopened.

What this can look like

- Decisions are discussed without an explicit decision owner.
- Consultation is confused with collective approval.
- Actions are agreed but ownership of follow-through is unclear.
- Decisions are reopened without a clear trigger or new information.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

Who decides, what has been decided, and who acts next?

Leaders become the organisational safety net

As accountability becomes less clear, senior leaders often compensate.

They attend more meetings, review more work, resolve more disagreements, approve more decisions and follow up more actions. In the short term this can keep things moving. Over time it can create a system increasingly dependent on senior intervention.

What this can look like

- Leaders routinely step in to resolve ambiguity between teams.
- Managers retain work their teams could increasingly own.
- Escalation substitutes for clearer decision rights.
- Senior attention is consumed by follow-up rather than direction.

THE DEEPER QUESTION

Am I providing necessary leadership - or compensating for unclear accountability?

Five elements need to work together

Accountability becomes easier to understand when several related ideas are separated. Problems often emerge not because one element is absent, but because the connections between them have become unclear.

OUTCOME

What are we trying to achieve?

Accountability should ultimately connect to an outcome, not simply completion of activity.

RESPONSIBILITY

What am I expected to contribute or deliver?

Responsibility identifies what sits with a person, team, function or organisation.

AUTHORITY

What am I empowered to decide or change?

Authority determines whether someone has sufficient agency to fulfil their responsibility.

DECISION RIGHTS

Which decisions are mine, which require consultation and which sit elsewhere?

Clear decision rights reduce unnecessary escalation while protecting decisions that legitimately require wider authority.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Where does achieving the outcome genuinely depend on several parties?

Shared responsibility recognises interdependence without allowing individual contributions to disappear into collective language.

Responsibility without authority creates dependency. Authority without accountability creates ambiguity.

This is a practical expression of the corresponding Deep Waters Signature Insight: ***Clear Accountability Enables Performance.***

The Accountability & Decision Rights Diagnostic

Use this diagnostic to support a leadership conversation rather than produce a definitive score. For each statement, mark whether it is Clear, Partly clear or Unclear. Use the notes column to capture examples or questions worth exploring.

Area / statement	Clear	Partly clear	Unclear	Notes
OUTCOMES We can clearly describe the outcomes for which we are accountable.	☐	☐	☐	
OUTCOMES People understand the difference between completing activity and achieving the outcome the activity is intended to support.	☐	☐	☐	
OUTCOMES Where an outcome is shared, each party can explain the contribution it is individually responsible for making.	☐	☐	☐	
OWNERSHIP Important responsibilities have identifiable owners.	☐	☐	☐	
OWNERSHIP People can explain what they own without relying solely on position descriptions, structures or process documents.	☐	☐	☐	
OWNERSHIP Where responsibilities overlap, the boundaries between ownership, contribution and support are understood.	☐	☐	☐	
AUTHORITY People generally have sufficient authority to influence the outcomes for which they are held accountable.	☐	☐	☐	
AUTHORITY The boundaries of that authority are understood.	☐	☐	☐	

The Accountability & Decision Rights Diagnostic

Area / statement	Clear	Partly clear	Unclear	Notes
AUTHORITY People know when they are expected to exercise judgement rather than seek further permission.	☐	☐	☐	
DECISION RIGHTS For important recurring decisions, it is clear who has authority to decide.	☐	☐	☐	
DECISION RIGHTS People understand when consultation is required without confusing consultation with collective approval.	☐	☐	☐	
DECISION RIGHTS Decisions are escalated because they genuinely require greater authority - not simply because people are uncertain about who can decide.	☐	☐	☐	
FOLLOW-THROUGH Once a decision is made, responsibility for the next action is clear.	☐	☐	☐	
FOLLOW-THROUGH There is sufficient visibility to know whether commitments are being delivered without unnecessary reporting or oversight.	☐	☐	☐	
FOLLOW-THROUGH When circumstances change or commitments cannot be met, people know who needs to be involved and what needs to happen next.	☐	☐	☐	

HOW TO USE IT

Look for clusters rather than a total score. The pattern tells you where ambiguity is concentrating and where greater clarity may most improve people's ability to act.

Read the pattern, not just the score

Do not begin by trying to fix every statement marked Partly clear or Unclear. Look for patterns.

If Outcomes are unclear

People cannot take meaningful ownership of an outcome they do not sufficiently understand. Clarify purpose, priorities and intended outcomes before redesigning accountability.

What outcome actually matters?

If Ownership is unclear

Look for gaps, overlaps and responsibilities that have become distributed without anyone retaining clear ownership.

Who needs to know that this is theirs to own?

If Authority is unclear

Examine whether responsibility and authority have become separated.

What authority is actually needed to fulfil this responsibility?

If Decision Rights are unclear

Identify the small number of recurring decisions creating the greatest delay, escalation or confusion.

Who should decide - and who genuinely needs to contribute first?

If Follow-through is unclear

The decision may be clear while ownership of implementation is not.

What happens immediately after the decision, and who owns it?

The diagnostic is intended to locate the conversation that matters.

Begin with the work

Choose one important outcome, recurring decision or area of work where accountability currently feels harder than it should. Do not begin with the organisation chart.

Begin with the work.

OUTCOME What are we trying to achieve?	OWNERSHIP Who owns what?
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY Where do others need to contribute - and what remains distinctly theirs to own?	DECISION RIGHTS Which decisions need to be made, and who has authority to make them?
AUTHORITY Does each person or team have sufficient authority to fulfil the responsibility they carry?	ESCALATION What genuinely needs to move elsewhere - and what should be resolved here?
EVIDENCE How will we know whether the outcome is being achieved?	CLARITY What are the two or three things that need to become clearer?

Create clarity where ambiguity has the greatest consequence

Accountability can become complicated because organisations are complicated. The response does not always need to be.

Rather than redesigning every role, governance arrangement or process, identify two or three points where ambiguity is creating the greatest consequence.

For each, establish:

Outcome - What are we trying to achieve?

Owner - Who ultimately owns the responsibility?

Authority - What can they decide or influence?

Contribution - Who else needs to contribute?

Escalation - What genuinely needs to move elsewhere?

Evidence - How will we know whether the outcome is being achieved?

Then test the result with the people doing the work.

Can they explain what is theirs to own?

Can they explain what they can decide?

Do they know when they need others?

Do they know when escalation is genuinely required?

Can they connect their responsibility to the outcome it is intended to serve?

If they cannot, the accountability may be documented - but it is not yet clear.

RELATED SIGNATURE INSIGHT

Clear Accountability Enables Performance

Accountability is not simply about determining who answers when something goes wrong. At its best, it creates agency - connecting responsibility with authority and giving people greater clarity about the outcomes they own, the decisions they can make and where responsibility is genuinely shared.

Read the Signature Insight at deepwatersconsulting.com/insights/accountability-drives-performance

What needs to become clearer so that people can act?

What appears on the surface as a performance problem may have a different cause underneath.

Slow decisions may reflect unclear authority.

Repeated escalation may reflect uncertain decision rights.

Duplication may reflect overlapping ownership.

Poor collaboration may reflect shared outcomes without distinct accountabilities.

Leadership overload may reflect a system that has become unnecessarily dependent on senior intervention.

Adding another process, report or approval may address the visible symptom while making the underlying problem harder to see.

Clear accountability does not remove complexity. It gives people greater agency within it.

About Deep Waters

Deep Waters Consulting is a principal-led advisory practice operating across the Public, Commercial and Civil Society sectors. We help leaders, organisations and systems navigate complexity, strengthen capability and deliver meaningful outcomes.

Reflection → Insight → Clarity → Action → Impact

The greatest opportunities rarely lie on the surface.

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