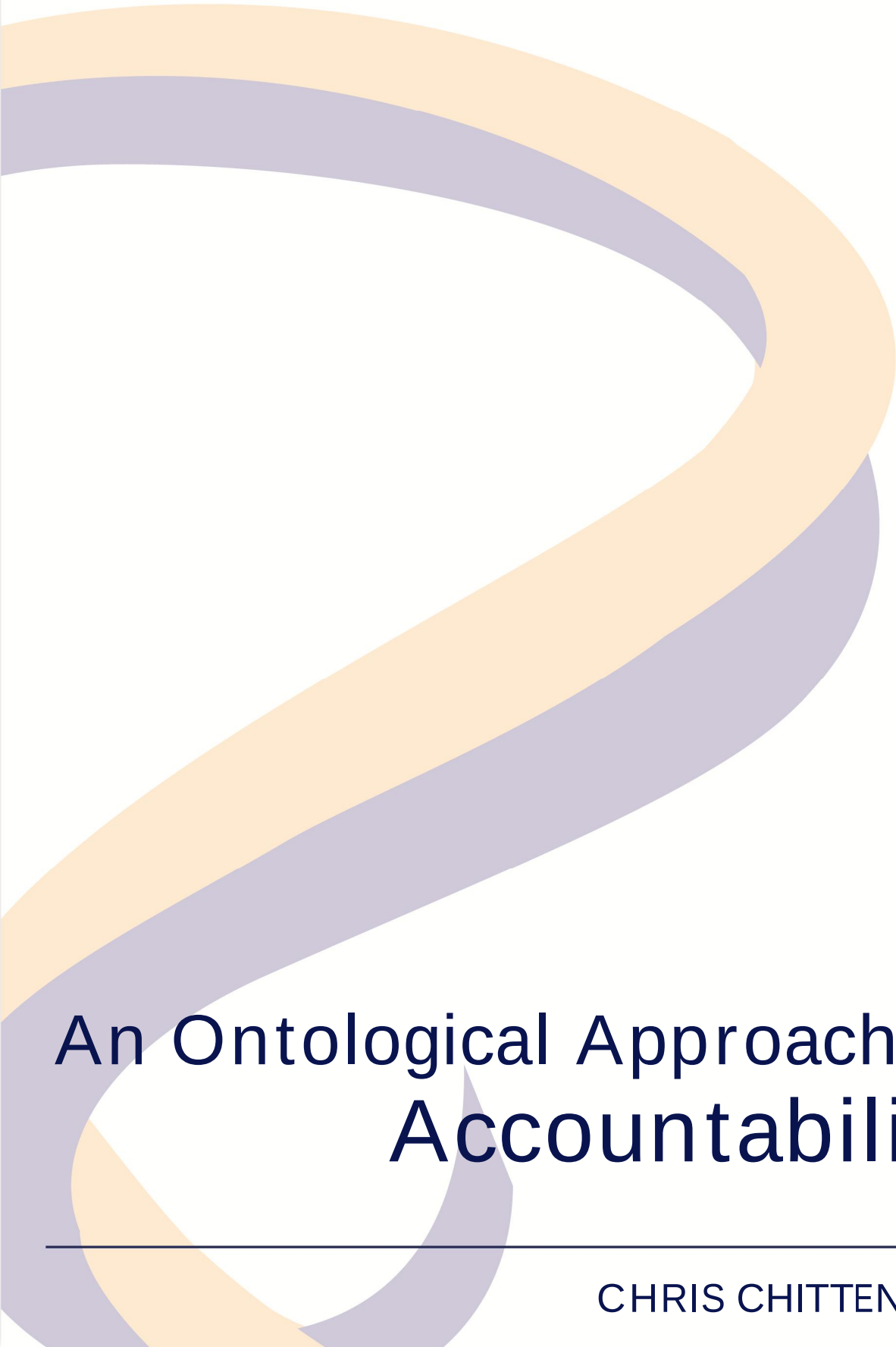




An Ontological Approach to Accountability

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Introduction

When people are asked about the cultural challenges in their organisation, it is not uncommon to hear them express a concern about accountability. Like many issues, much has been written on the subject yet somehow the issue persists and seems widespread. Why is this?

In some ways, the cause of this ongoing concern is found in the human condition. Accountability lies near the heart of three key areas of life – our sense of self, our relationships and coordinating action with others. Therefore when it comes to being accountable or holding others accountable, our sense of self and relationships with others is an ever present context. That context establishes our capacity in the domain of accountability.

From an individual perspective, we all know when we have not done something we should have done and in doing so, we have not been accountable for our actions. This has an impact on our “self” story as we seek to compensate in some way for that lack. For example, we may feel guilty and seek to cover up our lack of action or we may feel overwhelmed by what we believe we have to do and, as a result, feel incompetent. On the other hand, we may believe that we do not have to keep our promises. By holding this view, our promises don’t really matter all that much. Regardless of how we interpret such a situation, it plays a part in how we generate our “self” story.

Apart from what we do, we also expect those around us to do the right thing by us, particularly if they have explicitly committed to do so. When they don’t, it creates a problem for us and we have two options. We can avoid dealing with the fact they have made a commitment to us and do something else to fill the gap they have left us, such as taking action ourselves or finding someone else to do what is needed. In taking this option, we have to do something we did not expect to have to do, leading us to develop a story about the other person and their lack of reliability. The next time we have to deal with them, we take into account their past failings. This is often a slippery downhill slope for the relationship leading to resentment and frustration.

The alternative is to hold them accountable and take action to address their lack of completion of their commitment. This is often a more challenging path to take as it involves potential conflict, which is one of the major, if not the major, reason for poor accountability. Once again, there will also be some impact on our sense of self. What does it mean about us if people do not take the commitments they make to us seriously? At some level, this goes to the heart of our dignity – do we matter?

It is easy to stand on the sideline and say people should be accountable when they are not or they should hold others accountable when they don’t. It is something else when it applies to us. If we are to understand how we can be accountable and hold others accountable, and develop “accountable” relationships and cultures, we have to understand the roots of accountability and the skills needed to achieve it. Added to this there is the challenge of creating accountability in a manner that ensures sustainable healthy relationships and constructive organisations.

An ontological coach looks beyond the obvious to the underlying patterns that create ongoing breakdowns. To do this, we use distinctions related to the human condition and human relationships. These distinctions shed a new light on accountability, what it is and how to better create it. We hope to share these distinctions with you here and give you some new insights and approaches to dealing with accountability in your life and your organisation.

What is Accountability?

Let's begin this journey by defining "accountability". After all, we cannot determine how to do something more effectively if we cannot say exactly what it is!

Let's begin by defining accountability in a simple way.

"Accountability" is taking responsibility for what you have agreed to do.

This involves taking certain decisions and actions and creating certain outcomes as defined by what has been agreed.

This definition begs the question as to whether accountability applies to something to which an explicit commitment has not been made such as a community's standards or laws. There is no inconsistency here as we commit to many things without actually knowing that we have agreed to do so. For example, how many of us read the terms and conditions for software use before accepting them. Yet accept them we do. Furthermore, we all live in a community that has laws, which very few people or indeed anyone will know fully. Yet the community will hold its members accountable to those laws, regardless of their knowledge of them. As has been said many times, "ignorance of the law is no excuse". The underlying assumption to this is that by living within a community, a person automatically commits to uphold the standards and laws of the community. To ensure this happens, the community will put in place various entities, such as the police and the judiciary, to ensure people obey the community's laws.

We will not dwell any further on this aspect of accountability as it relates to an aspect of living in a community at large. Instead, let's focus on accountability as it applies in an organisational setting.

Although an organisation is also a community of people, it is one formed with a purpose in mind. As with any community, an organisation has rules and a means of enforcing them. These are generally set out in the various policies and procedures of the organisation. When a person joins that organisation, they usually sign a contract of employment that includes a commitment to uphold the organisation's policies, procedures and so on whilst they are engaged there. They also generally have some sort of position description, which identifies their role in the organisation although these descriptions are often vague in nature.

This vagueness spawns a host of undeclared expectations for individuals within an organisation as to what people should do and how they should do it. This is an area ripe for concerns about accountability as it involves widespread and ad hoc relational aspects of doing things together, yet without a clear and shared framework of commitments on which to base accountability. In other words, shared agreement is necessary to create effective accountability.

This then is our problem. Firstly, how do we create clarity about the basis of accountability within an organisation and then how do we actually be accountable ourselves and hold others accountable to us. A key part of the answer lies in the humble promise.

The Promise

A key aspect of the aforementioned definition of accountability is the word “agreed”. Its inclusion speaks to the involvement of at least two people and the commitments or promises they make to each other.

More often than not, the failings of accountability stem from the lack of a clear promise or commitment to which to be accountable. With that in mind, creating greater accountability begins with developing a better understanding of the meaning and making of a promise.

Although we make requests and promises many times each day, most people have never given a great deal of thought to what it means to make a promise and how to do so. It is almost invariably something that has been unconsciously learnt through modeling in the family home and so passed down from the previous generation.

This started to change in the middle of the last century when linguistic philosopher, J.L. Austin developed ‘*speech act theory*’, which has since been enhanced by people such as John Searle and Fernando Flores. Speech acts refer to the actions we take through language such as requesting, promising, congratulating and so on. Further work in this field recognised that not all language is spoken, for example there is sign language, so speech acts became interpreted as ‘*linguistic acts*’.

We have taken the work of these philosophers a step further and defined three major types of linguistic acts - assertions, assessments and declarations.

-  Assertions refer to what we believe to be true and form the basis of our view of the world;
-  Assessments are our opinions of what we observe and help us interpret what we believe to be true as it applies to our concerns and so navigate the future; and
-  Declarations are statements of what we want our future to be – many declarations are decisions of some sort and most importantly include the promise.

The distinction of linguistic acts in general is still not widely known and the theory and skills involved in making and managing promises, although central to human relationships, are rarely taught. As a result, people use language like fish use water – they live in it, but don't think too much about what it is.

So what is a promise?

Human beings live in a complex 'web of promises' with each other. We work for another on the promise they will pay us for what we promise to do. We turn on a power switch and expect power as we have agreed with our supplier and in return we pay the bill. We show up at a certain time to see a movie with a friend because we have both agreed to do so. Stop and think for a minute of all the times you coordinate action with someone and you will find the many promises you make each day. This is your 'web of promises'.

At the heart of this web is an idea termed the 'coordination of the coordination of action'. This distinction of the 'coordination of the coordination of action' speaks to more than just acting together, which can take place in the moment and apparently without language. All social animals coordinate action in some way – that is what makes them social; however it is through our sophisticated use of language that we humans are able to coordinate action in the future. In other words, this is the 'coordination of the coordination of action'.

Promises are central to human societies in that we continually build and live within networks of promises with others.

There are three types of declaration that are specific to the coordination of the coordination of action between human beings. For the purposes of understanding the way in which human beings utilise language as action in a conversational sense, it is valuable to distinguish these linguistic actions from other declarations. These actions are requests, offers and promises.

A promise is a declaration by one person to another that they will take some action in the future.

Through our promises, we can expand our capability in life and take care of much broader concerns than would otherwise be possible on the basis of our own actions. We do not need to rely on just ourselves to get things done because through a promise we can enlist the help of others. This is why our social structures and way of living can be seen as a vast network of promises. Indeed, one way in which we can assess the scope of our authority lies in the extent of the promises that we can obtain from others. Those with greater authority can acquire more significant promises in the world.

When a promise is made, the individual realities change for the two people involved and those people act as though whatever has been promised will occur. If I promise to do a report for you by the end of the week, you will act as if that report will be written. Unless you do not believe I will fulfill my promise, you will not go off and ask other people to do the same report; instead you will expect that come the end of the

week, I will have prepared a report for you. You may well make promises to other people based on my promise to you. So it is that human beings continually build webs of promises.

However, there is more involved in promises than just the linguistic act of making a promise. Once it is made, some action must also take place for the promise to be completed. As we all know, we do not keep all our promises no matter how well intentioned we may be. When this occurs, most people just look at the promise they have broken and consider the implications of the moment. What do they have to do to minimise the damage, the emotions at the time etc. However, human beings base their future on the past and every time a promise is broken the future is impacted and the dynamics of relationships can be altered. This is a key aspect of accountability.

The coordination of the coordination of action and making a promise always involves two people. The person making the promise and the person to whom the promise is made. As such a promise involves as a minimum the following:

1. A speaker;
2. A listener;
3. Some agreed future action; and
4. A timeframe.

As promises always involve two people, making promises always involves not one but two linguistic acts. The linguistic act of declaring a promise is always preceded by the linguistic act of either declaring a request or declaring an offer. It is the declaration of acceptance of the request or offer that creates a promise. So it can be said that a promise is created with a declaration of acceptance in response to a request or an offer.

Requests are declarations designed to obtain a promise from the listener. With a request, the person making the request has identified something is missing for them and he or she believes someone else can provide what they need. They then seek a promise from that person to provide what is missing in the form of a declaration of a request.

Offers are a declaration of a conditional promise. In this case, the speaker is proposing a promise that comes into being should it be accepted by the listener. The responsibility of the promise lies with the speaker should the offer be accepted and as such he or she is expected to act consistently with their offer.

Regardless of whether a promise emanates from a request or an offer, there is an undeclared responsibility that both the speaker and the listener will act in a way

that is consistent with their declarations. To do otherwise is to potentially damage the

Promise = Request + Declaration of Acceptance

Promise = Offer + Declaration of Acceptance

relationship between the speaker and the listener and diminish a key element of trust termed '*reliability*'.

Reliability is an assessment we make of someone in terms of how well they keep or manage their promises to us. We trust someone more if they are better at handling their promises and this aspect of trust shows up in the way we make requests of others and feel the need to check up on them when they do make a promise to us. Poor reliability is the cause of a good deal of the extra work and frustration that people experience in the work place.

The irony of all this is that even though promises are so fundamental to our use of language and being human, we often treat making them as a trivial matter. It could be argued that this lack of importance of a promise is a major cause of poor accountability. After all, if promises don't really matter then surely there is little point in being responsible for keeping them.

The Role of the Promise

What is the role of a promise in accountability?

The contention here is that effective accountability requires a promise or commitment.

No doubt, we can feel accountable and seek to hold others accountable without a promise being made. However, to do so sets up some significant personal and relationship breakdowns. Accountability without a commitment is based on the shaky ground of expectation. So, what does this mean?

Well, we each observe the world in our own unique way, and this way of observing and interpreting has us develop expectations of how we would like things to be. The challenge is that our way of observing and interpreting is unique to us and although we may share some expectations with others as a matter of shared community stories and beliefs, the way we hold those expectations is still unique to us. Why would we think that others would have the same expectations as us unless we have discussed this with them? Yet, that is exactly what we tend to do. We observe the world and interpret our experiences of it and assume others observe exactly the same things and interpret them in the same way.

So consider this. How would you feel if someone came up to you and accused you of not doing something simply because they thought you should have done it? Your first instinct is likely to be a defensive one – "*How dare you accuse me of this!*" Yet, this is often the approach people take when they are not happy with someone's actions. As a result of such an approach, the ensuing conversation is likely to be one where the subtext is really about the affront instead of the action that has not been taken. These conversations rarely end well and will tarnish the future relationship.

Accountability ultimately involves a person doing what they have said they will do. It seems unreasonable to expect someone to act in a way that another person expects

them to act without their agreement. It is even more unreasonable to challenge them when they don't act as desired in that expectation and imagine they will take kindly to this.

If we are to create constructive accountability then we have to create shared and agreed expectations on which to base those conversations. This has to involve the making of a promise.

Accountability and Organisational Structure

In the ontological approach, we define authority in two ways – personal and collective. “Collective authority” is invested in someone who plays a formal role in a community. For example, there are certain rights given to a judge or president to make certain declarations on the community's behalf.

“Personal authority” is declared by an individual when they validate any declaration to which they listen. Such declarations of authority are informed by the declarer's collective authority where it exists but this may not always mean that someone with collective authority is given personal authority by an individual.

In an organisation, collective authority is given to people based on the roles they play within the organisation. So what is the link between an organisational structure and accountability?

Having witnessed a number of organisational restructures that have been initiated in part to address the issue of poor accountability, it seems that in these instances the changes were predicated on the idea that accountability exists only in the structure. In others words, change the structure and you change accountability. Interestingly, the outcome in these organisations is that it appears that little has changed in the area of accountability.

Although the formal domains of accountability are defined in an organisation's structure, this is only part of the story. No doubt, a well-designed structure sets out roles and associated responsibilities even though these are often somewhat vague. However, just because a person in a role agrees they are responsible for something doesn't mean they are being accountable nor does it mean they are being held to account. This happens in conversations.

In others words, the organisational structure establishes a foundation for accountability, but effective accountability exists in the conversations had by people to be accountable and hold others to account.

Being Accountable

Based on our definition of accountability, responsibility is a key aspect. Yet “being accountable” and “feeling responsible” can be seen as slightly different things.

Based on what has been said so far, “being accountable” means that we have made a commitment that we then have to fulfill. We recognise that our promises mean something and we take responsibility for fulfilling them.

“Feeling responsible” lies in our story and expectations of how we should act in the world. This does not predicate a commitment on our part simply an expectation we have of our selves. For example, we may take an action that we later regret. We may say or do something that hurts someone we care for and feel responsible for that. It could be said that we should expect those who say they care about us, or should care about us, to act in a certain way that does not harm us. However, life is full of examples when this does not happen and even the way we show love or care may not be what is needed by another as is wonderfully shown in Gary Chapman’s book, *‘The Five Love Languages’*.

However the key difference here is that an explicit commitment has not been broken. We may not like it that we yell at someone, but we are probably not breaking any law if we do so. Nor are we breaking a promise if we have not made one. However, we may feel regret and take responsibility to make amends. As such, feeling responsible is central to being accountable but goes beyond it.

If “being accountable” is based on the promises we make, then how accountable we will be of our own volition, lies in the importance we give to the role of promises in our lives. Therefore to be more accountable we can:

1. Commit in a clear and decisive manner when making promises to others;
2. Appreciate the value of each promise we make;
3. Appreciate what that promise might mean to the other person involved and the potential impact on our relationship with them should it be kept or not kept;
and
4. Manage our promises effectively.

Holding Others Accountable

It is one thing to be accountable for what you commit to do; it is another to hold others accountable to what they have promised to do for you. This is often a challenge for people as they have to confront the prospect of dealing with a potential conflict when holding someone to account. In the face of this challenge, the first aspect of holding others accountable is to take responsibility for doing so.

It is also useful to recognise that holding others accountable is a means of respecting yourself. If we not do hold others to account, we establish a relationship dynamic with

the person who has not met their commitment such that a promise made to us is not that important. How can it be important to us if we are not prepared to do something about the promise not being completed?

For many people, the challenge of holding someone accountable lies in knowing how to have the conversation. Although most people do not realise it, there are clear and observable patterns of conversation that allow us to:

- ✚ Develop shared meaning and stories about how the world is for us. These are known as “descriptive conversations”;
- ✚ Develop new possibilities in life. These are known as “speculative conversations”; and
- ✚ Coordinate action with each other through the making and managing of promises. These are known as “action conversations”.

As has been said before, accountability is predicated on a promise, so it is the action conversation that provides the basis for holding others accountable.

The original form of the action conversation was developed by Fernando Flores in the 1970s and formed the basis for some workflow software. It is based on a four phase loop:

1. Make a request or an offer;
2. Respond to the request or offer and potentially create a promise;
3. Once a promise is made, perform or manage the promise; and
4. Assess the promise and complain if necessary.

There is not the scope to go into great detail here about these phases. Instead let's focus on the conversation to hold someone accountable – making a complaint.

It is useful to draw a distinction between "recrimination" and "complaining". With recrimination, nothing is sought other than venting dissatisfaction and making accusations. When effectively making a complaint, we are seeking redress in a manner that not only takes care of our dignity but also the dignity of the other person. In other words, we hold them accountable for not completing their promise and seek to do so in a respectful way.

An effectively made complaint provides for the possibility that the complainer's view of what has happened is not complete, yet provides the complainer with the opportunity to seek redress if indeed the promise has not been kept.

Before making a complaint, it is useful to go through our request and determine whether it was clear enough when made. Often one or more elements will have been missing and the request could have been much clearer, more specific or better timed. At this point, we may decide not to complain, but if we do decide to continue with the complaint the following steps are suggested:

1. Establish with the person, who you believe made the promise, that indeed a promise was made - *"I believe you made a commitment to me"*.

It may be the other person had not believed a promise was made and was unaware they were supposed to take any action. In this case you can then seek to establish a shared understanding of the situation and perhaps create a new promise. This can provide valuable learning about making effective requests and what might have been missing. If you often find yourself in situations where the other person denies they have made a promise then there are obviously other breakdowns to be addressed, such as failing to get a clear commitment in response to your requests.

2. If the other person agrees they had made a promise, the next step is for you to assert that the promise had not been fulfilled - *"It appears to me that you have not kept your promise"*.

Again this provides the other person with the opportunity to clarify the situation if they had indeed completed the actions asked of them but had not declared completion or there had been other communication failures. If these situations do occur, there is an opportunity to create further commitments regarding how the other person might ensure you know that a promise has been kept.

At this point, it is clear that a promise has been made and not been kept and you have taken steps to take care of the relationship in a respectful way. Now it is time to balance that by taking care of your own concerns and respecting yourself.

3. If the other person accepts that they have not completed their commitment, the next step is for you to declare the ensuing negative consequences.

This could relate to trust, a financial loss, a lost opportunity and so on. It may also be valid to speak the "unspeakable" here - how not fulfilling the commitment might have impacted on assessments of the relationship, identity etc. It is also important to include how you see the other person's responsibility for these outcomes. The purpose here is to establish a context for the final step in effectively making a complaint.

4. The last step is for you to make another request.

This may involve that you be more demanding than before when making this request depending on the circumstances.

This last step is critical as it turns the conversation from one of whining, a descriptive conversation that will not deal with the breakdown, into another action conversation from which the breakdown may be addressed.

In other words, it is the other person's new commitment that leads to accountability.

Towards Greater Accountability

So let us look at how to establish greater accountability in an organisational setting and what you can do within your field of influence.

Design organisations with clarity in terms of accountability.

The design of an organisation establishes the framework within which accountability is created and maintained. Most organisations are designed as a functional hierarchy yet accountability is a dynamic process. To accommodate better accountability it is useful to ensure the organisation is structured with its dynamic flows in mind. For example, it should be clear who has the authority to make what decisions and what commitments are necessary between groups to ensure a smoother transition in the work flow.

Although this area of design is outside of the direct influence of most people in an organisation, it can be valuable to understand the organisational structure and what that may mean for you.

Be clear about your commitments in taking a role – what are you accountable for?

Taking a new role in an organisation involves a commitment to fulfilling certain responsibilities. Clearly understand what your role entails and how it fits with adjacent roles. If you are not clear, then have the conversations necessary to create clarity and establish commitments with others as to how those dynamics will best work.

Promises matter.

If you are to establish greater accountability in your relationships with others, then appreciating that a promise is more than just words is an important foundation. A promise is a commitment to a new future and it also sits within a web of promises. The strength of that web is the strength of the organisation and every broken or mismanaged promise weakens it. It is also important to recognise that the web is dynamic and you are frequently not going to be able to fulfill your initial promise. In that case, manage it. Go back to the person who made the request and renegotiate the timeframe or outcome of its completion. The strength in the web also lies in its flexibility.

Be clear about what you request or offer

When you are asking someone to do something for you, be clear. Be clear about the desired outcome and, most importantly, be clear about the time frame. Your ability to hold others accountable rests on knowing when to do so. If there is no time frame associated with a promise then there is no promise, just a suggestion of some possible future action at some time in the future.

Negotiate if needed

The key to you making better promises lies in understanding your existing priorities and making promises on the basis of what is realistically achievable. If you are to be

more accountable, it is important to make promises you believe you can fulfill. If you do not do this, you are likely to find yourself feeling over-committed and become defensive when challenged over a lack of fulfillment. On the other side of the coin, allow others to negotiate with you when you make requests of them. Given that you will act on the basis of a promise that is made, wouldn't you prefer promises that are likely to be fulfilled?

Ensure a promise is made

There are many different responses to a request. The only one that creates a promise is a clear "yes". Ensure you get it. Everyone has their strategies for not committing to something and will employ them as needed, even sounding like they are committing when they are clearly not. The key is to recognise these strategies for what they are and follow through. After all, you are the one who wants something done and it is you who is likely to be responsible for the outcome.

Manage your promises and get a commitment from others to manage theirs

When you make a promise, ensure you complete it or go back to the other person and renegotiate your commitment if you can't. As soon as you know you will not complete a promise, say something to the other person. They might not like it, but you are giving them the 'gift of choice' and minimising the damage to your relationship.

COMPLAIN! And gain a new promise

When a promise to you is not completed as agreed, do something about it. Make an effective complaint and create a new commitment to action. Respect yourself and hold others to account.

And Finally

In many ways, we have just skimmed the surface of accountability.

There is a lot more that can be said about how each of us can develop our sense of self and our ways of relating to not only improve accountability but also the way that we live together and coordinate our actions with others.

It is useful to recognise that every organisation is a community of people relating to each other and it is the breakdowns in those relationships that are the cause of most organisational ineffectiveness and frustration for those involved.

Dealing with people is often talked about as the “soft skills”, yet ironically this area presents the most difficult challenges that are the hardest for most people to resolve. In many ways, this remains an area where organisations can gain vast improvements in effectiveness and outcomes.

Unfortunately, greater accountability will not come simply from reading these words. If you want to create greater accountability for yourself or in your workplace, then you have to act in new ways. At Talking About, we have developed approaches that can help everyone better understand how we relate to ourselves and others and also some easy to understand and applicable models and skills to do so. Through these approaches, you can further deepen your knowledge of accountability and develop the daily practices to create it in your world.

This document does not stand alone and is supported by seminars, webinars and individual and group coaching interactions. To find out more about our White Paper Series, we invite you to take a look at our web site, <http://talkingabout.com.au>, where you can find out more on accountability together with a wealth of supporting ideas and offers.

About the Author

Chris is a director of Talking About Pty Ltd and has been actively involved in the world of coaching since 1994, working full time as a professional coach since 1999.

He initially worked as professional coach with Gaia Consulting Group before establishing Talking About with Jacqui Chaplin towards the end of 2004.

He has over 4000 hours of coaching experience with both individuals and groups, including providing executive coaching to clients overseas in countries such as the US, UK, Taiwan and Hong Kong.



Chris specialises in executive and leadership coaching, and in developing new coaches. He created and wrote the Talking About Coach Training (TACT) program and continues to be involved as the course theorist and student supervisor. He has written and theorised on the subjects of leadership, coaching and the human condition since 1994 and continues to develop new ideas in these fields. He has authored over 140 newsletters on coaching and related topics.

Chris is a graduate of Newfield Australia's Diploma of Ontological Coaching and holds an Executive Diploma of Business Leadership Coaching. He is an Accredited Master Coach (AMC) through ANZI Coaching and a member of the International Coach Federation.