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Accountability 101

According to a 2004 Navy Inspector General report, more than half of the thirty-eight commanding officers relieved in 2003 and 2004 were fired for improper behavior, rather than poor performance. In essence, they may have met their performance responsibilities, but failed in their accountability.

Accountability is becoming increasingly rare in today's society. The prevalent message in our media seems to be "find someone else to blame." Politicians solicit votes by blaming the rich, or large corporations, or the President, or any other third party for conditions that are squarely the result of people's own choices. Lawyers pursue suits against defendants who happen to have deep pockets, and juries begin to view judgments as a courtroom version of the lottery. Many think young people have adopted the attitude of Bart Simpson: "I didn't do it; nobody saw me do it; there's no way you can prove anything!" Excuses, not explanations, seem to be the order of the day. Where can one turn to find a semblance of sanity?

Accountability.

Accountability has many origins. From a legal perspective, lawyers use the courts system to hold individuals and corporations accountable for certain outcomes. Whether it is a doctor being sued for malpractice, or a corporate executive charged with violating Sarbanes-Oxley for falsifying documents, determination of accountability usually is associated with "who pays."

Most modern religions assert spiritual accountability. One must either atone for one's infractions in this life, the next, or somewhere in between, or suffer the consequences.

Professional reputation results from personal accountability. Although Navy leaders are responsible for mission accomplishment, their performance is measured by how well they perform. Just obtaining responsibility is not enough. What helps motivate performance is that we in the Navy hold ourselves accountable through a performance evaluation system (FITREPs) as well as Navy Regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Our goal as Navy leaders should be to internalize our sense of accountability, and inculcate it in our Sailors. Our fears of the next generation "going bad" were probably held by our parents, and theirs, and so on. Somehow, America has managed to survive. When you read the accounts of our men and women in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan, enduring hardship and risking their lives and their safety to help their fellow Americans and the citizens of those countries, we begin to appreciate what a difference military experience can make in a person's life. We are growing a new generation of heroes, military veterans who embody the values of honor, courage, and commitment. Our heritage is not the medals we earn, or the retirement check we anticipate, but rather the growth of character and integrity in the Sailors for whom we are responsible.

The military has always led society in changes that were ultimately beneficial, but ran counter to the current trend. We removed racial barriers before it was common to do so. We extended career opportunities to women to match those available to their male counterparts. And in a culture of blame-shifting, we have remained resolute in holding our leaders accountable for outcome. By remaining the guardians of accountability, the Navy provides our society with an absolute reference point, independent of situational ethics or cultural vicissitudes. As our military veterans return to society, they will have before them a wealth of opportunity and achievement, reinforced by their internal values that reflect personal and professional accountability. Their future, and that of our nation, will rise or fall based in part on their willingness to accept personal accountability and their adherence to standards of behavior and moral values. Like ancient Rome, America can only be destroyed from the inside. It's never too early to begin planting seeds of accountability in our children or grandchildren. Teach them, and remind yourself, that the winning strategy to the "Blame Game" is simply not to play. 📌

Responsibility, authority, and accountability — do you know the difference? More importantly, do you know why that difference matters? If not, blurring these distinctions can result in unintended consequences in life. Let's start with the basics.

Responsibility relates to one's duty or mission. It is an obligation to answer for actions, to ensure that a task is accomplished. A "responsible" individual is one who gets the job done.

Authority is the power that is vested in an individual or organization to accomplish a given task or responsibility. It is the ability to act that exerts the necessary control or influence to make things happen.

Accountability is being liable for an outcome. It is not just about whether the job gets done, but also how it gets done.

This raises some interesting questions. Can one be assigned responsibility without authority? Can responsibility be delegated? Who is ultimately accountable for an action?

United States Navy Regulations offers some insight here. Article 0802 states that "the responsibility of the commanding officer for his or her command is absolute," and "the authority of the commanding officer is commensurate with his or her responsibility." Further, "delegation of authority shall in no way relieve the commanding officer of continued responsibility . . ."

Article 1021 states, "All officers of the Naval service . . . shall have all the necessary authority for the performance of their duties and shall be obeyed by all persons . . . subordinate to them." Article 1022 states, "The delegation of authority . . . shall not relieve such person from any responsibility imposed upon him or her."

Navy Regulations, however, are strangely silent on accountability.